



Distinctive Design

A practical guide to a useful,
beautiful web

Alexander Dawson

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A Practical Guide to a Useful, Beautiful Web

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*For the long suffering professionals who work tirelessly
to make the web a better place, and those individuals who continue to strive for
a more accessible, standards compliant Internet.*

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Setting the Stage

Some details for the journey ahead

WHEN THE WEB was new, the role of a web designer was fairly limited. Designers used HTML and liked it, CSS was lacking widespread, graceful support (some things never change), and the concept of designing good interfaces for the visitor was just being explored. With things gradually improving we've lived through two browser wars, the first via desktop browsers and the second (still ongoing) via handheld devices, both with plenty of casualties!

As the web continues to evolve with new standards, so must the methods for dealing with the demands placed upon its infrastructure. With the number of Internet users rising toward two billion, more browsers and devices than you can count, and with networks like Facebook gaining an enviable user base, the need to customize experiences and provide a non-intrusive way of showcasing content is critical.

As I move through the book, I shall not only focus on the key technologies that now influence how content is designed, structured, and visualized (HTML, CSS, and JavaScript.) I also give you plenty of diagrams (because this is a design book and the visuals are what much of our work comes down to). As such, design can and should be considered (whether distinctive or otherwise) both an art and science (with some philosophy thrown in).

Introducing distinctive design

Hopefully, as you examine distinctive design, you'll get as much enjoyment from reading about the material as I've had from writing it. Luckily, I'm a fan of simplicity and straight forward ideas so you don't need to be a rocket scientist or a brain surgeon to take part. Whether you're getting started in design (but know enough code to implement the changes) or have a background in it, you'll still find some useful nuggets of goodness to help you improve your design work.

I've also been of the opinion that designers want to do what's in their visitors' best interests. I've no worries if you've made some designs that have caused other experts to begin crying. My primary focus and goal is to let you know about the wonderful options that exist and allow you to make informed choices for yourself (in what's appropriate) – because one size simply doesn't fit all when it comes to your identity!

One of the benefits of this approach is that I'm firmly in support of trial, error, and continuing your education. So as you examine the theories, patterns, knowledge and perspectives laid out in this title, feel free to experiment (at your own pace) and take opportunities to learn more about the subject either using the links I'll provide, or through your own user research. Self-motivation is important to any designer (it's almost as important as having creativity).

Motives and Motivation

When I was first approached to write this book, the principles of distinctive design were firmly at the forefront of my attention. My passion for accessibility (at an almost religious level), my enthusiasm for writing, and my empathic need to help future generation of designers (and developers) has shaped how I not only build websites, but has also challenged and enhanced the knowledge I currently hold.

Although giving up the knowledge I've spent years learning may seem crazy to onlookers, design problems are so widespread, and the topic of good design both technical and theoretical that while you may benefit from what I'm providing (by opening your eyes to new ideas and methods to boost your designs visibility), it's almost certain that good practices will take some time to gain traction.

It's also worth stating that I love my job and find it deeply rewarding. The web has become such a dynamic environment that you'll never run out of things to learn (and those who say they know all they need to should be approached with caution). While the diverse nature of the web has driven a few of us crazy (literally), I jumped at this opportunity to showcase a subject within the scope of design that many aren't aware of (which is quite unfortunate).

The web is an amazing medium with scope for an almost infinite array of unique designs and potential improvements. Although much of what you'll read is common sense or practical advice, it should apply in equal measure to whatever you create. With this in

mind, I hope to challenge the way you view your designs and spark that creative “self-improving” spirit.

The need for a book that highlights the importance of distinctive design was born of this enthusiasm. Putting things simply, while designers are able to make something pretty and usable, few really examine the intricacies of the page (and its content) whilst taking time to consider, control, and hone the focus and attention to which visitors can gain benefits from.

A Primer on Distinction

The principle behind distinctive design can seem quite daunting once you look through the table of contents of this book. We’ll examine subjects like psychology and information design, findability and interaction design! There will be plenty of cool abbreviation usage (which won’t help your scrabble score) and some things you may not initially think of as web orientated.

Without going into a lecture about why this is important, I’ll let you in on a secret . . . distinctive design is simply about making things stand out and controlling the attention parts of a page receive! Department stores literally spend millions in researching how to lay out their shop floors to attract customers. Movie directors spend just as much trying to emphasize what’s on the screen to try and engage the viewer’s emotions.

The world influences how our attention is caught on a daily basis. Examples include the signposts we read, the ways in which our senses are “hooked” via television or radio, and even the spam that get’s shoved through the mail (as much as you wish the marketing men would leave you alone).

As the web is equally perceptive to similar techniques (just with different implementations to print, visual, or physical design), it seems only natural to want to explore how such methods can be leveraged to give your designs and layouts that distinctive sparkle of attention. You wouldn’t want to build a car unless you understood your tools, the same goes for the web.

Although you may be aware of core concepts like usability, accessibility, and their functions in a design’s success, the ability to maximize the way in which people recognize and respond to the interface is almost as important as ensuring that it can be seen and used (at the most primitive level). This book is therefore aiming to go beyond what you would find in your average design or usability title and highlight such inherent benefits.

At this point it's worth establishing that I'm not saying you should all start dumbing down our layouts and stylistic creativity so that the aesthetics or content suffers as a result. The whole process of wielding these ever more fanciful and useful technologies should engage your need to experiment and get your visitors involved in seeking (rather than just being served) attention-worthy content. Getting it shiny and noticeable is pretty much the ultimate goal.

Much of design is an illustration showcasing our ability to reflect our audience's needs in a consumable format. Doing this with accuracy (rather than guesswork) will not only make your awesome content and services more usable (and probably more awesome by the fact that people will see it, perhaps with feedback!), but it will help you target your sites visitors in ways that could give you an edge over the competition . . . like the idea?

Great Expectations

So now that you've heard the sales pitch and gained a brief insight into the concept of distinctive design, it's time to learn exactly what you should expect from this package. Because this title is based around design rather than development, there will be a few expectations of your skill set. Remember that even a novice can learn as they progress.

To keep this book at a readable length, attempts have been made to keep it from becoming a technical manual. While this title does cover a wide scope of subjects, keeping it in a format that's digestible is as important in print as it is on the web (and what kind of web designer would I be if I turned this title into something as huge as your telephone directory).

Secondly, because this is quite technical (relating to design) you'll need some basic skills to keep up. It doesn't matter if you're not artistic; it doesn't even matter if you're still learning to code. What is important is that you are passionate and are willing to learn the applicable skills (code or otherwise) to implement the techniques you'll uncover throughout the chapters.

Hopefully at this stage, things are looking peachy. If you do find that you do come up against a brick wall in a particular subject, it doesn't mean that the book is entirely useless. I've planned this title so you can apply the principles in any order, either as a supplement to your existing skills, or you can simply implement the techniques as you learn to develop. As with many things in life, it's the awareness of issues that matter, not the background you possess.

Beyond this, I think common sense and logic must prevail! This title certainly isn't feature complete (on every possible angle as you'd need hundreds of volumes) and to quote the phrase "here be dragons," there's elements that still require a lot of research and discovery. With this in mind, as developments occur in the future you'll want to be under no illusions that design-ing is a constant effort, so keep reading blogs, sites, journals, magazines, and books.

Frequently Asked Questions

I'm sure at this stage you have plenty of questions, such as what exactly are we going to talk about! Without giving away too many secrets at this early stage I decided that it would be in everyone's best interests if a few immediate concerns were resolved. As such, the following list of frequently asked questions aren't frequent (in the sense that my inbox is getting swamped) but they're incredibly valid at this stage and are usually asked within computer or design books.

Q: Do I need to know everything, and can I learn it all?

A: *Because of the web's evolutionary pace, it's impossible to know everything about designing for the medium. While you can become quite proficient with a good range of knowledge, you won't have the time to learn it all (so focus on what you need to know)!*

Q: What is the right way to design or build a website?

A: *Everyone has different needs, expectations, and ideas of what a good design is. While aesthetics are only part of the job, a good experience is made up of more than just eye candy! So there's no right or wrong way, just potentially helpful and unhelpful practices.*

Q: Does this information work for every type of site?

A: *Of course! Different websites will have different requirements and require a varying range of information to be displayed in the browser, however that doesn't detract from the nature of showcasing and giving distinction to a page (so that focus can be drawn).*

Q: Can I use these principles outside of the web?

A: *Absolutely! Although print (like magazines), visual (like video), and physical design (like architecture) have their own unique sets of challenges and requirements, it's perfectly possible to cross over many of the concepts in this book to other visualized formats.*

Q: Will this teach me how to create my first website?

A: *Sorry, although this book has plenty of newbie-friendly material and would make a great companion to a development book (or something that teaches you how to build your very first site), this will cover some advanced ground and focuses on improving experiences.*

Q: Should I pay a professional or do it myself?

A: *If you have the money to splash out on a guru, it may be worth the money as their years of experience will obviously cover a wider range of skills than this title can provide in a single volume. If not, self-testing is a better alternative to having no testing at all!*

Q: Is there really such a thing as bad design?

A: *Although this is a subjective answer, it's quite probably yes. Some sites can be really badly implemented, some can be impossible to use (for able-bodied and disabled individuals alike), and some are just plain ugly or annoying (or bad to the point of scary)!*

Q: I just want to have a simple site. Should I know this stuff?

A: *Although many individuals these days rely on content management systems like the mighty Wordpress or a template that was provided either for free or at cost, there are still improvements you can make. Why settle for average when you can be distinctive!*

Book Conventions

Like most books, this one follows a series of conventions. Regarding the personality of the content, an emphasis on being concise but useful is maintained. The last thing you want is to hear me waffle on about some *amazing* aspect of design to the sacrifice of something else of equal importance. In addition, it's always fun to see more than reels of text, so lists, tables, images, diagrams, and other cool “widgets” will be used in addition to visualize the principles.

Some of the things you'll find:

- > **Screenshots and Diagrams:** To see a real-world implementation.
- > **Wireframes:** Mockup interfaces to visualize specific concepts.
- > **Tables, Charts, and Graphs:** Flow, bar, pie, and other useful data.

Alongside these elements, you'll find a series of special calls to action that will give you some extra nuggets of useful information. They'll be quite distinct in appearance and have icons to let you know what type of details you shall receive. As for what they represent, I've included a complete list as follows (so that you will know what to look out for). Remember that in the case of website links, occasionally they may disappear (so check the book's errata for corrections).

Call to action conventions used:

- > **Note:** A technical term or abbreviation that requires an explanation.
- > **Reference:** A useful site, book, or something else to continue learning from.
- > **Tip:** A best practice or personal recommendation relating to a subject.
- > **Important:** A warning or reminder that may affect what's being attempted.

E-Book Bonus Chapters

Distinctive design is comprised of many components. Although this book covers a wide range of these valuable theories and practices, many more exist for you to explore. The supplementary e-book covers three additional subjects that can help you improve your sites visibility and ease-of-use. You can find the e-book at www.wiley.com/go/distinctivedesign.

The Bonus Chapters are

- > Bonus Chapter 1: Understanding Information Architecture
- > Bonus Chapter 2: The Influence of Sociology
- > Bonus Chapter 3: Accessibility: Removing Disability

Down The Rabbit Hole We Go!

Congratulations, you have completed this stage of the journey. Now that all the disclaimers and overview segments are complete, we can get down to business and this is where our distinctively unique quest for a better design shall begin. Just like in Alice, we shall go down the rabbit hole and tumble into Wonderland where nothing is as it seems (hopefully there won't be any animated GIFs of the Cheshire cat going on your site anytime soon)!

From this stage forward, the focus of this book shall not be aimed at either me (as the author) or you (as the designer or developer). Our focus is simply and quite literally aimed at the visitor (that fabled creature that often seems like a mythical beast). After all, we build sites and experiences for our visitors to enjoy, consume, and (in some cases) pay for. The greatest ace in the designer's handbook is to design for your users, not force users around your ideas.

Part I

Designing for the Web

The Distinction of Web Design

Principles and variables of a visually appealing
layout

CREATING THE IDEAL, aesthetically pleasing, distinctive design seems like an impossible task to many. While most web industry fields have their own methodology to improve and yield results in the layout and the structure of the content, a few basic defining concepts underpin the whole process of forging beautiful designs. Essentially, the goal is to achieve maximum impact on users.

Within this first chapter, I highlight the justifications for creating a distinctive design, the variables affecting the end users, and the importance of visibility. In addition, I provide a solid introduction to critical basic design concepts, including neutrality or balance. I also explain how to emphasize the right content, how to prioritize and analyze content in order to clean up an interface (using tools like minimalism), and how to avoid conflict and inconsistencies with websites.

Taking You Back to Basics

Within the realm of user experience, complexity has become the enemy of the people. Often at the most basic level, the need to create more intrinsically dynamic and functional designs causes website visitation (and the users who browse those sites) to suffer. Although the concept of “designing with purpose” is nothing new, how people read and recognize objects, and how much attention people give to some components within a layout compared to others, can be summed up in the four words shown in Figure 1-1.

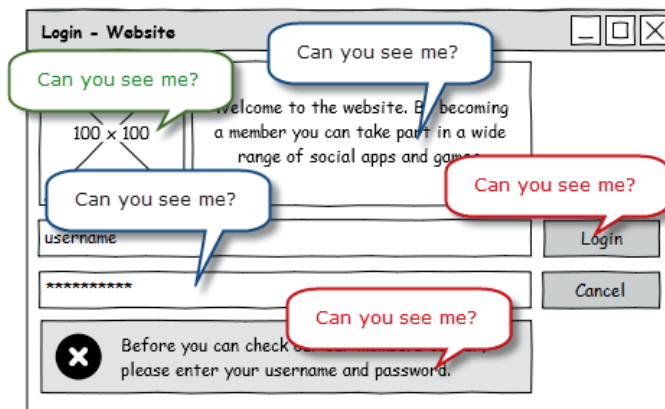


FIGURE 1-1: Each and every element asks, “Can you see me?”

Treating the elements of your website like a living, breathing entity may seem rather silly at first, but the visualization it produces accurately reflects the situation. Just picture

each part of your site as someone within a crowd. The loudest individuals are shouting above everyone else. This clashing certainly results in quieter voices going unnoticed, even if that voice is important within the project's context.

Gauging every object's importance against the level of noise and distraction elsewhere on the page is central to assigning a level of purposeful distinction to your pages. Your users have a limited attention span, and by ensuring that the objects on the page have a well-balanced proportion of importance versus voice, you create a distinctive—and visible—design that people can enjoy and browse without constraint.

**Tip**

To learn more about the average Internet user's attention span (or lack thereof), check out this article by usability specialist Jakob Nielsen: www.useit.com/alertbox/timeframes.html

If something is visibly useful to a page, assign more attention to it (see Figure 1-2). Less important items on a page require less attention. You have little time to impress visitors before they hit the Back button or look elsewhere. The exact amount of time is up for debate, ranging from zero points of a second, as people subconsciously pre-judge what they see, to five or ten seconds. Web professionals often forget that selective emphasis holds importance!

Headings are given size and strength advantages by default

Whereas a paragraph of text is of a regular size and appearance until *emphasis (giving italics)*, **strength (giving bold)** or **strong emphasis (giving both)** is applied through HTML elements or CSS!

FIGURE 1-2: A stylistic flourish within a page often depicts emphasis and strength.

The balancing act can be quite tricky. You should analyze and self-critique your methods as well as ask others to give feedback. Even negative feedback is helpful; actually, in many cases, it's more helpful than positive feedback. The justification for many design choices rests upon those four essential words (refer to Figure 1-1); by wielding such control over a page, you ensure users find what they want (or need) at the point they require it.

**Important**

Remember that feedback is quite subjective (and should be taken with a grain of salt). Don't implement changes that users request on a whim without a good reason. Some things can actually make a design worse, and the last thing you want to do is destroy all your hard work!

Time, space, and relativity

Understanding the needs of your content is central to the concept of distinctive design, but the user experience demands more than simple information visibility. Although an inanimate object, your content has a few primary needs that must be accounted for in the overall layout, such as visibility and accessibility. Many variables can affect the duration and extent of a visitor's experience, and while some of these are more imposing than others, such as pesky browser bugs and page availability, some can be tied into human perceptions and the amount of resources or self-sacrifice web professionals choose to assign to a service.

Time, space, relativity, and other variables speak volumes to the finite resources humans often temporarily assign to a site for the duration of their stay. Each variable ties deeply into the other because they are often measured upon the perception of whether the effort exerted by visitors matches the importance level of other events going on around them.

Check out this list of finite resources:

- > **Time:** There's only 24 hours in a day, and users rarely spend all of those browsing a single site. How much of this precious resource a visitor uses on your site depends on the value of the content.
- > **Space:** The freedom to browse a site without inhibition is important to the overall user experience. If users feel restricted or forced into jumping through unnecessary hoops, they may exit!
- > **Relativity:** The relationship between content and sites is important to the web. If a site's content connects to a concept or subject introduced by another site, it may gain added attention.
- > **Money:** Services with defined costs have to work even harder than free or ad-supported sites for attention. Since the content is provided behind a "paywall", money is needed to gain visibility.