

Iconic Semiotics on the Web

By Benito Cardenas

The web has come to play a crucial part of so many peoples' work, entertainment, and informational needs that navigation for ease of access has come to mean time management on the web influences so many other aspects of life. Information seeking behavior can be carried out in many ways by many users, but it is reliant on a pre-designed navigational scheme that may or may not fit well with a user's needs. There has been a reliance on icons to represent tasks on the web that has not been uniform in implementation due to the wide range of uses for the web. I will give a brief introduction of semiotics on the web followed by a discussion of icons on the web and conclude with a graphics section to allow for further discussion on the use of symbols on the internet.

Semiotics is often called 'the study of signs. It involves the study not only of what we refer to as signs in everyday speech, but of anything which stands for something else. Semiotics focuses on the ways producers create signs and the ways audiences understand those signs. According to semioticians, the representamen is that thing which acts as a sign, or in the case of the web, as an icon.

Even before we begin viewing individual web pages, the environment i.e. the browser uses a navigational metaphor that has a direct impact on the user experience. It must be noted that the browsers we use to view information on the internet are strongly dependent on metaphors and their representative symbols for navigation of the web as a whole. The home, forward, back, refresh, stop, favorites, among others help to form a predetermined scheme for an experience. It is perhaps no surprise that symbols like the home icon, forward and back arrows (right and left, respectively) have come to mean the same thing within whole websites. Although the arrow is used in virtually all parts of the world, it is a unique icon that could be studied unto itself. Some of the most popular browsers use a horizontal schema whereas directional arrows in other aspects of life use a vertical schema to show directional progressions. In addition to the use of arrows on the web, there is a tremendous reliance on the arrow in the browser itself. In my browser, for example, I have 18 arrow symbols that are all used in different ways, likely due to its ubiquity.

However, I will focus on the use of icons for other web functions such as register, new, help, faq, report, and sort. There is an ambiguity to the web due to its democratic nature, and the attempts at differentiation between websites has led to the use of a large variety of symbols that will likely not have the same meaning across other websites.

Another reason internet users may find it difficult to see a standardization of symbols is that we establish sign relationships only by a gradual learning process. We experience things in conjunction and thus form associations in memory. We develop a sense of the functional rules of the perceptual realm by trial and error, and are constantly in the process of revising our personal versions of the course of events in it. These

associations can make it difficult to expand the scope of internet navigation and expect a certain amount of intuitiveness.

I would like to propose the composition of a certain iconic vocabulary that can be voluntarily used by websites to allow users more direct access to information rather than discourage use due to its lack of a systematic approach to visual representations of common web-oriented tasks. There are websites like yahoo, for example, that use icons for easy identification of tasks, but, although most of those icons are quite common, it is just a sampling of the obstacles faced by interface designers.

Yahoo has a total of six highly stylized icons at the top of their webpage and, although they are likely some of the most intuitive icons on the web, including finance, shop, mail, messenger, and personalize, all these icons are underscored by text. This is only indicative of the lack of standards on the web. If more sites would voluntarily derive their symbols from a symbol dictionary, a controlled iconic vocabulary, internet users as a whole could begin the shift towards a common understanding of navigational symbols throughout the web.

The use of icons was once the standard navigation web solution, but many of today's most prominent websites rely heavily on text due to the high precision it lends in the use of an interface. At amazon and barnes and noble, for example, the only use of icons in its main navigation area is largely limited to the shopping cart. Even the search which can commonly be represented with a magnifying glass is identified by text and strategically placed white space.

It must be noted that it seems some of the easiest sites to navigate are those that either rely solely on text or use icons that are buttressed by text. There seems to be no empirical evidence supporting this, but the mere fact that iconic ambiguity is cast aside for the sake of clarity (and profit) suggests that until icons can be clearly defined, their use and reliance is questionable.

It remains to be seen if more complexly represented tasks such as generating reports, sorting, register, new window, and status can be symbolized in a concise and graphically intuitive manner. There are many instances of these symbols on the web, of which a sampling will be presented at the end of this text for further observation. It seems unlikely that there already exists an appropriate icon for even the top fifty tasks on the internet or intranets, but it appears there are many attempts to either use them or entirely discard them. With the evolution of the internet continuing at breakneck speed, it will be a matter of time before a universally accepted iconical vocabulary will be developed or a move toward text-only navigational options will be prominent.

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