The User Interface (UI) Designer’s Toolbox

This article will primarily be on the software used specifically within the interface design discipline, focusing on the creation of page layouts, simple interactive prototyping, and design assets.

A modern user interface designer has a number of options in regards to what software or tools that they use. These include classic tools like the whiteboards and sketchbooks to a number of software that can accomplish anything from site-mapping, page layouts or even interaction animations. What software should be used depends on the requirements of the project, and typically a single project uses a wide array of software and tools to convey the UI designer’s thoughts, ideas and research.

Whiteboards and Sketchbooks: The Classics

Oftentimes the classic tools are the most effective. When starting a digital project being able to quickly work through ideas and concepts to allow for a team quickly discover points of discussion and any potential roadblocks to the production process. To create these rapidly evolving and changing definition level items it helps to get all of the project stakeholders together and do a whiteboarding workshop. Whiteboarding is the method of using a whiteboard to rapidly draw up different layouts, organizational structures, and workflows, allowing the team to quickly try out solutions. If the whole team can’t be available or whiteboarding isn’t an option, quickly sketching (pencil and paper) concepts and discussing them with your team in order to ensure you are moving forward with the best possible solution.

The Adobe Creative Suite: The Standard

The software suite that needs no introduction, as if you are reading this post you are certainly familiar with it, The Adobe Creative Suite. Adobe has cornered the market on graphic design software for as long as I have been in the industry. It is the primary focus of most graphic design programs and the name Adobe is ubiquitous in the field of Graphic Design. As interface design was starting out, most designers created their layouts in Photoshop or Illustrator, and while there were several workarounds to make them work these programs were created with specific goals in mind, primarily dealing with the creation of designs for Print mediums. Certainly these softwares still have their uses, namely in the creation of image assets for digital products and I still haven't found a replacement for Illustrator when it comes to the creation of icons and logos. Adobe XD is Adobe's attempt at creating an interface design software from the ground up, but it leaves much to be desired, which brings us to…

Sketch And Invision: The New Standard

In my experience drafting UI job descriptions and looking over job postings and seeing what companies are looking for in their UI designers, the new standard for the industry has shifted from the primary focus from the creative suite to an understanding of the combination of Sketch and Invision. These two software, when integrated into a workflow, can quickly produce interactive prototypes without having to develop anything into code, allowing the digital product team to move through iterations quicker and update designs without having to redevelop the codebase. Sketch is a software that was built with interface design in mind, and as such Sketch provides the ability to efficiently layout pages using a combination of the best features from photoshop and illustrator. Invision allows the designer to take those layouts and make them interactive, giving the team and client something to click through, test and quickly iterate on to produce a better quality of work.

What’s Next?

One of the most important aspects of being a successful user interface designer is ensuring that you maintain an understanding of the best tools to create the best assets for your digital project. As the design software landscape evolves, it allows designers to create assets that better convey their ideas to their clients. It is entirely possible that the most useful tools in any UI designer’s toolbox haven’t even been created yet.

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