

Review: A Pattern Language for Web Usability

In the world of wu the Web is a friendly and organized place.

A Pattern Language for Web Usability, Ian Graham, Addison-Wesley, 2003

Reviewed by Carl Bedingfield

While the actual content of a set of rules or guidelines may technically be enough to ensure success, the presentation of the set is even more important, because the presentation often determines whether we will effectively apply the rules. For example, the rules for healthy eating are readily available, but a comprehensive presentation such as Weight Watchers (tm) can mean the difference between success and failure. In his preface, Ian Graham says of his book, "There is little original in this book, most of the ideas having been published elsewhere already." While that may be true, there is certainly value in assembling the ideas of others in a useful format, and even more value in presenting those ideas in a fresh perspective.

Patterns

The notion of "patterns," and of a "pattern language," comes from the work of Christopher Alexander, a contemporary architect who proposed the use of collections of architectural patterns to address deficiencies in modern building design. In later works, Alexander expanded the scope of his rather fascinating concept of patterns to a broader design context. In the early 90s, computer scientists began to apply Alexander's work to software development. The Web usability pattern language described in this book resulted from the collaborative efforts of attendees at a workshop hosted by the author in 1994.

So, what is a pattern? In 1993, Doug Lea, SUNY Oswego/NY CASE Center, defined a pattern as a "preformal construct ... describing sets of forces in the world and relations among them" (from "Christopher Alexander: An Introduction for Object-Oriented Designers", as found at <http://gee.cs.oswego.edu/dl/ca/ca/ca.html>.) Graham defines a pattern as a "standard solution to a recurring problem" (page 2). The Web usability pattern language is a collection of recommendations for the design of usable Web sites. While it will be of particular benefit to designers of Web sites designed for commercial or informative purposes, it also provides useful advice for sites intended purely for personal use or as creative outlets (e.g., the abstract site for the British band Radiohead).

The pattern language documents each pattern in a structure based on Alexander's work. The structure includes graphical depictions of the relationships between the patterns ("Where do I start?", "What happens next?"), and a list of the patterns themselves. Each pattern entry includes the title of the pattern, an example of the pattern, the problem it solves, the recommended solution, and a list of patterns which might be used in the next steps. Finally, the pattern entry concludes with credit to the individual(s) who proposed the pattern. The language includes 79 patterns, including such titles as "Sense of Location", "Exploit Closure", "Magic Margins", and "The Human Touch."

The book includes four sections. The first section contains a good introduction to the concept of patterns. The second provides some general guidelines for designing user interfaces. The third section, which is the bulk of the book, contains the patterns that comprise the "wu" language (for "Web usability"), and specific process recommendations for using the language. The fourth section shows how the language might be used in the design of an actual Web site.

Usability

By the time I had gotten to the language specification section, I confess I had already formed some negative preconceptions. The first was that the strict use of such a language would result in Web pages with a boring sameness. However, as I pressed on, I realized that the recommendations of the language are more analogous to the common practices used in other publications such as newspapers and magazines. There are certain formatting practices we assume about a newspaper or a magazine (sequential numbering of pages, table of contents, article continuation indicators, image captions, etc.) These standard practices allow the content designer significant freedom, while making sure that the publication is easily usable by the reader.

My second preconception was that, at this stage of Web site development, and with the ready availability of Web design tools, any commercial site of any size would already be implementing the recommendations found in the wu language. However, since reading the book, I've found quite a number of commercial sites whose usability falls short in many of the areas covered in the book.

wu

I enjoyed reading the book, partly because it provides a fresh look at helpful information, and because it is filled with human touches. For example, there is a sort of undercurrent of trans-lingual play with the "wu" acronym, and the eastern Chinese dialect, family name, and Chinese ideogram which all share the word "wu." Graham's writing voice and his British usages are pleasing to my American ears. Finally, I appreciated his use of humor throughout the book. The shortcomings of the book, and its related Web site

<http://www.tireme-international.com/Wu/whatis.htm> ,

are few. Some of the examples seem to reflect limited experience with actual html coding, and the information on the Web site seems to have been selected primarily to encourage the purchase of the book rather than to expand on the language. For example, a text-based list of the pattern names would be a useful addition to the site. A reader attempting to develop a Web site using the wu language could use such a list as a checklist and a documentation tool.

My ultimate assessment of the wu language continues. When I started reading the book, I was already happily engaged in building an in-house Web site, filled with all sorts of creative and impressive ideas, with little thought given to actual users and how they might interact with the site. But thanks to Ian Graham and his wu, I've had to redesign the whole darn thing, with a new goal of making the Web site a useful

interactive component of our work, rather than simply a clever
afterthought. I'm pretty sure the users will be grateful.

[Weight Watchers is a registered trademark of Weight Watchers
International, Inc.]

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