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The Visual Storyteller's Guide to Web UI Design

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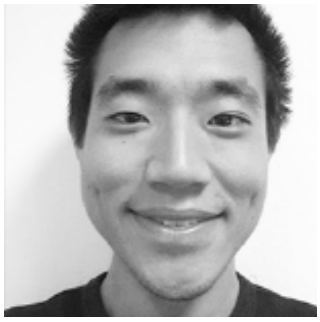

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A Few Quick Words

Before you know your story, you must first know your user. Conduct user research, create supporting UX documentation (personas, storyboards, user scenarios, experience maps, etc). Circulate the knowledge through the team, and make sure everyone understands.

Once you know the user like an old friend, then it's time to start crafting your narrative. What message resonates most with your audience, and which mediums will you use to tell that story? Will text work best? Or should you use plenty of images? How about animations and high definition videos?

Like most situations in design, there is no magic bullet. It's not easy to tell a product-relevant story that users actually care about. In this book, we'll explore the craft of storytelling through UI design by exploring the psychological power of visuals, the different types of images, and how to create unique and memorable stories through interaction design.

Instead of harping only on design theory, we're going to teach through example. In fact, we've included 31 examples of some of the best visual storytelling on the web. You'll find straightforward explanations, visual case studies, and plenty of plain-English tips for everyday web UI design.

We hope this book helps you better grasp how to add some storytelling magic to your website. If you find the book helpful, feel free to share with others.

For the love of UX design,
Jerry Cao & Cameron Chapman

The Undeniable Picture Superiority Effect

Storytelling in web design guides the user experience, incorporating all types of media to craft a logical and emotional narrative out of thin air.

Since the beginning of human history, stories have played an important part in how we connect with one another. Just because we now tell our stories on the screen rather than around a campfire does not lessen their ability to captivate people emotionally. The tricky part, of course, is creating a cohesive narrative when the story is not always told linearly since the "listener" (in this case, the user) can control the flow and pace of the experience through multiple avenues of navigation.

Photo credit: Artotem. Creative Commons

Before you know your story, know your user.

Conduct user research, create supporting UX documentation (personas, storyboards, experience maps), then dive into the psychology and behavior of your users. Once you know where your product fits into their goals, you'll know how to start craft your visuals and content to deliver on your promise.

The web is now certainly a visual medium, though in its early days it was largely text-based. As bandwidth concerns become less of an issue, though, visual media now dominates almost all corners of the web. A website devoid of images looks out of place and often gets ignored in favor of one that is well illustrated and full of rich animations and interactions.

Visual narrative creates purpose in web design, distilling complex scenarios into a simple dramatic arc. Without good visual storytelling skills, your websites will never live up to their full potential, whether they're for your own personal or professional projects.

In this piece, we'll explore some of the psychology behind why visual storytelling is so effective in web UI design.

An Image is Worth More Than a Thousand Words

We've all heard the old adage that "A photo is worth a thousand words". But did you know there's real science behind the statement?

The "picture superiority effect" says that visuals can convey up to six times more information than words alone.

The two primary theories supporting the picture superiority effect both explain how we encode information for later retrieval. The Paivio Dual Coding Theory says that we can recall images better because they create both verbal and image codes (because images generally create a verbal label in addition to the image, whereas words are less likely to create image labels).

The Nelson Sensory Semantic Theory, meanwhile, states that since people notice differences more readily in images rather than words, we can recall the meaning of images with less effort. To further support this theory, when people are presented with multiple similar images, the picture superiority effect disappears since they lose the power of distinction.

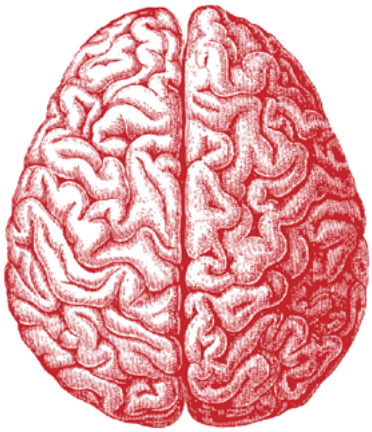

Photo credit: Allan Ajifo. Creative Commons

Keep this in mind when creating visual stories, since using images that are too similar can negate the advantages of visual storytelling compared to straightforward verbal narrative.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind:

- Use images that coordinate and have a cohesiveness to them, but also display distinct content so they're easily distinguished and remembered.
- Don't repeat concepts in your images. Let one image flow into the next to tell your story.
- If you're using visuals with models (or characters), make sure they stay consistent throughout your story. Even if they're not the same models, be sure they at least look like they're from the same "world".
- Just because the story is visual doesn't mean you can't use text to guide and clarify the message for your users.
- The more clear, striking, and impactful your images are, the more likely your users will remember them. The goal is unique imagery that stands apart in the user's mind.

Visual Storytelling for Accessibility

Interestingly enough, the picture superiority effect becomes more pronounced with age. The picture superiority effect even remains in effect among those with with Alzheimer's disease and mild cognitive impairments, which also makes visual storytelling a useful tool for making your websites more accessible for older populations.

On the other hand, younger people (especially children) have a less pronounced picture superiority effect than do adults. So visual storytelling on sites aimed at children can be less effective than you might expect, which requires that the verbal content is explicitly clear.

Photo credit: Bob the Builder via Louis Lazarus

In fact, as you can see in the above Bob the Builder site, the overstimulating visuals are designed to capture a shorter attention span than to tell some emotionally captivating story. To supplement the visuals, the spoken navigation also creates more of a "choose your own adventure" feel, which is perfect for the younger audience.

Visuals Improve Retention

Regardless of the type of website you're designing, you probably want your visitors to remember the information on your site a few days later. On a site with just text or audio content, a visitor is likely to

remember ten percent of the information they consumed after three days. That's not a whole lot.

But, if you add a picture to those words, they're likely to remember around 65% of that information. That's more than six times the information, just through one relatively simple change.

Even if creating or finding appropriate images to illustrate your content takes two or three times as long as simply writing good text, the payoff is well worth the added effort.
We retain so much more information through visual storytelling, that to ignore that aspect of the learning experience is to significantly hinder your user's ability to retain the information you're presenting.

For example, let's take a look at the colorful site for the friend-making app Yep!. Created in a single-page format that naturally encourages storytelling due to the linear up/down scrolling, the rich graphics and fun copy instantly entice users to learn more about the app.

Photo credit: Yep!

As you scroll down the page, the site takes you on a visual tour with each section showing (rather than just telling) how the app pairs people with potential friends based upon shared hobbies.

Photo credit: Yep!

Once the app has finished walking you through the hypothetical scenario with Brad, the bottom of the scroll reaches the download call-to-action (in this case, the climax of the story they're presenting). Even if you don't immediately download the app, do you remember how it works? How about if it's free or costs money? And can you give feedback afterwards?

The details are much easier to recall because they weren't just chunks of text on the page. The clever animations and smooth transitions from section to section stitches the story together in a simple, almost film-like format.

Visual Information is Processed Faster

While retention is important when talking about visual storytelling, so is the time it takes to mentally process the visuals.

Users have a limited attention span and know within 10 seconds if a site is worthwhile. If they're presented with a huge block of text, they may not bother to read it all (or even skim it if they're really pressed for time).

When presented with images, however, users can process more information faster. In fact, visual information is processed up to 60,000 times faster than text information. That's right: *60,000 times*.

Photo credit: Christos Tsoumplekas. Creative Commons

When someone visiting your website can glance at a chart or another visual and immediately draw the desired conclusion, that not only saves them time and effort, but it also is more likely to stick with them a few days down the road. Between those two benefits, visual storytelling is a strategy that you can't neglect if you care about educating and informing your visitors.

Let's think back to the Yep! example we just discussed. The illustrations showing people using the app (selecting hobbies, being paired with people, chatting and meeting up) provide the bulk of on-screen information. The text merely creates context. But because the narrative flows naturally, we're still able to understand all the content even though not much of it is written.

Of course, visual storytelling also works for conveying benefits of complex products. In the below photo from the Fitbit website, just the simple photograph of a potential use case (showing on-screen messages in the device) is enough to communicate how the product smooths over communication for on-the-go professionals.

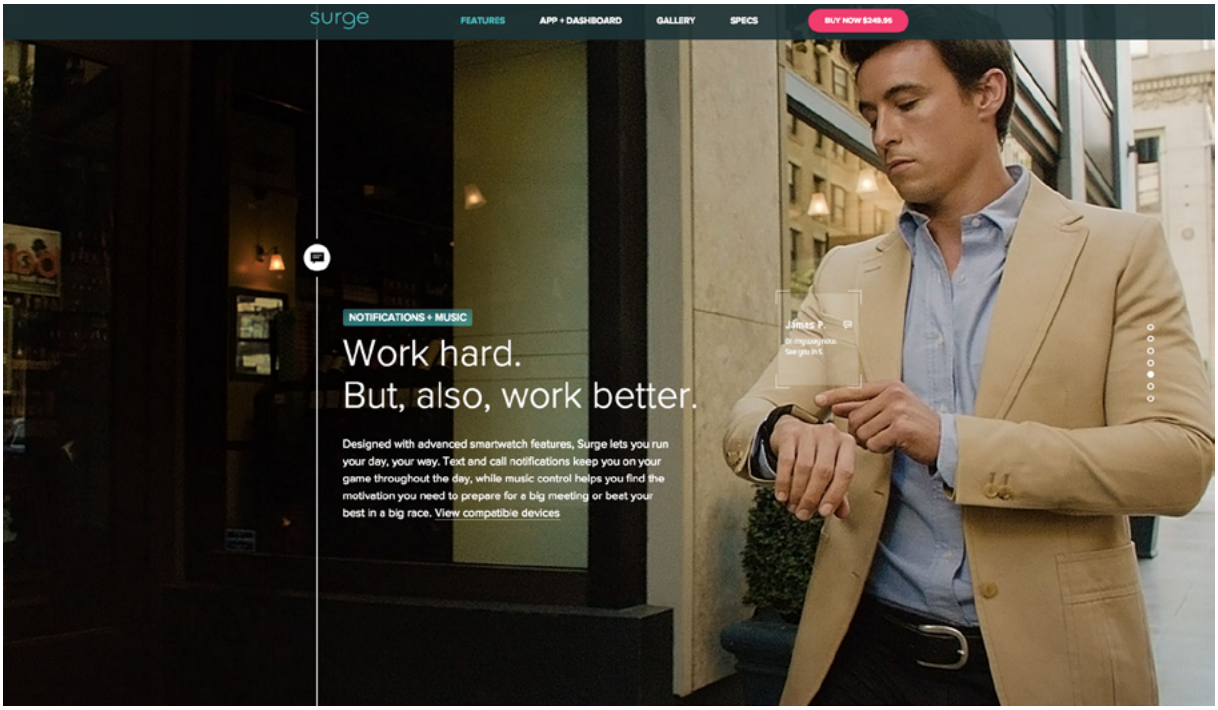

Photo credit: Fitbit

The site follows the beginning-middle-end format of storytelling. When you first land on the site, you're introduced to the product framed against an HD photo of a person running. As you scroll downwards,

the middle of the story explains each benefit against rich pictures of people using the product in real-life scenarios. The picture tells us the story, we relate to the person and the situation, and that is what makes us actually want to read the text to learn more.

Finally, when you reach the bottom of the page, the resolution is presented in the form of a call to action to customize your own Fitbit so that you too can enjoy a better life.

Visuals Evoke Instant Emotions

Visual content can instantly evokes an array of emotions that are more difficult to convey with words alone. An image of a couple holding hands, for example, can evoke feelings of happiness and love, along with feelings of sadness or loss depending on the mindset of the person viewing it.

That is one of the trickiest things about choosing how to visually tell a story: the varied experience of those viewing your content can greatly impact how they perceive it. It's why you have to carefully think through the images you use, but also, and more importantly, the users who will be viewing those images. Like we suggested in *Web UI Best Practices*, research your users, create your personas, iterate your design, and don't forget to keep testing in between.

It's important that you consider what emotions you're trying to bring forth when you create your stories. If the point is to excite your visi-

tors and energize them, then you need to choose images accordingly. The last thing you want to use is something that evokes relaxation and a sense of calm, even if it fits your actual story.

The single-page site One to See One to Kill reminiscing the harrowing experience of tunnel rats in the Vietnam War is one of the most emotional storytelling sites we've ever encountered.

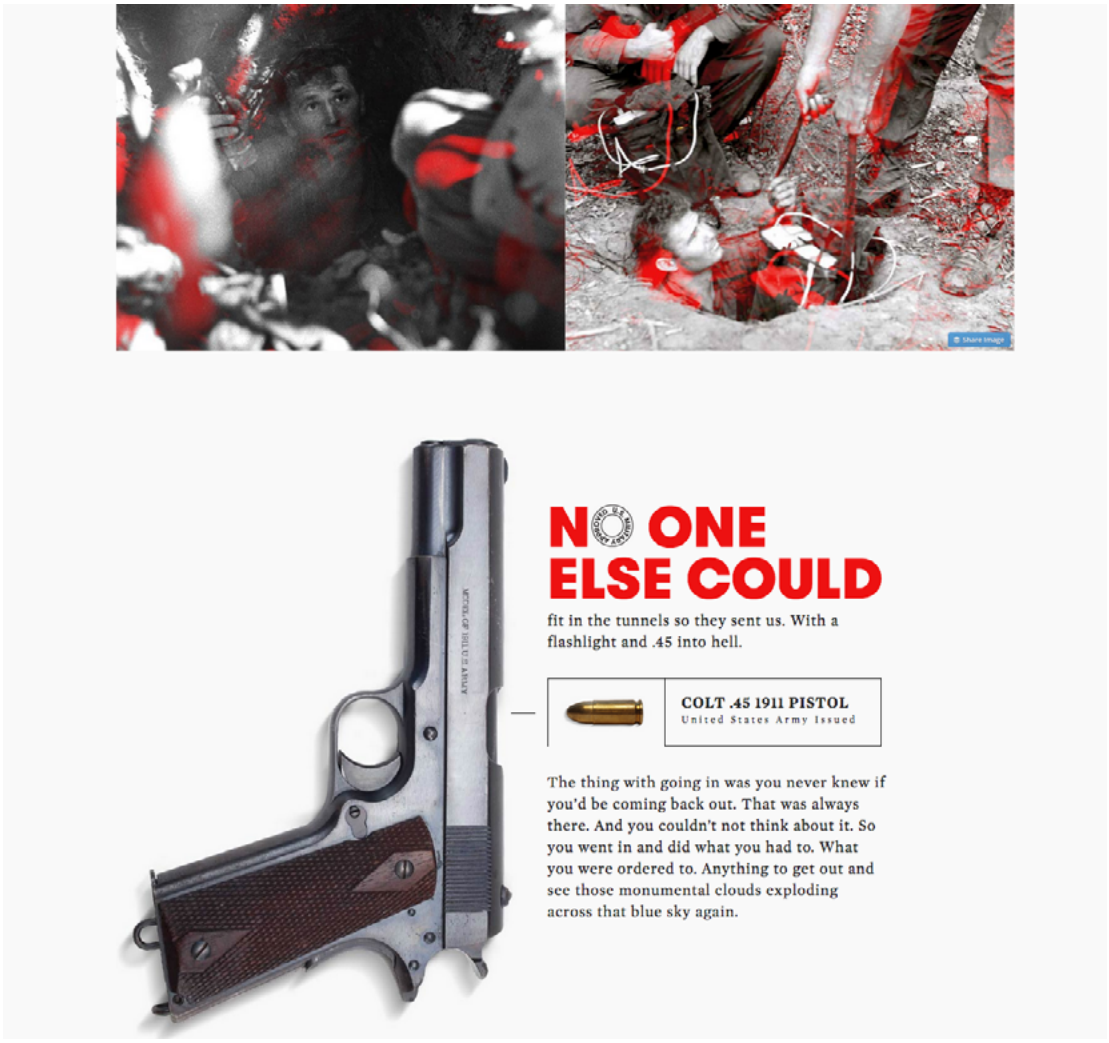

Photo credit: Tunnel Rats

Everything from the flow of veteran testimonials to the black & white images wrapped in red outlines (suggesting the surreal horror) communicates the savagery of killing in close quarters.

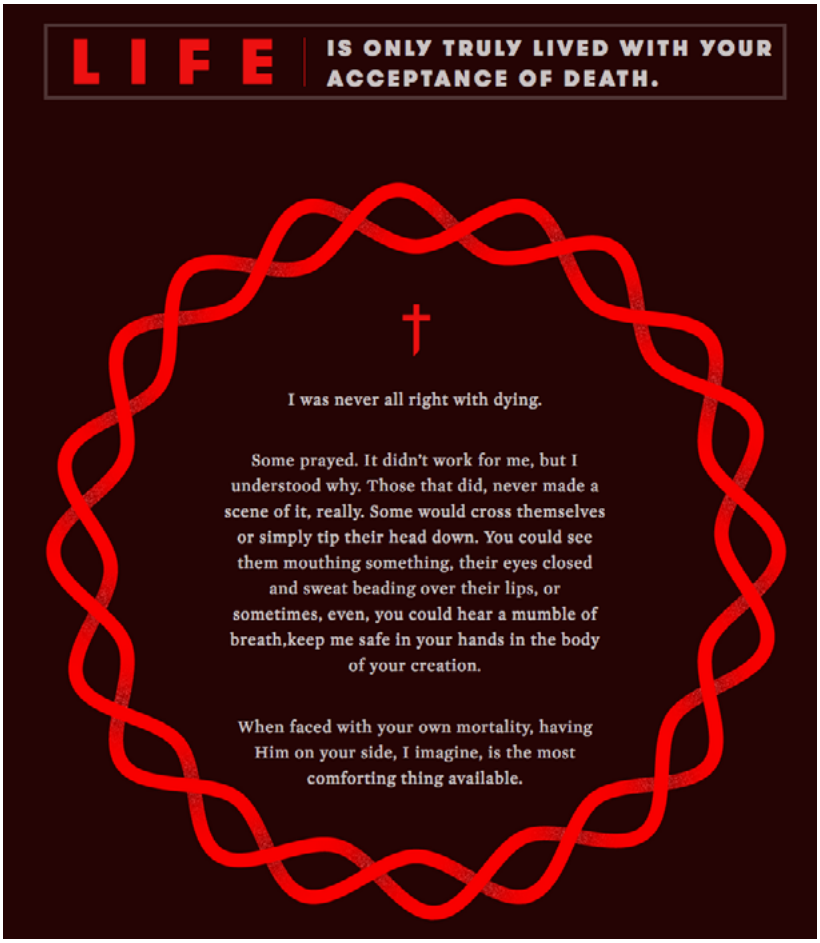

Photo credit: Tunnel Rats

On a subtler level, the bold typeface and red illustrations continue the theme of horror, sacrifice, and emotional vulnerability. Once you reach the bottom of the scroll, you feel like you bore silent witness to the war in the tunnels – no easy feat to accomplish with just a single page.

A Long-Standing Concept in Advertising

Pick up any magazine and you're likely to see pages upon pages of advertisements. And the one thing that virtually all of those ads have in common?

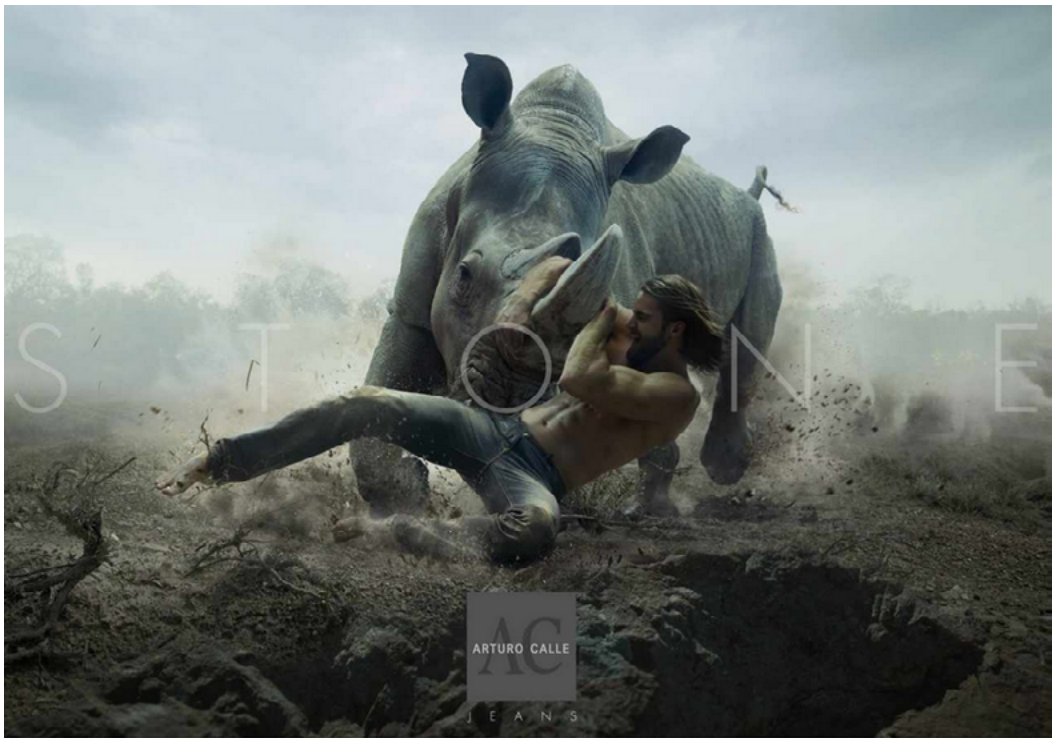

Photo credit: Ads Around the World

They all use visual imagery to illustrate their points. You rarely see an advertisement that relies on text alone to get its message across. Because the advertising industry has known for years that visuals are what people remember, and visuals are what sell products.

Advertising relies on strong, powerful visuals to sell products or ideas. Visual storytelling on the web is no different. Regardless of the purpose of your site, it's advertising something, even if that something is just knowledge or an idea.

Bullet Points are Not Pictures

It is often said that most people are visual learners. This is true, of course, due to the picture superiority effect we've been discussing.

But a lot of content creators are confused about what, exactly, constitutes "visual".

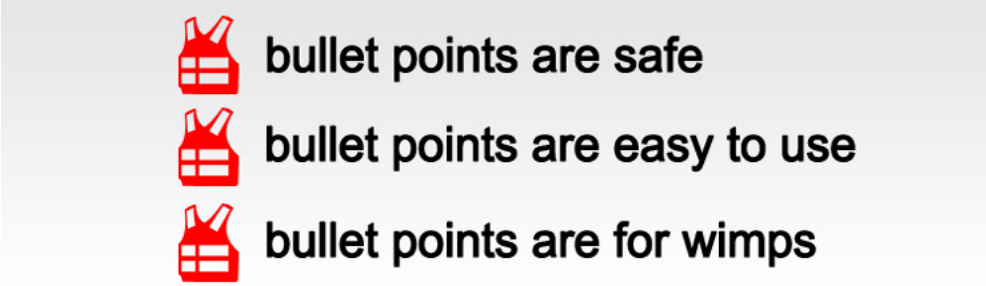

Photo credit: Sean Macentee. Creative Commons.

All too often, people are told to use bullet points as a way to make their content more visual, and therefore easier to learn. But bullet points aren't images.

Say it with me: *Bullet points are **not** pictures*.

Just because you've broken a chunk of text into shorter lines and added a dot next to each doesn't mean you've magically transformed them into pictures. You haven't magically taken that text and made it an image. It's still words on a page. Just with a little extra decoration.

Is it easier to process and understand than a giant block of text? Probably. But that doesn't make it an image.

While bullet points, lists, and text content have their place, don't fool yourself into thinking that they're equivalent to visual content. As we described in *Interaction Design Best Practices*, bullets certainly help chunk out content to reduce cognitive strain, but in most cases you still want rich visuals to add an extra element of delight and allure.

Conclusion

Understanding the psychology behind the impact visuals have on the average user gives you an edge over designers and content creators who may approach projects purely from an aesthetic point of view.

The psychology behind concepts like the picture superiority effect allow you to make better informed decisions and create more impactful websites. It puts you in a position to understand and influence your users' emotional reactions to your story, which will help you design to meet the site's goals.

3 Powerful Types of Imagery in Visual Storytelling

In visual storytelling, you'll usually apply three different types of images: iconic images, symbolic images, and indexical images. There is no one type of image that is "best" suited to web design. Each one can be used, often simultaneously on the same project, to achieve the desired results.

Let's take a look at the characteristics of each type of image, then examine the best scenarios of use.

Iconic Images

Iconic images are instantly recognizable and strongly associated with a defined concept. They're also generally very literal images, so even someone not familiar with them can deduce a general meaning. They look like what they mean.

Think about the symbols for male and female restrooms. A human figure in either pants or a dress is fairly easy to interpret, regardless

of whether you'd ever seen these images or not, or whether their meaning had ever been explained to you.

Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain

Things like arrows, wheelchairs, and icons that are simplified forms of physical things, also often fall under iconic imagery. Icon sets (like our free icon pack) are often an excellent source for iconic images, as they need to be obvious and easy to interpret with or without text labels.

Diagrams, charts, and scientific illustrations are all examples of iconic imagery. They very literally represent information in a way that is hard to misinterpret (which is the cornerstone of an iconic image).

Think about the icons you'll likely encounter on the web or in an application:

- envelopes to indicate email
- a trash can to indicate deleting something
- a house to indicate the home page
- a disk to indicate saving something
- a check mark to indicate task completion

Regardless of prior familiarity with these icons in a specific setting, most users will be able to make an educated guess about what gets triggered by clicking on these icons.

While some icon imagery may have started out as symbolic (more about symbolic imagery in the next section), many are so widely recognized now that they have become iconic.

For example, the folder icon is pretty much universally recognized as a symbol to open a file, but the folder itself doesn't indicate this without its longstanding cultural association. The same applies to the commonly-seen "gear" icon to access settings, along with the icons for uploading (which usually includes an arrow pointing up) and downloading (includes an arrow pointing down), and many others.

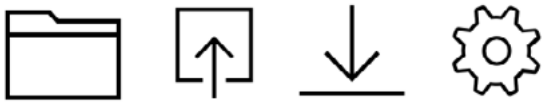

Photo credit: UXPin

This is a common result of an image becoming a part of mainstream culture: its meaning can become so fixed that it is universally recognized, even if originally that meaning had to be learned. Like we described in *Consistency in UI Design*, you don't need to always break new creative ground: use widely accepted icons to create a baseline understanding, then add creative flourishes as needed.

One thing to keep in mind: not all icons are iconic. Some still need to be explained before they are correctly interpreted (known as an explicit signifier, which we explain in *Interaction Design Best Practices*).

Designers sometimes opt to use icons that are customized to their own site's design or theme, but those kinds of icons may need to be labeled for clarity, as they're purely symbolic. At the very least, a label should appear when they're hovered over. In cases where you want users to instantly recognize the meaning of an icon, stick with images that are actually iconic.

Symbolic Images

Symbolic images are more abstract than iconic images, and often do more to convey a feeling or general idea than a specific concrete object. Symbolic images are very often seen in logos, as they reinforce the feelings a brand wants to convey.

For example, the Microsoft Windows logo is an abstract representation of a window, but isn't a direct interpretation. Someone could interpret it to represent something else, particularly if they come from a culture where a different style of window is more common.

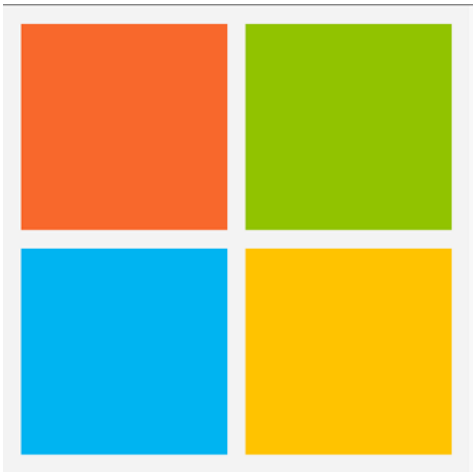

Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons

Symbolic images generally need to have their meanings taught. They are not instantly recognizable, because they are not literal. Until the meaning is learned, they can be widely open to interpretation.

Instead, symbolic images use semiotics – visual grammar – to convey meaning more than iconic images do. Symbolic images are visual metaphors, and those metaphors often must be learned in order to be interpreted correctly. Granted, many symbols are recognized on a cultural level, due to their common usage associated with specific things or ideas.

One example would be traffic signs, like stop signs (which are eight sided in most countries, but in Japan, are only three-sided and more closely resemble the US "yield" sign, and in numerous other countries the sign is a circle with a triangle in it). And if you asked someone from one country what the traffic signs of another country meant, they would likely get a considerable percentage of them incorrect.

Photo credit: UXPin

This is because these images are symbolic, rather than iconic. Their meanings need to be taught, and are often based on cultural associations rather than universal understandings.

One example in the web design world is the hamburger menu icon. While it does somewhat resemble a menu, the image is too abstract to

accurately be called iconic. As a result, one study actually found that its interpretation is age-sensitive. In fact, 80% of users between 18-44 understood its meaning, while only 52% of older users understood.

Indexical Images

Indexical images link meanings between the image's appearance and its representation. For example, a thermometer showing it's below zero indicates that something is cold.

Indexical images are some of the most commonly found images in advertising and design. We tend to shy away from representing things too literally, often because we prefer to evoke an emotion rather than shove literal information down the user's throat.

Consider these two examples:

- For sadness, would you use an image of a person crying (literal), or a dark, cloudy day with rain pouring down and a kid's bicycle sitting unused and soaked in the front yard (emotional)?

Photo credit: Volken Olmez via Unsplash. Creative Commons

- To evoke happiness, would you use an image of someone smiling (literal), or a cute puppy playing in the sand (emotional)?

Photo credit: Andrew Pons via Unsplash. Creative Commons

Both types of images are indicative of an emotion, but the latter example in each is more likely to make the *user* feel something, rather than just think of the word for the emotion.

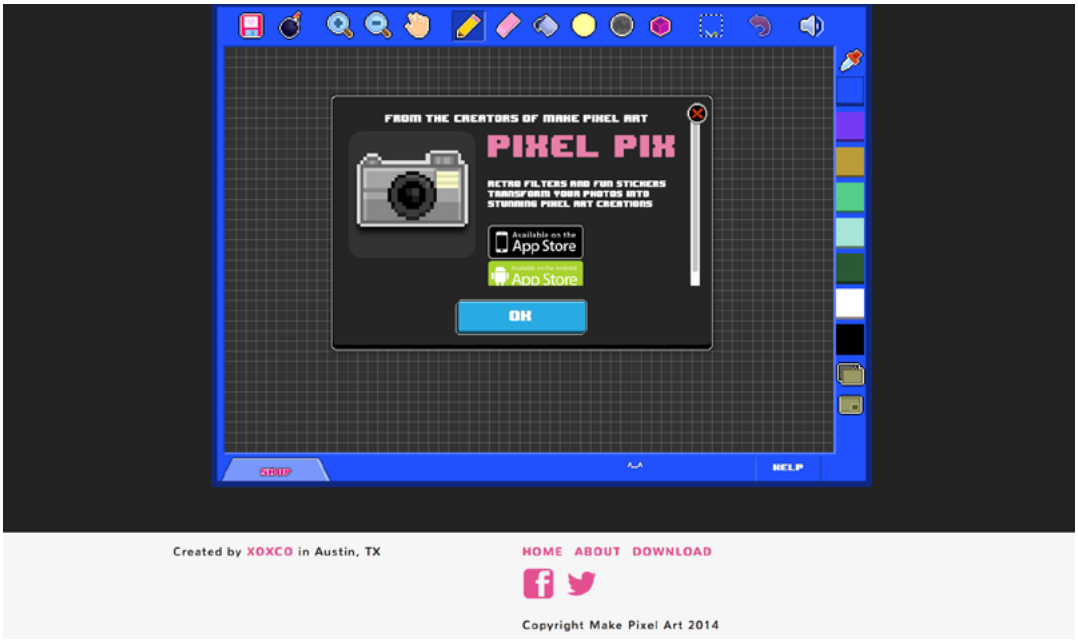

Photo credit: Pixel Art via FastCo Design

Let’s say that you want to make people nostalgic when they visit your website. There are a number of ways to do that, but starting with images that evoke that feeling without screaming “NOSTALGIA” are a good place to start. If your target audience is likely to be in their 30s, you might use imagery that evokes the 1980s, as that’s the time when your audience was growing up.

You can achieve the same effect with more abstract visual elements like color palettes. Using a neon color palette reminiscent of the late 80s and early 90s is immediately going to create a much different impression than a color palette of rosy pinks and muted aquas that were more common in the 1950s.

Which Type of Image Works Best for Web UI Design?

All three images have their place in good design. As with all design techniques, it all depends on the parameters of your project. But that doesn't mean there aren't some good ground rules.

When you're creating the basic navigational structure of your site, you're likely going to want to stick with images that are iconic, or that ride the line between iconic and symbolic. You don't want your visitors looking at a particular image and wondering what will happen if they click on it.

For that reason, graphics like icons used for navigation must be universally recognizable and as close to iconic as you can manage.

There are tons of options out there for icons, whether you want to design your own or use a pre-made set. Just be sure to find a set that is easy to interpret for your visitors, and don't be afraid to label if it's not immediately clear.

Photo credit: Luhse Tea

To a large extent, finding the iconic images you want to use on your site is a no-brainer. There are only so many things that literally represent what you want to convey. The hardest part is finding images that are the correct style to fit with your overall design.

For other visual elements of your site, though, and particularly the visuals accompanying content, you can exercise more creative freedom. You can use more abstract images, which are made clear through the context created by other images and other types of content on your site.

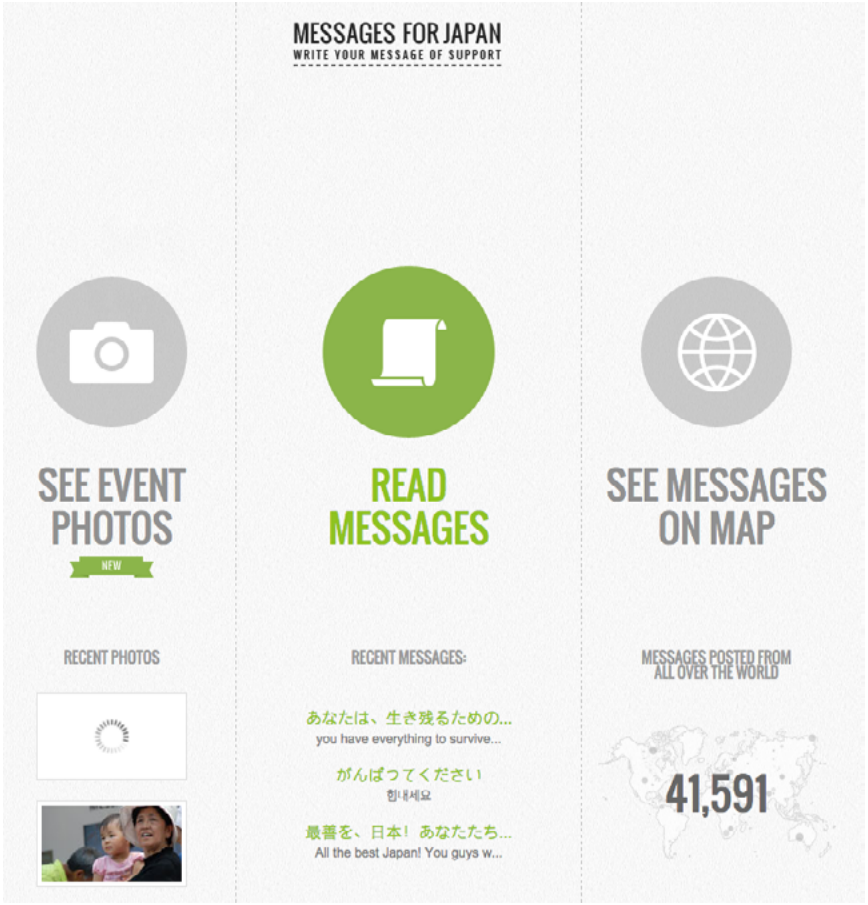

Photo credit: Messages for Japan via awwwards

Your decision to use a more symbolic image or a more abstract indexical image depends on both your site's overall style and content, as well as your target audience.

One way to find indexical images when you're unsure of exactly how you want to convey an idea is to use keyword searches on photo sharing sites like Flickr or stock photo sites(be sure to use images with an appropriate license if you actually use them in your design, rather than just using the search as inspiration).

For example, if you search for "love" on Flickr, you get a host of images that can represent love: hearts, flowers (particularly roses),

the Eiffel Tower, happy couples, a disturbing number of images of bugs mating, as well as a few that directly depict the word "love" in various media. This provides a good jumping-off point for finding or creating the exact images you might want to use in my design.

Photo credit: Nicolas Raymond. Creative Commons

Another example would be to search for something like "fear". You get images of horror movie villains, heights, violence, people who appear to be afraid, various animals, and similar imagery. It's clear to see what types of images are likely to evoke fear in a visitor's mind. This type of research is important in determining what types of images you should avoid in your visual storytelling. You might not associate a particular image with a particular idea, but a little research might find that a significant portion of the population does make a correlation.

Make a Game Plan

In the next chapter, we'll hit on exactly how to decide which images to use in your storytelling, but in the meantime, take some time to jot down some ideas on the concepts your images need to explain.

Do some free association with those concepts and the types of images you might use. Search for images based on those concept keywords, too, and start brainstorming on what might best work together, as well as things you definitely want to leave out.

Selecting the Right Style for Visual Storytelling

Every story must be unique and tailored to your brand and users. While you should certainly research what other sites, both in and outside of your industry, are doing and consider what works and what doesn't, your story is your own to craft and tell.

Photo credit: Sonoran's Valley

When it comes to visual storytelling, photos are an obvious choice, but you shouldn't overlook illustrations if they might better suit your story and brand. Mascots can even add another level of personaliza-

tion and friendliness. And while foreground visuals are important, don't overlook the power of a well-thought-out background image.

The singular goal is to create visuals that work together and convey your message clearly and effectively to your users.

Consider illustrations as an alternative to photos

When many designers think of using images, it's easy to only think about photos. Photos are great when a realistic image needs to be portrayed (although photo manipulations can present almost anything, their strength still lies in their realism). This can create a very strong connection with your visitors, because it's often easier to identify with a photo than an illustration.

What's great about photos is that there are millions of photos out there, already available, to suit what you need. You don't have to create custom images to create emotional impact with photos. Granted, photos captured specifically for a site, and edited specifically to tell *your* story will always have an even greater impact, but of course can also stretch your budget beyond what's possible (think about locations, photographer fees, and even travel or talent costs).

Even though you'll generally need to create illustrations specifically for your project, they can still end up being more affordable than a full photo shoot. And stock illustrations are certainly available, although they're often too generic to effectively tell a story.

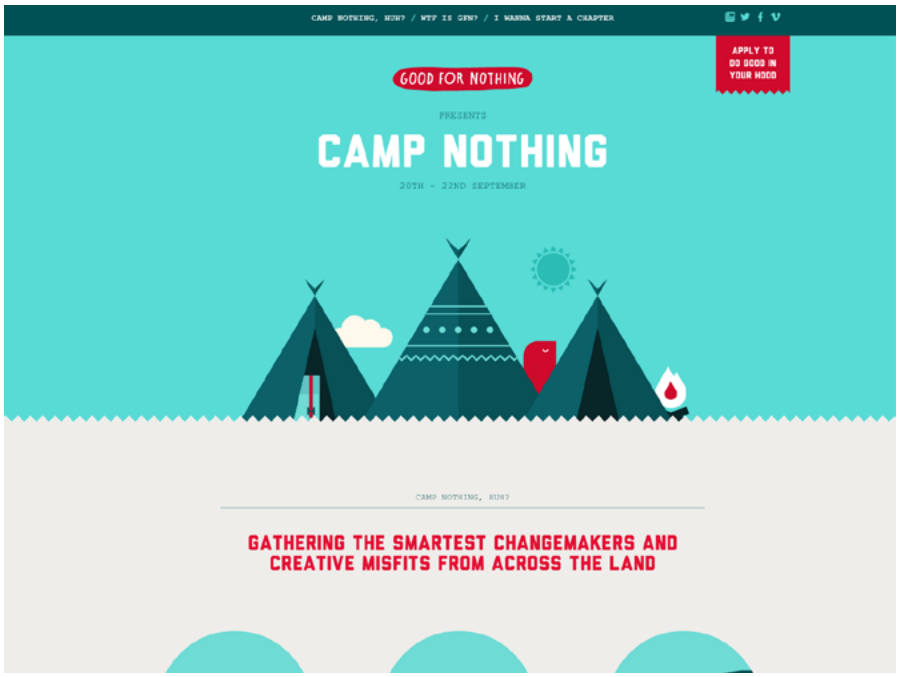

Photo credit: Camp Nothing

Illustrations are appropriate when realism isn't necessarily the top priority and when a diagram, flowchart, or similar graphic is needed to effectively tell your story. It's pretty difficult, after all, to represent data or abstract concepts with a photograph.

As is the case with everything in web design, make sure you thoroughly understand your users. While illustrations are appropriate for almost every site, you must adapt the style to suit the appropriate look and feel.

For example, let's look at the images on the Le Printemps du Polar website, which feature a mature and alluring visual aesthetic that's very appropriate for its artistic adult audience. The site celebrates the history of the femme fatale archetype in film, so we can assume that the people who appreciate the site are fairly sophisticated film aficionados.

Photo credit: Le Printemps Du Polar

The Dangers of Fracking website combines lighthearted animations with illustrations to tell the very serious story behind the environmental costs of fracking. You would think that the site would adopt a more foreboding artistic style to convey caution, but remember that users also must want to engage with your design.

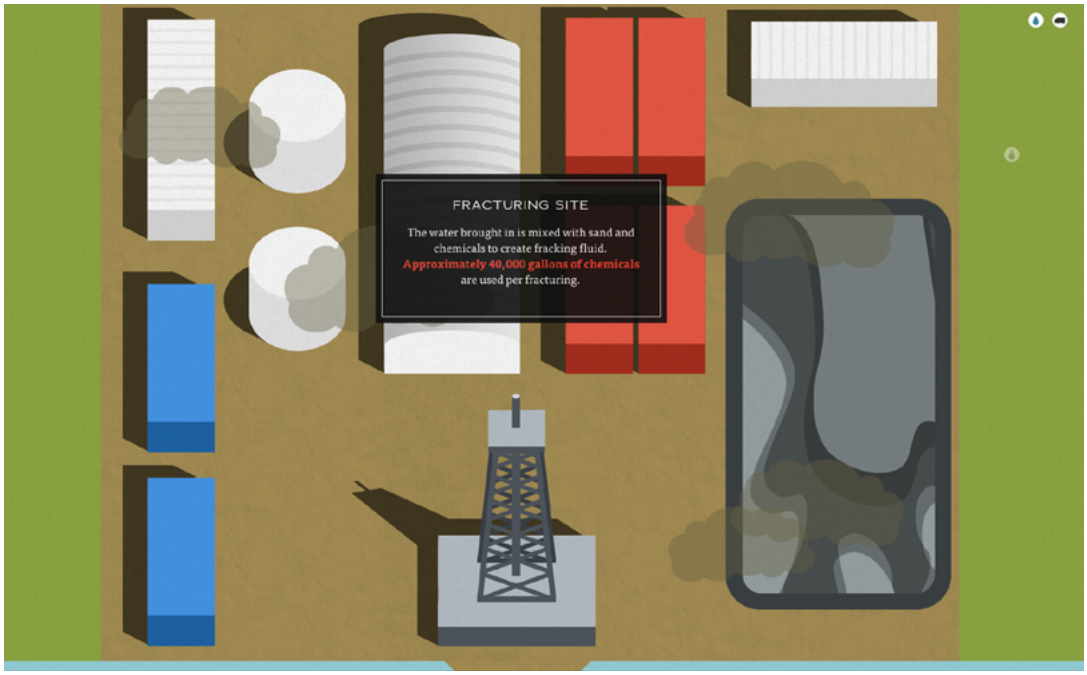

Photo credit: Dangers of Fracking

If the mood becomes too heavy and depressing, then people might be put off emotionally (which is of course counterproductive to educating them). In this case, if the parallax-driven site were too somber, the unfolding visual experience wouldn't be nearly as enjoyable.

Don't fear the mascot

A site mascot is a simple but great way to tell a story, too. Mascots can say a lot about your brand since they are a living manifestation of your design persona. But don't just create a single static version of your mascot. Instead, we recommend creating a dynamic version that feels alive in your interface (and provides fun conversational feedback).

Look at the MailChimp logo mascot, Freddie, for a great example. He's a logo that *says something*. He implies movement, ambition, and determination. He tells a story all on his own, and is very adaptable at the same time. While a mascot may not be able to tell the entire story, it can enhance the other visuals on your site.

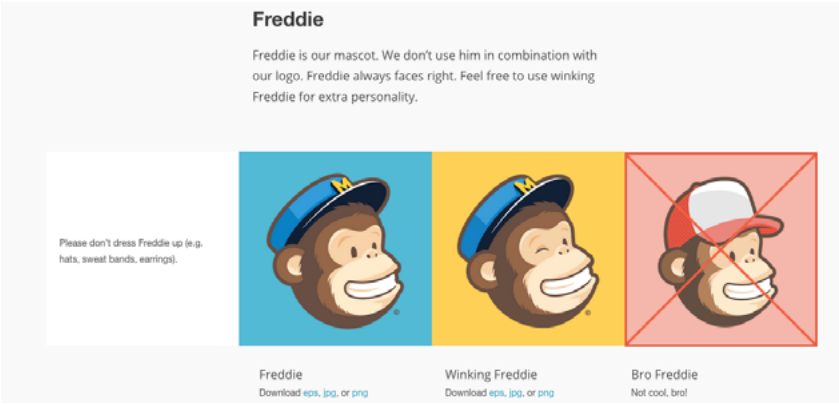

Photo credit: MailChimp

Freddie is as integral a component of MailChimp's delightful experience as its crisp visuals, simple feedback, and smooth flow between actions. He tells jokes, he humorously validates your nervousness right before sending a campaign (his sweaty hand hovers over a red button), and afterwards even encourages you with a high-five.

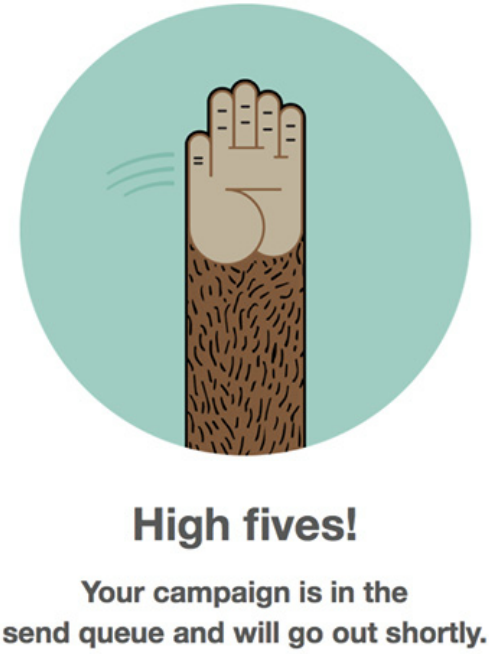

Photo credit: MailChimp via KISSMetrics

As we described in *Interaction Design Best Practices*, mascots inject personality into the interactions between your site and the user. It's not always a nice-to-have either, since much of MailChimp's success is due to the fun experience it creates (with much help from Freddie) in the otherwise technical world of email marketing automation.

Mascots are more than just playful afterthoughts: they create emotional connections, and emotions increase conversions.

Keep the background in the front of your mind

So far we've discussed the types of images you'll use as part of your main content, but don't overlook the importance of background visuals.

While you might think of them more as just an element to add interest rather than a powerful storytelling tool, they can certainly tell their own story or reinforce the story you're already telling with other content.

Using background images that rotate or change depending on the purpose of the page adds an extra dimension of liveliness to your site. The more "alive" your site feels, the stronger the impression you leave – which means that users will remember your story.

Photo credit: Words Can Save via awwwards

Video and motion graphics production is generally more expensive than still images, which is why it's sometimes overlooked as an option. But between stock videos, and low-cost video production equipment, it's more affordable than before.

If your story is complex, then video or motion graphics may be a more effective tactic than static graphics alone. Just keep in mind that with video, especially, a certain segment of your users is likely going to skip watching it, or at least wish that there was a text alternative. You may also run into issues in which it is impractical for your user to watch a video (such as when they're pressed for time).

You must keep in mind, however, that the web experience is fast becoming a cinematic experience as high-resolution Retina displays become more popular and affordable. HD video in websites creates a rich multimedia experience with layers of information conveyed through a moving background.

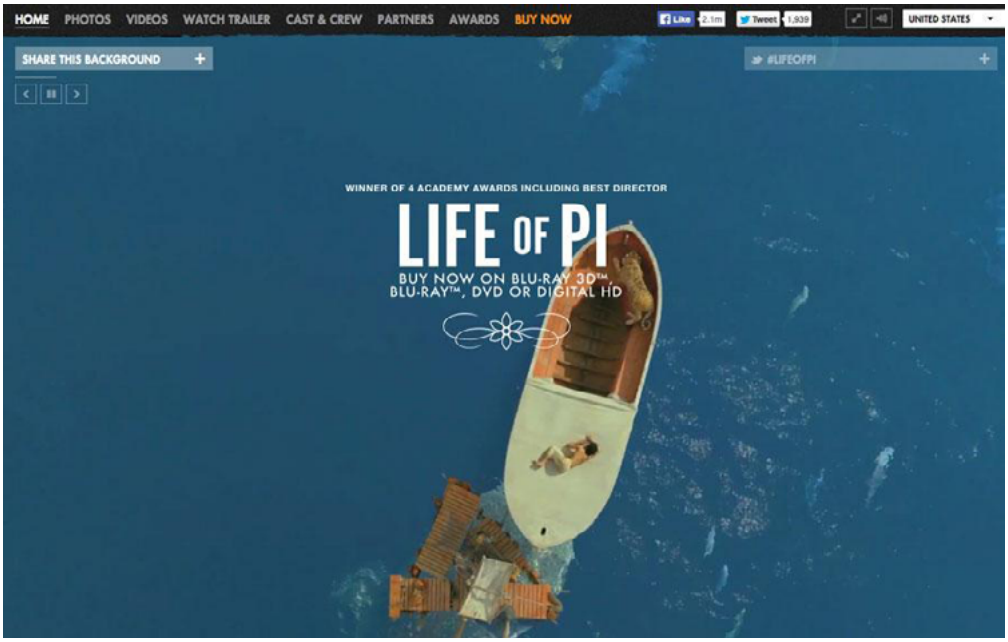

Photo credit: Life of Pi Movie

HD video backgrounds might be one of the most popular storytelling techniques in recent years. From giants such as AirBnB to smaller sites across almost every genre, streaming video is fast becoming a vital part of the web design landscape.

For example, even the golf company Ashworth uses a video background with a purpose.

Photo credit: Ashworth

Notice how they've opted for a slower, serene looped video that shows the elegance of their golf green through a black-and-white filter. It makes a lot of sense considering that golf is as much about the atmosphere as the game, which means that conveying ambiance becomes a top priority of the site experience.

Here's five ways to make background HD video work in your design framework:

1. **Pay attention to video length and duration**

   A background video should tell a visual story that users can get a feel for in a few seconds. It's perfectly fine for the background to loop; it is more important that the video is sharp, clear and un-

derstandable. Somewhere between 10 and 30 seconds is a good goal for loop time.

2. **Turn the sound off**

   Sound is still a polarizing autoplay element for most users.If you're going to play sound, allow users to turn it on (and make sure it's not obnoxiously loud or annoying).

3. **Focus on load times**

   While HD video is fun, it should not bog down your website. If users abandon your site during a slow load, they will never see your awesome background. Never forget that usability is your first and foremost design consideration.

4. **Consider alternatives for devices or device connections that can't render HD video**

   Check in Google Analytics to reveal popular devices, then design accordingly. Usually, you'll find that you'll want to use a static image as a backup option.

5. **Stick to quality video**

   Whether you film your own, hire someone to do it or use stock video, it needs to be top-notch in terms of visual quality. Not only does it have to work in a high-definition framework, but it has to actually be HD quality. Just like a photo, video falls apart at any resolution above what was originally captured.

Images must make sense

We've touched on this a bit already, but it's vital that the images you use in your storytelling make sense within the context of the story you are trying to tell, and the goals of your site.

Photo credit: Quechua

Here are a few tips for making sure that your images make sense in the context of your site:

- **Does the image reflect your persona?** – If your site is aimed at 20-somethings who work hard and play harder, don't fill it with images of middle-aged people going about daily life.
- **Do the colors in the image echo your brand?** – If your site is all muted neutrals and you opt for images filled with neon colors, it could be very jarring for your users. To learn more, refer to our discussion of color theory in *Web Design for the Human Eye*.

- **The same goes for style** – A sophisticated site needs sophisticated images, a fun site needs fun images, etc.
- **Make a list (even just mentally) of some descriptors for your site** – Make sure that images you select also match those descriptors.

Let's take a look at House of Borel below, a luxury boutique fashion brand, as an excellent example of telling the right story to their audience.

Photo credit: House of Borel

There's certainly no shortage of luxury clothing brands, so how do you stand out from the crowd? Clearly, House of Borel creates a visually-driven experience driven by the narrative of a young woman exploring the quaint rooms of a French chateau.

Each section of the site is labelled a "secret", adding to the mystery our main character must unravel. As you explore each secret, you watch the character discover (in an almost Cinderella-like fashion) the remnants of handcrafted luxury. At each step, the site teases you to explore a little bit further – just like the on-screen character.

The brand understands it's speaking to highly sophisticated young women, which is reflected in the main character. As we described in the *Zen of White Space*, the generous negative space also creates an immediate level of sophistication. The background music, while set to autoplay, provides just the right vocal ambiance without annoying users.

As a result, the unorthodox site experience tells the perfect story: we're high-end, we certainly aren't like other big-box brands, and we're just the hidden gem you've been searching for.

Making it personal

When you choose images to tell your story, it can pay off to focus on what sets your brand apart from your competition. This will make your story more personal, and help your users identify and connect with your site over others.

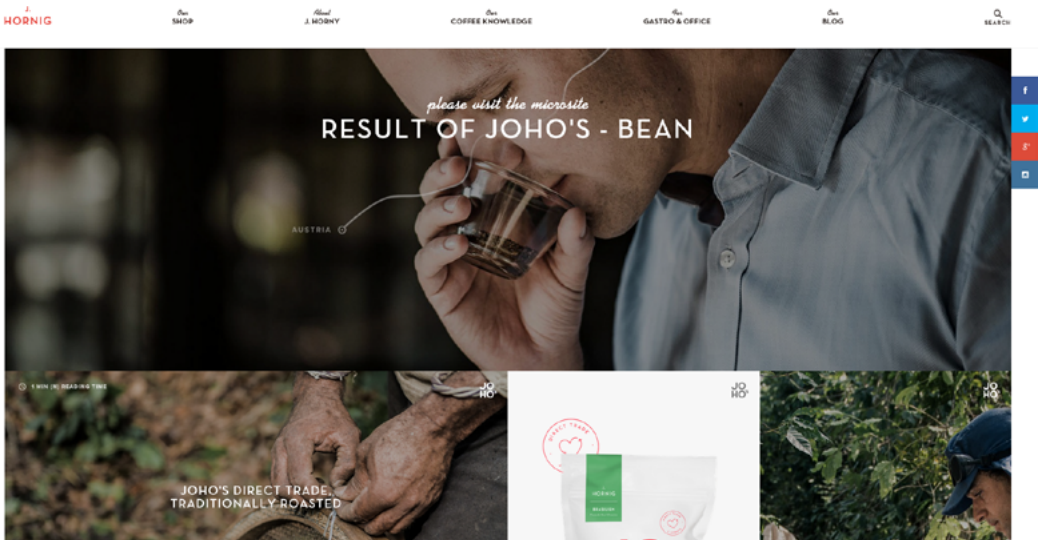

Photo credit: J Hornig

As already mentioned above, making sure that your images make sense within the context of the site is the first step. But you can go beyond that to make them truly personal with a few more steps:

- **If it fits in your budget, create completely custom images** – Custom illustrations are less expensive than custom photos in many cases, but even photos shot specifically to tell your story are automatically going to be more personal than any stock photo you'll find.

- **List descriptors of your site that don't apply to your competitors** – Following a process of competitive heuristic reviews, play to your competitive advantages and emphasize them.

- **Show people** – There's a reason that "person" and "personal" have the same root word. People automatically identify with other people. Think about how many online retailers include photos of people wearing or using their products, rather than just the products sitting against a neutral backdrop. Jakob Nielsen found in a study that social approval is a major motivating factor for most people, so seeing other people (even people that they know are getting paid to be there) use those products subtly removes barriers to purchasing. The technique is effective even if you aren't selling anything.

- **Use colors and patterns in your images consistent with your visual design** – Even adding something like a subtle color overlay to your visuals that tie them into your site's overall color scheme can make a dramatic impact on the visual cohesion of the entire site.

The ultimate goal is ensuring your site meets the criteria we discussed in Principles of Visual Consistency: meet the user's expectations based on their prior experience, ensure your site appears consistent on all pages, then throw in your own creative twist to stay memorable.

Conclusion

You can't really design the UX of a site, but you can certainly design all the elements that contribute to the overall experience. Work backwards from your users, then narrow down your options based on what is most visually compelling.

As you're creating the look and feel of your site, don't forget to zoom out from time to time to check the overall visual consistency. It's easy to get lost in the details, but make sure you come up for air periodically to evaluate your design from the user's point of view.

Creating an Engaging Interactive Story Through Storytelling

Let's start this chapter by stating this: Not every visual story has to be interactive! Say it again: Your visual story does not have to be interactive to be effective!

Your story, however, must be engaging. If your users barely look at it, or get bored with it, then what was the point of creating a visual story in the first place? You might as well have left it out entirely.

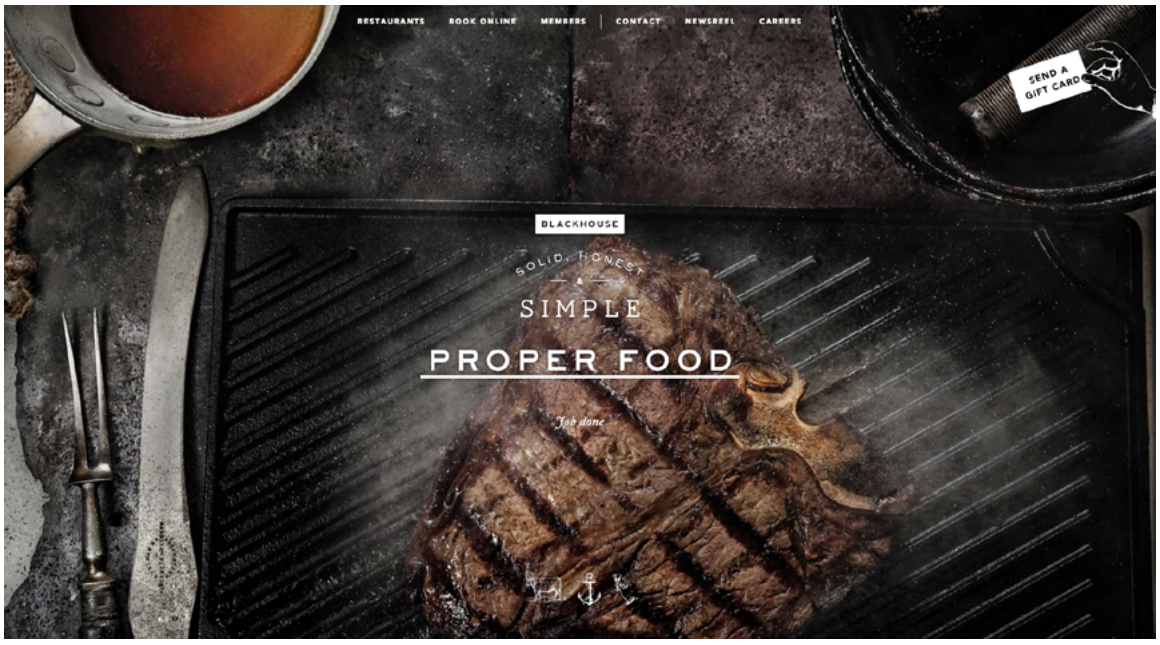

Photo credit: Blackhouse

An engaging story doesn't have to be complex or elaborate. In some cases, you can tell a cohesive story with just one image.

If your story can be told with a single image, then don't use twenty. But if your story needs twenty visuals to work well and be understood, then definitely don't try to do it in eight. It's all about making your story as detailed or simple as it *needs* to be: no more, no less.

Some sites wouldn't benefit from interactive stories. A site where users want to instantly access information wouldn't work as well with drawn-out interactivity. The point isn't to create a connection on those sites – the point is to provide knowledge quickly and simply. A site like Wikipedia, for example, wouldn't do well with loads of interactive content slowing down the user.

Some stories, though, are more complicated, and aren't well suited to static images. Sometimes they greatly benefit from directly involving the user in the story itself. In these cases, figuring out how to get the user to interact becomes key.

In this piece, we'll explain a few ways to approach creating an interactive story.

Make users a character in the story

One of the easiest ways to directly engage your user is to effectively make them a character in your story. The Slavery Footprint website,

for example, uses a guided questionnaire to make the information they're presenting personal to the user. Effectively, the website becomes directly about *them*, rather than just some general, faceless person.

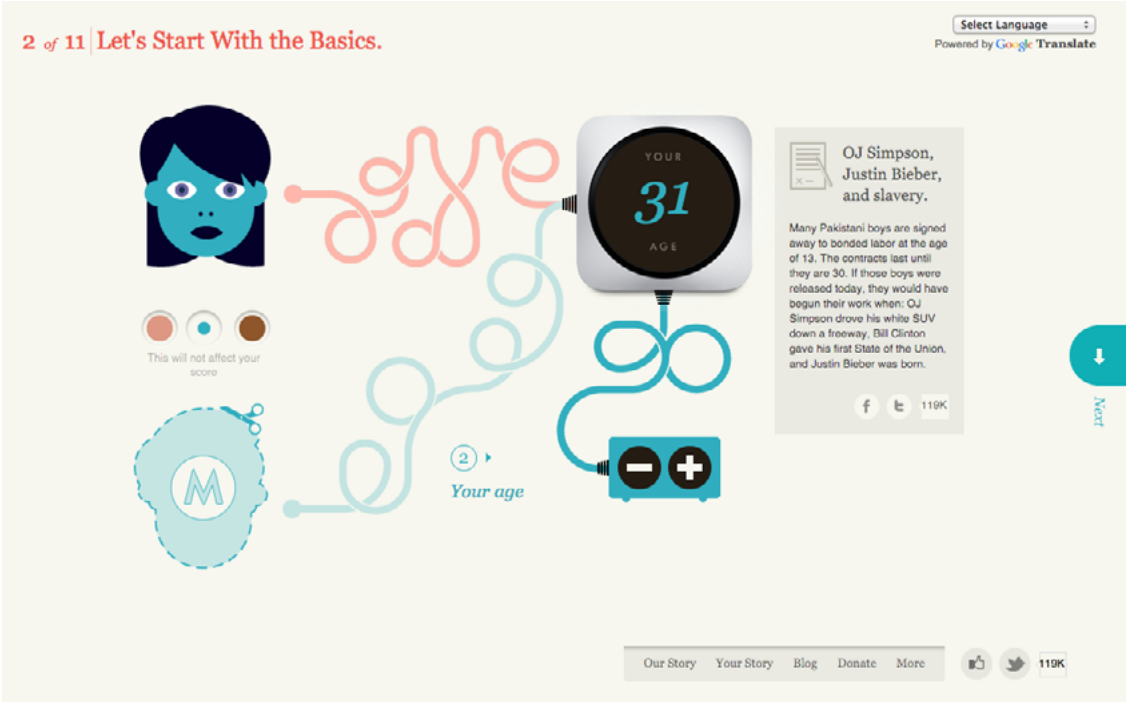

Photo credit: The Slavery Footprint via Digital Telepathy

This is an excellent way to engage your user. They immediately become invested in what you're telling them because you reveal something new about themselves.

Think of ways you can make your user a character in your story, by directly involving them and personalizing the way information is presented. Whether it's based upon user input (e.g. sites that first make you choose if you're a developer, marketer, or designer) or based upon complex real time-data, this kind of interaction is incredibly effective – especially if the goal is to get your user to *care* about a cause to topic.

Another great example of a site that leverages involving the user directly as a "character" is Tesla Motors, specifically their Go Electric page, which showcases some of the common questions a user might have about switching to an electric car. By addressing the user directly, it makes the user feel like they matter (which of course improves engagement).

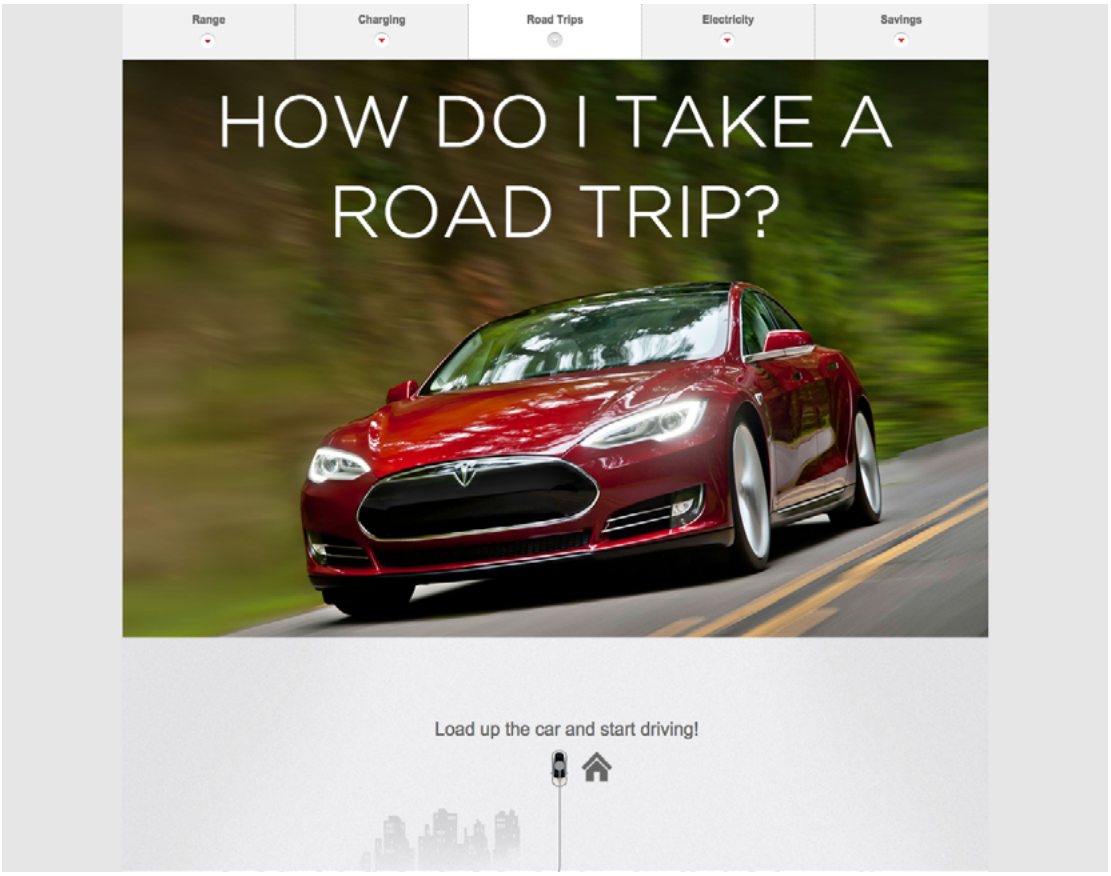

Photo credit: Tesla Motors

Also, notice how Tesla creates a fully immersive learning experience through high-resolution visuals and a long-scroll. Through tasteful parallax techniques like scroll-triggered animations, the site takes the user on a linear journey from exploring how the battery works to learning how to take a road trip, finishing up with a subtle conversion-driven section regarding fuel savings.

The site speaks directly to the user, then frames questions as product benefits. Tesla's "Go Electric" page strikes the perfect balance between product focus and user focus.

Gamify your site

While gamifying your site is related to making your users feel like characters, the two tactics can function independently.

Gamification, in simple terms, is a system of risk (or other cost) and reward. You want to find ways to make your story reward your users for performing certain tasks.

It's most commonly seen in web and mobile apps, though that doesn't mean you can't use it on your website. Think of sites that offer credits or points in return for completing tasks (like filling out a registration form or completing special offers). That's gamification.

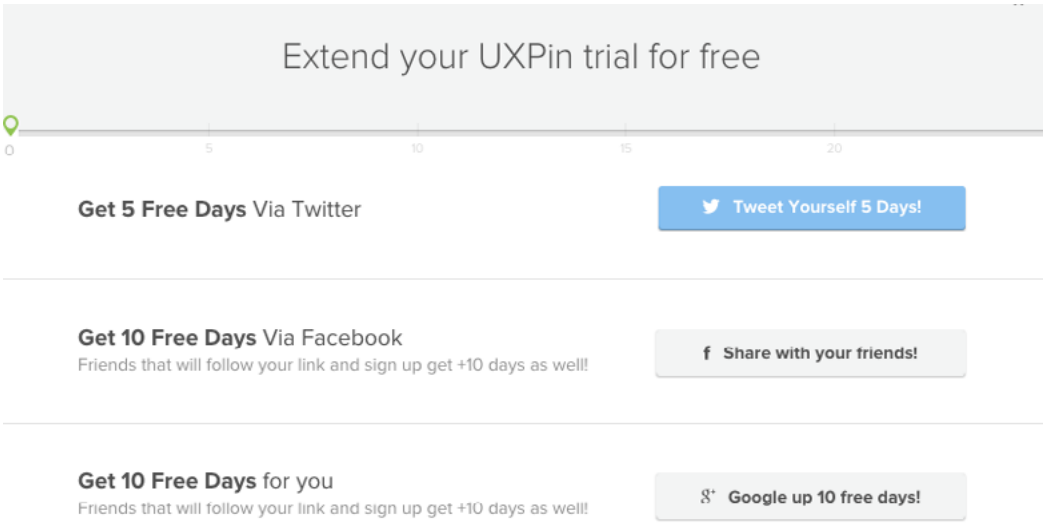

Photo credit: UXPin

Rewards, when they're worthwhile (either psychologically or physically), are a huge motivator for users. Just be careful that the rewards you're offering are appropriate to the level of risk for your user. Too small a reward isn't enough incentive, while too large of a reward may make them wary ("Why am I getting so much for so little? There must be a catch.").

On the most basic level, visuals that change, improve, or do something "cool" can be a great reward for simple tasks. After all, that's how many video games work: complete a task, move on to the next level. Your website or app can do the same thing.

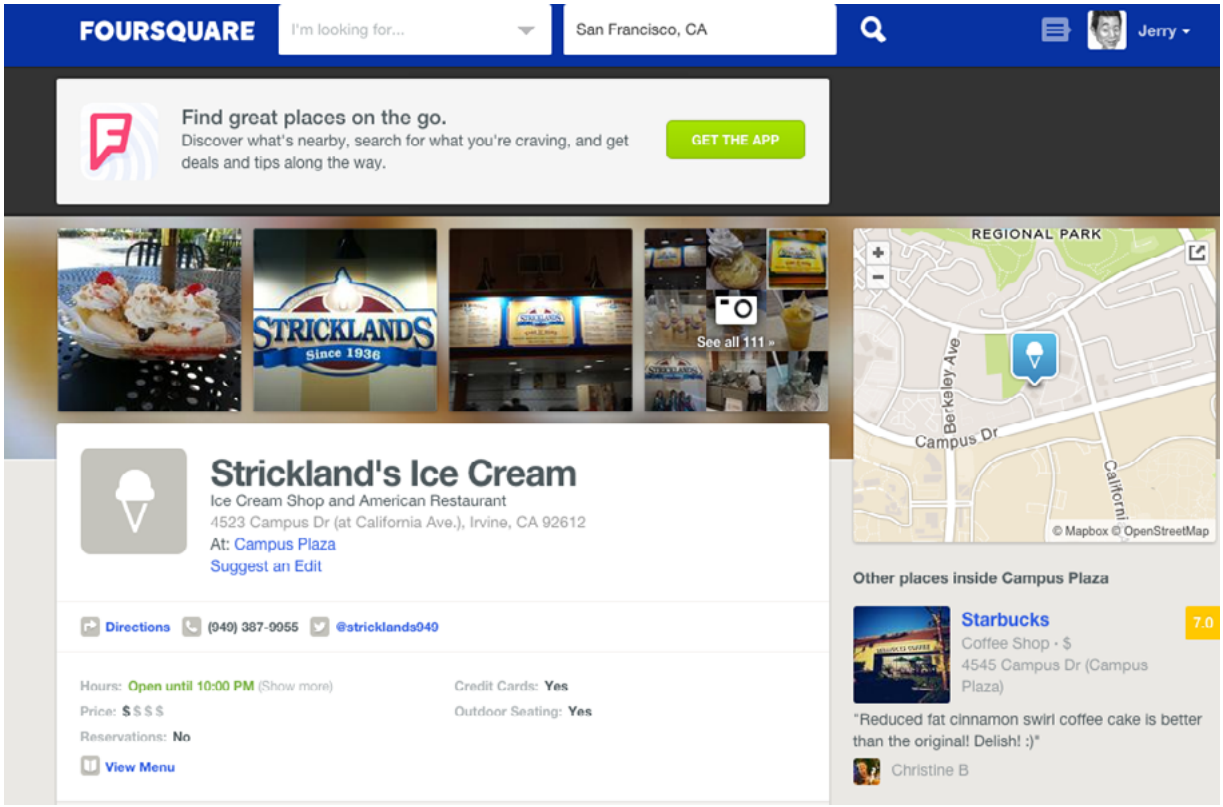

Photo credit: Foursquare

Foursquare has long used gamification in their app to encourage users to continuously check in at various places. The more users who

check in, the more useful the app is to everyone, so gamification makes a ton of sense in this case. In their Swarm app, you can also gain rewards like becoming "mayor" of a place you check into often (among your friends who also use Swarm).

As we described in *Interaction Design Best Practices*, gamification works off of the simple cue-routine-reward loop that creates user habits.

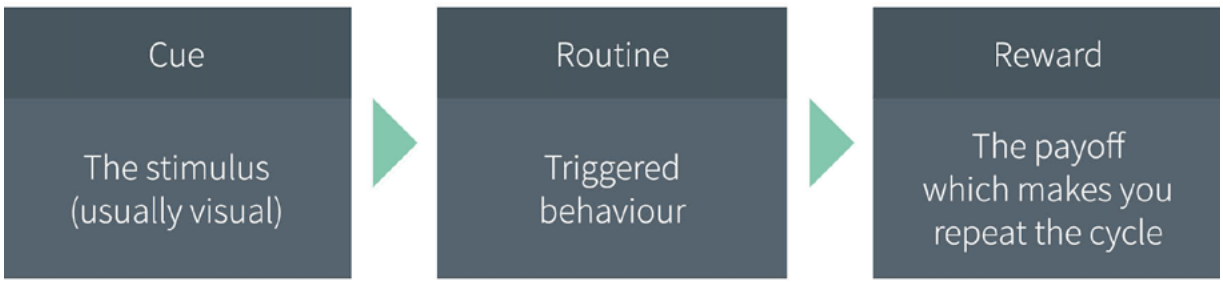

Photo credit: UXPin

Because it's difficult to change the actual cue, you'll want to either change the routine or reward.

Dropbox is a good example of gamification through voluntary reward. They dangle a reward (250MB of free space) in front of users in exchange for a series of small actions, which it cleverly frames as "a series of quests". They also present the 7 quests in a checklist format, which taps into people's need to feel a sense of accomplishment.

Unsurprisingly, this gamification model actually played a huge role in Dropbox's initial growth.

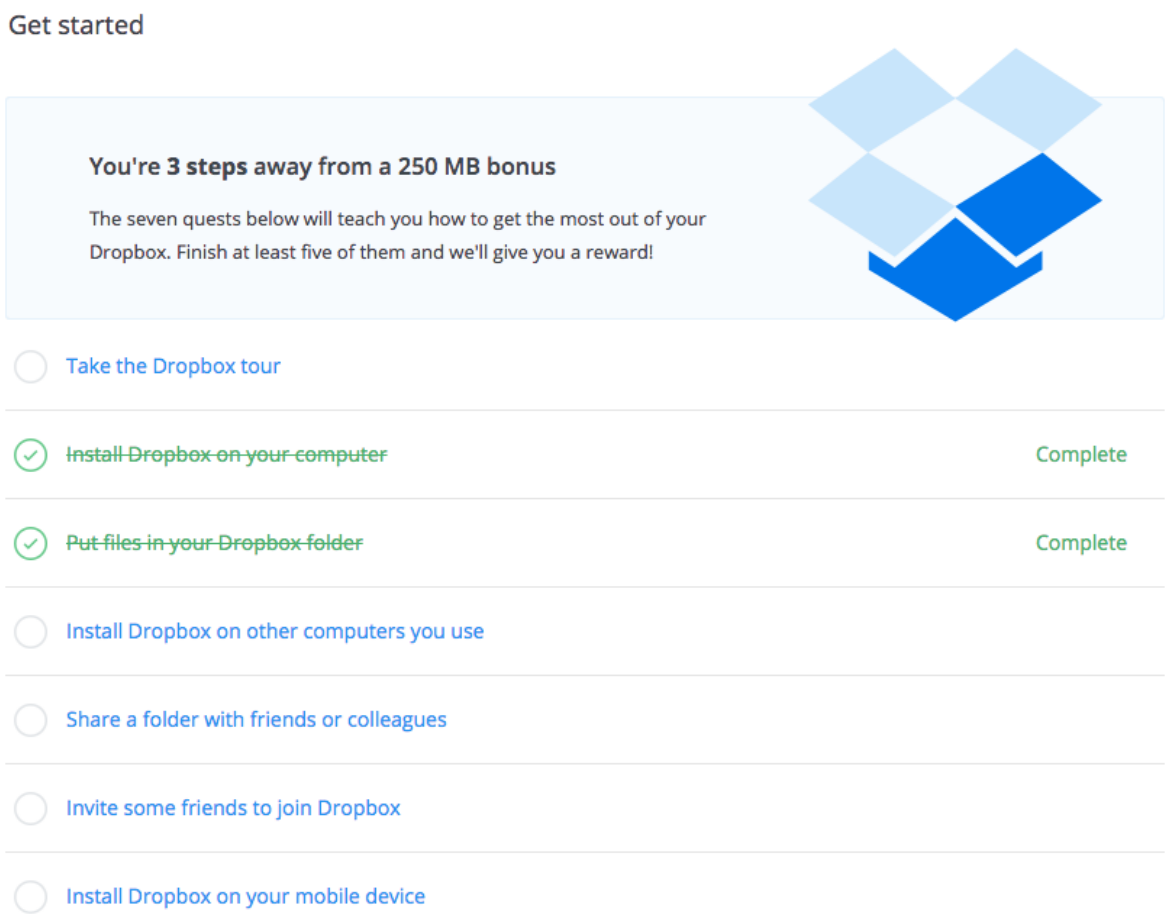

Photo credit: Dropbox

As you approach your initial data limit, users will be shown a notification (cue) to either upgrade their account or invite others (both of which are routines). By presenting a simpler routine (inviting others) without altering the reward, Dropbox manages to capture value from less convinced users who otherwise might just abandon the app if they didn't want to pay.

While gamification isn't a direct form of storytelling, it does create a stronger overall narrative for the experience. By offering different rewards for different actions, you end up creating more of a "choose your own adventure" feel to your site or app.

Supplement common actions with interactivity

Certain actions are quite commonplace online. For example, clicking (or tapping on mobile devices) and scrolling are actions that users complete without a second thought – you might as well add some interactive value.

When it comes to clicking, use your images to reinforce where users should click and what will happen when they do (and why that's beneficial). As we described in *Web Design for the Human Eye*, you must ensure consistency between the tone of your copy and the images.

Notice in the below example from Squarespace that the high-resolution image fulfills the promise suggested by "Create a beautiful website". If you want to capture user attention, keep the headline within 5-7 words, then find (or create) the right graphics to communicate the message on an instantaneous level.

Photo credit: Squarespace

When it comes to scrolling, you must be very nuanced in your approach if you want it to work. Parallax scrolling has become one of

the most popular techniques to tell a linear visual story as a user scrolls down a site.

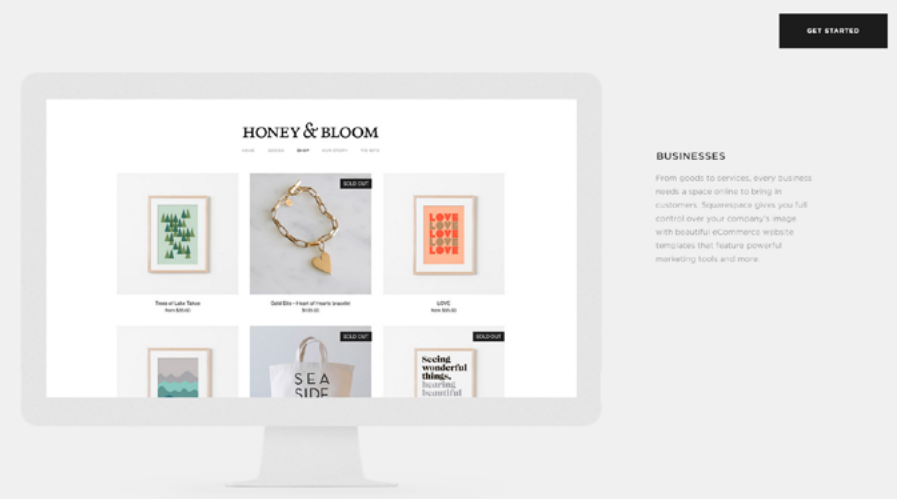

Photo credit: Squarespace

Of course, you don't need a full parallax site to create a more immersive experience. For example (also from Squarespace), you'll see below that the image in the computer and copy on the page rotate in place as you scroll downwards. As a result, the overall scroll is shortened while also providing a bit of unexpected visual delight.

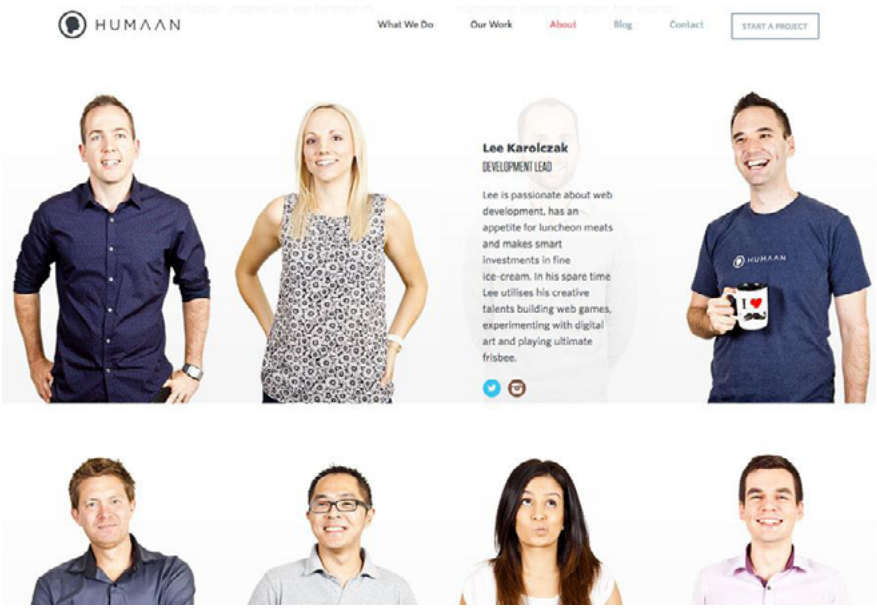

Photo credit: Humaan

Also borrowing some tricks from parallax design, design agency Humaan tells a fun interactive story with hover-to-reveal copy and scroll-triggered animations.

Photo credit: Humaan

As you scroll down the About page, fun facts about the agency are also revealed as part of a larger grid. Without the clever animations here, the storytelling pace is ruined since the user would feel overwhelmed by all the copy appearing at once.

Remember that interaction design isn't about flashy animations at every corner. Embed additional interactivity into existing user actions, and you'll find that the effects quickly add up to create a more delightful experience.

Make your visuals respond

Adding visuals that respond to user actions is tactic that's similar to our previous tips on leveraging common actions. In most cases, this is going to be some simple animation that they'll perform (like we mentioned with Humaan). The visual reaction can be triggered by clicking, scrolling, or a more complex action like a form submission.

Take the Babel app website, for one great example. As you scroll down, a cat (the title character, Babel) seemingly falls from the sky, tumbling on the way down. Stop scrolling, and the cat rights itself, holding onto an umbrella. (You can't see the effect here, but visit the site to try it out for yourself.)

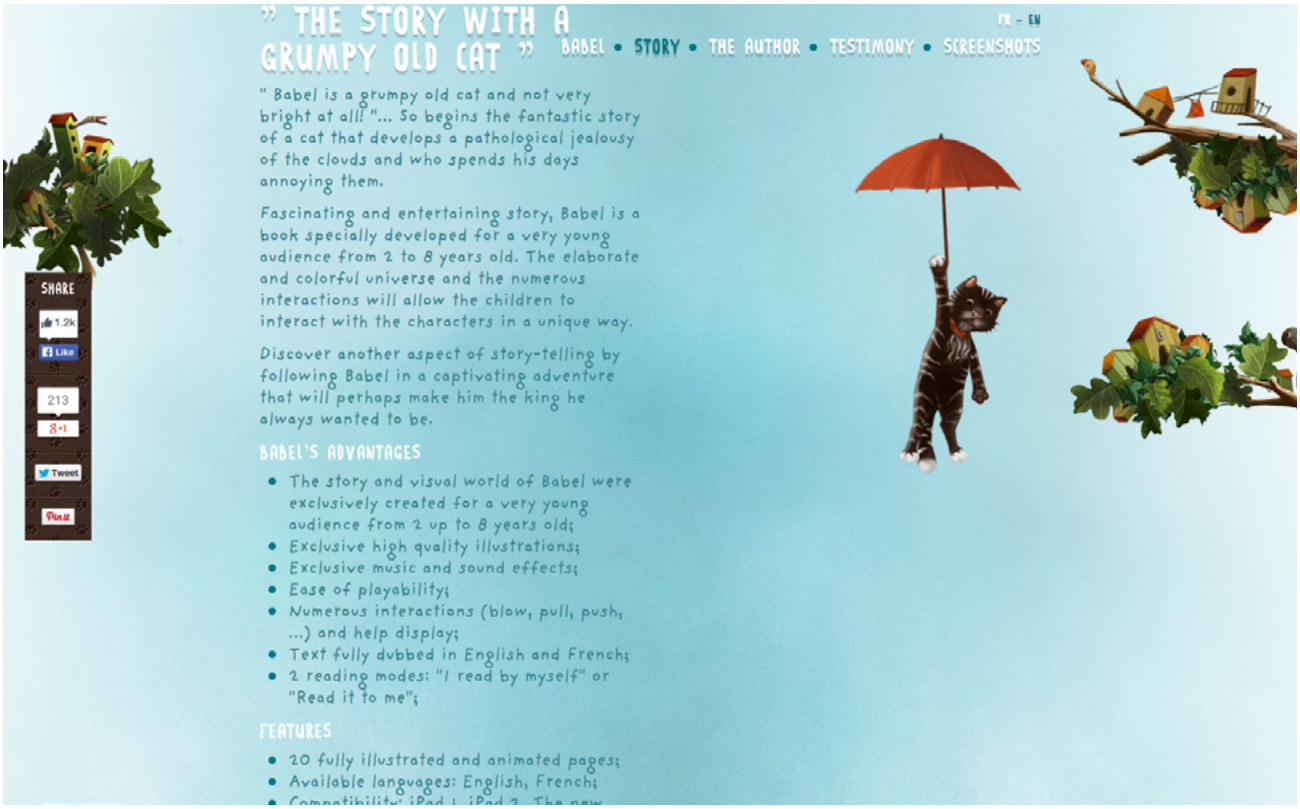

Photo credit: Babel the King via Digital Telepathy

Hide secondary elements for an "easter egg" effect

This is one of the trickiest interaction design strategies to pull off, and is only suitable for certain sites. But if your project is well-suited, the joy of discoverability can be one of the most memorable experiences for users. Some types of sites that might be appropriate for this:

- Game sites (both those for actual games and those about gaming in general)
- Giveaway or contest sites (it can add to the fun of the contest)
- Sites aimed at geeks, nerds, and the computer-proficient (who doesn't love a good Konami Code easter egg?)
- Any site where the premise is supposed to be fun and lighthearted, or where the user will feel a sense of accomplishment at discovering something hidden

One great example of a site that uses this tactic well is The Museum of Mario website, which showcases the evolution of the Super Mario Bros. and related video games. Different areas on different screens within the site perform a variety of actions, including mimicking game play and revealing information about characters and games.

Because The Museum of Mario site is already targeting gamers who mostly enjoy easter eggs, this kind of hidden information works. It's also effective because it says right under the header "click around to find hidden interactions!"

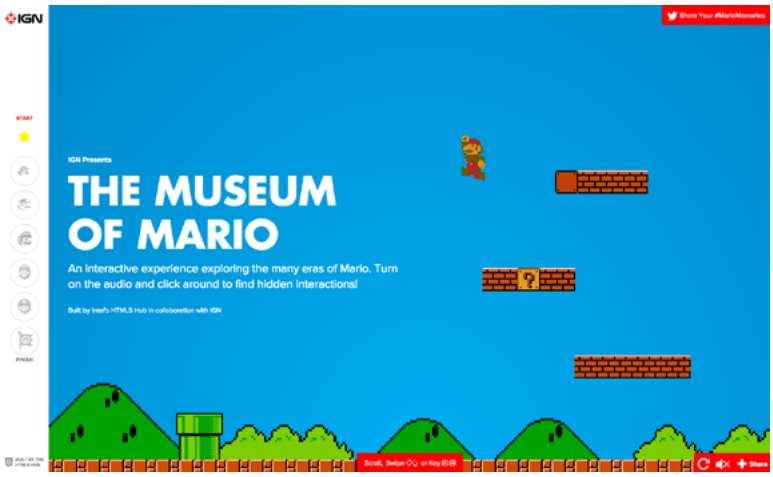

Photo credit: Mario IGN via TheUltralinx

But be careful that your audience actually understands and enjoys this kind of playful interaction. Not everyone will appreciate it, and for some users, it may prove to simply be frustrating. We can't emphasize this enough: before you design anything, know your users inside and out.

Once you know your users, make sure you prioritize the tasks. Actions that are critical to completing user goals must be explicitly visible, while those that are more occasional can afford to be less visible or even hidden. As you can see in the previous Mario example, you can still experience the whole history of Mario without ever using the hidden click feature (which means they prioritized correctly).

Keep the bigger picture in mind: a beginning, middle, and end

Every good story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Even a story told with a single image follows the same narrative arc (just completing the cycle faster), but it becomes even more vital for a longer, more complex story (like explaining why your cloud CRM solution stands out from the dozens of others).

Take time to map out the beginning, middle, and end of the experience. You should approach it from the point of view of the user: the beginning is the stimulus of the customer journey, somewhere in the middle you'll engage with them, and the end is where they complete their final goal.

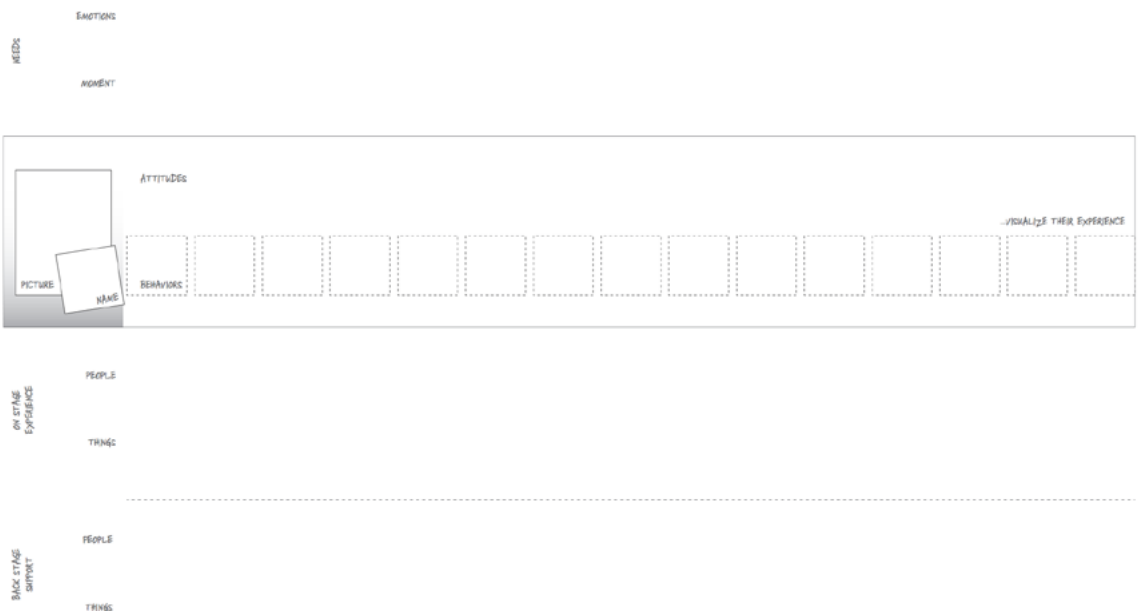

Photo credit: Designing CX Free Customer Journey Template

The stage of engagement and completion of sale varies dramatically depending on product and service. For example, a user might dis-

cover your product comparison tool at the beginning of their quest for a better computer, do some research, then decide it's easier to pay for the tool. Your part of that experience is technically complete, but the user still has a ways to go before completing their final goal.

It's never a bad idea to conduct user research and then create a thorough experience map for the whole journey (Adaptive Path offers an excellent free guide, and Designing CX provides a helpful free toolkit). Once you've explored the complete journey, you can then create a more localized experience map that focuses only on the beginning, middle, and end of where your site or app plays a role within the context of the bigger picture.

After you know the high-level and more focused customer journeys, you'll be able to craft the most intriguing story to tell through your site's visual and interaction design. Align your multimedia efforts to that narrative, and you've now crafted a targeted experience that is far more than just pretty pictures and animations.

Conclusion

Interaction design isn't an ornamental branch of web design. It is the core to allowing users to become part of the story you tell, which makes them more of a participant than a passive observer.

Make your visual story as simple or complex as it needs to be to get the job done. Don't add interactive elements just for the sake of adding them, and consider carefully those that you do add to ensure they add value to the end user, rather than just being there to "impress".

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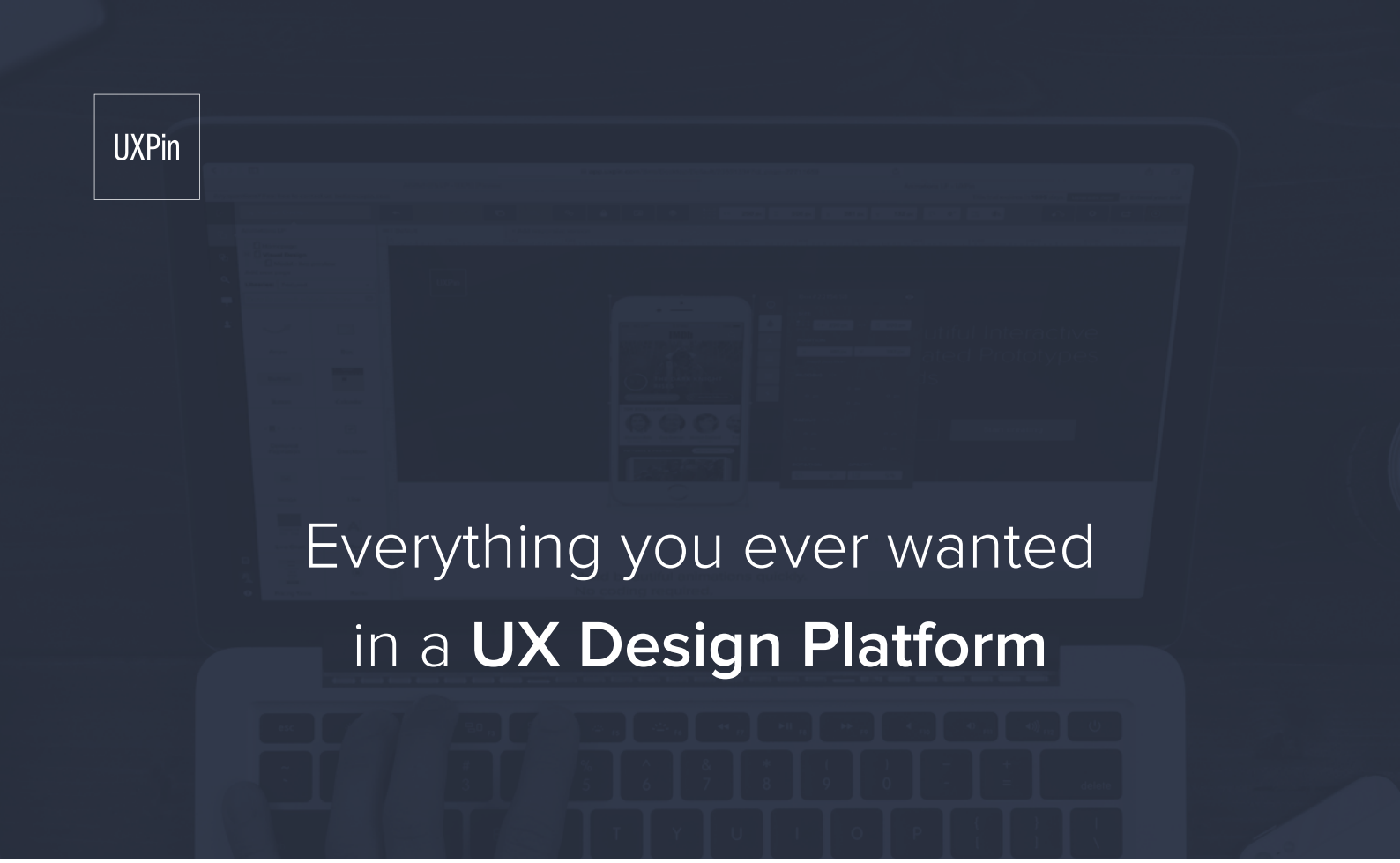

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