Redesigning Home (Before the Holidays)

Reflections on a Group Design Project

Michael Wojcik

December 15, 2009

In which a plucky band of WRA415 students examine the home, about, and registration pages of OurMichiganAve.org, and find them Good, but not Good Enough. Ideas are mooted. Bold proposals, and bold posters, are made. Designs are reviewed, often raising eyebrows (and, fortunately, provoking more useful reactions as well). Prototypes are typed. Next, the play's the thing in which we catch the essence of the thing; and with a grand report exuent omnes.

For the second phase of WRA415, I worked with Design Group 4 (the "Visual Identity" group, aka the "Home Page Heroes"[1]) studying aspects of the existing OurMichiganAve.org site (OMA), making design proposals and reviewing them with the rest of the class, creating prototypes to demonstrate our ideas, describing our vision of the updated site for the Corridor community in narrative form, and finally producing a design proposal report. Group 4 was tasked specifically with considering the atmosphere and comfort of the site's initial features. In the words of the assignment, we were asked whether the home page "felt like home", whether it "welcomed" users. Were navigation and site mission clear? How was the registration process for new users who decided to join?

These issues affect many aspects of site use, but two are particularly apparent. For users encountering the site for the first time, does the site have a hook to draw them in? Does it convey something of value to keep them reading? For users who have prior knowledge of the site, does it leave them wanting to return? In other words, what is the site's immediate draw, and what is its long-term draw, and what obstacles weigh in against those attractions? Those were the questions that framed our work.

On the whole, the project was successful. We generated a number of ideas, winnowed and refined them in design review, and produced various products (prototypes, a presentation, and a report) to present them. That said, this project was, I think, not quite as successful as the user research group project from the first phase of WRA415. I'll discuss that at more length at the end.

Bringing users home

How does a website attract and retain users? For commercial sites, these are among the most pressing concerns—after all, commercial websites exist to attract user traffic and extract customer value, whether that's through enticing visitors into profitable transactions

[1] I have just now made up this nickname, so don't expect anyone else to mention it.

(for sites that sell something) or through advertising or other value-by-proxy schemes. And they are addressed in the usual ways: marketing techniques to acquire "mindshare" (that is, to encourage web users to remember the site and think of visiting it), and offering users something of value to them, most often information (Google and Wikipedia are the most prominent examples, and news sites such as CNN are also popular), shopping opportunities (Amazon, eBay), entertainment (YouTube, Hulu, icanhascheezburger), socialization (Facebook, Twitter), or what have you.

A public-service website like OMA, particularly one that aims to solicit thoughtful contributions from users, has somewhat different aims. It wants to inculcate a somewhat more sober atmosphere, but it still needs to convey a sense of purpose and energy. It deals with contentious topics, which are simultaneously of great concern to many users (dealing as they do with their basic life situations and needs) and exhausting—partly because they *are* of great concern, and partly because there are no easy or fast solutions to them. Rewards are mostly slow to arrive and somewhat abstract—a feeling of connection to the community, of accomplishment.

Commercial sites typically aim for a high information density—consider Google's dense results page, Facebook's list of status updates, the busy pages of news sites, Amazon's added-value catalog with reviews and suggestions—in order to provide something appealing to as wide a range of users as possible, and most use eye-catching visual features to keep users' attention and inspire a sense of excitement. This claim might seem to be at odds with, for example, Emily Chang's contention (in "Design 2.0: Minimalism, Transparency, and You") that "web 2.0" sites emphasize "simple" and "minimal" designs. In fact, the stars of Web 2.0 (insofar as such a category exists) generally populate their pages with close to *maximal* content. A Facebook "News Feed" page has very little whitespace, with controls at top, left, and bottom, advertisements down the right, and the center jammed with messages. Google, which trumpets the minimalist design of its home page, leaves little whitespace on its search results (as indeed it must, since its entire business model is based on showing advertisements). Where these sites are "minimal" is in reducing passive content—removing or shrinking elements such as logos and decorative elements, using very small controls, and so on—to maximize the screen real estate available for active content.

OMA, on the other hand, deals with complex topics that require some time to absorb and consider. It has a pressing need to avoid overwhelming users. Its target audience has a wide range of technical knowledge: knowledge about the area, about local politics and urban-development processes, about using the web; that means the site needs to let users find their own comfortable path and pace through the available content. Though we didn't explicitly consult it at the time, I note that several of our decisions are similar to the attributes Cameron Olthuis praises in his "Top 10 Web 2.0 Designs" (about which I have my reservations, but that's not important here). For example, by adding colorful visual elements and short blurbs about the site to the front page, we've incorporated the clarity of purpose that Olthuis praises in sites like Cork'd and Firefox. (On the other hand, I'd say we've moved away from the community blogging site he praises, 9rules. Can't say as I care for it.)

Our goals for the parts of the site we examined, then, were to make them inviting for new users, with small pieces of critical content and attractive visuals and features; and at the same time, streamline processes for experienced users, to try to make the site a place they could swing by regularly to read recent content and contribute.

The redesign process

As with other group projects, the six of us—Gillian, John, Laura, Doug, Brad, and myself—met numerous times, in and out of class (I believe there were three face-to-face meetings of the entire group outside class, and two of the two-person design teams). We exchanged many emails and created a number of shared documents, some in Google Docs and some in Word and other formats. Considering our short timetable and the scheduling disruptions of the Thanksgiving and pending Christmas holidays, I believe we were highly productive.

Brainstorming

We began by brainstorming on our assignment and the goals we derived from it. Much of this took place in our first out-of-class group meeting, which lasted somewhat over an hour and produced a shared document with a breakdown of elements of the assignment, a sizeable outline of ideas for our design proposals, and assorted notes. This was a joint effort in which everyone participated.

Not long after that first meeting, we grouped our redesign ideas into three categories (Actions, Content, and Atmosphere), then divided ourselves into two-person teams to create proposals for the three categories. I worked with Gillian on the Actions team; we considered the login process, the navigation tabs, and the registration process.

Topic presentation

Like the other groups, we made a short in-class presentation to discuss what aspects of the site we were considering. This took the form of a 9-slide Google Docs presentation. I edited together the final version of that presentation, based on content contributed by the group.

Lo-fi sketches

Each of the three teams then created a number of lo-fi sketches of proposed design changes. In our first team meeting, Gillian and I discussed the ideas we had been assigned (some of which I modified based on technical considerations, since I have the most web development experience in the group), and sketched out rough drafts. Then, during the second team meeting, Gillian drew the actual lo-fi presentation poster, while I offered suggestions and worked on the initial versions of our rapid prototypes (discussed below).

For the lo-fi prototyping process we took a number of cues from the readings, such as Andrew Chen's "Why low-fidelity prototyping kicks butt for customer-driven design"; as Chen points out, lo-fi prototypes encourage better feedback because audience members are comfortable critiquing rough sketches, and variations (for A/B testing) are more prominent. In "35 Excellent Wireframing Resources", Cameron Chapman mentions various sofware packages for lo-fi prototyping, such as Balsamiq. We did look briefly at a number of these, including Balsamiq, iPlotz, Denim, and Flair Builder. But as Jason Robb argues in "Tools for Sketching User Experiences", in the end pen and paper proved to be the best tools. Sketching on the pad was relatively quick and easy, even for "artistic" sketches like Gillian's, and being able to jot notes on them during review was very convenient.[2]

[2] I used the free version of iPlotz to create some wireframes for a project in another class, and I'm not convinced it was superior to simply drawing them in something like Open Office Draw.

Design review

For the design review, Gillian and I presented our lo-fi sketches to the other design teams. I believe we did a good job of sharing presentation duties and coordinating with each other while we talked about our ideas and solicited feedback from the audience. This was a productive exercise; we were able to narrow our alternatives down to one in each of the three areas we discussed (login, navigation, and registration), and audience members made some additional suggestions regarding elements such as profile pictures. I found that we were more or less following the patterns described in readings such as Scott Berkun's "How to run a design critique" (for example by narrating user walkthroughs and comparing elements of our design to "competing products" such as the Twitter login mechanism), but to be honest, as the final group to conduct a critique, I think we were mostly guided by what the previous groups had done.

We took notes directly on the lo-fi sketch poster. Gillian kept those and brought them to subsequent classes, and eventually took photos of them for the report. After she photographed them I took possession so I could refer to them while working on the rapid prototypes.

Rapid prototypes

A significant portion of my effort in this project went into the rapid prototypes I created for the group, based on the materials extracted from the site by Matt Penniman. As the experienced web developer, I did the actual HTML, CSS, and Javascript changes for our prototypes. However, the other group members supplied extensive portions of content, layout and styling changes, and new interaction behaviors. For example, Laura supplied me with a document, based on her team's work, with a complete new script for the About page. I also had input from other teams, most notably the interview video supplied by Jeff and Joe, which I incorporated into the prototype for the Home page.

There were times when this prototyping process seemed anything other than rapid—particularly an infamous in-class group session that I spent almost all of trying to figure out why the new subtitle feature of the Home page (supplied by John and Laura) wasn't being styled correctly. I also ended up putting quite a bit of effort into getting Doug and Brad's photo/text combination widget for the Home page working properly. But this was largely an artifact of the accelerated schedule; getting this much revised code working, even in its quick & dirty prototype fashion, in the course of a couple of weeks would be a respectable achievement in corporate web development. I say that not to claim any extraordinary achievement on my part, but rather to suggest that the rapid prototyping exercise was surprisingly productive. Obviously it required the kind of specialized technical knowledge which most students don't possess, but since we had it available I'm glad we made use of it. The rapid prototypes are a very nice demonstration of our ideas.

Narrative presentation

With the other three design groups, for the final class session we presented our refined design suggestions at the Center for Community & Economic Development. This presentation took the form of a narrative, in which one of the personas developed during user research interacts with both the existing site and the proposed redesigned site. We chose to use the "Rosemary" persona, who represents users with limited web experience and existing social connections, for whom a welcoming and clear site is particularly important, and had her encountering the site for the first time, learning about it, and creating an account.

I had relatively little to do with this stage of the project, as I was focussed on the rapid prototypes. I did suggest some items to include in the presentation, and took some screen snapshots of the existing site pages and the prototypes.

Final report

For the final report, still in progress at this writing, we drew up an outline as a group and then each took on various duties. Since I had developed the rapid prototypes, I wrote that section of the report. The material was fresh in my mind (I'd been modifying the prototypes right up until a day or two before), and I had ample screenshots, so I went ahead and described both the existing pages and the proposed revisions in some detail, with illustrations and links to both.

My text was reviewed by the other group members, and in some cases revised and extended. By the same token, I've reviewed materials submitted for other sections of the report by some of the other members, and expect to see the rest shortly. Gillian has taken on the task of editing the final report together.

Successes and limitations

Clearly, by the terms of the assignment and the broader goal of improving the OMA site, the project was a success. We produced a number of possible revisions, refined them in design review, and created descriptions in the form of the rapid prototypes and final report to convey them to the developers. (My role as one of those developers notwithstanding—without this sort of material, it's difficult to retain a vision for changing the site.) The group dynamics were good, with healthy participation from all members (even with holiday interruptions), reasonable division of labor, and appropriate use of different skill sets and knowledge. (For example, everyone was able to supply input based on the kind of user research they had conducted.)

That said, this project does not feel quite as successful as the first group project. The work products, while solid—assuming the final report comes together as planned—are not as thorough and wide-ranging as the products from the user research effort. We had several successful meetings and generated plenty of discussion and internal documentation, but not nearly the volume produced in the first phase of the course; and we were distinctly less organized (albeit organized enough to make our deadlines). The user research project, while it often felt monumental (if not overwhelming) while it was in progress, forced us to become a cohesive team with detailed knowledge of the members' individual strengths, agile work practices, and a will to produce the best results we could achieve. This project usually felt like work, even when we were enjoying group camaraderie.

To a large part I think that was due to the short timeline and holiday interruptions. I also feel, though, that the staggered schedule, with one group presenting per week, disrupted the rhythm of the group. I'm not sure how that could be fixed, given the time requirements for the design review; maybe all the groups could produce their lo-fi sketches in the first week, then there could be four days of design review over two weeks' class periods.

Beyond that, the work for this project was in competition with the final project proposal and (in theory—though it's not clear how much time anyone had to spend on it) the final project work itself. I think that is an issue that will need to be addressed in the next iteration of the class. The final project gets minimal class time and is naturally starved for time by group work, which students will tend to prioritize out of a desire to support the group. And although most of the intellectual work and actual labor happens in the class group projects, the grading system is weighted toward the individual project, which seems both a misrepresentation of the course and somewhat unfair. The individual project, which ought to be an opportunity for students to investigate their personal interests in relation to the site, thus becomes a looming problem that can't comfortably be addressed until after the conclusion of group work; and the group project, in turn, is blamed for the anxiety over the individual project. Neither benefits from this unfortunate conflict.

All in all, I am reasonably satisfied with this project. I do feel, though, that some adjustments to the second half of the course could improve it, both as an educational experience and as an opportunity to contribute to the OurMichiganAve.org website.