



# designing the moment

web interface design concepts in action

robert hoekman, jr.

# **Designing the Moment**

***Web Interface Design  
Concepts in Action***

**Robert Hoekman, Jr.**

**New  
Riders**

**Designing the Moment:  
Web Interface Design Concepts in Action**

Robert Hoekman, Jr.

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*This book is dedicated to you, the hardworking designers and developers who have made it your mission to improve user experiences on the web.*

*Keep fighting the good fight. It's working.*

# Acknowledgments

A portion of my royalties from *Designing the Moment* will go towards offsetting the carbon footprint of the book's printing process, so you can enjoy the comforts of the printed word without worrying about damage to the environment.

For information on how I keep my company, Miskeeto, carbon neutral, please visit [www.miskeeto.com/about/carbonneutral](http://www.miskeeto.com/about/carbonneutral).

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with all of you is one of the best parts of my job. You've made every grueling flight, every long day, and every stressful weekend worth the effort. You've brought insights, questions, challenges, and even friends to my sessions, my inbox, and my social networks, and I am eternally grateful for your support. Thank you very much—I hope to see you again soon.

## Author Biography



Robert Hoekman, Jr., is the founder of Miskeeto, a product development and web design consultancy focused on socially-conscious projects that improve the world.

He's a passionate and outspoken interaction designer, writer, and user-experience evangelist who has written dozens of articles and has worked with Adobe, Automattic, United Airlines, DoTheRightThing.com, Go Daddy Software, and countless others to create superior user experiences for a wide range of audiences. He also gives in-house training sessions and speaks regularly at industry events like Adobe MAX, Flashforward, SxSW, Future of Web Design, and others.

Robert is the author of the Amazon bestseller *Designing the Obvious*, which focuses on seven guiding principles of great web-based software and how to leverage them in any real-world project.

# Introduction

A good user experience is all about good moments.

In one moment, a user's goal can be to figure out the name and purpose of a site after landing there from a Google search result. The goal of the next moment can be to figure out the controls for a video player to watch a screen-cast about an application. The next can be to figure out how to sign up, or to find out about pricing plans, or to contact the company.

These are not *life* goals, like those that many designers prefer to capture in the form of a "persona" (a description of an archetypal user within a particular product's audience), but rather *interaction goals*.

Achieving great design means asking ourselves, What is it we want the user to do in this moment and how does the interface encourage him to do it?

What is the user's goal in this moment, and how does the design help her accomplish that goal? Is her goal to get oriented to a new site? Find specific information? Complete a form? Add something to the shopping cart?

Each moment has the potential to increase a user's confidence or destroy his trust in a product or company, and each one is an important piece of the whole experience.

Why? Because the task a person is attempting to complete at any given moment is the most important task to that person, at that moment.

It's our job to make sure nothing goes wrong. To make sure that moment is enjoyable and productive, and helps our user feel smart.

Our job is to solve for *all* of these moments. To design something that supports each of these goals without interfering with any of them. To create a cohesive whole out of the oft-disparate parts.

Our job is not to design screens, it's to design *moments*.

It doesn't matter how simple or complex an application might be. What matters is what happens when a user tries to accomplish his interaction goals for any given moment.

One of the keys to achieving great design is to look at our work in terms of what has to happen in each one of these moments to make it successful, and then solve for that.

## Navigating a Moment

In these moments, users take all kinds of actions. In the course of a day, they can cruise from Amazon to Z Gallerie and do everything from register to quit.

The actions users take online are broad and varied. We do things like input, edit, search, format, create, upload, delete, share, organize, and participate. These are the actions designers want users to take. And much of the time, these are actions we *want* to take.

Of course, we also do things we don't usually realize we're doing. We analyze. We judge. We forget, make mistakes, lose our train of thought, change our minds, get lost, and become confused. If we're lucky, we learn things. We get oriented. We form ideas, memorize, habituate, trust, get inspired, and feel productive.

This book is about designing interfaces that support all of these behaviors—you know, the things that make us human—in a way that is conducive to good decision-making in the moment a choice is presented. It's about creating interactions that inspire people to input, edit, search, share, and do all those other wonderful things we want them to do. It's about designing applications that help people feel productive in spite of their innate tendency to forget, make mistakes, and change their minds.

More specifically, it's a collection of over 30 stories that illustrate how to put good design principles to work on real-world Web application interfaces to make them obvious and compelling. From the first impression to the last, these stories are about looking critically at designs and questioning every detail to ensure that human beings—the kind that make mistakes and do things we don't expect—can walk away from our software feeling productive, respected, and smart.



*Designing for the Moment* is

- A revealing and insightful “think out loud” approach to interface design
- A critical look at elements from every phase of a user’s interaction with a Web application, one moment at a time
- A set of best-practice recommendations for the design of everything from page layouts to social-networking features

Most of all, it’s a critical look into the subtle details of an interface that make or break a user’s experience during the moments he navigates his way through them, and how to improve each and every one.

## **The Design of Interactions**

This book is organized in order of the actions users typically take when they encounter a Web application, from the pivotal first few moments of getting oriented to the moment they finally close up their accounts and move on to something else. The titles of each part correspond directly to these actions. Each part is about something they actually *do* with a Web application in a given moment.

Parts 1 through 3 are about things users typically are able to do within the first 30 seconds or so of encountering a new application. The stories in these sections are about exploring an interface for the first time, finding their way around, reading bits of text to learn and get familiar, watching videos and animations, and searching for specific information.

Parts 4 through 6 are about things users do as they get more involved with an application. Once they decide to create an account, they input information, edit content, manage data, and participate in a variety of ways, and each of these moments can have a lasting impact on their confidence with an application.

And Part 7 focuses on what happens when users bail out, either temporarily or permanently.

In other words, I've intentionally structured this book so that it forms a complete picture of a user's experience with a Web application, in a way that addresses each and every phase of this human-to-product conversation, whether it lasts three seconds or two years. As a collection, the elements discussed in these stories comprise the complete picture of the online user experience.

The book is also organized in this way so that you can return to it later on and use it as a sort of "reference guide of inspiration". When grappling with the design of a new editing feature six months from now, you can open up the Participating section in this book, read a few pages, and hopefully get some ideas.

And it's all done via the timeless art of storytelling.

## Postcards from the real world

Some of these stories are about specific implementations of design patterns. Some are about individual situations you may never face. Some are about new ideas. Some are about old ones. Regardless, they're all aimed at illuminating the thought processes, facts, findings, theories, and hunches that go into the design of great moments.

In *Designing the Obvious* (my previous book), I talked at length about seven core, guiding principles of Web application design that produce a common-sense approach that can be reproduced consistently and successfully in any Web project.

In *Designing the Moment*, I offer stories about how I've applied these ideas to real projects to create effective moments for users, and I offer a ton of new ideas along the way.

Some of these stories are personal—about things I've designed in the past. Some are brand-new, designed specifically for this book.

All of them are straight from the mind of someone who obsesses over the interaction design of, well, pretty much everything. Someone who lies awake at night thinking about how the local casual dining joint could tweak its drink counter to optimize the flow of customer traffic. Someone who spends the vast majority of his time thinking about the moments that make up a user experience and how to improve them.

## Making decisions, out loud

At the end of *Designing the Obvious*, I talked about how important it is to step up and make design decisions, even if you're sure they will change later on. Regardless of how long each decision lasts, it needs to be made so that everything in a design is considered and deliberately directed. Nothing should be left to fate.

In this book, I attempt to do something I've never had to do before. I *articulate* the process of making those decisions.

I *think out loud* to try to shed some light on the *kaizen* ("continuous improvement") approach to design. To show how iteration is absolutely essential for achieving good results. To show how design principles, research, experience, hunches, and *feelings* are all applied to guide the design process.

In other words, I make decisions, out loud.

I also admit to mistakes, give credit to other people, and generally demonstrate that good design is the evolutionary result of a whole lot of bad design. Hopefully, through this, you'll see that good design is not merely the product of creative genius or moments of divine inspiration. It's the product of *forward momentum*.

You'll be able to go back over these pages for years and question my decisions. And you may reach a point where all the things I've said here have become ridiculously obvious to you, and you have surpassed anything I could offer you. My greatest hope is that this very thing happens for you.

I'm putting myself out there to try to help you learn to question yourself. To find fault in every design, and to continually look for ways to improve it.

## Starting the conversation

With all that in mind, this book is *not* meant as a definitive guide for the design of Web interfaces. This book is offered as a conversation starter. It's meant to get you *thinking*.

These are not definitive answers, because there are no definitive answers. When I make a specific recommendation, it's based on my own experiences,

perspectives, and knowledge. Sometimes, it's based entirely on my *hunches* (something every designer should have and trust).

As such, I can practically guarantee that you will come across something in this book that you think you can do better—some way to improve a moment for your users in a way I hadn't thought about. If you do, I want you to talk about it. Don't be an armchair designer—go out and tell people about your improvements.

Send me an email about your ideas. Blog about them. Tell your friends. Better yet, tell your coworkers. And your bosses.

I don't believe for a second that I'm the most knowledgeable designer on the planet and that everything I do is gold. I learn from and get inspired by other people *all the time*. With *Designing the Moment*, I hope to teach and inspire you, but I strongly believe and hope that you'll end up teaching others as a result.

If you have a good idea, talk about it. Keep the conversation going.

Everything we do can be done better, even when we've already done our best. I've tried to do my best with these designs. If you find a way to take them even further, speak up!

## **And just so you don't need to take notes**

Because typing out URLs found in books is a terribly annoying process of looking-typing-looking-and-typing-again, I've created an archive of all the Web sites, applications, blog posts, articles, research papers, and other stuff referenced throughout this book. You won't find URLs anywhere in these pages. If you want to check something out, visit [www.rhjr.net/dtm](http://www.rhjr.net/dtm). Click on the [Links from the book](#) link.

Without further ado, let's get to it.

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