

Symbol Mall

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1 Introduction

Symbol Mall (<http://uregina.ca/~uttaranj/SM.html>) is a multimedia application that explores new media theory, narrative, and aesthetics in digital culture from a designer's point of view. It may be argued that human cognitive processes are prepared from birth to embrace life-long learning as a basis for conceiving new circumstances and dealing with shifts in environmental contexts [Benjamin 1968]. *Symbol Mall* investigates the level of cognitive grounding and metaphor use [Norman 1993] necessary to provide accessibility to interactors. It examines how designers can balance the need for accessibility against design innovations that challenge average interactors and convince them of the need for new narrative strategies.

The application is based on a series of cognitive steps that enhance interactors' learning of the application through exploration. The key strategies adopted in order to create the interface's learning environment include the use of low-level or minimalistic navigation, repetition of visual elements, and concentric narrative strands used to reinforce cognitive processes. Test subjects successfully decoded the interface and enriched their level of understanding of the application, which demonstrates the possibilities of low-level navigation as a new media narrative strategy. New design approaches, it seems, can be effectively introduced when the application guides interactors with enough conventional cognitive markers.

2 Design

The goal is to create a minimalistic layout that results in reduced information overload, while at the same time forcing the interactors to explore the interface. *Symbol Mall* employs the most conventional interactive narrative cue (arrow turns to pointer), a minimalistic layout (that emphasizes existing elements on each page), and low-level guidance (no captions assigned to signify the clickable area or destination). The visual presentation was designed to suit the content that contains specific cultural and gender aspects. Within this, interactors are given a variety of symbols to explore by first choosing between symbols that denote male and female genders. Figure 1 shows the menu of symbols available for exploration from the female view of the application.

The application is strategically designed to offer the minimum navigation sufficient for accessing its features, thereby encouraging interactors' exploration. The interactors are expected, or manipulated, to perform interactions in a specific order. First, they select their preference of symbol from the menu. Second, the interactors are required to solve a task associated with that symbol. Finally, after the task is completed successfully, the application delivers the meaning of the selected symbol.

Another objective of *Symbol Mall* is to encourage designers and interactors to explore new skills by taking full advantage of the specific aesthetic strengths of the digital environment. However, the new digital environment must be given some connection to the real-world. Supportive theory [Norman 1993] suggests that these

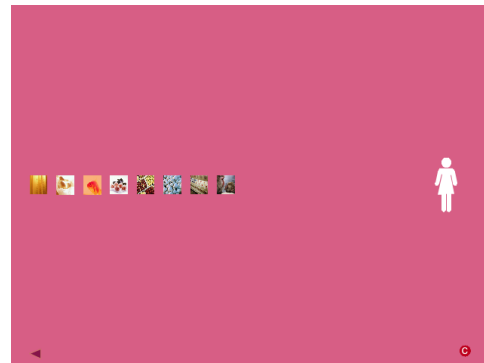


Figure 1: The menu of symbols presented to interactors who choose the female view of the application.

links be established through metaphors. *Symbol Mall* metaphorically contains real world shopping elements as a guide for the interactors to follow. The typical event sequence of real-world shopping is that first, the shoppers choose their preferred products, then they purchase the products at the cashier's counter, and finally, the shoppers examine the products they have purchased. The sequence of events for the digital experience is based on this metaphor.

The application explores new narrative strategies to reduce the learning curve for interactors. Repetition of required actions increases the interactors' comfort levels and allows them to build their own infrastructures. This repetition of actions that have a common focus builds a concentric narrative structure that keeps interactors focused on one element at a time. It is important to quickly engage and orient interactors within the application, since it provides only low-level navigation. To retain interactor engagement and to balance the frustration that may be experienced from this low-level navigation, the successful completion of the task associated with the chosen symbol provides a catharsis and the interactor is rewarded not only with the meaning of the symbol but also with the satisfaction of completing a challenging task.

3 Discussion

Symbol Mall is implemented in Macromedia Flash 5 and is widely accessible on the internet. It was tested with 20 participants (10 male, 10 female) who were able to decode the interface and engage the application in a satisfying way. The meaning conveyed from the application was enabled solely through minimalist navigation that holds promise as an important narrative form for emerging media.

References

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