

A heuristic evaluation – Stuck between aesthetics and commercialization?

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ABSTRACT: In this paper we will do a heuristic evaluation on a homepage that belongs to an illustrator who wants to show his work. Before we present the result of the evaluation, we will shortly explain the context. The result of the heuristic evaluation falls in two parts. First, we look at some of the usability problems we discovered overall at the website and secondly we look at one particular problem with the website, where the illustrator tries to sell his book. After each part, we present some recommendations to the problems. Finally, we try to answer some of the questions that arose when we carried out the evaluation. Questions like – is it possible to do a traditional heuristic evaluation on a website which aim is rather aesthetic than commercial? Is a website aesthetic if it has a commercial touch? And finally what are the problems with heuristic evaluation in this content?

KEYWORDS: Heuristic evaluation, website, aesthetic, commercial, user involvement

INTRODUCTION

We are three students at the IT University of Copenhagen. In this semester - spring 2004, we take the course HCI – human and technology. The aim of the course is to introduce the students to the extensive world of HCI. One lecture was about heuristic evaluation which fall under usability testing - a fragment of the HCI world and the focus for this paper. At this particular lecture about heuristic evaluation, we tried to evaluate different websites on the internet and we looked at some of the problems with the method. In addition to learning how to do a heuristic evaluation, we also learned that the context of a given website may be important – is it a commercial website which aim is to sell or is it an aesthetic website which aim is to give the user an experience?

One of the websites was CraigFrazierStudio [1], which differentiate from other traditional commercial websites we tested because of its aesthetic touch. Many questions arose – What is Craig Frazier’s purpose of the website? Is

it to give the user an artistic experience or is it to sell his work? Will a usability evaluation of an aesthetic site make it loose the artistic touch?

WHAT IS A HEURISTIC EVALUATION?

However, what exactly is heuristic evaluation? One of the gurus of heuristic evaluation is Jakob Nielsen. In 1990, he developed a set of nine heuristics together with Rolf Molich and later Nielsen redefined the heuristics [5]. Heuristic evaluation is a usability inspection method, which exists of general principals, which are used to inspect a user interface to find usability problems. It is a very popular method because it is cost effective, and because it only involves having a small set of evaluators examine a given interface [4].

There are several problems related to heuristic evaluation. Research finds that one evaluator is not enough to find all problems and the more expertise the evaluator has in usability and the field the more problems he will find [6]. Jakob Nielsen recommends using three to five evaluators to improve the effectiveness of the method. We are only novice evaluators and therefore we will probably only find 40% of the problems on a site [6].

Another problem is that heuristic evaluation only looks for problems. It does not provide answers or suggestions; this is solely up to the evaluators to provide. The heuristics only provides a uniform measure for problems, which leaves a lot of decision to the individual evaluator. The solutions can be anything that follows the heuristic criteria. This provides challenges but also opportunities for the single evaluator to apply a personal touch. Furthermore the fact that solutions are not provided in the heuristics could prove to be a positive character that leaves space for user-friendly websites to be aesthetic.

Yet another problem is the lack of user involvement, which becomes a reel problem if the method is isolated. It is recommended that the method is combined with others which focus is on user involvement. It is the users who are going to use a website and not the evaluator who are doing heuristic evaluation. Problems may occur because some of the problems the evaluator finds on a given webpage are not problems in the user’s eyes.

Even though Jakob Nielsen’s heuristics are frequently used, we have decided to use a different set of heuristics developed by Gitte Lindgaard. Her heuristics are not as

focused on efficiency and correctness as Nielsen's [2]. Gitte Lindgaard is a psychologist and is employed at Department of Psychology at Carleton University in Canada, where she works with HCI [3]. The heuristics are: Match with user tasks, Consistency and standards, Terminology, Navigation, Visual feedback and system status, Error prevention and recovery, User control, Recognition [rather than recall] and Flexibility and efficiency of use. Five of Lindgaard's heuristics are identical with Nielsen's, but the rest of them are different – Match with user tasks, Terminology, Navigation and User control, and more focused on the problems a real user might find on an interface.

We want to do a heuristic evaluation on CraigFrazierStudio [1]. We will point out some of the problems and propose a solution to those problems. In-between we will discuss some of the questions mentioned in the beginning of this paper. - Is it possible to do a heuristic evaluation on an aesthetic website? And can an aesthetic site exist in combination with sale of the material it presents?

The content will fall in two parts. First we will discuss some of the problems we found on the homepage in general and secondly we will focus on the more commercial part of the homepage where a book is offered for sale.

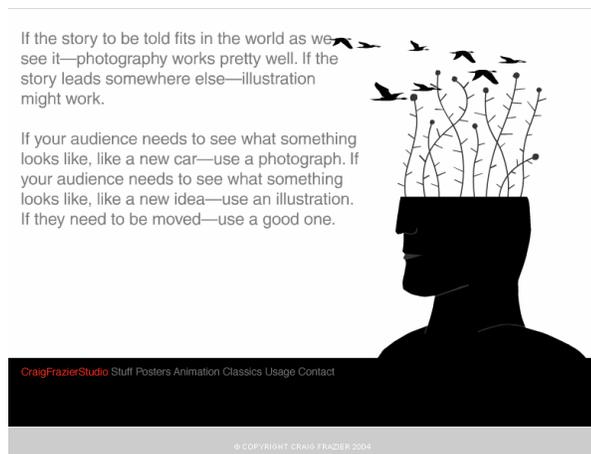


Figure 1: Webpage of Craig Frazier [1]

HEURISTIC EVALUATION

We evaluate using Gitte Lindgaard's heuristics and we found six of them relevant for Craig Frazier's website.

The three of us have done the evaluations separately and afterwards we have discussed the problems we have found, and have agreed on what would most likely be problematic for the users.

THE WEBSITE IN GENERAL

Navigation

Navigation is one of the most important features of a

website. If it does not work properly; the user will quickly be lost.

A problem at this website is the colours in the menu, grey font on a black background, which can be quite difficult to read.

It can also be a bit difficult to guess what is hidden in the menu. What can you expect from "Stuff" or "Classics"?

Consistency and standards

A standard on the internet is that links are blue and underlined and if they are not, they should not look like anything else because it could confuse the user. At the site "Contact", the headline is red, but a link in the next paragraph is also red, this is inconsistent and confusing.

None of the pictures has alt-texts. That may not be that important for the target group of the website, but if there is a broken link it is nice to be able to learn what you are missing.

The page "Usage" is missing a title, which is just a little thing from a usage aspect, but important for instance for search engines.

Error prevention and recovery

On a website there should not be anything that does not work, like broken links or pages under construction. At "Animation" the animations "Potholes", "Tubes" and "Buoys" do not work.

Another problem is that when you are on one page and you click on the same page in the menu, then it reloads. This takes time and can cause irritation and confusion for the user.

User control

It is important, that the user is in control of what happens, where he goes and what he does.

On the front page, there is a big black box, where there is nothing but the text "CraigFrazierStudio" in the left corner. Nothing happens before the user decides to click somewhere. Other websites has splash screens with some kind of animations, so the user can be confused when entering Frazier's homepage because nothing will happen before he decides to take action.

When you are watching an animation, it is not possible to pause it, so if you get distracted you have to wait till it's over and see it from the beginning.

Many internet users are goal-orientated and come to a website for information. That is a problem with this website, because there is not much information about anything. For instance, the pictures in "Classics" have no name or year and the same goes for the pictures in "Posters". A big question that the website does not answer is "Who is Craig Frazier?" After reading the whole

website we still do not know.

Visual feedback and system status

When the user does something, it is important to tell him that he is doing the right thing and that something is happening. You cannot see how long the animations at the page "Animation" last – you just have to click and wait.

Recognition [rather than recall]

It is easier for the user to recognize something than to be having to recall how something works.

At the "Contact" website in the right bottom there is an @, which links to the website "artsites.tv". Normally you do not combine this sign with a link, so the user is very unlikely to try to use it, and it gives the user the load to remember this for the next visit.

Recommendations

According to a traditional heuristic evaluation we find it very important to put more information on the website - Information about Craig Frazier and his work. We also find it important to make the menu more visible, so instead of the grey font color a color like white could be used.

However, heuristic evaluation is about making a website more effective and efficiently to use. It is important to the user of a commercial website like www.amazon.co.uk that he can quickly find that particular book he is looking for. But when it comes to more pleasurable experience-based sites like Frazier's it is about satisfaction and artistic expression, which is very hard to measure.

We do not think that it is appropriate to do a heuristic evaluation on an aesthetic site like Frazier's, because the user's goal is to get an experience rather than getting information. But we still find it important that errors like broken links and animations that do not work does not occur. And this can be analyzed using heuristics as a tool. But by applying a whole evaluation some of the things that deliberately try to make people wonder will be lost. This will hurt the aesthetic expression of the website.

THE COMMERCIAL PART

As well as everybody else, who produces products, illustrators need to sell their products. A website is in most cases the perfect medium to reach the customer. In Craig Frazier's studio the decision has been made that it should be possible to purchase a book or make a subscription of magazines through the website. But the way to buy the book is well hidden and long. The customer is taken through different websites before he is finally asked to make the payment.

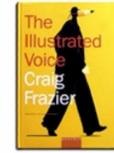


Figure 2: The Illustrated Voice

We will look at the way to buy the book "The Illustrated Voice".

User control

You find the book among different things as animations and posters for viewing under the menu point "Stuff". Choosing it gives the opportunity to preview or purchase it unlike the other things there, but in order to come to the next website that gives the purchasing opportunity the user must pass seven different sites. Some of them inconsistently open in a new window, which means that the users desktop will become full, or the user has to go back and close. Along the way the URL also changes two times, without information about the cause or who are in charge of the new website. This can only leave the user wondering "What are they trying to hide?"

Choosing to view and order the book through several links will bring the user to a list of goods where the title of the book, for those who still remember it, and can see the vague grayish color in their browser, is posed. Clicking at least 11 times going through previews and pure links is not very optimal, even for the determined user. If the user purpose is solely to buy the book, the website does not match with user task. The not so determined and/or experienced user will likely loose orientation and give up before he or she will ever reach the colorful and artistic, but not very trustworthy website of the shop.

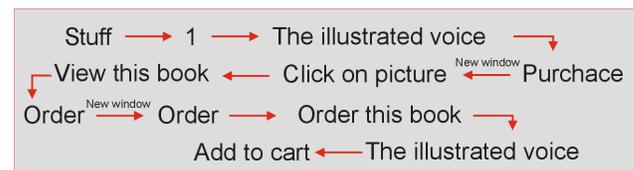


Figure 3: Illustration of the buying process

The art of commercializing art

It seems like the selling function has on purpose or subconsciously been hidden in order not to destroy the aesthetic touch of the website. The website also has a well-hidden link to Folioart that sells Craig Frazier posters. This again underlines the fact that maybe Craig Frazier does not find the art of commercializing very artistic!

Recommendations

Hiding the book is not the best way to make people want to buy it. Is it meant to be sold? And does Frazier think it would be a good buy? - Then this is what should be shown. Make it obvious that this is a good product and that it is for sale. If they are worried that it will interfere with the artistic expression of the website, then they should put it somewhere well separated from the rest. This could be under the headline "buy", showing clearly that they are proud to be able to offer this product, and making it very easy for the user, whose task is to buy, to fulfill their job.

We have also considered the possibility that the people who want to buy the book like the fact that it is not so commercialized and even difficult to find, making it a bigger accomplishment to have found it, and that this fact could add some exclusivity to owning it. The fact that it is very difficult to find might, seen from this consideration, be a deliberate choice. Still we believe that more people would choose to buy it if they could find it, and therefore recommend that it is made more accessible.

Furthermore, it is important to make the function functional. This includes diminishing links, for example by letting the user choose to either view or buy the book and to make the color of letters standard, for example letting red mean clickable.

This commercial page differentiates from the rest of the aesthetic site. To our perception it is not only possible, but very recommendable that this particularly page is put through heuristic evaluation, and changed in accordance to the problems explored. Another recommendable thing is to have the user's, that the site is intended for, evaluating it. This would give the most realistic picture of their expectations, and this would again be the most valuable knowledge for the designer to possess.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE USER

One of the problems with heuristic evaluation is the lack of involvement of users. If you want to know what the preference of the user is, the easiest way is to ask them. In this particular case; CraigFrazierStudio [1], it is very important to get in touch with the users of the website. Do they think it is a problem that they need to take this amount of steps if they want to buy the book? Do they need more information about the illustrator and about his products? The three of us had two big problems. The first one was the missing information about Frazier and the second problem was difficulties buying the book. However, the fact that we had problems does not mean that the user of the website has. Heuristic evaluation is done by people who have experience in usability problems, but who might never choose to use a website like Craig Fraizers'. This can mean that their perception of things is different than that of the actual user. Therefore, our final recommendation would be always to ask for the users' opinion too.

CONCLUSION

After doing a heuristic evaluation on an aesthetic webpage like Craig Frazier's, which aim is to give the user an experience rather than providing information. We think that the method is only relevant for homepages with a more commercial aim. Even though it is possible to buy Frazier's book while admiring his pieces, we do not think that it should be considered a site with a commercial purpose. Still we think it is advisable to do an heuristic evaluation on this particular part of the homepage. Specific problems like bad navigation and lack of consistency should be corrected.

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