Graphic design and the aesthetics of user interfaces

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Abstract

Graphic design as I understand is a process which creates communicative artefacts that will be interpreted. The principal focus of research in this context is the visual ‘surface’ or landscape where the user, the ‘machine’ and digital material meet. The user acts through and interacts with this surface. Here, aesthetics encompasses not only beauty but also an understanding of the function and the cultural genre of the user interface, service or artefact.

Aesthetics can be seen 1) as subjective satisfaction (Nielsen 1993), i.e., a sort of personal cultural concept or a shared cultural concept with all of the associated symbolic meanings and 2) usability that satisfies the user. Usability means that something can be used efficiently in practice. The graphic designer has to know the user/receiver, and knowing the cultural genre helps the graphic designer to design the visuality/appearance of the artefact well.

Graphic design and the aesthetics of user interfaces

Graphic design as design is a process which creates communicative artefacts (entities) that receivers interpret. In this context, the principal focus is the visual ‘surface’ or landscape where the user, the ‘machine’ and digital material meet. The user acts through and interacts with this surface. The user interface is also the visual part of a computer system that forms the basis for the user’s opinion of the system. It is a place where the technical designer, software designer and graphic designer meet. The material with which the graphic designer works encompasses all the traditional visual materials, forms, shapes, colours, typography, pictorial material and metaphors.

Aesthetics in graphic design is constructed using forms and colours and their combinations and functionality; this is typical of all design processes. The graphic designer works with symbolic material (Buchanan 2001), and symbolic material is closely bound to the cultural context.

When we speak about products, we speak about users; in the case of graphic design and communication, we refer to receivers. In this paper, I use both terms because I will be discussing usability and user interfaces. These involve both symbols and action. Symbols refer to communication and meaning, action to usability.

Aesthetics has been understood mostly as a part of art. When an artefact is ‘aesthetic’, it is pleasing, beautiful, etc. In graphic design, aesthetics can be seen in two ways: 1) It is subjective satisfaction (Nielsen 1993) and a sort of personal cultural concept (deriving from a person’s own experience) or a shared cultural concept and all the symbolic meanings associated with it; 2) on the other hand, usability can satisfy the user, and this, too, is a cultural consideration. Usability means that something can be used efficiently in practice and without errors – or with as few as possible. The user learns how to use the system and what the symbols mean. Thus, ease of use also can be an aspect of aesthetics.
Today, we can see focus of the aesthetics of interaction shifting from this ease of use to enjoyment of the experience. The aesthetics of a product or a service must be tailored to its functions and roles, and the interaction it involves must be judged by its aesthetic qualities - sensory as well as conceptual (Djajadiningrat et al, 2000, 66).

Accordingly, when we speak about applied art – which graphic design is – function comes first. The graphic designer always has a given message, or content, that is basis for designing form. But very often graphic design is understood as art (in itself). In this romantic tradition, the designer is an artist and follows his/her intuition (Schriver 1997). The romantic tradition emphasises that design is more art and “doing art” than it is communication, for instance. Individual style is important and design work is based on intuition. The renown of the designer is important.

There is nothing wrong with intuition, of course, but we must know more. We must follow the rhetorical tradition in graphic design and realise that there is also the function and the receiver. There is no interpreted message without a receiver. Intuition and intuitive solutions can draw on very profound professional skill and knowledge of the cultural context and the audience. This develops through long practice and experience in design. Yet, besides this, we need exact information and knowledge about the meanings and experiences that are created. Cultural interests are moving from the moral-political towards entertainment.

But is there aesthetics without enjoyment of an experience? People experience positive feelings when they encounter visually pleasing views, symbols, entities etc. (e.g. Ermi 2002, 61). The user may also trust more in visually appealing machines and objects (Karvonen 2000). But is it appearance that attracts the user, or suitability for some certain purpose in a genre? For instance, people expect soap operas to look like soap operas, and if a new soap opera can be assigned to the genre ‘soap opera’, people are satisfied with it. (Thereafter, of course, they may decide to like the show or not, but determining the genre is the first step). Expectations have been fulfilled. Expectations have to be distinguished from real enjoyment and aesthetic experience. If gatekeepers like something, so, as a rule, do the masses, too.

Function and experience go hand in hand. Good experience is a significant part of how the function has been designed. If use has been successful, the user may decide to like or not to like an interface, service or artefact.

**ANALYSING THE PROCESS**

Graphic designers design forms and symbols, and users use interfaces and artefacts in a certain social and cultural environment and context (Forlizzi et al, 2000, 420). Users have their emotional values and prior experience, and the product/artefact/service has a certain form, features, aesthetic quality and usefulness. There is again a meeting point. The designer should note how forms and colours, etc., are interpreted against users’ values.

We can analyse the process as follows:

1) The first step is to catch the user’s eye. There have to be forms and colours that users will be interested in and want to know or experience more. This step may be seen as a perceptual matter by perceptual psychologists but it can also be regarded as a cultural dimension of design.

2) The second step is understanding and providing the necessary information, so that the user can go on. This area is for denotative interpreting. It is connected to ease of use and familiarity, that is, understanding how the system works and, of course, identification.

3) The third step is the most interesting, particularly where aesthetics is concerned. It is the essential subjective satisfaction. This is the area of connotative interpretation. Users study the material and subjective satisfaction is
possible. This is an interesting area for the graphic designer to examine, because good design should produce satisfying artefacts and symbols.

Forlizzi (et al., 2000, 423) suggests that an interaction designer should understand experience and how it might be created. Actually this idea is very much in line with the rhetorical tradition in graphic design. Design work is a process in which the function of a message or action as well as its receiver and user are important parts of the process. Designers have to know the user/receiver.

Aesthetics is a part of the whole experience in another way as well. Usability is good if something (an application, message) looks good and produces some enjoyment. But what do we mean by these results? Are they bound to a certain cultural context and certain technical solutions in a certain historical period?

Djajadiningrat (et al 2000, 66) suggests further that one requirement for an aesthetics of interaction is attention to the richness of a system’s appearance, interaction and potential roles. Richness in appearance means that a product and its controls distinguish themselves through differentiation in form, material and texture. This richness can attract users to act through the expectation of appealing – or aesthetically powerful - interaction. Users find enjoyment in a product’s combination of appearances. Today’s black boxes, designed for generic users and with rows of similar looking controls that all require pushing, turning or sliding, lack richness in the dimensions mentioned (Djajadiningrat et al 200, 66).

Appearance and visuality have to be rich, so that all different actions can be understood correctly.

**DEVELOPING VISUAL GENRES**

How are beauty and attractive appearance designed? Where do they come from? How do meanings become positive experiences? Here, I regard aesthetics as positive experiences brought about by designed entities. We can speak about a suitable style. The concept of style can be problematic; genre may be a better one.

Again, I would like to ask why a particular visual symbol or syntactic layout generates pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment in my mind? I can recall experiences from my own history of experiences. But how can a designer know the user’s mind? In the following, I will present the concept of genre and use it as a tool to understand how aesthetics can be understood in the design process and the final outcome.

Genre is a kind of a convention. Its presence is acknowledged not only by following it but also by breaking it. All of these rules work in relation to one’s audience. Different kinds of audiences may interpret elements in different ways.
The concept of genre developed in research on film. It can be seen as expressional habits, how things and characters should look and act. It has created cultural expectations; we know what a detective story is and what a Western is. We know what a women’s or a news magazine should look like. A bank’s user interface on the Internet should look like a bank’s user interface and we know what an automatic teller (ATM; computer terminal for playing bills) should look like. (Figure 2.)

Reinforcing habits and considerate redesigning bring enjoyment to the receiver/user. Nowadays popular culture and so-called high art are mixed. Aesthetics has been a part of high art before. The more popular the genre, the more fixed its rules are. A particular visual expression evokes a certain content strategy. But what happens when the phenomenon is new and there is no genre frame yet? A new technological environment will first adopt old forms of expression, so we can think that new user interfaces include a certain parts of old expressions. This in turn means that the more referents old expressions have, the more careful the designer has to be.

Aesthetic enjoyment is created in the usability of visuality, with genre recognised through the following rules:

1) Genre is recognised: visuality has typical features and forms in a genre (in this case, the features and forms are limited symbolic forms, metaphors, typography and the syntactic location of the elements). It is important for the genre that it be recognised. That activates its rules.

2) There is something new in the relation of the other older representations of this genre.

3) Visuality is well and professionally designed; meanings are understandable and the symbolic material, etc., respond to the given function. Recognising professional features in a design presumes an understanding of the profession of design.

In visual surfaces, the symbolic material and metaphors have to relate correctly to the old and new content, expression and use. By placing value on an old as well as a suitable new and surprising feature, but one which is controllable, the designer can bring aesthetic enjoyment to the receiver/user.
Bibliography

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