

Interactive Systems 3:

Practical 1: Home Page Development and Design

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1 Introduction

In this week's practical you will conduct an informal evaluation using Nielsen's heuristics for home page design. Heuristics are guidelines or 'rules of thumb'. They provide informal help on things to look for when evaluating the design of an interactive system. Heuristic evaluation does not involve testing with end-users. It can be conducted by systems developers, it is, therefore, relatively cheap and can be performed almost continuously during development. There is evidence to suggest that this approach can provide significant benefits in terms of the usability problems that are later identified during the formal evaluation of an interactive system. In contrast to heuristic approaches, formal approaches typically rely upon controlled experiments run under laboratory conditions. These techniques will be covered later in this course.

2 What Do I Do Now?

This section briefly summarises your task for this week's practical component of IS3. You should complete these tasks working in the same teams that you have been assigned for the level 3 team projects. If this causes anyone any problems then please see me as soon as possible. These teams will also be used for the first part of the IS3 assessed exercise.

2.1 Find Out More About the Guidelines

You should begin this week's practical by researching Nielsen's heuristics. Information about these guidelines, together with descriptions of the commercial application of this approach, can be found on:

<http://www.useit.com>

You should look for Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox article from May 12, 2002 entitled 'Home Page Design Guidelines'. This provides a brief introduction to the heuristics. You should also use the search facility on this site to review Nielsen's other papers on heuristic evaluation for web site development.

2.2 Apply the Guidelines

Once you are familiar with Nielsen's guidelines, your next task is to apply them to BOTH of the following web sites. It is important to remember that these sites are intended to support very different tasks for very different user groups.

<http://www.roads.dft.gov.uk>

<http://www.disney.co.uk>

In the assessed exercise for this part of the IS3 course you will be asked to redesign a portion of ONE of these two sites. This week's practical will not only help you to understand Nielsen's heuristics but will also provide an opportunity to explore these different sites before work begins on the assessment.

2.3 Briefly Document Your Findings

This exercise is not degree assessed. However, it may help with your assessed exercise if you write a one-page summary answering the following questions:

- was it equally easy to apply the heuristics to both a commercial and a government web site? Remember that heuristics are general rules of thumb. It may be necessary to devise additional guidelines to support the evaluation of particular types of web site. For example, additional heuristics might be devised for sites that are targeted at users in a particular age group.
- did the heuristics elicit any disagreements or discussion within the group? The guidelines are intended to provoke discussion. They are subjective in the sense that designers may disagree over the degree to which an interface meets or does not meet an heuristic. By arguing about them, it is possible that you may uncover more serious usability issues or dismiss trivial problems that will not affect the operation of the web site.
- were there any aspects of the home page design that might affect the usability of the site but that were not captured by the guidelines? Remember that the proponents of heuristic evaluation often make claims that are deliberately intended to encourage you to use them. It is, therefore, important that you retain a degree of skepticism about some of the more extreme claims. For example, it can be difficult to use heuristics alone as a means of anticipating the usability problems that particular user groups will experience. It can also be difficult to anticipate the effects of retrieval delays and of different hardware/software configurations that can be particularly problematic for web-based systems.

Email me if you would like to discuss your answers to these questions and I will try to schedule time in one of the following practical sessions.

3 After the Practical

This practical is designed so that it will contribute directly toward the first part of your open assessment. Information about this assessment can be obtained via the course web site:

<http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/~johnson/teaching/is3/exercises>

Additional copies of these laboratory notes can also be found from this source. Please make sure that you are familiar with Nielsen's heuristics for web page development for the exam. You should also be able to provide an analysis of the strengths and benefits of heuristics for the evaluation of interactive, web-based systems.