

Thinking Through a Training Website - Wisdom for Designers & Consumers

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McCLUHAN RIDES AGAIN

We have reached the 21st Century. The basis of interactive technological applications within our new Age of Access (Rifkin, 2000) is a flashback to Marshall McLuhan (1964) – “the medium is the message”. Rifkin declares that we have forsaken ownership and the sense of community that entails in exchange for renting or leasing to gain quick access to a new lifestyle. At the same time, we need not forsake that which history has already taught us. Much of what media consumers experience is essentially derived from their interaction with the media itself – perhaps as much so as the words of the message. Consider a simple experiment. Play the classic shower stabbing scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s film “Psycho” (1960) on video, but turn off the sound. Hmmm, not so scary after all? Indeed the interaction of the multimedia, the harsh sounds, wrenched the last ounce of placidity out of the viewing audience. Same things can happen by turning the sound off on one of the many chase/fight scenes in a Star Wars movie (Lucas, 1977, 1980, 1983, 1999). Your adrenaline is no longer pumping without the sound blended with the action. McLuhan made the same sort of comparison with the impact of Bible stories enhanced by stained glass windows in churches. There are not a lot of new concepts, just new applications. We can find that the same is true with today’s websites. Even better, the interactive nature of the worldwide web allows it to be much more engaging and intimate than just listening to an intentionally scary soundtrack designed to invoke terror in your heart.

What can the users (learners/trainees, consumers, potential purchasers) of 21st century multimedia come to expect or believe in when they *participate* in a website? What can a teacher or media developer do with the planning and design of a website to maximize the interactive media’s usefulness (impact)?

No longer is interactive media an occasional frill. It is a mainstream tool in school, on the job and at home. We find in “Falling Through the Net” (October 2000) that the majority of American school age children are indeed regularly exposed to the Internet, not to mention CD-ROMs and other interactive media. Even the adult population has dramatically been increasing Internet access. Falling Through the Net shows that as of August 2000, some 41.5% of American households accessed the net, up 58% from a 1998 usage of 26.2%. By about 2005, we can expect the majority of Americans will be obtaining information from the Internet, be it entertainment, shopping, governmental information and assistance, or just communication with one another.

Creation and distribution for access and consumption of interactive media has been made so simple and prolific today. Users must possess the wisdom to know reality from opinion, and honesty from propaganda. The interplay and ownership between

print/journalism, cinema, cable television networks, major websites -- virtually all the media that touch people today is often overlooked as a unified, controlling form of communication. Users must be aware of the source(s) of their media knowledge. Concurrently, designers need the insight, skills and responsibility to avoid creating media that sidesteps or ignores the societal impact of what the content presents.

Exploring fewer than a dozen major domain areas (Grisé, 1999), interactive media designers can create solid, trustworthy and manageable materials for individuals to use. By developing websites, or evaluating content of web materials based upon these precepts, designers and consumers can better evaluate the functionality of a site. Does it serve individual users and society as a whole? It all comes down to perspective and responsibility.

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Essential Features for a Successful Website (And Other Interactive Digital Media)

Phil Gris , 2001

| Purpose/ Usefulness | Visual Design | Content | Security | Navigation Structure | Downloadability | Quality of Links | Multi- media |
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| <p>Understanding the connection/responsibility for this website to enhance the quality of life – the reality of interconnectedness</p> <p>A planned, goal-oriented action plan with measurable results is used to design function of piece. Have a clear definition of why site exists</p> <p>Designed to inform, sell, entertain, instruct, communicate, persuade, be a helpful tool</p> <p>Beneficial to many!</p> <p>Unique application of the medium/media – justification of why this interactive medium has been employed</p> <p>Target audience identified and site pilot-tested on a</p> | <p>Cite author and latest revision date for website. Have link to webmaster for comments</p> <p>Use only a few graphics -- max 60-75K/page; no one over 50K – for download speed. Use thumbnails</p> <p>Keep graphic balance simple, yet eye-catching – e.g., blurred edges on graphics</p> <p>Generally, use an alternate color text only for emphasis. Font color should be easy on the eye and harmonious with background</p> <p>Serif font offers maximum legibility</p> <p>Subtle – non-ugly backgrounds that don't interfere with legibility are critical. Baby boomers eyes are going fast</p> <p>Minimum font= 8 point, double-space text</p> <p>Maintain consistent style throughout site with all visual matters</p> <p>Provide balanced white-space using graphic design standards, & minimal text -- plenty of white space to relieve clutter</p> <p>Design logical progression for structure</p> | <p>Relevant to purpose</p> <p>NEVER forget spell check & grammar review</p> <p>Sufficiently interactive so user is not passive – exploit the medium</p> <p>Warn of potentially sensitive text & images for user to pre-evaluate</p> <p>Citations for others' work – do not plagiarize</p> <p>Avoid too much information on a page – consider outlining with subsets to select</p> <p>Remember that pictures CAN convey a</p> | <p>Determine level of security for website, it any</p> <p>Any special hardware or software requirements for secure use?</p> <p>What might be impact on potential users of security protocols?</p> <p>What might be impact on</p> | <p>While 21st century Browsers handle Frames quite well, Tables are more easily read</p> <p>A left vertical content source is most recognizable by users</p> <p>Frames enable only partial reload of information - may enhance speed in some cases</p> <p>Provide index and direction to navigation scheme. Avoid user having to guess for clicks</p> <p>Ensure that site is easy to move about and find functioning links</p> <p>'Back' is able to function and allow users to remain in</p> | <p>Succinct audio/visual graphics – almost by definition 'cool' sites demand huge download capability/time</p> <p>Consider constraints of low-end users, both in terms of Browsers used and modem speed</p> <p>A 28.8 modem downloads at 2K/second and a 56K at 4K/second – calculate your download demands</p> <p>Use graphics text titles within ALT coding to aid users without graphic viewing</p> <p>Use gateways at beginning of website permitting user a choice of level for download speed (elect to ignore</p> | <p>Links are relevant to the theme, not just oddball stuff the webmaster likes</p> <p>Appropriate links are provided</p> <p>Links are reviewed and updated <i>regularly</i> to eliminate dead links</p> <p>Updating links includes all associated information</p> <p>Consider program affiliates to</p> | <p>Balance colors and saturation levels betw. Merged media</p> <p>Balance audio levels betw. merged media</p> <p>Think about the joys of Flash and Shock-wave</p> <p>Ensure ease of integrat-</p> |

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| <p>representative sample audience – and revised accordingly</p> <p>Provides a sense of personal control and direction while not too complex for user to understand organization and navigation</p> <p>Website induces action by viewer</p> <p>Provides incentives and rewards for repeat visitors/users (updated info, etc.)</p> <p>Build a reference section so that other webmasters who update “your” site know some of the ins and outs you’ve used as conventions</p> <p>Ensure that the website follows best practices of journalism – a story is being pitched. Encourage the user to be stimulated</p> <p>Ensure no carelessness</p> | <p>which contributes to purpose & reduces confusion</p> <p>Proximity of linking icons may indicate relative importance</p> <p>Consistent, non-confusing icons</p> <p>Provide harmonious relationship between text & background colors</p> <p>Use of page headers/Title to define purpose of site and assist in bookmarking</p> <p>Use programming checker (Dr. HTML, Webgarage, Weblint, Halsoft, etc.)</p> <p>Consider impact of monitor sizes and resolution setting which will invoke scroll bars</p> <p>Present easy to find main page with multiple links back from anywhere</p> <p>Include height and width parameters in HTML along with names of graphics for user download information</p> <p>Be compatible within ADA guidelines</p> | <p>thousand words</p> <p>Include meta tags in Header include useful identifiers for browsers to use</p> <p>Be sensitive to regional idiosyncrasies such as international dates: 2/5/01 = or May 5, 2001</p> <p>Be aware of and adhere to international laws</p> <p>Consider value of installing a search engine</p> <p>Do not incorporate beta version of programs which may still have bugs</p> | <p>future info. And possible vulnerability</p> | <p>current website</p> <p>Short text used for opening page with button links to topics</p> <p>Avoid information overload on buttons/links</p> <p>Mouseover color changes are useful</p> <p>Permit choices within choices for personal program branching</p> <p>‘Site map’ inclusion enables user to see overall structure entering any page, skipping intermediate pages at will</p> <p>User has the capability to QUIT site at will</p> <p>Avoid frequent and drastic revisions to appearance and navigation</p> | <p>graphics/audio)</p> <p>Test pages on both Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator to confirm opening and appearance. Notify viewer of potential differences</p> <p>Thumbnail images may fulfill need for conveying information and download much faster than larger images.</p> <p>Don’t use WordPerfect for downloadable files as it is too uncommon</p> <p>When possible, notify user, and provide links to download software, such as Flash</p> <p>Provide dual gateways for users, e.g. – high speed with Flash versus slower modem speed without multimedia</p> | <p>attract users</p> <p>Provide user some rationale as to why link is relevant – why go there</p> <p>Do not use different names to direct user to same link</p> <p>Include off-line links to contact organizations such as phone number and mailing address</p> <p>Provide clear labeling of links</p> | <p>ion of periph. such as camera, mike, voice commands</p> <p>Stay abreast of technol. advances and deletions</p> |
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