

<The uniformity in web design and possibilities of user sentimental experience>
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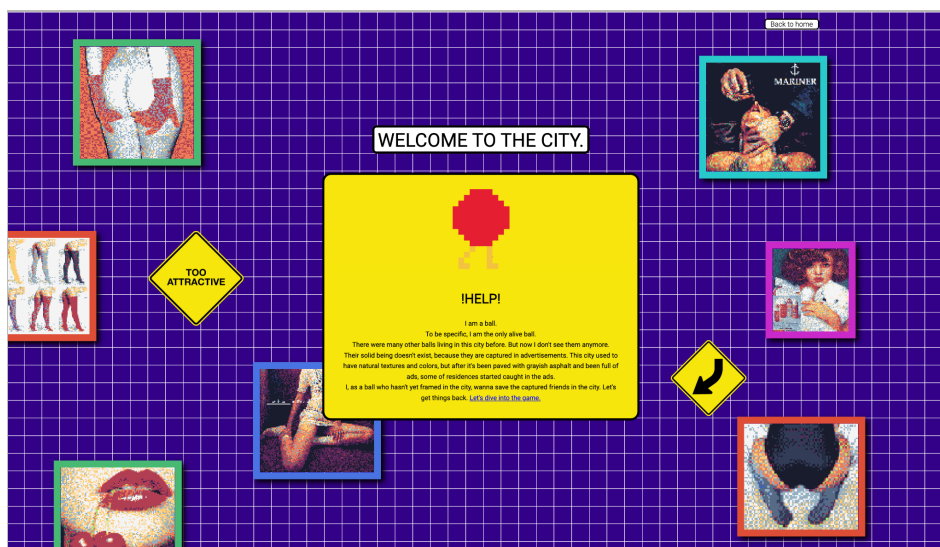
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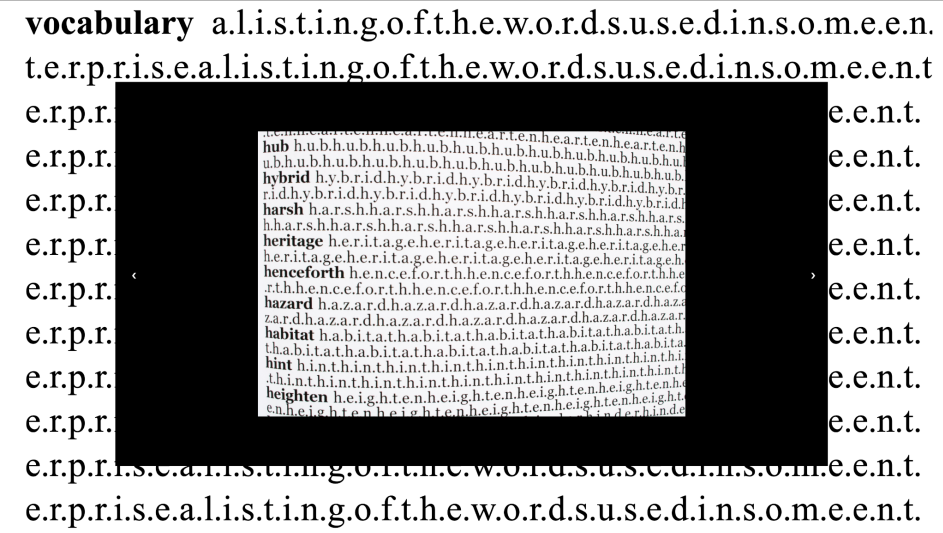
Introduction

My interest in web design has been evolving in the context of the art academy as a graphic design student. Exploring experimental visual cultures, I have aspired to place playful and deconstructive aesthetics in the web context. For the last two years, I have been publishing a few self-initiated web essay projects. These tend to represent my skepticism about conventional web design because I've been holding a question about why most websites today look so similar. I've aimed to make playful web pages, customising experimental images and dismantling traditional grid layouts.

From a business driven perspective, however, my experiments might not often be communicative to general user groups as they haven't been made with the standards of design they often require. As I've explored web design throughout artistic manners, most of my projects aren't strictly based on the notions such as usability and functionality. I admit that most of them had better be polished, especially in terms of information architecture and user navigation.



[Savior: one of my web projects)] (Kim, 2021a)



[Voca: one of my web projects] (Kim, 2021b)

Thus I've been also studying web design standards and disciplines, which makes me realise that I should take more responsibility to convey my messages to users. The truthful pity would be that people in my web projects experience embarrassment, not knowing where they are and what they could do. The learning has also brought me a chance to release my implicit reluctance about all the design rules, which I used to think of as dull.

As I've just mentioned, to me the term 'design thinking'¹, which is often addressed in design practice, was considered an outdated tradition. I used to accuse the design conventions that it's the main reason to bore users, harming diversity. Yet now I'd say I'm slowly admitting that they are often necessary to guide visitors better in a website with intertwined contents. I'm in a process of learning that creating a webpage is not only the realm of visualising things but also understanding the technical characteristics of the web medium. (The experiments I strive for have to FUNCTION, as well as aesthetically pleasing.) For instance, I need to understand the mechanism of scaling visual elements, to make them compatible with all the different screen viewports and computer specifications. (It was really tragic when my web project that I worked on for dozens of days broke down on my friend's phone.) Simply I'm saying it's tricky to approach web design practice with mere artistic passion.

The web design convention mainly lies on the strong attachment between form and function. In other words, the link between the two elements should be very smooth. This may sound like just AN easy process, yet indeed it includes many different tasks step-by-step. It's a collaborative practice, requiring quick and consistent communication among different professions. For instance, there should be designers who are more in

¹ The design thinking is an ideology and a process with problem solving and user-centric approach. It entails process of emphasising, defining, ideating, prototyping, testing, and implementing. (Gibbons, 2016)

charge of visualisation. They sketch how every single webpage in a project would look, based on a concept. They also make decisions on visual elements for the project. Then front-end developers embody the sketch in a codified form. There should also be other experts managing technical matters on the server, who are called back-end developers. And throughout all the steps, professionals called UI(User Interface) and UX designers(User Experience) are likely to lead and direct the project. They mainly strive to offer users clear content architecture and good experience, which sounds like quite an extensive range of tasks.

The UI and UX, however, sound a bit blurry to me. Well yeah, the UI designers seem to work to organise information structures, and the UX designers would literally work to draw a positive user experience. But... I don't know, from my point of view (as both a web user and a creator), I have some misgivings about the two missions. Especially the term called 'user experience' makes me question if that even exists today. This is because most websites now seem to have an idea that the positive user experience is synonymous with clear and efficient user navigation. Surely, easy recognition and behaviour will be an important part of it, but are they all of it? The positive (or rich) user experience is a motto that has been claimed by the web industry so hard, but the current definition of it is narrow. Their interpretation of it mainly focuses on efficient user performance. There are other elements contributing to it, but they are overshadowed.

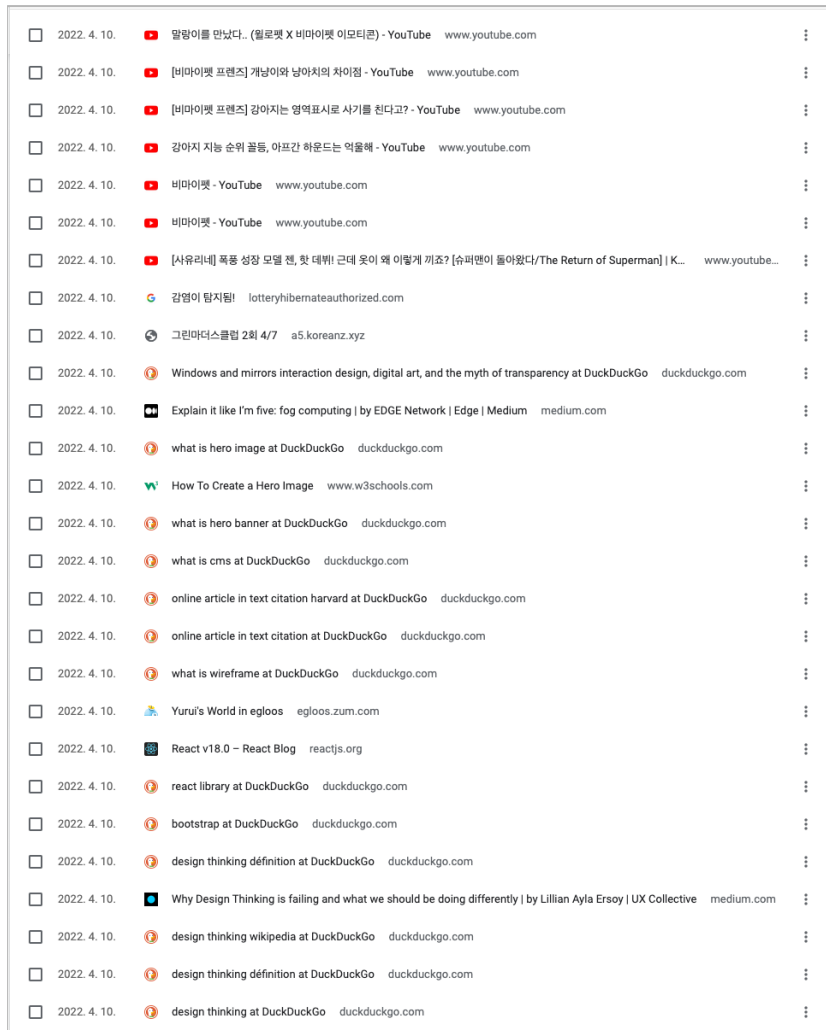
Let's think about travel experiences in our lives. We laugh at funny signages while driving a car or walking, and subtly smile while listening to the birds chirping. For me, these are also elements of the positive experience. Of course, I wouldn't deliberately take a long detour to reach an arrival point. But if I have a choice between 'arriving at a destination as quick as possible without feeling things' or 'arriving there a few minutes late with some sentiments', my choice would be the latter. Although this may sound like very much of a personal argument, a good experience for me is also about emotions, not only convenience. Unfortunately the 'feelings' are shaded by the condition of usability in plenty of websites today. They seem busy to give users a space to feel.

Thus, I, as someone who feels pity for web design practice today, am curious if there are some wiggle rooms for web designers to enrich the meaning of 'positive user experience'. What if more emotions or even sentiments are imported into the web? What kinds of small gestures can be made by designers? And how would users react to them? In my thesis, I aim to explore comprehensive meanings of the rich user experience beyond its common definition, as well as look into potential causes of web design uniformity. In the upcoming two chapters, I shall investigate the background of the homogeneous design. Then in conclusion I will explore how a broader range of the rich user experience can be drawn.

Chapter 1. The relation between form and function on the web

1. Understanding web medium: Functionality and Usability

Even though I'm visiting many websites a day, I don't need to adapt myself to every single place I visit. The navigation style remains pretty much the same everywhere. When I see my Chrome browser histories, I can see that I move around dozens of websites in a day.



[A screenshot of my Chrome browser history] (Kim, 2022a)

This clearly illustrates that I'm actually traveling through the world of the web almost every day, moving here and there. But how come I haven't felt as if I visited many different places? Traveling on the Internet is less of a struggle than traveling in real life; I mostly don't have to figure out where I am and where I could and should go (even when I'm on a new website). Whereas in real life, it is common to feel lost and embarrassed when navigating myself in a new place. Truly, we have better not feel frustrated to get to know what and how we do in a website. We don't indeed. This is because visual elements in the web context are highly created for the purpose of usability on the digital medium. It must serve clear user navigation. For instance we often see most menu bars

in websites contain some marks, helping to differentiate the visuality of unclicked and clicked elements at the current moment. It's also the case that most of the navigation bars are located on the top rather than the middle or the bottom, and on the left, rather than the right. This is one of the representative wayfinding traditions on the web, playing a role as a kind of map at the sides where our eyes quickly target.



[A screenshot of Tripadvisor menu bar] (Kim, 2022b)

Aren't these visual signs, however, installed in the physical context as well? The wayfinding and signages are commonly set in many places, delivering spatial context of the current place and guiding people's directions. However, there are still some travellers getting lost because it might be not possible to immediately grasp the logic of it and the grand architecture all the time. Indeed design in physical contexts helps us to navigate better, yet doesn't necessarily guarantee perfect achievement rate of finding directions. And indeed the 'figuring out and moving back and forth' is mostly unpleasant, but many seem to accept this as a natural process in reality. Of course I'm not claiming that we all should be lost. In my personal experience, however, the 'running about in confusion' has sometimes helped me to understand the larger context of an architecture where I was at the moment. Walking a bit further or into a wrong direction was not necessarily to be done, but somehow I was able to grasp the relationship between the space and myself through that.

Very differently, however, in the web context people aren't supposed to be disoriented even for a little while. There exists no mercy or a romantic value in momentarily fidgeting to figure out our next step on the Internet, unlike the physical. This is actually a part of what I have been questioning. How come are the romantic values dismissed in web design practice?

This is because the web is highly a 'usability' and 'functionality' oriented medium.

In an article 'Explain it like I'm five: fog computing', the author described the primary logic of the Internet context.

"As you might know, the Internet is just a massive group of interconnected computers, each of which is identified by a unique address (much like your home address). When you type the address to a website in your browser, you're sending a message to the computer that lives on that address, asking it to send you the files with the content you're after. Once the files are transferred to your computer, your browser can render them on the screen." (Bouças, 2017)

As his description illustrates, it is the fact that I can enter any kinds of websites with the network connection. The thing, however, is I don't just get to coincidentally reach any random website. Rather than that, I mostly type or search particular web addresses with specific purposes. I don't enter arbitrary websites that I don't know, just to look around. What this indicates is that the web medium involves the conditions of 'purpose' and 'usability'. Indeed these are primary aspects to be considered in web design and development, from the very beginning to the end. Entering the world of web browsers mostly has a strong premise that a person is going to do something. And the 'something' can't be achieved without certain behaviours such as clicking, typing, and scrolling. Whether the 'something' is reading, watching, or shopping, it is to be activated through one of these behaviours.

2. The relation between form and function

And the fact that a person decides to perform the behaviours means that her cognition is communicating with the visual architecture in the websites or mobile applications. She's now processing and understanding.

Once the understanding is done, she is finally able to make her behaviours in a 'useful' way. In other words, the 'use' is generated through understanding the visual logic of websites. Which is commonly called an interface. It's commonly known that it must be intuitively readable at first glance for the majority of users, and this condition is called accessibility.

In a book DESIGNING VISUAL INTERFACES, authors Kevin Mullet and Darrell Sano wrote that communication design always begins with an analysis and organisation of the information to be communicated. The authors claim that the aesthetics of a display cannot be considered in isolation from the purpose for which the display is intended in the communication design. This explains that there should be considerate decisions when aesthetics are to be experimented. (1995, p.79)

According to their theory, what decides user communication with a medium is how its aesthetics are linked to the purpose (function) of it. It implies that what the user sees on the digital screen is not good-looking contents, but more like an organised structure of the contents that she can understand what they are and what to do.

3. Design vs Art: Creating a website is a design practice

It seems clear that the primary approach in web design is based on the idea that people 'use' the Internet. Considering the tendency that people visit websites to 'use' and 'to gain something', it's not doubtful that building websites is definitely a realm of design. Again, Mullet and Sano explained how different the approach in design and art is, from the same book.

The authors describe that the process taken by visual designers is comparable to the typical engineering methodology, thus thorough background research should be initially

executed for an ultimate understanding of the problem. Then, the solution that best meets the requirements is selected for production. (ibid, p.7)

"The designer is not an artist, at least not in the sense in which that term is commonly understood, although admitting that it has remained a point of confusion for many in the software industry. The artist, like the poet, is engaged in the manipulation of the formal qualities of a particular medium to produce an aesthetic response." (ibid, p.8)

Yes, indeed the similarities and differences of art and design have been questioned and discussed for a long time by many authors, including Mullet and Sano.

Perhaps I'm also one of the people exploring the lines between art and design with some questions. Although I call myself a designer, the trajectory that I've gone through has evolved with artistic manners. It doesn't mean that I doubt design is for the user to serve a function though. I agree that while art is casting a question or eliciting a feeling, a design should give the user a clear message and functionality.

My doubt is rather that the range of how design is interpreted today is somehow tilted to the side of functionality and usability.

4. Other aspects to be embraced in design, not only usability and functionality

There's a representative figure who highlighted the straightforward interface design. It's Donald Norman who is a cognitive scientist, and who is today known as the father of user-centered design.

In his book 'The Invisible Computer', he argues that the primary goal of the information appliance, which can be understood as interface design now, is to overcome the complexity barrier of today's personal computers. *"Computers are complex, difficult to learn, difficult to use, difficult to maintain."* (1999, p.53)

"What's the matter of graphical interface today? The solution doesn't scale. Making everything visible is great when you have only twenty things. When you have twenty thousand, it only adds to the confusion. Show everything at once, and the result is chaos. Don't show everything, and then stuff gets lost." (ibid, p.74)

He claims that digital interface design should be highly transparent to make the user achieve her or his desire as quickly and easily as possible. His argument is firmly based on a premise that users always have specific goals to achieve when using the computer, thus user reactions to the interface should be highly immediate and productive.

However, his idea that people only 'use' the (annoyingly complex) computer for her sake is controversial. Indeed the majority of users are likely to have the computer for performing particular tasks, but there are also users who interact with the computer with explorative and floaty attitudes. Although most websites highly entail the goal-orientation approach, we shouldn't overlook other aspects too.

Let's just escape the web browser context for a moment. Imagine that you are in an art gallery. You're in a space where a few pieces of art are exhibited. I want to ask if you want and aim to completely understand all of them. Probably not. Likely, you would have been there just to feel and experience. Not to understand and nail certain functional goals. Complete understanding is not necessarily important here, which is quite different with the context of a company where you're working at or a school you must submit a thesis (it's my situation now). As a visitor you can hold a moment in front of an artwork to really look at it, but can also just pass by, scanning through, or even not really seeing it. These are all okay for your experience in the place. As it's not particularly about 'making use' of the moment. It may be more about 'exploring'. And fortunately the World Wide Web also hasn't been fully saturated by the purposeful mechanism.

Webring can be an example. *"A webring is a collection of websites linked together in a circular structure. The point of a webring is to create a virtuous cycle of recommendations between web authors. One author sends the 'ring' traffic and exposes the ideas that they think are interesting in a way that is more seamless than a 'you should read this [link]', and hopefully if that stuff is interesting the other author(s) will reciprocate."* (IndieWeb Camp, 2022)

There are indeed methods of exploring the Internet that are determined by commercial search engines. It's not easy to see how pervasive it is. As a term called Googling already explains, entering Google to look for something or to wander around has become a natural part of many people's lives. Some even set a 'Search in Google' function as a default in the browser searching bar.

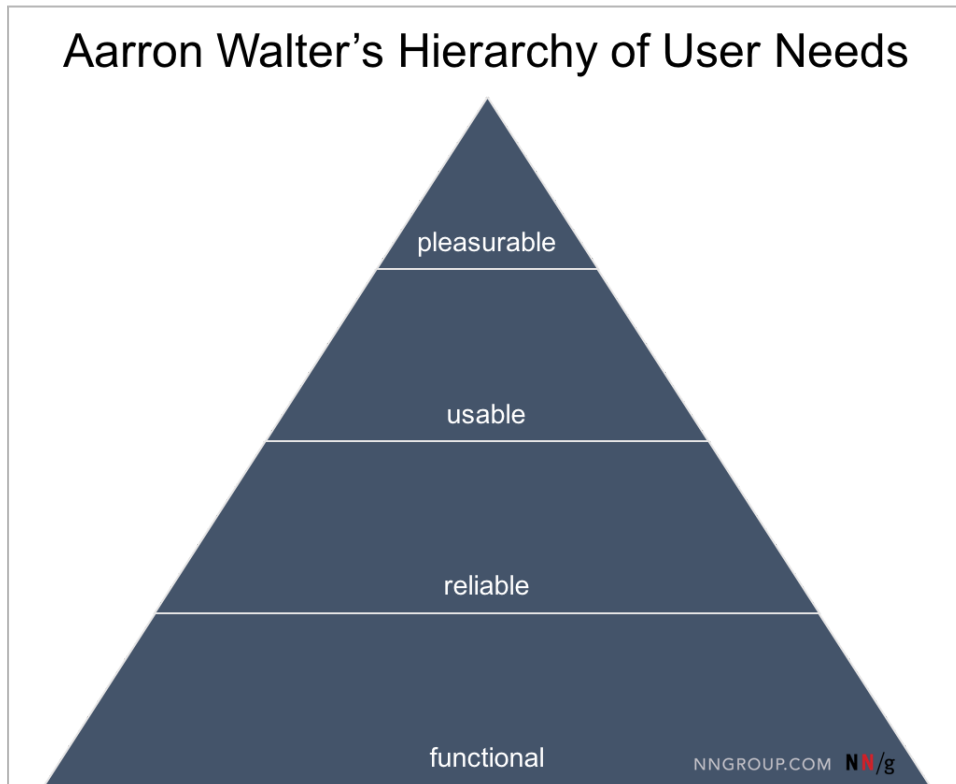
What the webring indicates, in contrast, is that exploring the web is not just that you search something particular, then see tons of information in an order of what the powerful platform recommends.

I think it can be thought of by analogy with physical travel again. There are many other ways of traveling than guiding yourself with the aid of a map application. A few months ago I and a friend went hiking in the Eastern part of the Netherlands. An interesting way he navigated himself in the forest was to follow his intuitive, roughly over-viewing general landform and the flow of clouds. He said it's not necessary to look at the digital map. It was really fun that we just let ourselves go with the flow, looking around at the beautiful landscape. More importantly, we arrived well to the arrival point we aimed for (not too late)!

5. Not only functionality and usability, but also delights

My personal hiking experience again resonates with how I perceive design. I don't particularly advocate being lost and frustrated but what I firmly believe is that designers need to put down the idea that design should be only functional and usable. When design embraces a bit more generosity, on top of the usability, the user experience will be enriched too.

While researching, I came to know a book called *Designing for Emotions* written by Aarron Walter. In the book he illustrated a hierarchy of user needs in the design practice.



(NNGroup.com, 2017)

As the title of the book indicates, he claims the significance of embracing emotional aspects in design and also explains how that can be possible. (2011)

What he firstly emphasises is that functionality and usability should be a foundation of pleasurability in the design process. But what I find interesting in his theory is that he really encourages designers NOT to dismiss pleasurable aspects. He doesn't see that as a subordinate condition. Although he emphasises the three basic elements, which are functionality, reliability, and usability, he firmly says that experiments for user delight should be possible. As for his argument, I can refer to one of the interviews that I've done for my research.

I interviewed a few web designers to ask what they think about the web design culture today. Then I heard an inspiring opinion (about when experiments can be made in design), from Noemi Biro who is a Rumanian and Rotterdam-based graphic designer. Her practice is designing brand identities and prototyping websites.

Noemi: "I'm now commissioned to design a social organisation's website and what my client wants is very specific. He showed me a few other websites and said that he prefers to have sorts of similar layout and typography. He is aware that conventional design will somehow guarantee basic usability and credibility of the main visitors, who are mostly donators and students. In general I agree with what he says. Of course making it more unique or experimental is appreciable but making it usable and credible should be precedent."

Nami: "But I know that you're also one of the designers advocating dynamic user experience. It's tricky, but there must still be some space for experiments in web design. What would be the possible space for instance?"

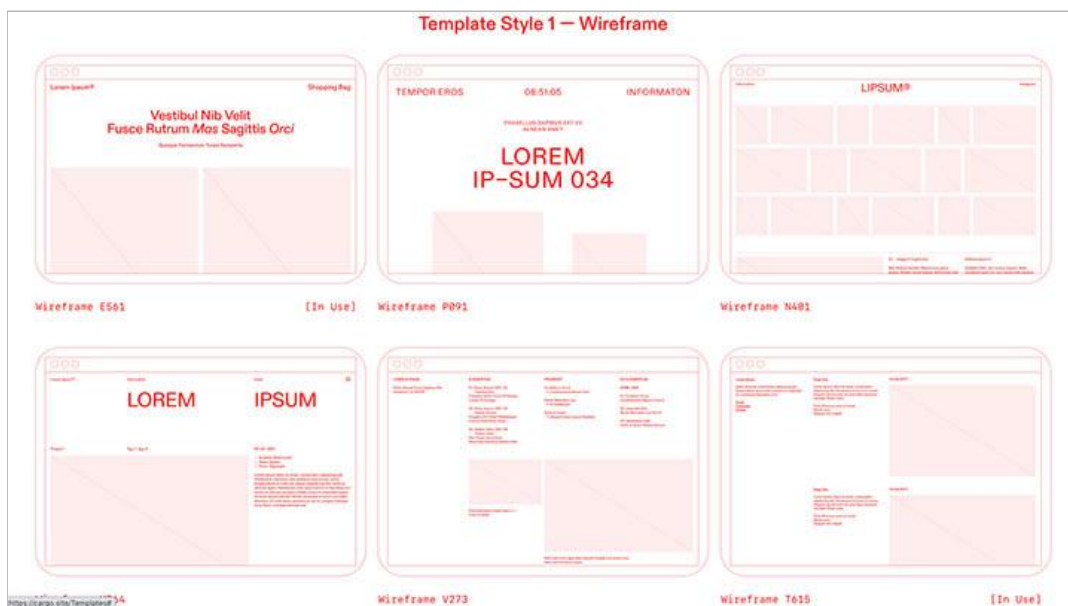
Noemi: "I often look around at other designers' works. And I think subtle animation or visual effects during the loading page moment is a clever attempt. These are actually fine in commercial context too, not harming usability. I find this is an example where artistic experiments can be involved in conventional web design. In addition, I release my expressive desire in my personal projects. They're relatively not confined by all the strict rules. I don't think visitors for my web projects will be bothered, as they know that it's a different context." (Biro, 2022)

I think her last answer supports my point a lot. Indeed experiments are tricky but there should be possible areas where it can be accepted, not undermining usability. Also, it's about the matter of context. There exist different contexts where the experiments for dynamic user interaction are to be possibly appreciated.

Chapter 2. Design templates and frameworks

1. Irresistible power of design templates and frameworks

The validity of conventional web design languages, such as grid-based layouts, universal iconography, etc have been proven enough, and it doesn't seem there are reasons the disciplines shouldn't be used. For instance, the grid structure is one of the best options to most clearly provide a broad range of users with content, as it generally works in many different contexts. It is deemed versatile; The forms of the web design have been standardised into a few representative wireframes².



[A screenshot of wireframe and template from Cargo] (Kim, 2022c)

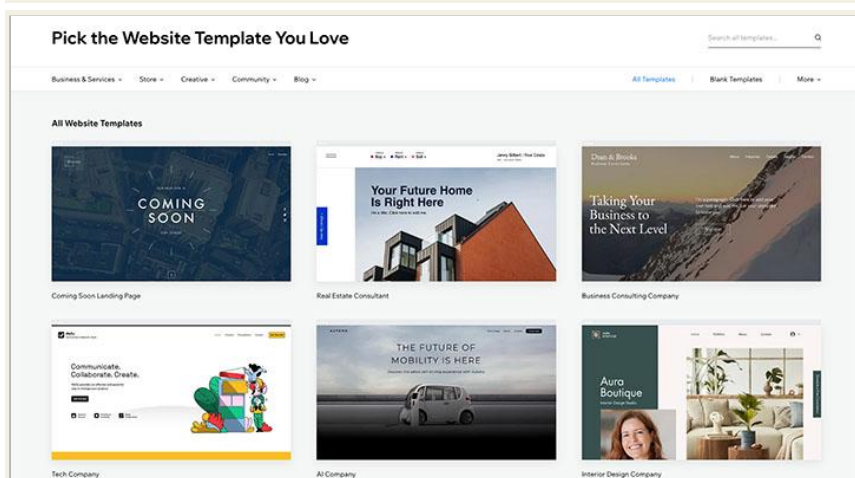
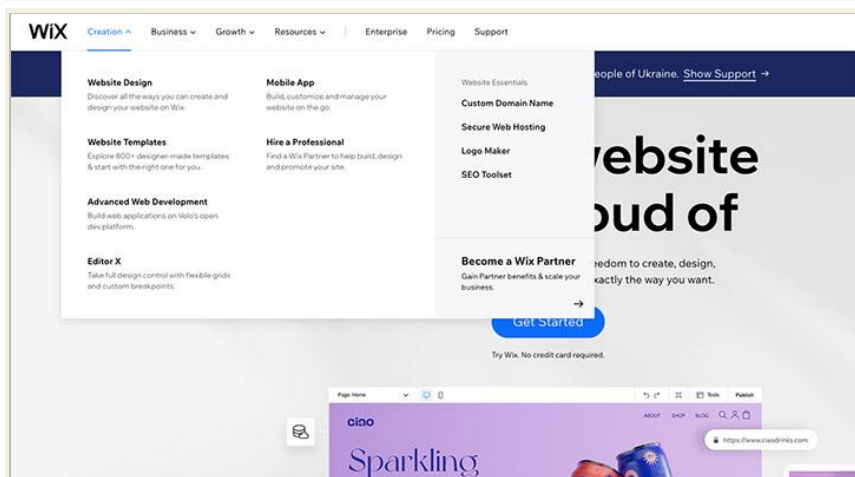
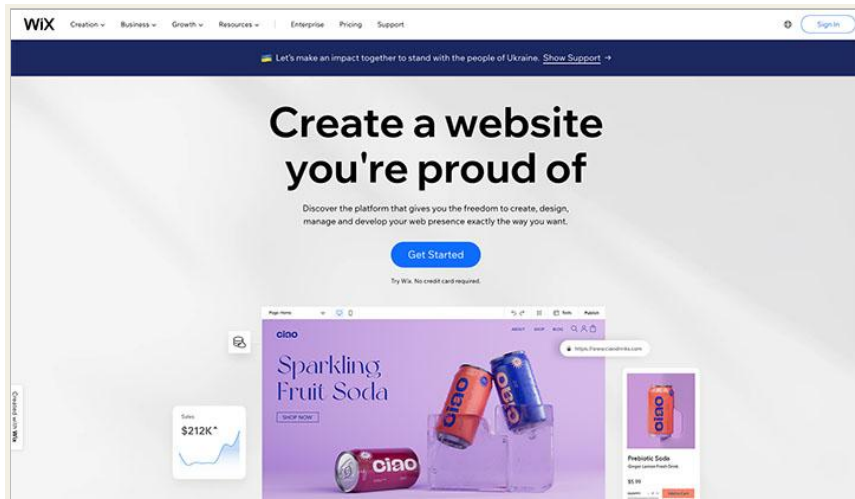
It's not even an exaggeration to say that the majority of the websites we see today are made by one of the design templates. Well, they have some variations with colour themes, typography, etc, yet their layouts aren't that different in fact. They are too powerful to be blamed for just its commonness. They are essentially helpful as a mediator, offering people who want to create websites with no technical skills and knowledge. Today anyone can create a good-looking website with the service of a design template.

Another tempting point is that the service platforms will guarantee the design to be responsive to any devices' screen sizes. They have a 'mobile-first approach', accepting mobile devices, especially phones, are the most accessible medium for the digital context today. It is quite a tiring task for designers and developers to make web pages to be aesthetically responsive for many different screen viewports. It is quite a labour,

² A wireframe in digital design is a visual guide or page schematic that is stripped of typographic style, colors, graphics, and interactive elements, and represents a specific point in the design process. (Ketterman, 2019?)

especially when the design is experimental and unconventional. And the template services lessen this burden.

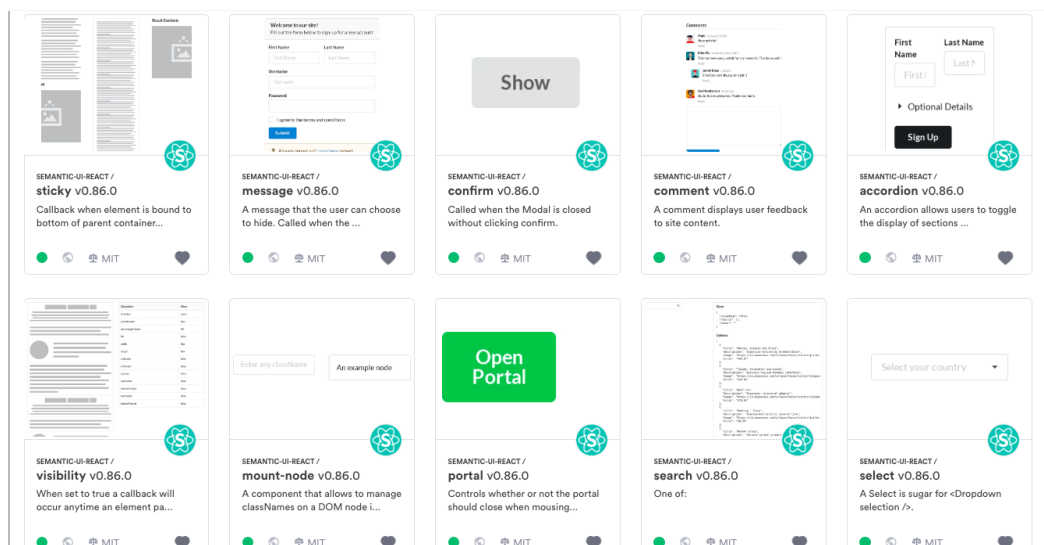
There are a few representative web design template companies, such as Wix and Weebly. There is even a sub-sector business like Squarespace, which is a platform for creating logos for clients who don't have a big budget and creative skills.



[Screenshots of Wix website] (Kim, 2022d)

Furthermore, many technical frameworks, such as javascript libraries, offer many code snippets for commonly used web design functions.

Javascript is considered one of the main languages to be used to draw dynamic effects for users or to process data. Although it's often considered one of the primary code languages, it still remains a specialised technical realm for many web designers. It requires quite much of time and effort to comprehensively study it. To save creators' energy for studying the computational knowledge one by one, there are many open-source libraries, such as Bootstrap³, React⁴, etc.



[React components] (Saring, 2017)

I'm not sure if I can phrase it something fortunate though, because it seems to aggravate the tendency that designers rely on the frameworks, not really attempting to understand what they are writing for. I don't know if it's just me but I've often failed to deeply learn javascript as I wished. Honestly I've also been tempted to extract some snippets of functions I needed from the libraries. This could be somehow considered a way of studying javascript too, but I can't stop feeling that my depth in understanding it is on the surface. It's an interesting irony that designers may have some desire to study codes but eventually tend to dismiss or overlook them, due to the technical barrier. It can be a stress for them. Even languages like Html, Css, which are often regarded as basic, are complicatedly evolving. The evolution of Css is ongoing and quick. Realistically it'd be not easy for an individual designer to keep up with the ray of technology.

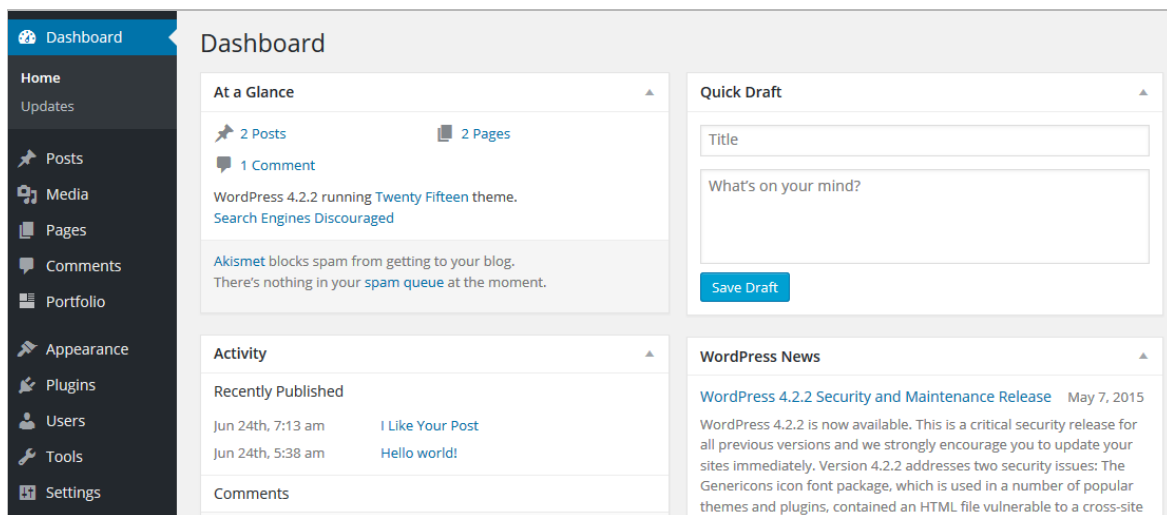
³ Bootstrap is a framework for building responsive, mobile-first sites, with jsDelivr and a template starter page. (Bootstrap, 2022)

⁴ React is a JavaScript library for building user interfaces. React (React, 2019)

And there is another step left beyond the aesthetic embodiments. It's about server and PHP management, which is called back-end management. Technical functions like enabling users to create an account, upload content, etc, are related.

At the moment I have a client who wants to create his artistic portfolio. He and I discussed how the visual identity and wireframe can look like. but we don't talk about server management. From the beginning we have implicitly agreed that we'll use the service of CMS⁵ (Content Management System). I'm also one of the many designers who lean on a powerful technical agency. (Kinsta, 2021)

Representative CMS platforms are WordPress (WP, WordPress.org) and Homestead.



[WordPress dashboard] (Ewer, 2021)

All the technical requirements explain why web design is a collaborative practice. Building a website demands many different expertise. For clients who have a small budget and tight timeline, using all the technical service platforms would be more realistic, rather than hiring web designers and developers.

Once missions of the technology and capital conditions are resolved by such a service, creating a website becomes easy. Does it sound exciting?

2. The backgrounds for the prevalence of template market

The power of templates and frameworks has been also interlocked with the contextual transformation of the web context as well.

⁵ A CMS, or content management system, is software that helps users create, manage, and modify content on a website without the need for specialized technical knowledge. (Kinsta, 2021)

2.1 E-commerce takes a large part on the web

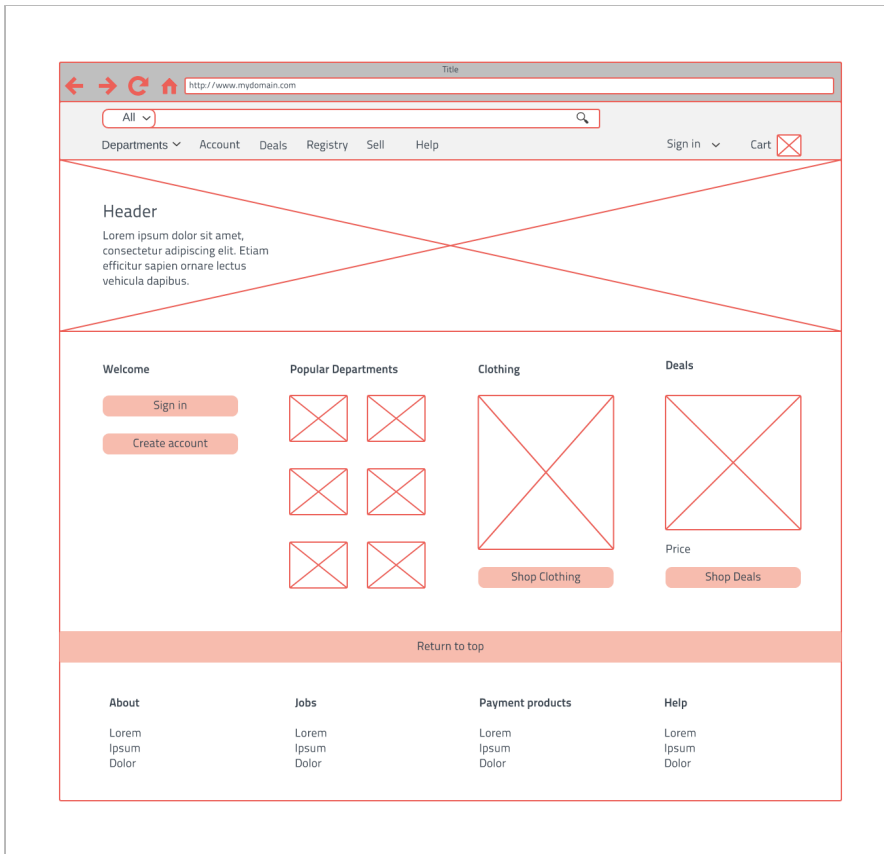
One of the changes is that the digital place today is mainly a commercial arena. In other words, the web is taken by a huge occupancy of E-commerce.

Yes, this might also sound like a remark unnecessary to say anew. Most of us would know that the web is largely saturated by plenty of commercial websites. Why so serious with that? The thing is, however, that just around 25 years ago the web context was far different. The Internet was not a world full of high-resolution images and videos like now. Back then, E-commerce didn't occupy that much space. It slowly emerged from the mid-the 90s and flourished from the 00s. How was the web context that era then? The culture of the World Wide Web in the past, especially at the end of the 90s and the early 00s, was a lot more adventurous and personal. It was relatively an individual place for people to explore and hang around. It was quite a short duration but people at the time used to create personal web pages more often, without particular aims and technical pressures.

I still remember when I was 10 years old (it was 2002), there was a girl in my class who created her homepage for fun. She announced that she made it by hand, and my friends and I entered there to just leave a hello memo. There was nothing special to do. It's just that we were excited enough, by spending floating time there. Also, online shopping culture was considered something uncertified as it was not that common at the time. (It's a bit funny but I remember my mom used to tell me that online shopping is dangerous.) In contrast, now it's almost hard to imagine such a goal-less approach in website creation and use. Doesn't it even sound too naive? Now reading news headlines or buying online is a natural part of my life.

The growth of E-commerce has become enormous in the retail industry since the 00s, meaning most websites have similar goals, which were ultimately to promote and sell products. They aim visitors efficiently to scan lists of items, then make a decision. Thus, good visual categorisation has become a mandatory design rule, in terms of content architectures. There should be a clear and consistent emphasis on the items, which has deeply influenced the main definition of the 'positive user experience' motto told by the industry. These are all clichéd stories but at the same time explain why all the online-shopping malls or service companies stick to the classic design templates with hero banner⁶s and the grid-based layouts in the main section of Html.

⁶ In web design, "hero image" is a term that is applied to a big eye-catching image that is usually seen in the above-the-fold zone of the webpage right below the website header. (Yalanska, 2021)



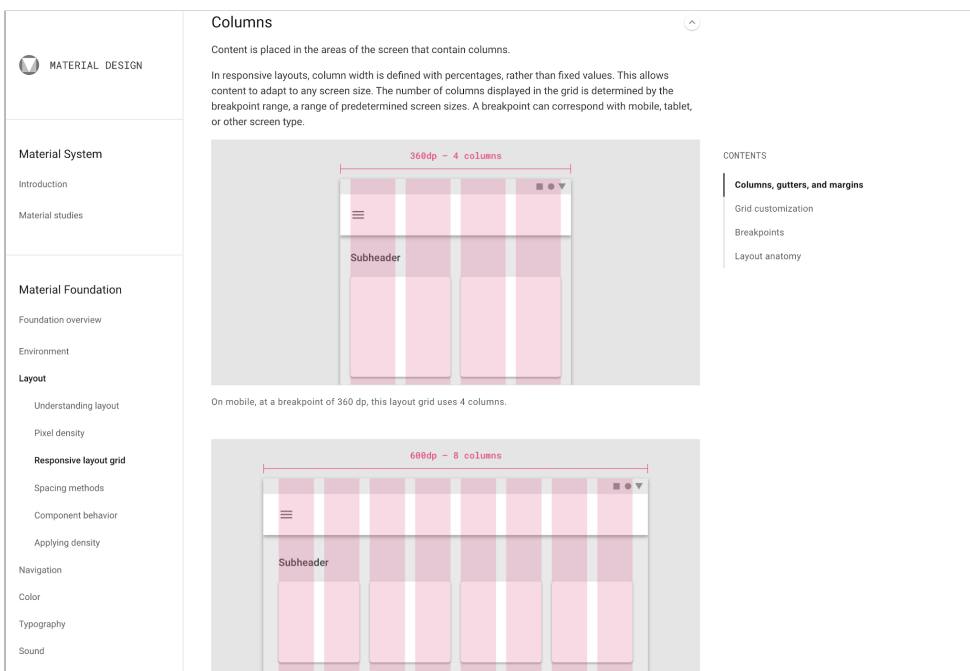
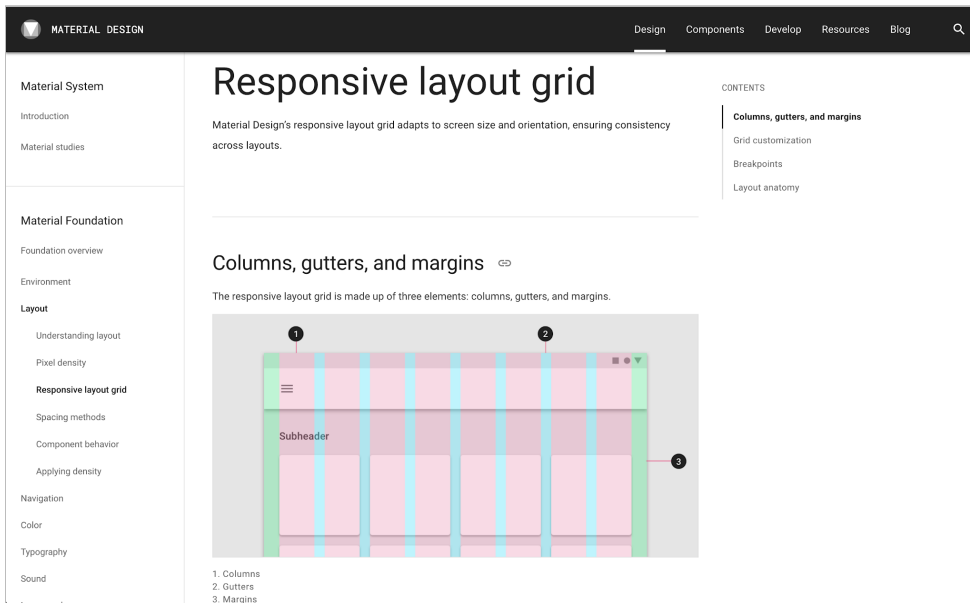
[Example of an E-commerce home page template] (Lucidchart, n.d.)

The power of all contemporary UI/UX design research seems to be boosted by the explosive necessity of commercial activities on the Internet.

The domination of E-commerce has been the reality. When the commercial goal is translated to the visuals on the Internet browser, a few certain types of wireframes and aesthetics are preferably chosen. This directly explains the iterations of the design templates. Again as I've explained in the last chapter, it's a matter that forms are to be synchronised to their functionalities.

2.2 The lead of big tech companies

Another thing we have to look at is that E-commerce has been boosted by the globalised user groups and content circulation happening at the speed of light. Since the commercial agenda such as advertising and promotion has started dominating the web, the big tech industry has gotten a good excuse to frame the notion of accessibility into particular design rules. The 'accessibility'-orient approach is authoritative, subordinating companies that are smaller in scale. I and my friends who also work in web design practice used to share a thought that there's strong pressure that web designers and publishers should conform to a certain design trend, initiated by the powerful industry in the name of accessibility. For instance Material design, which is a digital design language developed by Google in 2014, guides web designers to use responsive grid-based layouts, animations, and effective transitions in specific ways.



[Screenshots of MaterialDesign's Responsive layout grid guideline] (Kim, 2022e)

Such a design guide often tends to be considered legit as it comes from thorough research taken by the company. Due to the dignified position of Google, their guidance can't easily be neglected by designers. But we may need to remind ourselves that the lead by such a huge company has been shaping users' minds as well as designers' minds about how the web and app interface should look like. It is consequential that the design template service tends to comply with its powerful lead.

"If we only look through the interface we cannot appreciate the ways in which it shapes our experience." (Bolter, J and Gromala, D., 2005, p.27)

In the book, the author (ibid, p.26) suggests readers see the computer interface as if they're looking through windows. Through the windows, we look beyond. Of course he also mentions that there are some cases when the interface becomes rather mirrors than windows, such as when activating icons or choosing menus; When we make it to function. Yet his central argument is that it's problematic that most digital interfaces are designed to convey information just quickly and clearly to users. What he strongly claims is that (ibid, p.23) the digital experience does not simply enhance the delivery of information but makes the information to be an experience itself. What a beautiful perspective it is.

The industrial perspective of a transparent interface presupposes that users only want productivity, but it may not be entirely true. A real tragedy now in the web is that the personal sentiments of users are dismissed.

Here I want to tell you my personal story. When I was a teenager in South Korea, a hang-out platform called *Cyworld* was very much flourishing. It's not an exaggeration to say that most Koreans had accounts there.



[Mini-homepage in Cyworld] (SK Communications, n.d.)

It was established in 1999 and then began to prosper around the mid of the 00s. I think I was 12 years old when I first joined the Cyworld community, and it was in 2004. The mechanism of the platform was that basically, you create your own page which is called a mini-homepage. Then you set your profile, decorate your homepage with different types of wallpapers and background music, upload photos or videos (most of them were stupidly cute selfies I remember), and more importantly, make a family ship-like

connection with your friends. Especially I loved a guest book section where I could leave a message when visiting friends' pages.

The idea of the platform was to offer users a pure social agency, with intimacy. Sadly, however, Cyworld died around 2010. There are many evaluations about its fall, but one of the main reasons is told that it had merely remained as a small scale 'hang-out' community, not functioning more as a global and commercial arena. The main motto of the company was to draw 'personal' and 'intimate' feelings of users. By the time, in contrast, users' desires were changing from feeling personal to being influenced by a broad choice of lifestyle cultures. (This is explained by the flourish of Facebook, which is now renamed Meta.) Ironically now, there's a wave now in Korea that Cyworld should revive as people are missing the feeling of a cozy home. It'd be partially because many users are probably exhausted by the mega social network platforms. This example illustrates users are not just charmed by the efficient mechanism of web culture.

3. Conclusion

It seems like I've taken a detour to talk about why the design templates and frameworks are prevalent. In a nutshell, I want to point out that the domination of design templates and frameworks is involved not only with the fact that building a website is a technical realm, but also with the contextual transformations on the web by high commercial demands and the trend lead of the major tech industry.

I find it understandable that templates and technical frameworks are almost indispensable. It doesn't mean, however, that I completely advocate the common practice of deifying them based on efficiency and transparency. I as a user and a creator believe the web design practice will prosper more when fresh perspectives are added to it. I wish designers could create more windows that users can look through, beyond, and sentimentise.

Conclusion. User Sentimental Experience

As web design and development entail usability, the room for artistic expression is not very huge indeed.

But what I still firmly believe is that there ARE spaces for the attempts to be made. The matter is more about when and how the experiments come.

1.1 What I mean by the experiment: attempts to embrace emotions

In the thesis I've been repeating the word 'experiment', but this has many different layers of meanings in fact. (Even implementing technical functions is an experiment.) To be honest, I chose to use this vocabulary because I had to take advantage of its huge abstraction to be interpreted till I figured out what I truly meant.

I think I can finally clarify it now. My lamentation mainly lies on the lack of 'emotions' and 'sentiments' in the websites both as a user and a creator. Thus what I mean by the experiment is attempts to bring more emotions on the web.

1.2 The lack of emotion in the web as a user: a dry arena for tasks

I don't even remember since when I've been missing my freedom and sentiments on the world of WWW. This argument may sound like a nostalgic complaint but as a user, I've had some suppression that I must do something productive on the web. Maybe I should search for some helpful articles and references, answer emails, apply for some job positions, etc. My mind is occupied with many internal and external assignments and I can't really be spaced out. Having fun on the Internet sounds extravagant. Most of the clean layouts and the text on flawless white background keep giving me a message that I MUST stay awake and focus on the tasks on the Internet. It is somehow cold and dry. Even scanning through news headlines or watching recommended videos from Youtube is not as free as they sound. Usually these behaviours are for warming up my brain or procrastination before I perform upcoming tasks.

1.3 The lack of emotion in the web as a creator: the oppressive disciplines

The missing sentiment still exists from a creator's position too. Since I've been wishing to work with the web medium, there has been some pressure that I should make a website as most other websites look and function. Of course I learned the web medium should firstly be functional and usable. But still, I can't stop feeling that the two conditions are eating up other elements. Once they are fulfilled, there are barely any next steps.

I personally believe designers from the industry can put their efforts into establishing functionality with 60-70% of energy, then have spare rooms to think about user emotions too. But it seems like most of the websites are made with 90-100% of energy for solidifying usability.

This kind of argument is easy to be neglected by firm research-based arguments in UI/UX disciplines though. Therese Fessenden, a Senior User Experience specialist with Nielsen Norman Group, claimed the significance of prioritising usability over delightfulness.

"Pleasurable product can never be really useful without great usability, but usable product can be alright, even if they're not very pleasurable." (Fessenden, 2017)

Truly, what she says is right. Indeed it is 'alright' once a product has good usability, without pleasurable elements. On the other hand, her argument is a bit cold and provoking to me because the 'alright' she's claiming sounds coercive. Usability and functionality are highly dignified in the web design industry, which seems to form some atmosphere that many designers or people who want to be called designers must conform to. Otherwise they become reckless rebels or amateurs against the legit rule. If a designer attempts to import a sense of humour or playful aspects, she is prone to be a target of criticism that she takes her task at a risk. These attempts are often evaluated as a non-professional attitude.

The industry tends to think users are likely to be happy with just well-functioning websites and applications. It is of course not a wrong idea, but there are users' emotions to be taken care of as well. Careful contemplation on how users feel will not only enrich their experiences, but also expand creators' horizons. When designers have room to take a breath of fresh air, they will be able to learn about the inclusive design process.

When I was young, driving a car was always my dad's share because my mom was afraid of it. It was often that he had to drive at least two hours when traveling to my grandparents' place. The thing was that he always wanted me to take his next seat in the car, for a reason that I'm more talkative than my mom. Then any kind of conversation filled the moment of driving. Our topics were mostly very daily things. I often talked about some hilarious stories that my friends told me or celebrities who I had a crush on. Another type of conversation was about people or landscapes we were observing through the car windows. He liked opening a window at his side. "Doesn't that building over there look quite old?" "The lady is carrying so many things. She must have shopped in the market." There were many interesting elements outside to see, which made us slightly smile during the travel hours. He 'had' to drive, but he was enjoying it with conversations through the windows.

2. What is a 'professional' designer?

Although I'm convinced about the value of small experiments, I'm still a bit unsure if they'll be accepted by the industry. There is implicit fear that the experiments for user sentiment would be rejected for a reason of efficiency. I know there are some welcoming gestures about the adventurous attitude but also skeptical viewpoints, saying that they're risky in the so-called 'professional' area. But what does the professional really mean?

In reality, it's likely that I'll be heard I'm professional if my technological skills and working experience correspond with qualifications determined in the industry. (The technical skills would be capacities to create responsive wireframes, flat iconography, transition effects, etc. It'd be a big plus to have knowledge about Javascript.) This is a very pragmatic and economic perspective. Of course I'm not saying that designers don't need to know about design tools or programming languages. But being a UI or UX designer is not only to be proven by her technical skills but also by how deeply she understands the terms. As I mentioned in the chapter before, there is unfortunate pressure on the technical capacities required for web designers. This is of course one of the significant qualifications for them, but shouldn't be all of it.

Personally I like working with Html and Css. Javascript is still a bit new. I'm still learning it. I believe I can create a good interface and user experience, using only Html and Css. But honestly I must confess that I'm often discouraged by my ignorance of javascript writing.

It is a pity that designers' talents and passions are mainly estimated by their technical abilities. This pressure might be one of the causes why many web designers can't or don't think beyond the pragmatic conditions.

3. Rich user experience

In addition, I think the positions labeled as UI, UX, or product designer sound a bit hyped and majestic.

Have you ever heard the term 'rich (or positive) user experience'? It's a motto of the UX design practice, literally saying that enhancing user experience of digital products. I was wondering about the origin of it, then found a clue from the article 'Rich User Experience, UX and Desktopization of War' written by Olia Lialina.

"So I remember very well the moment when Tim O'Reilly promoted the term Web 2.0 and announced that the time of Rich User Experience has begun. This buzzword was based on Rich Internet Applications, coined by Macromedia,¹ that literally meant their Flash product." (Lialina, 2015)

The part where Lialina described the term 'buzzwords' shows her critical stance towards it. Let me imagine the phrase by myself, apart from the actual root of it. Thinking about the words 'rich' or 'positive' and 'experience', I can sense some warmth, smiles, playfulness, activeness, energy, personal, etc. These words don't necessarily mean something complete and flawless. Sadly, however, interpretations of the words by major web design industries seem quite narrow. Another word that is often claimed by the industry is 'user intimacy', which is also doubtful to me. When I heard the word the first time, I naturally thought of something cozy, warm, and personal. In reality, however, many (so-called professional) designers tend to define the intimacy as a design mechanism of making a website familiar with many others, so that users feel visual seamlessness. Where are all the warmth and energy? I believe these phrases can be more generously

interpreted. Some might point out that I have a naive perspective, but I believe it's crucial to smile and feel warm and happy. It's true that we want our life to be easy and comfortable, but recognising how we FEEL is also very important to navigate our lives.

Lialina again pointed out how restrictively the rich experience is defined, in her publication 'Turing Complete User Resisting Alienation in Human Computer Interaction'. *"The paradox for me at that time was that "rich user experience" was the name for a reality where user experiences were getting poorer and poorer. You no longer had to think about web or web-specific activities.*

Also, Web 2.0 was the culmination of approximately seven years of neglecting and denying the experience of web users – where experience was Erfahrung, rather than Erlebnis.⁶ So layouts, graphics, scripts, tools and solutions made by naive users were neither seen as a heritage nor as valuable elements or structures for professional web productions. That is why designers of today are certain that responsive design was invented in 2010, mixing up the idea with coining the term; though it was there from at least 1994." (Lialina, 2021, p.41)

4. My project

Her argument above also makes me think about how I as a designer have tended to confine myself from ideas of good designers. In the thesis I've been repeating the word 'the design industry' a lot, which indicates how much I've been caring and conscious of the standards in web design. (I mean I've been criticising but also concerned about judgments for my portfolio at the same time.)

Through my upcoming project, however, I want to give myself a chance of emancipation from the shaped image of the 'good' and 'professional' web designer.

What I aim to explore in the project is the comprehensive possibilities of the rich user experience. The exploration will be presented as a series of web-based prototypes and essays, focusing on drawing users' daily sentiments. Thus it can be called a project for *User Sentimental eXperience*. As for the sentiments, I'm thinking of many different aspects such as tenderness, immersion, nostalgia, cuteness, playfulness, or even momentarily zoning out, etc. What I expect these attempts to be meaningful is that the sentiments are not something based on proof and certainty. As I'm questioning the status quo of web design practice with full of functionality prioritisation, I believe the moves to embrace ambiguity could bring some freshness.

Sometimes I used to complain that my life is boring. I used to wish for some big happy events or gifts to come. What enriches my life, however, might be not necessarily the big happy events. It might be rather some tiny and grateful emotions that I've been passing by or dismissing. They have always been there but I often didn't bring them into my life, saying I'm too busy. Now I'm curious to see if my small attempts to import more 'sentiments' on the web could bring more colours to my life, as well as to my practice.

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