TEMPLATED: THE ARGUMENT FOR CONCEPTUAL REPRESENTATION IN RESPONSIVE LANDSCAPES

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Synopsis:

The contemporary landscape of the web is oversaturated with template-based, repetitive layouts all served conveniently to a multitude of devices. This research seeks to challenge the normalizes and possibilities of responsive web design by identifying the decline of conceptual experiences lacking in contemporary user interface design, and to seek how these two worlds can co-exist. Pedagogical integrations, inclusive of instructional premises, methods and student design results will be discussed.

ABSTRACT

The contemporary landscape of the web is captured within a multitude of platforms within various contexts, creating a diverse set of roles for end-users. Devices come in many shapes and sizes, presently occupying our wrist, fitting seamlessly into the palm of our hand and found traditionally in the home office, all the while with the ability to accompany on the go. The notion of what constitutes screen-based media has begun to shift rapidly, and thus have users' expectations. While devices spoil users with endless accessibility, speed, and convenience, one component of past importance now occupies a position of inferiority—the concept.

In the early years of the web, technology lacked the support to give digital pioneers a more lucrative platform for variation and experimentation. As time progressed, these roles have reversed, technology now outweighs the need for conceptual clarity.

This transition can be attributed to the rise of mobile technology in 2007 followed by Responsive Web Design (RWD) taking precedence in 2010 (Ruluks, paras. 8 - 9). Coined by web developer and author, Ethan Marcotte, RWD has forever changed the expectations of how the web should operate, and for good reason. RWD allows a website that is displayed on a desktop platform to systematically reformat to tablet and mobile devices and, in many ways, change the experience of how information is served to these devices in a positive manner. In his May 2010 *A List Apart* article, Marcotte describes the necessity of approaching User Interface (UI) systems as "design for the ebb and flow of things" by featuring flexible grid systems, flexible images, and media queries for device types (para. 37). Marcotte's revolutionary vision has now become the standard practice in contemporary UI design and front-end web development. As RWD continues to define and shape the web, the importance of conceptual representation has taken a backseat. This research challenges the normalcies and expectations of

RWD by identifying the decline of conceptual experiences lacking in contemporary UI and to seek how these can co-exist. How can conceptual experiences live in a responsive world?

CSS Grid and Flexbox, offspring of this development, have emerged recently to enhance the range of solutions RWD can provide. Alternatively, the emergence of template-based website solutions, such as Squarespace, Wix, and Weebly, have also advocated for a do-it-yourself approach for novice business owners, ultimately devaluing RWD's essence and capabilities. Within this norm of templated web design, responsive sites have been accustomed to serve as defaults, in which a typical site for a healthcare provider can also share the same structural format as a retail site, and so forth. A copycat representation of parallax effects surrounded by equally set horizontal rows framed within an exaggerated vertical-based design has become the default experience and expectation. Designing with a concept at the forefront has been replaced by the repetitive nature of mobile first frameworks, mere cookie-cutter representations of constructs. Template-based web systems continue to devalue the professional interactive design community due to their robotic, non-conceptual approach to creating websites via a reliance upon the expediency of assemblage.

This problematic mindset has created contemporary, yet repetitive, safe havens of UI designs within the public domain and also within the classroom environment. As a design educator teaching User Experience (UX) and UI, it is common to see current design students approach their design goals with this imitation assemblage in mind. Their need to conform to this new normative, yet linear and non-conceptual design solutions, is usually composed without fault of their own and rather a visual manifestation influenced from their reproduced digital surroundings.

To combat this, students are challenged to address their design solutions with the

importance of concept in mind, including components of narrative design and storytelling derived from extensive research. Instead of allowing format to drive the design, the idea once again drives the composition. Responsive design is then technically utilized within contemporary web development methods while maintaining the essence of the idea, the client's story and messaging, establishing depth and meaning. This formula has continued to shape my pedagogy rooted in conceptual responsibility, and thus students' design and web development solutions. Integration has coalesced between conceptual and responsive worlds, and these pedagogical premises, methods, and results will be discussed in this research.

When should a concept be sacrificed for a grid-based formula? When does accessibility outweigh storytelling? This is a call to challenge the normative in web design instruction and student engagement. If the past can inform the future, it should be noted that experimentation and variation can live and thrive within the digital frameworks of our devices. As author Jen Simmons profoundly asks, "How can we better use the space inside the glass rectangle?" (para. 1). As the "space" continues to evolve, designers should strive to break away from these contrived landscapes, allowing UX and UI designs to be unique to the concept and context of one's display. By aligning concept, design, and responsive formats, we may work toward redefining a more balanced web, one free from reliance on templates and prebuilt systems. Users, as a consequence, are sacrificing concept for speed, accessibility, and convenience —all of which are extremely important, yet continue to frame this topic within an area of conventional expectation—an opposition to the web's unique capabilities in crafting contemporary online experiences.

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