

DESIGN RANT

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I must say first that I am an amateur, many design decisions were made from ignorance, and some were made to buffer ignorance.

SOME DESIGN CHOICES

I elected to freeze the size and location of elements in the window. Most design decisions have a rich history, this one harks back to before windows floated and could be moved around. As a general rule, experts need more flexibility, novices just get confused. So it is a good idea to put the dashboard in the same place, to keep the same navigation elements, and to keep them in the same place from day to day. Dragging windows about is for experts; well, that is, it was for experts before software products became so enamored with features that appeal to every possible subgroup of users. Now, not only is there not enough screen space for fixed windows, there is not enough screen space to hold all the windows you need for doing simple tasks like text processing.

I designed this site with a professional program that had twenty or so different types of windows, each with several context-sensitive modes (i.e. they changed content as well as location), and each with pull-down and pop-up windows of their own. Can you imagine a painter who had to spend a few months learning each color of the rainbow, before he could paint a picture?

So I froze the windows, and created a limited and specific space for words and links. The discipline of saying what you have to say in a few inches, rather than in an apparently infinite roll-down sheet, is highly beneficial for clarity and for consideration. The discipline of using a strongly structured format, with consistent tables and buttons, and not much ease, is highly beneficial to reduce cognitive load for the user. Like Pong, very easy to learn very quickly!

Each page has exactly the same size and format and function. All documents and longer discussions are in PDF files linked to a few words that are all the same size and in the same font.

TOOLS

Learning new tools is a necessity, having to fight those tools to achieve design results is a pisser.

In particular, it appears that the lack of standardization of HTML interpretations across different browsers make *aesthetic design* nearly

impossible (well, unless you are a professional fighting software to achieve beautiful results, like Knuth's TeX crusade). I've been critical in the past of web-pages that are poorly designed and that prevent ease of navigation. My favorite is business web-sites that make it nearly impossible for you to purchase the product. Well, now I'm more tolerant of bad design, because the language and the tools do not support design in the first place.

Foxfire is quite beautiful, Safari is not, Explorer is an evil troll. Now, I don't know exactly why browser developers have made the choices that they have, but I have taught dozens of Software Engineering graduate students who also happen to work for Microsoft. And from the assignments that they turned in, I've learned that their corporate culture is arrogant, internally competitive, high testosterone, and values hacks over good style.

So when Explorer ignores the spaces that I have crafted so carefully in order to place information in the best location for comprehension and for lightening the cognitive load, I suspect that the coders of Explorer would say that I really don't know where space should be in the first place. That they know better because they, after all, are writing the code and making the bucks.

Or perhaps it is generally important for products to differentiate themselves by undermining sane standards in favor of obfuscation. Cause after all, if they don't, then the poor quality of their workmanship might work against them.

Or perhaps the pace of internet technology is so fast that no one can both write good code and keep up with the changes. As if the pace and evolution of technology were not connected with the pace and evolution of the development of technological tools.

This I do know: Foxfire was written by an individual, with the help of a few friends. Every piece of good software that I can think of was first written by an individual. If a company can afford to put more than a few programmers on a project, then we are paying them too much for their products!