Reaction Paper #1 (September 13, 2012)
Johnson, J. (2010). Designing with the mind in mind: Simple guide to understanding user interface design rules. Chapters 1-4

While I thought each of the first four chapters in Johnson’s “Designing with the Mind in Mind” book were interesting and helpfully illustrated with many examples, I’m going to focus this reaction paper on chapters 3 and 4. These two chapters made me realize that designing a website really isn’t just about me and what colors I think look nice or how ‘fun’ it would be to create a unique site, but that there are real, logistical tactics that go into creating a website that are necessary and practical for the average user.

The most appealing feature of these two chapters were the frequent compare and contrast pictures with the ‘thumbs up’ and ‘thumbs down’ icons next to images. As I read the text and observed the related images, it was useful to look at pictures of whole websites or sections from a website that were either cumbersome to look at or simplified and easy to navigate. As many of us are frequent users of websites, there are undoubtedly many times when we experience websites that are frustrating and poorly structured, while we also know how nice it is to navigate through a visually appealing and easy-to-use site!

Since I am pretty new to designing web sites, I thought chapter 3 provided a nice overview of how the visual elements in a website can either help or hinder a user’s experience. While reading this chapter, I often found myself looking at the example photos and thinking “Oh yeah, I’ve seen webpages like that and I always thought they were terrible!” or “Oh, wow, that is a lot easier to follow when the contents of the webpage are structured in that way.” These examples reminded me that I need to really consider the actual user and their preferences when I am building a website and that it’s probably good practice to frequently ‘test’ your site with real people, which Johnson suggests at the end of chapter 4 (p. 51).

For me, the take home message from chapter 4 was to be simplistic and clear with text—whether it means to be simplistic with the amount of words you put down in a space or whether it means to be simplistic with the typeface and clear when it comes to the colors, backgrounds, and images—being simplistic and clear with your text is extremely important when building a website. In this chapter, the most helpful section for me to read was on page 47: “Much of the Reading Required by Software is Unnecessary.” I am, by nature, someone who believes that the more descriptive I am in my writing, the better chance there is that the reader will get a full picture of what it is I’m trying to say. This, of course, is not always the best way to write—often, writing less and being more concise is the best way to go (as I have learned throughout my doctoral experience so far!). This section in chapter 4 reminded me that when designing a website, often one or two words can be replaced for an entire sentence in some circumstances and that paragraphs can often dismay readers, even those who are interested in your content. Keeping it
simple, both visually and textually is the key to building a good, and user-friendly website.

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**Reaction Paper #2 (October 4, 2012)**


*Chapters 5-10*

The topic of humans’ ability to perceive color is discussed in chapter 5. Two types of cells exist in the back of the human eye that help us to perceive shapes and outlines when it’s dark (rods) and three overlapping ranges of light frequencies, which help us to notice color in our world (cones). While distinguishing colors is an evolutionary adaptation that has persisted in humans for many eras, it is important as interface designers to be aware of those who have inherited color blindness. Color blindness is somewhat of a misnomer in that it does not mean one cannot see color at all; however, it does mean that certain pairs of colors—the most common being red and green—are perceived as being the same (p. 59). With this in mind, designers must take this trait into account along with other considerations pertaining to color (p. 61-62).

I looked forward to reading chapter 5 because I’ve been really thinking about the colors I’m using in my personal website. My favorite colors are green and blue, so my website is currently based on these two colors. I think, however, that it is a little too brilliant and bright as it currently stands. However, after reading chapter 5, I did not get the impression that these two colors are incompatible. Instead, I may need to tone down the brightness to achieve a more subdued page.

Chapter 7 was fascinating to read and it made me a lot more conscious about the ‘everyday’, but evolutionarily advanced tasks that I complete on a regular. For instance, as I sit here and type out these words, it’s easy because I’ve been typing for almost 15 years now; but I can still remember how tough it was when I was first learning how to type correctly in middle school and how awkward it felt to stretch my pointer fingers to the “Y” and “T” keys.

Johnson would refer to my unconscious ability to type effortlessly as a skill attributed to my long-term memory. Since I type (and have been typing) almost every single day for over a decade, typing is now a skill that is normal, repetitive, and thus, stronger (p. 81) than it was when I first began typing over 15 years ago. While humans’ long-term memory acts as a ‘store’ of information (p. 89), the short-term memory lacks the capacity to store and retain fleeting moments that we experience. Instead, the short-term memory is what makes us conscious and aware of our current activities, yet it can be easily disrupted. If you’ve ever been shown a picture of 20 different items and then had to write down as many of the objects as you could from memory, your short-term memory is both productive and counter-
productive during this exercise; it helps you retain and write down the objects that resonated with you, yet challenges you to remember every single one of those 20 objects.

Although the connections that this chapter made between human memory and technological interfaces made sense (authentication usernames/passwords, security questions, etc.), at this point in my web development, I do not think they necessarily apply to me. However, it makes me appreciate web designers that do put an effort towards creating systems that allow users to achieve their end goals without getting bogged down by log-in windows, security question pull-down boxes, or passwords with one number, one capital letter, and one special symbol.

Reaction Paper #3 (November 1, 2012)
Preface and Chapter 1

In the preface and first chapter of Emotional Design, Norman argues that aesthetics and appealing to one’s emotions are critical, yet often overlooked elements of a design. Human emotions and cognition inextricably overlap when it comes to interacting with products and Norman describes three different levels of the human brain that require different design styles: visceral, behavioral, and reflective.

The visceral layer of the brain is the automatic, or ‘prewired’ level. This correlates with a human’s predisposition to disliking bad smells, or enjoying pleasant sensations—both of which are not learned, but are simply reactive and instinctual. The behavioral region of the brain accounts for human behaviors and feelings. It is also responsible for the things we do subconsciously after having learned a certain skill, like typing, after many years of experience. Lastly, the reflective level of the brain is what makes humans unique from other animals. Reflection is a conscious activity, which allows us to reason with information we receive in order to make new decisions.

Norman also refers to these three levels of processing in order to describe aspects of a design. Visceral design focuses on the appearance of the design. Behavioral design appreciates the appearance of a design, but it also incorporates the functionality of a product. Reflective design is a less concrete element of design, but notes the importance of the “intellectualization” of a product (p. 3). For example, the reflective design of an object may not be functional at all, but its quirkiness is personally meaningful to the owner or the explanation behind its existence is worthwhile.
Norman attests that attractive things work better, or at least make us happier than something that is less attractive. From a personal standpoint, when I choose new clothes, I am drawn to colors that I love, but before I buy anything, I must try them on to make sure they fit well and are comfortable. I do not buy clothes only because they fit well; I need to like the color, material, and patterns, too. The behavioral layer of my brain works aptly when I am in need of new clothes because it is important to buy clothing that is not only appealing to the eye, but that also fit well.

On the other hand, I believe that sometimes the instinctual pull towards attractive things causes us to overlook the realistic functionality of the object. For example, I have never owned a wallet that I really loved. I am always looking for a new wallet that will be big enough for the items I carry. I've gone through many wallets and have never found a single one that pleases me for more than a year. My downfall is my lure towards the color or patterns on a certain wallet, not the size and usefulness of it. While attractiveness is certainly a valuable and influential element of a product, the practicality of that product is also important for long-lasting satisfaction.

When designing, Norman’s three levels are useful and practical to consider. For one, it is clear that even the most highly efficient machines need to be appealing to human emotions in order to create a positive and gratifying interaction. Additionally, something that is attractive on the surface must still be functional and be effective at what it does. A hint of uniqueness and quirkiness are also elements that humans are drawn to because those little details may enable an object to symbolize something meaningful or create a rich conversation with colleagues.