
Designing Social Interfaces

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Preface

Why We Wrote This Book

We wrote this book because we needed a book like this and knew there wasn't one on the market yet. We wrote this book because our pattern of collecting and documenting and arranging social user experience interface design patterns grew large and complex enough that we felt that it warranted a book-length treatment and presentation. We wrote this book to build on the work of the social design community and propose a large macro-landscape for organizing and discussing these interaction patterns and to help build a consensus on a common language and set of conventions for discussing social design. We wrote this book because every web designer and developer on the planet today is being asked to consider the social dimension of their work and we wanted to help.

Who Should Read This Book

This book is for people who make digitally interconnected websites, mobile applications and other software with the potential to connect people to each other.

This includes web designers (who may call themselves interaction designers, user experience designers, information architects, user interface designers, usability experts, or front-end developers), developers (who may call themselves engineers, software architects, programmers, coders, or database architects), business owners (who may call themselves product managers, business analysts, marketers, CEOs, or founders), and anyone else who has an investment in creating compelling engaging user experiences for social groups of people through the interfaces of their software products.

How to Use This Book

You can read this book cover to cover. It's arranged with a narrative flow in which ideas build on each other. But we designed it to work just as well as a reference. You can zero in on the particular section you're interested in or just read about a specific interface pattern, exploring related concepts through cross-references and the index. The book

also has a companion wiki at <http://designingsocialinterfaces.com/patterns.wiki> where you can offer feedback and suggestions or request that we address subtleties you did not find in this edition of the book.

How This Book is Organized

This book is organized into five sections. The first introduces the concept of user interface design patterns and outlines some high-level principles for social design that we believe inform all the subsequent patterns, the next three parts each introduce a major cluster of related patterns, grouped together by theme, and the final part explores some emerging considerations that have not yet attained the status of patterns but that bear close attention.

Part I: What Are Social Patterns?

In Chapter 1 we lay out exactly what we're talking about when we're talking about patterns in the design of interfaces for social user experiences and how to work with them. In Chapter 2 we cover some of the broad overarching principles that can make the difference between a successful thriving online community and a ghost town.

Part II: I Am Somebody

One of the building blocks of social experiences are representations of individual people in the system. Just as in Monopoly, each “player” needs a “token” that represents them in the “game.” Chapter 3 explores how to engage users and get them to register for and sign in to your service, thus establishing the beginnings of a new “self” in your system. Chapter 4 offers patterns for the representation of an individual identity, using things like profiles and avatars. Chapter 5 discusses ways to indicate presence and show people in your application who else is there. Chapter 6 presents a family of reputation patterns that can help encourage the sort of behaviors you wish to foster.

Part III: Where's the Action?

This is the largest chunk of the book, where we get into the actual behaviors the people engage in online, and introduce the concept of social objects: those “conversation pieces” that anchor and give meaning to social interactions online. Chapter 7 address how people may collect objects in your application. Chapter 8 looks at how sharing and gift giving work. Chapter 9 presents interfaces for publishing and broadcasting found objects and original content. Chapter 10 examines techniques for enabling people to give each other feedback on their contributions. Chapter 11 talks about communication and how it is bound to social objects. Chapter 12 looks at collaboration and how people can work together to create and evolve shared objects. Chapter 13

takes a step back to discuss social media ecosystems and how to fit your offerings into them.

Can You Tell Me How to Get...?

The third cluster of patterns addresses relationships and the communities that can grow out of them. Chapter 14 examines relationship terminology and models of reciprocity or asymmetry, how to enable users to find each other and form and declare relationships. Chapter 15 presents interfaces for community management and moderation, and models for collaborative filtering. Chapter 16 explores how to enable people to meet each other in the real world and create shared events.

Further Considerations

In the final part we approach the leading edge of social design and discuss some of the considerations you may encounter there. In Chapter 17 we look at many models of openness and the benefits and consequences of embracing them in your social architecture. In Chapter 18 we look to the frontiers of “social in the enterprise,” mobile application development, generational change (at both ends of the age spectrum), and what we can learn from game design.

Using Interaction Patterns [suggested rewrite of example code disclaimer/or just cut? (no code in this book) —xian]

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What Are Social Patterns?

In the past 15 years, I have watched the proliferation of Internet technology spread across the globe and have been immersed in the creation of tools and interactive experiences to help people navigate their way to information, to other people and to create their own places on the web. I have seen the rise and fall of the first wave—the dot.com boom and bust—and have experienced first hand the explosion of Web 2.0 and social media as both a designer and a participant.

These electronic connections and social enabling tools are changing the way we interact with each other. I believe that these tools can be designed and simplified to enable normal people to expand their online experiences with others. These social patterns of behavior and the interfaces to support them have emerged and continue to settle out as we find better ways to bring people together.

Social patterns are the components and pieces of interactive experiences that are the building blocks of social experiences. They are the best practices and principles we have seen emerge from hundreds of sites and applications with social features or focus. They are the emergent interaction patterns that have become the standard way for users to interact with their content and with people who matter most to them.

Mommy, what's a social user experience pattern?

"I have a dream for the Web...and it has two parts. In the first part, the Web becomes a much more powerful means for collaboration between people. I have always imagined the information space as something to which everyone has immediate and intuitive access, and not just to browse, but to create. Furthermore, the dream of people-to-people communication through shared knowledge must be possible for groups of all sizes, interacting electronically with as much ease as they do now in person."

—Tim Berners-Lee *Weaving the Web*, p 157, 1999

A little social backstory...

The terms “community,” “social media,” and “social networking” all describe these kinds of tools and experiences but I’d like to clarify what they mean and how they are different. The terms are often used interchangeably but they provide different views and facets of the same phenomenon.

In a paper published in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* in 2007, Danah Boyd, noted researcher specializing in social network sites, and Nicole B. Ellison defined social network sites as: “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.”

According to wikipedia: “Social media is the use of electronic and Internet tools for the purpose of sharing and discussing information and experiences with other human beings” and it defines social networking as “a service which focuses on building online

communities of people who share interests and activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Most social network services are web based and provide a variety of ways for users to interact, such as e-mail and instant messaging services.” Community is defined as the group of people who utilize these environments and tools.

Social design for interactive digital spaces has been around since the earliest bulletin board systems. The most famous being The Well(1985) which was described by Wired magazine in 1997 as “the world's most influential online community and predated the world wide web and browser interfaces by several years. Since the beginning of connected computers, we have tried to have computer-mediated experiences between people. As Clay Shirky notes in a 2004 Salon article, “Online social networks go all the way back to the Plato BBS 40 years ago!”

In the early days of the web, social experiences were simply called Community and generally consisted of message boards, groups, list-servs and virtual worlds. Amy Jo Kim, author and community expert, calls these place-centric—gathering places. Community features allowed users to talk and interact with each other and the connection between people was usually based on the topic of interest that drew them to the site in the first place. Communities formed around interests and relationships evolved over time. There was little distinction between the building of the tools to enable these gatherings and the groups of people who made up the community itself. Bonds were formed in this space but generally didn't exist in the real-world, offline.

The interfaces and interaction design for these types of tools were all over the board—from graphical representations like eWorld to scary looking, only for early adopters, to the simple forms of AOL chat rooms.

The first example that straddled the line between Community and what we now call Social Networks was the site, SixDegrees.com (1997). Six Degrees showcased connections between people, allowed users to create and manage their personal profiles, and brought people together based on interests and other features. Sound familiar?

Somewhere along the way though, before the dot.com bust, Community became a dirty word—most likely because it was overly resource intensive to build and care for and no one had quite figured out how to make money from all that work.

With the advent of Web 2.0, and this second wave of websites and applications and the richer experiences offered—more sophisticated technologies and faster bandwidth for the masses—social has taken on a new life. Suddenly, social networking is all the rage and every site must have social features. In this phase, social has many more components and options available to users, but generally means features or sites that allow interaction in real or asynchronous time between users. The tools are more robust, storage space is more ample and more people are online to participate. The increase in online population is a major driving force for the shift in priorities of these types of features and sites. There is critical mass now. By 2006, 73% of Americans, 64% of Europeans and over 50% in the rest of the world, were online and participating.

Another key difference between the first cycle of social and now, is that the social network—the real relationships, people that I know and care about—is key to the interactions and features. Features are gated based on the degrees of connection between two people. Many of the tools and websites offer features and tools that support existing offline relationships and behaviors. These sites count on each person bringing their personal networks into the online experience. The concept of tribes and friends has become more important than ever and has driven the development of many products.

What was ho-hum in 1997 has become the core—for user features as well as opportunities for making money. Additionally, the power of the many, or the wisdom of crowds, has been allowed to exert some control in terms of creating content and spaces and in the processes of self-moderation. Companies are learning that successful social experiences shouldn't and can't be overly controlled. They are learning they can leverage the crowd to do some of the heavy lifting, which in return spares some of the costs. User-generated content has helped many businesses and the participating community keeps things moderated.

The other factor contributing to the spread of these types of features is the simple fact of a new generation of users. These folks have grown up on technology and expect it to help facilitate and mediate all their interactions with friends, colleagues, teachers and coworkers. They move seamlessly from computer to their mobile device or phone and back and they want the tools to move with them. They work with technology, they play in technology, they breathe this technology and it is virtually invisible to them.

With the expectation of seamless experiences, it becomes important for designers to see the emerging standards and to understand how one experience of a site and its interactions affects the expectations of how the next site is experienced. By working with standard and emerging best practices, principles and interaction patterns, the designer takes some of the work off the user to understand how their application works and can focus on the unique properties of the social experience they are building.

What do we mean by principle, best practice and patterns?

To start, we do define these three things differently. They live along a continuum, from prescriptive—rules you should follow—to assumptions—a basic generalization that is accepted as true—to process—ways to approach thinking about these concepts.

Principle: A basic truth, law, or assumption.

Principles are basic assumptions that have been accepted as true. In interaction design, they can lend guidance for how to approach a design problem, and have been generally shown to be true in respect to a known user experience problem or a set of accepted truths. They don't prescribe the solution though, like an interaction pattern does. They

generally support the rationale behind an interaction design pattern or set of best practices.

Practice (or best practice): A habitual or customary action or way of doing something.

Best practices are funny things. They are often confused with principle or interaction patterns. They fall along the continuum and are less prescriptive than an interaction pattern solution—in our definition. We often include best practices inside an interaction pattern. The best practice helps clarify how to approach a design solution and is generally the most efficient and effective way to approach solving the problem, although not necessarily the only way.

Pattern: A model or original used as an archetype.

When we developed the Yahoo! Pattern Library, we defined a pattern as:

Common, successful interaction design components and design solutions for a known problem in a context.

Patterns are used like building block or bricks. They are fundamental components of a user experience and describe interaction processes. They can be combined with other patterns as well as other pieces of interface and content to create an interactive user experience. They are technology and visually agnostic and we do not prescribe either of these. User experience design patterns give guidance to a designer for how to solve a specific problem in a context in a way that has been shown to work over and over again.

The notion of using interaction design patterns in the user experience design process follows the model that computer software programming took when it adopted the concepts and philosophies of Christopher Alexander. Alexander, an architect, wrote the book, *A Pattern Language* (1977). In his book he describes a language, a set of rules or patterns for design, for how to design and build cities, buildings and other human spaces. The approach is repeatable and works at various levels of scale.

Alexander says that, “each pattern describes a problem which occurs over and over again in our environment, and then describes the core of the solution to that problem, in such a way that you can use this solution a million times over, without ever doing it the same way twice.”

In addition to developing this language of elemental repeatable patterns, he was concerned with the human aspect of building. In a 2008 interview, he says that his ideas “make them (homes) work so that people would feel good.” This human approach and concern for the person (as user) is part of what has appealed to both software developers and user experience designers.

The idea of building with a pattern language was adopted by the computer software industry in 1987 when Ward Cunningham and Kent Beck began experimenting with the idea of applying patterns to programming. As Ward says, they “looked for a way to write programs that embraced the user, where users felt supported by computer program not interrogated by the computer program.”

This approach took off and in 1995 the book *Design Patterns: Elements of Reusable Object-Oriented Software* by Erich Gamma, Richard Helm, Ralph Johnson, and John Vlissides (known as Gang of Four) was published.

In 1997, Jenifer Tidwell published a collection of user interface patterns for the HCI community based on the premise that capturing the collective wisdom of experienced designers helps educate novice designers and gives the community as a whole a common vocabulary for discussion. She specifically called out that she was attempting create an Alexandrian like language for interface designers and the HCI community. The evolution of that site and her work became the book *Designing Interfaces*, published in 2005 by O’Reilly Media.

Several others published collections on the web including Martijn Van Welie, a long time proponent of patterns in the interaction design realm, which in turn inspired my team at Yahoo! to publish portions of our internal interaction pattern library to the public in 2006.

I had joined Yahoo! In 2004 to build a pattern library for the ever-growing user experience design team and to create a common vocabulary for the network of sites that Yahoo! produced for it’s hundreds of millions of global users. We built the library in a collaborative manner, utilizing the most successful, well-researched, design solutions as models for each pattern. Designers from across the company contributed patterns, commented and discussed their merits, added new information as technology and users changed and moderated the quality and lifecycle of each pattern. In 2006, spearheaded by Bill Scott, we were able to go public with our work with a subset of the internal library. The work has been very well received by the interaction design and information architecture community and has inspired many in their design work.

The notion of having a suite of reusable building blocks to inform and help designers develop their sites and applications has gained traction within the interaction design community as the demand for web and mobile interfaces has become more complex. When the web was mostly text, there wasn’t a whole lot of variety to how a user interacted with a site and the toolkit was small. The complexity of client applications was difficult at best to duplicate online. But that was then.

Now, whole businesses and industries rely on easy-to-use web based software to conduct their business. There is more need than ever to have a common language for designers and developers. And as social becomes integrated into every facet of interactive experiences, it is important to put a stake in the ground around just what those pieces should be and how they should and shouldn’t behave.

The importance of anti-patterns

The term Anti-patterns was coined in 1995 by Andrew Koenig in the C++ Report, and was inspired by the Gang of Four's book Design Patterns.

He defined the term with two variants:

1. Those that describe a bad solution to a problem which resulted in a bad situation.
2. Those that describe how to get out of a bad situation and how to proceed from there to a good solution.

Anti-patterns became a popular method for understanding bad design solutions in programming with the publication of the book Anti-Patterns: Refactoring Software, Architectures, and Projects in Crisis by William Brown, Raphael Malveau, Skip McCormick, and Tom Mowbray.

For our purposes, anti-patterns are common mistakes or a bad solution to a common problem. It is sometimes easier to understand how to design successfully by dissecting what not to do. In the world of social experiences, often the anti-patterns have some sort of jarring or malicious side effects.

The anti-patterns we illustrate will point out why the solution seems good, why it turns out to be bad and then we will discuss re-factored alternatives that are more successful or gentle to the user experience.

So, that's all the little parts. Now what?

Our approach for the rest of this book is similar to Alexander's in that we start with a foundational set of high-level practices that underpin the individual interactions detailed in subsequent chapters.

In each section we talk about which patterns build on others and how you can combine patterns to create a robust experience. We cross-reference patterns and give examples from the wild where we see examples of these patterns in action.

The social patterns support the entire lifecycle that a user may experience within a site or application, from signing up to actively participating, to building a reputation, to dating or collaborating with friends, to collaborative games and even moderation. We are building a vocabulary and language for social application design in the same spirit as Alexander.

“We were always looking for the capacity of a pattern language to generate coherence, and that was the most vital test used, again and again, during the process of creating a language. The language was always seen as a whole. We were looking for the extent to which, as a whole, a pattern language would produce a coherent entity.”

—Christopher Alexander, 1996

Further Reading

- A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction (Center for Environmental Structure Series) by Christopher Alexander, Oxford University Press, 1977
- A Timeless Way of Building by Christopher Alexander, Oxford University Press, 1979
- Design Patterns, Erich Gamma, Richard Helm, Ralph Johnson, and John M. Vlissides, Addison-Wesley Professional; illustrated edition edition, 1994
- Designing Interfaces by Jenifer Tidwell, O'Reilly Media, Inc.; illustrated edition edition, 2005
- Groundswell by Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, Harvard Business School Press; 1 edition, 2008
- Designing for the Social Web by Joshua Porter, New Riders Press; 1 edition, 2008
- The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier by Howard Rheingold, The MIT Press; Rev Sub edition, 2000
- Community Building on the Web: Secret Strategies for Successful Online Communities by Amy Jo Kim, Peachpit Press; 1 edition, 2000
- The Well: A Story of Love, Death and Real Life in the Seminal Online Community by Katie Hafner, Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2001
- Design for Community by Derek Powazek, Waite Group Press, 2001

Social to the Core

*The Web is more a social creation than a technical one.
I designed it for a social effect--to help people work together--and not as a technical toy.*

—Tim Berners-Lee [Weaving the Web], p 123, 1999

In *A Timeless Way of Building*, Christopher Alexander explains the purpose of pattern languages in part by saying that they are about imbuing built spaces with "the quality without a name." There is something, often something ineffable, about some architectural spaces that make them inviting, warm, humane, comfortable, healthy, and alive. Analyzing these spaces may tell us that the seating area is built on a good scale or that the lighting helps foster small groups conversations, but underlying these granular design decisions are some higher order principles that can be applied across the board.

Metaphorically, online social spaces operate similarly. A well designed sign-up flow will have a real direct impact on whether people feel invited and encouraged to join and capable of doing so. That may be one specific interface you will need to define for your site. But internalizing some higher level principles first can help you make better design decisions as you get down to the details.

So before delving deeply into all of the specific design decisions you're going to make when creating a new site or application, it can be helpful to take a step back and think about what underlying principles will help make your project successful. How can you create a space that invites healthy participation from users, grows organically, and creates value that is greater than the sum of its parts (see Figure 2-1)?

We've identified a few principles that are as close to universal as possible. Most or all successful social websites and apps exhibit these factors. They can help you decide how and when to apply the more tactical design patterns we'll be explaining throughout the rest of the book, too.

One common characteristic of social sites is that they must strive to work for everyone (that is to say, everyone in the target audience). They can't necessarily be tailored to a specific, narrow niche. But how do you cut across the variations in your user group?

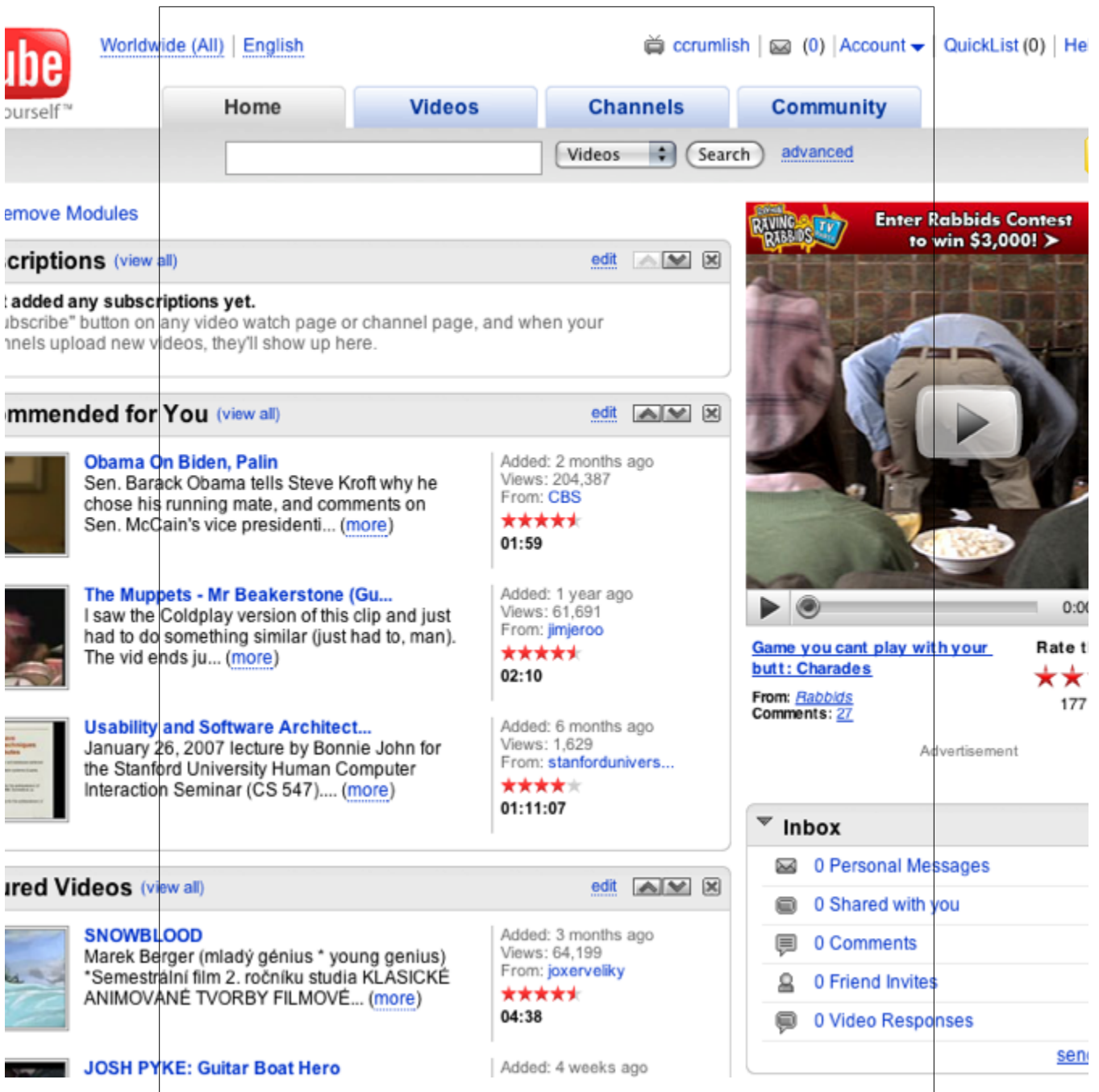


Figure 2-1. The home page YouTube creates for me after I've used it for a while and signed up for an account employs a number of different strategies to engage my attention, invite my participation, and to try to encourage me to explore some of the more social aspects of the site. Can you identify any social design principles at work here?

You can't please everybody. In fact, user experience design inherently involves trade-offs. So how do you cast as wide a net as possible and include as many people as possible?

Design for Everyone

—George Oates

Deliberately Leave Things Incomplete

One of the key differences between designing a social environment online and designing a traditional-media-style broadcast-oriented content site is that the design of a social community online cannot be entirely predetermined. Or, rather, let me say that it should not be. The denizens of a social site must be given the opportunity to “finish” the design themselves.

This principle finds form in a number of familiar concepts: customization, skinning, user-contributed tags and the emergent folksonomies they can give rise to.

You might call this part of the process "meta-design." Rather than giving our users a fish, we are giving them a rod, reel, bait, and instructions to teach them how to fish. We design the rules of the system but not all of the outcomes.

By designing with this philosophy, we create open space rather than filled-in labyrinths. If we are successful in bringing people to our site, engaging them, and involving them in the life of the community (as will be discussed in the following chapters), then they will make the subsequent choices, individually and collectively, that will determine the more detailed shape of their shared environment.

Strict vs. Fluid Example: Your Taxonomy

Part of leaving the design unfinished involves determining which elements to nail down and which to leave more free-form. Using Flickr, as I often will, as a sort of canonical thriving social application, it's easy to see examples of both design decisions at work. Some elements of Flickr's interface are rigidly defined. These include the object model, the site's master navigation, and the short list of predefined relation types.

The object model provides for people, people have collections of media objects, people can join groups and submit media objects to them, and so on. The site's master navigation has these items at its top level: (Home, You, Organize, Contacts, Groups, Explore). The short list of predefined relation types allows for a person to define another person as a contact (this relationship need not be reciprocated to take effect), and optionally to further classify the person as a friend, a family member, or both (see Figure 2-2).

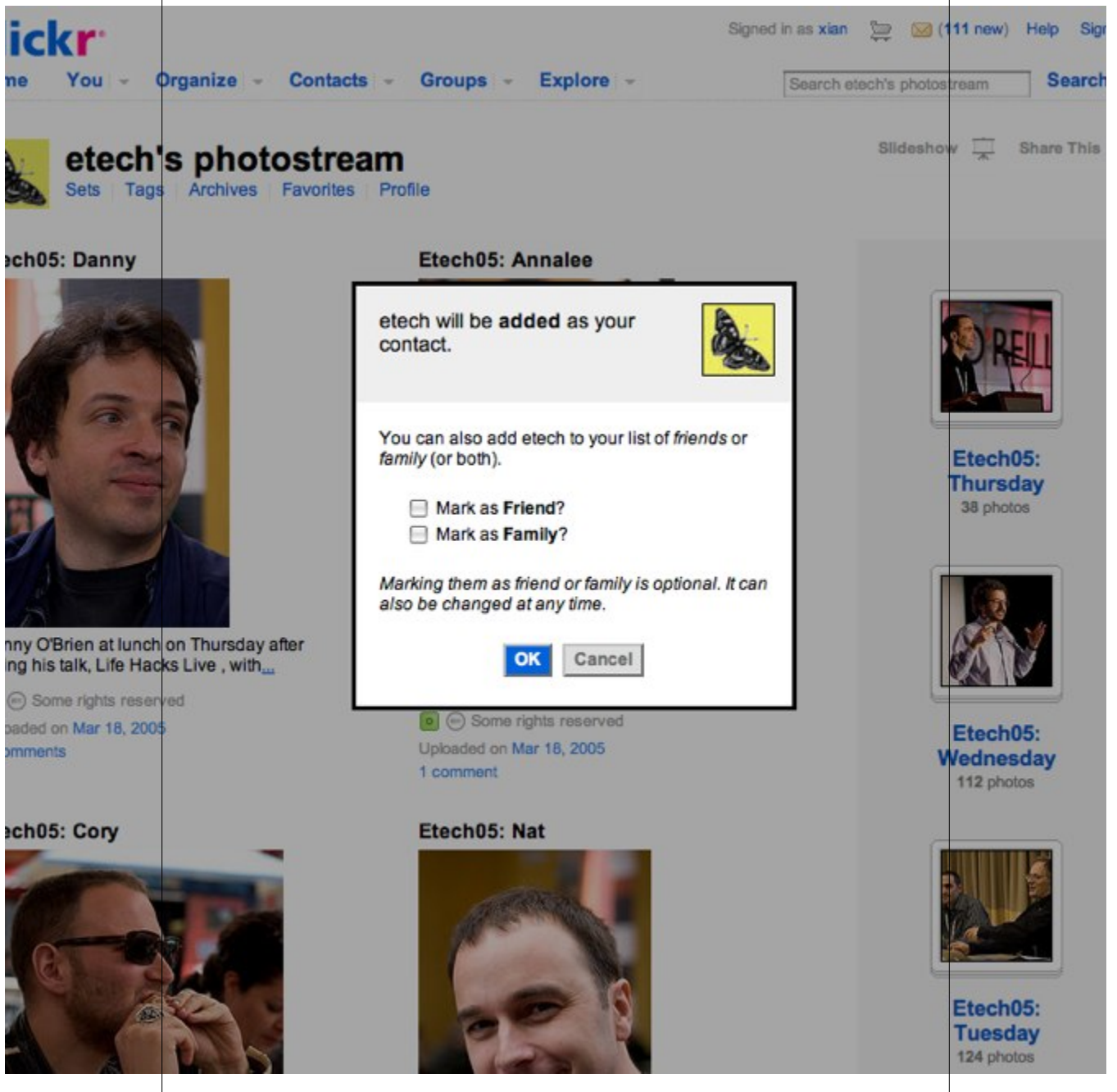


Figure 2-2. At Flickr, contacts can be friend, family, or both (but that's it)

I'm not saying these design and information architecture decisions have never changed. Since its launch, Flickr has added a second media type (video), and has refactored its navigation menus without changing the basic philosophy. It has also changed from a free-form connection model that allowed users to define additional relationships to the narrow one it has today (because relatively few users took much advantage of this feature, so it offered limited value for the maintenance required).

This last change backed off from the more fluid taxonomy approach that, where appropriate, can enable users to invent concepts, labels, classifications and groups in an evolving way that meets their needs without requiring the you, as the designer, fully anticipate every conceivable scenario that your social application might foster and support.

In addition to these "rigid" taxonomy elements, Flickr does also give its users unlimited freedom along some carefully defined axes to invent whatever meaning they need. Examples of this include Flickr's well known free tagging feature that enables users to tag their own objects and gives users the option of permitting others to tag them as well (see Figure 2-2).

Another free-form taxonomy element inherent in Flickr's design is the unlimited ability to create groups with any conceivable name or purpose. This feature involves a number of patterns we'll discuss presently, including the concept of a group, ridiculously easy group formation, discussions, joining, invitation, and the ability to add media objects to a group's "pool."

Flickr users also invented the concept of an award associated with a group. These often gaudy images are offered to users in the comments on a particularly relevant image or video and generally accompanied by an invitation to join the associated group (or at the very least to proudly display the award which, incidentally, then functions as a sort of advertisement for the related group). Many people consider these awards tacky and pushy, but they do represent an innovation invented by users and permitted (but not directly supported) by the Flickr UI.

In this way (with or without awards) groups can function as browsing "pivot" for the user, taking them from the image of a friend, to a related group, and then on to other images (see Figures 2-4, 2-5, and 2-6).

Palimpsest

In a talk Matt "blackbeltjones" Jones gave at Adaptive Path's MX week in 2008, he recommended the metaphor of the palimpsest (<http://www.slideshare.net/blackbeltjones/battle-for-the-planet-of-the-apes-a-perspective-on-social-software-and-social-net-works/56>) as a "model for social tools," while speaking of Dopplr, a social network for frequent travelers:



The Hair Triplets by [Rugby Mad Girl](#)

3 comments 4 faves 1 note

Tagged with [party](#), [molly](#), [clockwork](#), [islington](#) ...

Taken on [June 7, 2007](#), uploaded [June 12, 2007](#)

Taken in [Pentonville, London, England, United Kingdom](#) ([map](#))

See more of [Rugby Mad Girl's](#) photos, or visit her profile.



Molly And Christian by [Rugby Mad Girl](#)

2 comments 4 faves 1 note

Tagged with [party](#), [molly](#), [clockwork](#), [islington](#) ...

Taken on [June 7, 2007](#), uploaded [June 12, 2007](#)

Taken in [Pentonville, London, England, United Kingdom](#) ([map](#))

See more of [Rugby Mad Girl's](#) photos, or visit her profile.



krauts all over london by [Tomas Caspers](#)

2 faves

Tagged with [london](#), [media](#), [atmedia](#), [jensgrochtdreis](#) ...

Taken on [June 18, 2006](#), uploaded [June 18, 2006](#)

Taken in [London, England](#) ([map](#))

See more of [Tomas Caspers' photos](#), or visit his profile.

Aktuell sehen Sie:
WS 15: Zukunft des Barrierefreien Internets



The live hair of Christian Heilmann by [Tomas Caspers](#)

1 fave

Tagged with [barrierefreiheit](#), [aktionmensch](#), [webconference](#), [thehairofchristianheilmann](#) ...

Uploaded [May 6, 2008](#)

Taken in [Neustadt, Gelsenkirchen, NW, Germany](#) ([map](#))

See more of [Tomas Caspers' photos](#), or visit his profile.

Figure 2-3. There's no way the designer of a social application can anticipate every tag a user might want to apply. What controlled vocabulary, for instance, would ever include a tag called "thehairofchrisheilmann"?

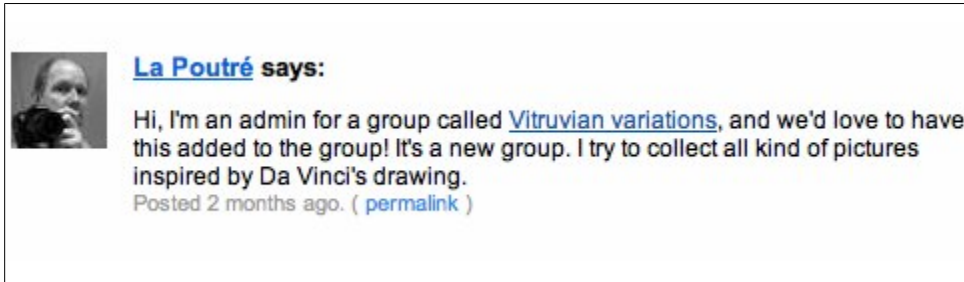


Figure 2-4. A caricature of Merlin Mann in the style of da Vinci's "Vetruvian Man" prompts an invitation to a group dedicated to just such parodies and variations.

Our content itself gets smarter as it aggregates our thoughts about it.... I think the palimpsest as a model for social tools is a powerful one.

Of course they originated from the scarcity of media, something we don't exactly suffer [from]. But thinking about the medium as something that accretes messages in the way they did helps me.

I also just like saying it. Palimpsest!

We like saying it too!

Literally, a *palimpsest* is a manuscript (this being an ancient term, it might be papyrus or parchment) that has been overwritten at least once, with the earlier text only partially erased and obscured. Thus the layers of the preceding meaning are still slightly visible through or "behind" the most current layer. The word has also been used as a metaphor to describe any place that reveals its own history.

Kenneth G. Wilson defined it in *The Columbia Guide to Standard American English* as, "a piece of writing that has been erased one or more times and written over, so that it is layers deep. It then provides a metaphor for complicated reading or deciphering or simply for penetrating to truth through layers of matter overlying it. The metaphor is not so much about mystery or age as it is about layers of meaning."

OK, so what does it mean, then? Well, it means providing your users with ways to annotate, add meaning, add metadata, reformat, recreate, and change the environment you've designed for them, while still leaving traces of the earlier contexts.

Flickr Commons is a great example of this, also ~~stolen~~ borrowed from Matt (see Figure 2-7).

Palimpsestastic!

essay still t/k from Blackbeltjones



Vitruvian variations

Group Pool | Discussion | 13 Members | Map | Join This Group

Share This

Group Pool (73 photos | Only members can add to the pool. [Join?](#))



From [Funkmania](#)



From [graham_wa](#)



From [bluemooddream](#)



From [aknacer](#)



From [Miss Advantage](#)



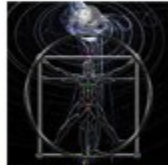
From [Ksologist!](#)



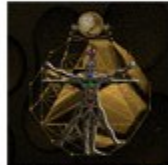
From [shaman_artist](#)



From [shaman_artist](#)



From [shaman_artist](#)



From [shaman_artist](#)



From [shaman_artist](#)



From [shaman_artist](#)

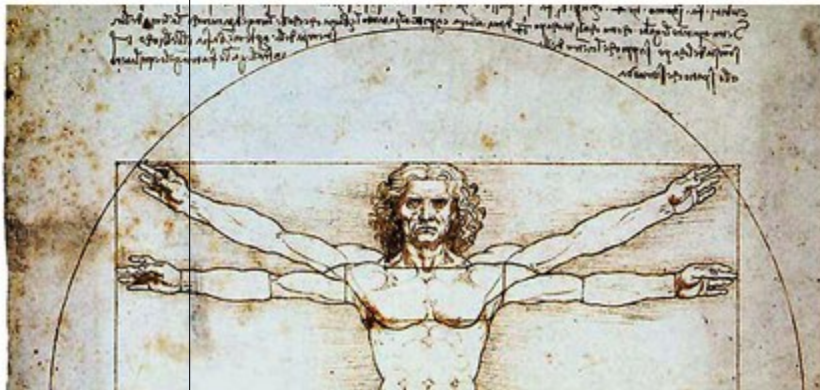
[» More](#)

Discussion (0 posts | Only members can post. [Join?](#))

No topics have been posted yet.

About Vitruvian variations

A collection of (self)portraits and other photos inspired by Da Vinci's drawing The Vitruvian Man.



Additional Information

This is a **public** group.

- This group allows safe:
 - Photos
 - Screenshots
 - Art or illustration

Figure 2-5. The Vitruvian variations group showcases a series of images with a common theme.

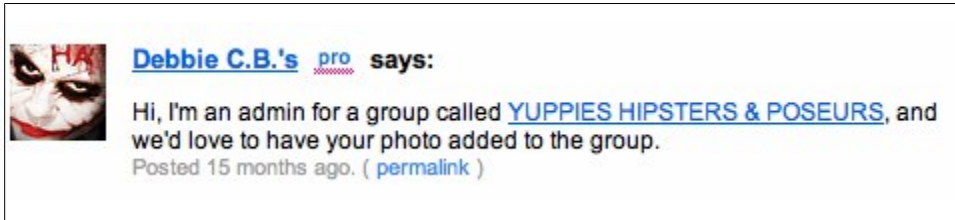


Figure 2-6. Another image in the group then prompts this further invitation that appears to facetiously parody the whole "Hi, I'm an administrator for a group called..." social interaction.

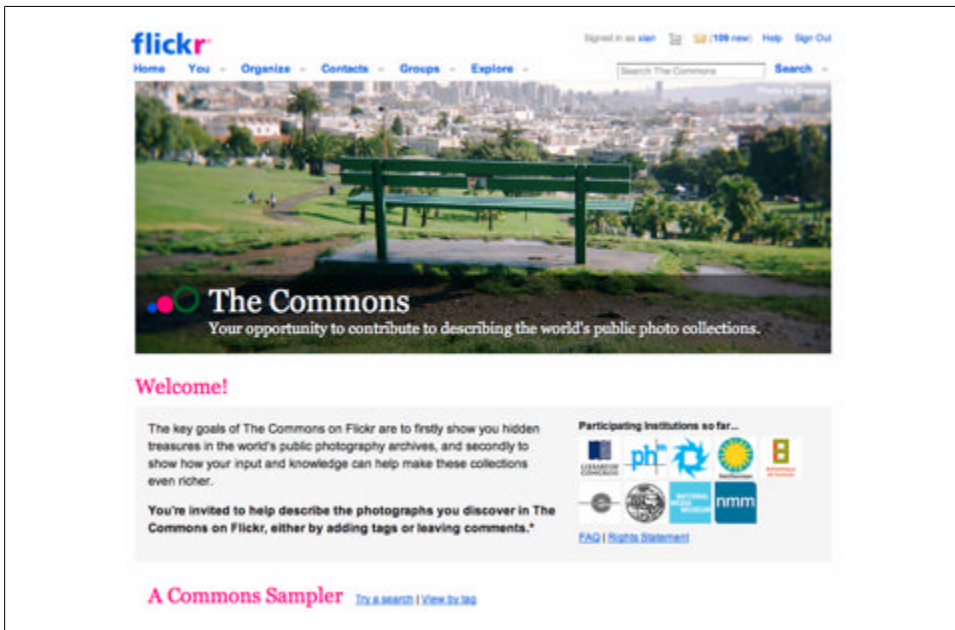


Figure 2-7. The Commons at Flickr provides a way for members of the community to annotate (by adding tags or comments to) photos from various museums and libraries (starting with the Library of Congress), thus adding successive layers of meaning to the digitized artifacts from these collections.

Social but Not Social Only

Throughout this book we will at times introduce patterns and principles whose domain is not limited to the realm of social applications. That's OK. There has always been a social undercurrent to the Internet, inherent in the fact that it has always offered a connection between people. For most of us, before we had Internet access, our computers were more like filing cabinets than telephones. They weren't communication devices, at least not in any direct way. (A typewriter may enable you to write a letter, but it doesn't deliver the letter to your correspondent.)

When personal computers became more readily networked to each other and ultimately the the “cloud” of the Internet, the experience of getting in front of a screen, typing on a keyboard (and later perhaps talking into a mic and staring into a camera) all became potentially social rather than solipsistic.

Thus a number of the patterns and principles in this book, such as the next set of patterns in this chapter, might be considered good advice for most contemporary web development projects, but they are particularly applicable to sites with a social dimension. (And, of course, that’s also becoming a greater and greater percentage of the sites out there over time.)

Talk Like a Person!

(I was originally going to call this section "Speak in Human Voice" but then I decided to follow my own advice - I mean, really, who talks that way?. "Talk like a person!" I think is closer to the mark.)

When many of us started putting together personal sites, art projects, and other creative or informal objects starting in the 1990s, the air of informality online was palpable, but when business came online a bit later in the decade, many of the first business-oriented websites reproduced the remote, inanimate, almost robotic corporate voice you tend to find in annual reports and catalog copy.

Even there, the more savvy enterprises appreciated the value of communicating to potential customers in a human voice. The corporation has always been a mask that disguises the human nature of the people who do the actual work of the business. Revealing the humanity of the people at the other end of the wire has a softening and welcoming effect.

Sure, there are still times where great formality and even perhaps distance are useful, but in an age where authority emerges from collaboration rather than being handed down from on high, the remote, formal, stylized tone of printed communications is continually in the process of giving way to a more natural, conversational tone.

This is all the more true in the context of social sites. If a website does not communicate from the get-go that it is peopled, and written by, ordinary human beings, how will people ever feel comfortable there? The antiseptic air of a hospital or the bureaucratic formality of the department of motor vehicles is no environment for fostering connections, relationships, or collaboration.

Bear in mind that the writing on your site or in your application is a key part of the user interface. Call it web copy, nomenclature, and labels if you like, but it’s as much a part of the UI as the buttons, windows, and sliders.

So, communicate with your site participants in a human voice. But how? This looks like a job for some patterns:

- **Don't upload content that is illegal or prohibited.**
If we find you doing that, your account will be deleted and we'll take appropriate action, which may include reporting you to the authorities.
- **Don't vent your frustrations, rant, or bore the brains out of other members.**
Flickr is not a venue for you to harass, abuse, impersonate, or intimidate others. If we receive a valid complaint about your conduct, we'll send you a warning or terminate your account.
- **Don't be creepy.**
You know the guy. Don't be that guy.

Figure 2-8. Use the language of contemporary speech, not that of text books, tax forms, or street signs.

Conversation

The easiest way to talk like a person (in the user interface copy of your site or application) is to adopt a conversational tone.

Problem

People reading impersonal text on a screen will remain disengaged.

Context

Use this pattern when writing copy for a social site, including instructions, errors, and other messages coming from the system itself and addressed at the reader, visitor, or member.

Solution

Resist the urge to write like a grad student or a bureaucrat. Ask yourself if that's really how you talk. Read any copy out loud and strike out anything that feels awkward to say. Try speaking the text out loud to another person to see how it feels in your mouth, hear how it sounds aloud, and observe how the other person responds.

Despite what your English teacher may have told you, it's OK to use contractions, to split infinitives, and even to start sentences with conjunctions. Just make sure it feels natural.

Special Cases

Be careful to avoid obscure slang unless you have already established confidence in the minds of your users to the extent that they are willing to rely on context and gist to follow your meaning.

Don't mistake being cute for being real.

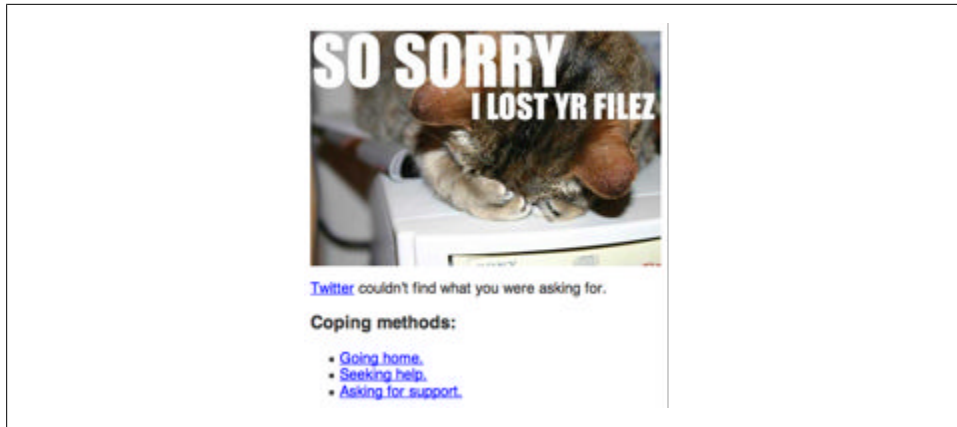


Figure 2-9. Self-deprecating or just cute?

Rationale

A conversational tone provides an opportunity for your site's visitor to respond as if really being spoken to by another person. This receptive state of mind permits the reader to enter into a dialogue with the site and reinforces the feeling that the site is made by people and not machines.

Examples

Flickr's terms of service (see Figure 2-8) epitomize this plainspoken approach, particularly the "Don't be that guy" comment.

Self-Deprecating Error Message

Error messages should always put the blame squarely on the shoulders of the site's owners and not on those of the visitor.

Problem

Error messages written in a negative or even neutral tone can sound accusatory, suggesting that the visitor has misread instructions, filled out a form incorrectly, or otherwise screwed up. Being blamed for an error by a computer is offputting.

Context

Use this pattern when writing the copy for error messages at your site. You were planning to write those messages, right? You weren't going to forget about them (yielding helpful dialog boxes that say something like "Error 41"), right? You weren't going to expect your engineers to write them were you (yielding helpful dialog boxes that say something like "Error 41: Error 41 has occurred"), were you?

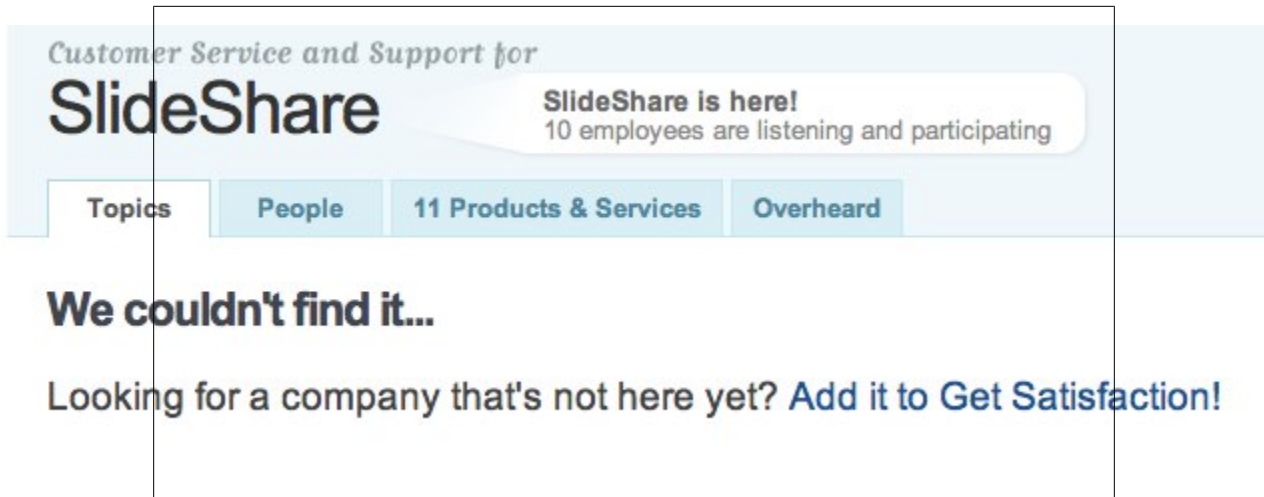


Figure 2-10. Get Satisfaction doesn't make the user feel bad when a search fails.

Solution

Writing in a *conversational tone*, explain to the extent possible what has gone wrong, why, and what to do next, if anything. Be sure to express the error in terms of a failure on the part of the system. Even if the cause of the error is the user's failure to comply with an instruction, assume that the instructions were unclear or that the entry form didn't provide sufficient guidance.

Don't blame the user for the error. Take the blame, apologize, and move forward.

Special Cases

Saying "Oops" is one way to mimic a very human way of noticing a problem and taking responsibility at the same time. However, as Bill Cosby once joked, you never want to hear your surgeon say "Oops." It's equally true that for sites dealing with sensitive personal information or circumstances (such as, for example, medical or financial contexts), a more formal tone may be appropriate to avoid the appearance of an insensitive flippancy. Even in a formal or sensitive situation, it's equally important to avoid blaming the victim when a problem occurs.

Examples

GetSatisfaction.com takes responsibility ("We couldn't find it") when a search turns up no results (see Figure 2-10).

Likewise, Twitter (see Figure 2-8) takes the blame for a failed search, makes light of the problem with a LOLcat image, and offers some links to help the user proceed.



Figure 2-11. Twitter asks you a question to get you started.

Ask Questions

One of the most common structures for a human conversation or dialogue is the format of question and answer. Since the days of the oldest mailing lists, Usenet, and Gopher, frequently asked question lists (FAQs) have sought to answer a person's questions with either the collected wisdom of the community or the answers from some authority.

People naturally have questions and ask them, either silently while seeking an answer or directly if they perceive an opportunity to do so (in an inviting interface or in the context of a welcoming group of helpful, experienced community members).

But this pattern is about how you, as the voice of your site, should ask questions of your users.

Problem

It's very easy to arrive at a page or context online and not be sure what to do, how to proceed, what to say, what to type. A blank space can be very intimidating. (You should have seen my flopsweat when I started trying to write this chapter.)

An empty or silent page can leave the site visitor unsure of how to proceed.

Context

Use this pattern when writing explanatory copy, help text, and labels on potential but currently unpopulated features in the user's interface.

Solution

Ask questions.

Pose suggestions in the form of inviting questions. Write copy in an inquisitive way so that the site visitor feels compelled to reply with an answer.

Rationale

Questions invite responses, and asking them is a way of inviting participation.

Examples

Twitter asks you "What are you doing?" Some people get hung up on whether or not to take this literally but the point is they asked, they prompted. They're starting the conversation. They're inviting you to respond.

Your vs. My

Site developers frequently argue about how to label a user's own customized elements or collected objects to distinguish them from generic site content or objects belonging to other users of the site.

There are two schools of thought on this, which can be called "Your" or "My." The names of some popular sites hint at this dilemma: MyYahoo, MySpace, YouTube.

Labeling stuff with "My" imitates the point of view of the user. It is as if the user has printed out labels and stuck them to various objects: My Lunch, My Desk, My Red Stapler. Except the user hasn't done this, you (the site) did it for them.

Labeling stuff with "Your" instead reinforced the conversational dialogue. It is how another human being might address you when talking about your stuff. Even with MySpace, people say things like "I saw what you put on your MySpace."

Problem

The possessive pronoun used to personalize or customize content on a site can reinforce either a social or solipsistic state of mind, depending on whether it's expressed in the second person or the first.

Context

Use this pattern when labeling objects belonging to or chosen by the individual user.

Solution

Use "Your" to label personal objects in social sites.

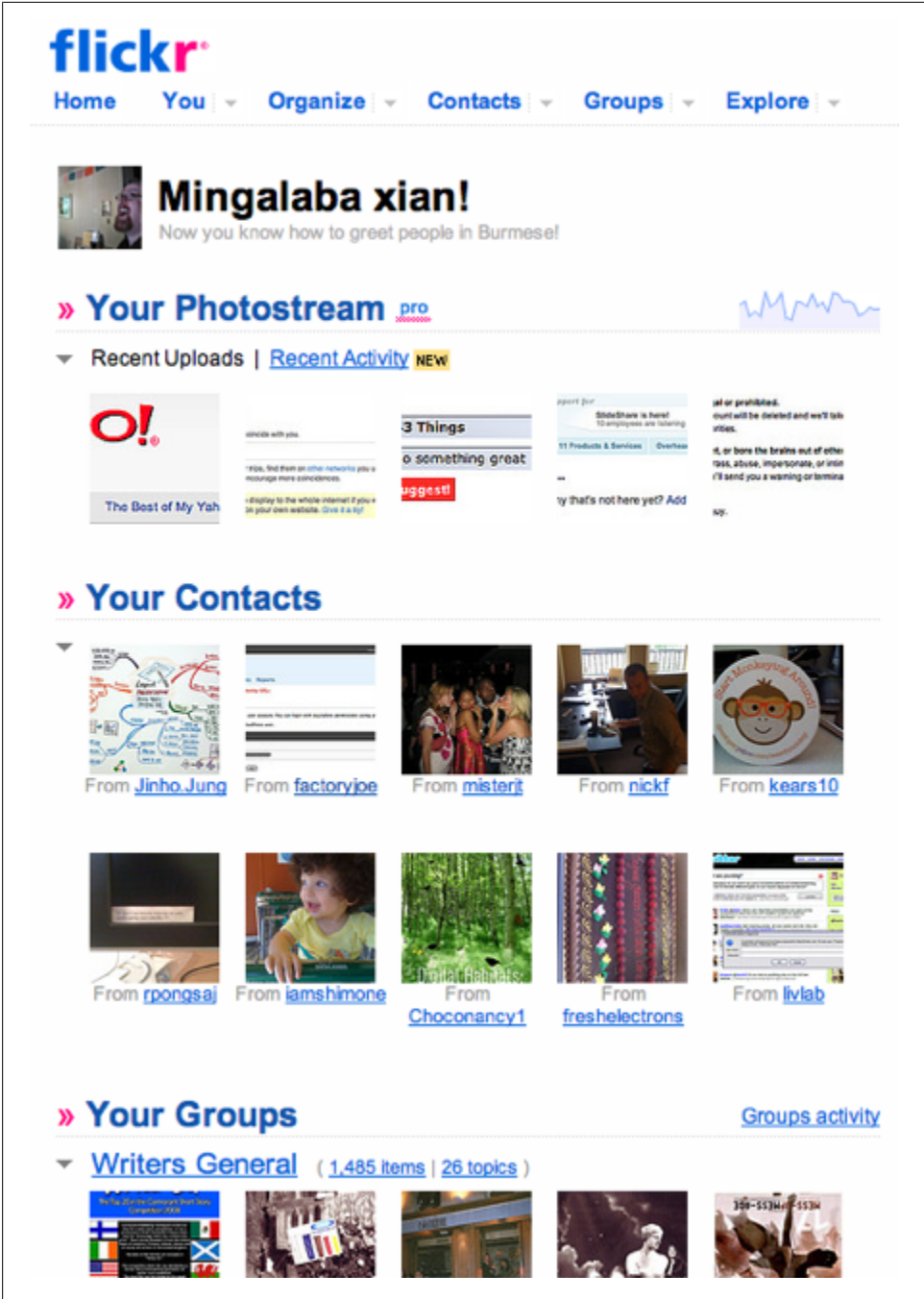


Figure 2-12. Flickr refers to “your stuff,” not “my stuff.”



Figure 2-13. MyYahoo provides users with a personal, customized experience but one that has not, up to now, been social, and the labeling comports with that.

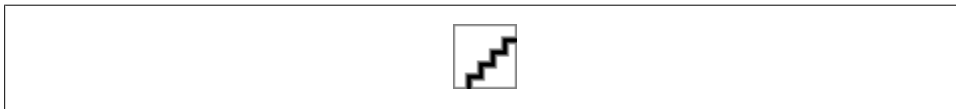


Figure 2-14.

Rationale

Objects labeled “My” on behalf of a user by the system give the feeling of an impersonal, if helpful, robotic valet or assistant, generically identifying items as if by proxy. This mode of nomenclature works just fine for private, individual environments. If a site has the feel of a bathroom cabinet or sock drawer, then calling items My Toothpaste or My Socks suits the solipsistic environment just fine.

However, in a social site, we want to avoid the call of introversion and instead encourage our participants to open themselves up to the possibility of conversation both with their co-denizens of the site and with the site (or rather the people “behind” the site) itself. Hence, we use “Your” to engage the social mind in a dialogue. A human being, even perhaps a live assistant or valet might say “I bought you your favorite toothpaste,” or “here are your socks.”

Examples

Flickr refers to all of the user's objects as "your" (see Figure 2-10).

The canonical asocial antipattern is perhaps Yahoo!'s MyYahoo! site, where everything is labeled as "My," the site's name has My in it (MySpace falls prey to the same thinking, by the way), and the site's initials are even MY (see Figure 2-12).

No Joking Around

It's often been said that sarcasm and irony don't translate well into email (or ASCII communication in general). Hence the proliferation of smilies and other emoticons to soften the impact of stark words or cue the reader that the writer may have been kidding around and not intending to give offense.

By the same token, it's nearly impossible to tell jokes in user interface copy. A sense of humor is a unique thing in each person. What strikes one as funny might strike another as vulgar, inappropriate, boring, or tedious and if the site has an international audience, differences in cultures only exacerbate the potential problems.

Resist the urge to tell jokes or to be facetious in your interface copy.

Problem

People appreciate humor and ice-breaking witticisms but unserious text in an interface is as likely to confuse people as amuse them.

Context

Apply this pattern when tempted to put jokes in your interface.

Solution

Strike out any out-and-out jokes. This is not say that you can't be witty or make sly allusions to shared cultural references. But very few people can tell a joke well, especially to an invisible audience.

Special Cases

A niche site catering to a community with a well worn stock of traditional witticisms can probably offer jokes in that same vein safely without risking alienating or confusing potential site members.

Rationale

Because humor strikes so many people in different ways and because it's nearly impossible to anticipate exactly who will end up reading interface copy, it's best to eliminate outright jokes to avoid giving offense or creating unnecessary fiction.

Let your users tell each other jokes.

Be Open

One final principle I'd like to plant now in the back of your mind: openness. Being open is all the rage these days, but it means many things to many people. It can mean radical transparency, the use of open-source software, exposing platform hooks, crowdsourcing, and more. In Chapter 15 we'll discuss several approaches to openness that we believe are essential to the effective design and development of social environments online, but for now just keep in mind the question "how could this interface be improved if we made it more open?" while designing your experiences.

The Ethical Dimension

When you are designing experiences for people, or designing frameworks within which people will create their own experiences, there is always an ethical dimension. What commitments are you making explicitly or implying when you open your doors for business. Are you promising to keep people safe, to keep their information secure, to respect their privacy? Are you willing to bend ethical rules to cheat your way through the cold start problem and rapidly build your social graph? Balzac once wrote ""The secret of great wealth with no obvious source is some forgotten crime, forgotten because it was done neatly" and many successful social sites today founded themselves on an original sin, perhaps a spammy viral invitation model or unapproved abuse of new users' address books. Some companies never lived down the taint and other seem to have passed some unspoken statute of limitations. You'll find that some of the forces that must be balanced to apply many of these patterns involve ethical dilemmas. Is opt-out good enough? Is this disclosure adequate? Is it your responsibility to stop the bullying? Throughout this book we'll call out ethical factors when we see them, and encourage you in general to keep an eye out for them yourselves.

