

Website Usability Graduate Course Assignment
ANALYSIS OF HOW THE FLORIDA STATE HOMEPAGE HAS EVOLVED...

The Florida State University Homepage (www.fsu.edu) has considerably evolved since its advent in 1997. The technological advances and trends in website design are extremely evident by analyzing FSU's website layout from 1997 to 2008. I chose to examine this homepage because it is the website that FSU students, myself included, use often as the chief school reference. The FSU homepage is also the site that connects all of its academic-affiliated websites; it can be considered the University's starting point and the heart of FSU's web pages.

Archive.org shows the FSU website was first published on April 27, 1997. The homepage began with a simple layout listing the website's featured content in a table-of-contents fashion. This introductory page consisted of small picture icons aligned with a minimal amount of links. All of the page content is set on a white background and the alignment is left-justified. The traditional serif Times New Roman is the only typeface used throughout the website and its pages. Links are differentiated in red from the ordinary black font. Located at the bottom of this page are two buttons: "Search" which directs users to a search directory and "Comment" providing a page with FSU's contact information so that users can send direct feedback. Located at the top of this page, is a square-shaped, relatively small and plain FSU logo.



FSU's homepage layout slightly changed from 1997 to 1998. Although the design elements maintained their simplicity, subject links were rearranged into two columns instead of being listed in a plain table-of-contents document structure. The font size was also minimized and the links were more appropriately organized in their designated columns. A thick (about one inch wide) yellow-

shaded vertical column was added as a sidebar to stand out against the white background and located to the left of the listed text links. The FSU signature logo was now placed to the top of this left-aligned sidebar and redesigned in a circle layout. *As Shown* →



There definitely seems to be a pattern of recurrent preference for circular shapes in 1998's new layout. Perfect examples would be the redesigned circular logo as well as the image and button icons changed from being square to round-shaped. The addition of the circular shapes and splitting the navigational links into two columns adds a rounder look to the overall homepage design itself.

Before (1997)



After (1998)



Before (1997)



After (1998)



The links to informational pages within the FSU website during these years were even more simple than the homepage. They contained few decorative elements except for a occasional graphics. Throughout 1999, the most apparent design modification was the spacing between content elements minimized to make the space appear narrower. When the homepage was published again in early 2000, they added one animated image to the thick yellow sidebar and a third button at the bottom to direct users to an “About” page containing information about FSU websites. Overall, from 1998 until mid-2000, the FSU website's layout and chief design elements changed minimally.

In the initial versions of FSU's website, only basic HTML language are used for the pages since this is what was most commonly used during the Internet's earlier time period (1995-2000). The FSU website initial versions contain source codes that are short and simple. In June 2000, FSU announced it would be coming out with a new look.

This radical transition for the entire site design occurred on August 20, 2000 when the FSU site began taken on a more 'high-tech' look and employ many additional design elements. Graphically, the new 2000 homepage is in a condensed format and looks very visually appealing. The new millennium really kicked off for when image-altering computer programs, such as Adobe Photoshop, became common by increasing in widespread use and popularity. This is evident in the 2000 updated FSU website because the images used are now sharper and include design effects such as dissolve, saturation, and borders. A major transformation is that the background color of the homepage went from being plain white to a deep scarlet red.

Another visible change on the 2000 site version is that a completely different fonts and typefaces are used. Instead of the old Times New Roman, sans serif fonts have been chosen for most of the links, text, and captions. The only apparent use of serif text is for the four main categories listed on the homepage dividing into: Prospective Students, Current Students, Faculty & Staff, Alumni & Friends. Other than the images of the Westcott fountain and FSU torch on the homepage, these four categories are primary visual focus of the page. They are the main navigational tools that capture your attention.

When conducting my analysis of these webpage design and layouts I kept in mind some key advice from the *Web Style Guide 2.0* class book. This is that "Webpage layouts should be judged not by viewing the whole page as a unit but by dividing the page into visual and functional zones and judging the suitability of each screen of information. (p. 93)" In addition to the four main categories

in large serif font mentioned, there are smaller navigation bars on the page separated into Departments, Directories, and Search tools. On the homepage, there are additional navigation links to other main sites at the bottom footer of the homepage.

Besides the content being updated and the middle bar containing images listing different upcoming events, the website stayed consistent with the same format from its introduction in mid-2000 until March 2005; this is when the FSU website underwent its third most rapid transition. It also marked when FSU began using an eZ-Publish Content Management System to begin the process of standardizing their pages. The aim is to make basic design and layout elements consistent across eventually all FSU department and academic-affiliated websites.

Currently I am learning how to use FSU's Content Management System (CMS) in order to update the Center for Hispanic Marketing Communication website for which I work. In my opinion, the CMS makes the job easier to put together websites since all you need to do is figure out the functions on the system and add the site's content.

It was fascinating to analyze the evolution of the FSU website from 1997 to its present state. I am especially interested in observing the changes in design elements over the years because of my interest in Website Design and my present work with the FSU Center for Hispanic Marketing Communication website. The progression of the FSU website is evidence that Web Design and Layout has certainly come a long way in its development. If the FSU website and many others have drastically evolved in only a few years, I anticipate and can only imagine what future designs and layouts are in store in the near future. Whatever is to come, maintaining balanced and consistent design elements will be crucial to maintaining a good layout.