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People Profile: Lilia Murray

Editor

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and by working with gaming professionals, EBSCO Publishing (EBSCO) has introduced a new interface which combines the need for a simplified search experience with in-depth functions.

Web 2.0 — a label for recent advances in technology (AJAX, etc...) that provide a richer experience for the user, as well as a shift in the way modern Websites approach the user experience — putting the user at the center of the experience, has had a profound effect on user expectations. While the term Web 2.0 may mean different things to different people, it is clear that Websites today are using technology that make pages seem more powerful and “fuller” than they’d been in the past. For example, the hovers that Netflix or Google Maps show over a movie image or street address have become familiar — users put their mouse over an image or icon and wait for the screen to react — showing a ‘bubble’ of additional information right there on the page — no delay with clear cause and effect — completely logical and helpful.

Similarly, it has become extremely common for sites that rely on users finding information on their site (Amazon.com, Walmart, Land’s End) to allow users to narrow results by clicking on categories on the left bar. Likewise, many sites use a multi-column layout, putting related but less central information in the far right column. Examples of this include cnn.com, nytimes.com, and facebook.com. Many sites have developed useful tools to help users accomplish specific tasks, for example, kayak.com uses sliders to adjust flight times.

Reviewing these sites and features expanded the designers’ notions of what could be possible. Web 2.0 has raised the bar.

Working with The School of Library and Information Science’s (SLIS) ScanPath Usability Lab at Kent State University, EBSCO began to investigate how EBSCOhost functions from a user perspective. At each step in the research process analysis was performed to determine what worked well and what didn’t. Eye tracking tests showed that important functions were being overlooked or were not located where users wanted to find them. Language and terminology was tested. Other tests at other universities and public libraries were also used to validate assumptions and to vet new design ideas. Goal-oriented analysis helped the team focus its analysis and designs. At each step the desire was to make sure that users’ actions would feel natural, familiar and logical.

One of the user behaviors that had been noticed in testing was “Find Box fixation.” If users were given a search task, once they saw a Find Box on the screen, virtually all else was ignored. They typed words in the find box and then clicked enter. Participants explained that it was quickest to enter the search term and then refine within the results screen.

With this data in mind, the team set out to provide logical ways to provide the user with a full array of meaningful and logical options to refine, narrow and explore the results in a way that was intuitive.

The design team felt that using these approaches for presenting and organizing information for users on a research Website could add to its usability and appeal. They looked for opportunities to use these Web 2.0 approaches, focusing on the EBSCOhost result list.

Key features were added, such as including a snippet of the abstract in line with results, a dynamic date slider to narrow in on a specific date range, article preview hovers, expandable/collapsible sections for subject, author, publication clusters, and related information panels. One of the most commonly sought after features, limiting to full-text articles, was also made available in a prominent spot on the result list — when the user is thinking about full-text results.

Additional functionality is available in advanced search, including the ability to choose subjects, preferences, databases, limiters and thesaurus terms. For instance, limiters are now presented in two columns which means users no longer need to scroll down a long page of options. Users can also mouse over preview options providing them with detailed descriptions of databases from the Choose Databases dialog.

While users can choose session-based preferences for such features as number of results and the type of abstract displayed, the library has ultimate control. EBSCOadmin (the administrative application that accompanies EBSCOhost access) remains the key, allowing library administrators to tailor-make the way EBSCOhost operates in a given library. In EBSCOadmin, defaults can be set to control a variety of features including default screens, branding, local holding information, and linking capabilities.

Making Finding as Easy as Searching

Today, searching is easy. Most browsers have a search box built into the browser itself. The challenge for traditional research databases like EBSCOhost is to make finding premium high-quality content just as easy. This means creating a usable and familiar experience for researchers that will invite them to explore the research databases comfortably, leveraging their other Web experiences to make them more effective. Changing with the times and keeping the 21st Century Searcher in mind allows database providers to ensure that the best content can be found easily.

Endnotes
1. Alexa is a Website ranking site. This sequence was retrieved on February 4th from this URL: http://www.alexa.com/site/ds?top_sites?tx_mod=global&lang=none.
2. Jakob Nielsen is a renowned usability expert, and this text was copied from his “Usability 101” article at this URL: http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030825.html.