

Looks Really DO Matter

The Importance of Visual Design in Online Courses

Introduction

2020 was one for the record books. One of the many records set last year was the amount of content and courses that were rapidly put online. And let's face it, you didn't have time to worry about how good it looked. That would have been like stopping to pick out a great outfit and fix your hair before heading out the door to respond to an emergency.

But now that we're out of emergency mode, it's time to turn our attention back to some of the things we may have neglected out of necessity, since it's clear that much of the content that made its way into Canvas last year is here to stay.

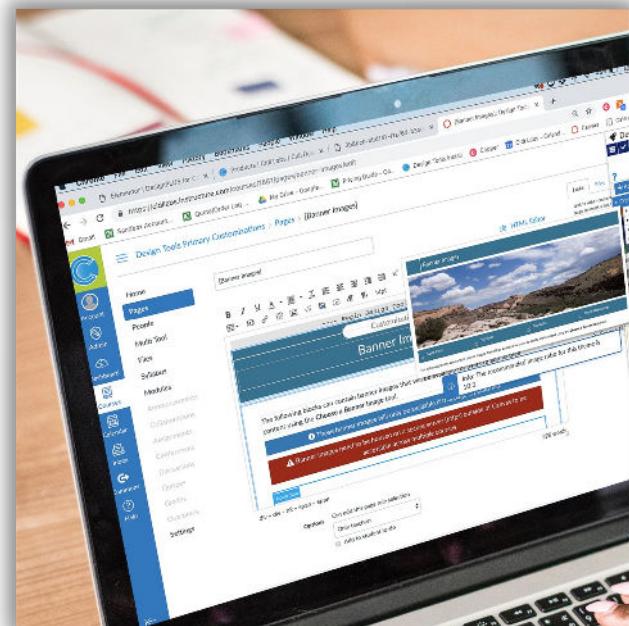
One of the easiest and most impactful things you can do to transform that emergency content into something more polished and intentional is to focus on the visual or aesthetic design.

Why Looks Really DO Matter

Improving the look and feel of your online courses can accomplish much more than just making things easier on the eyes. In *The Students' Guide to Learning Design and Research* (2020), the authors of the chapter on Visual Aesthetics explain:

“Research and practice increasingly recognize that visual design does impact many aspects of the learning experience. It affects the quality of learning, the value of the communication, and the motivation of the audience members. It leverages the brain’s innate capabilities, improves engagement, and satisfies the audience’s aesthetic sensibilities.”

Those all sound like highly desirable things to accomplish, don't they? Let's explore how good visual design contributes to those outcomes.



GOOD VISUAL DESIGN:

- 1 Reduces irrelevant cognitive processing
- 2 Improves perception of credibility and value
- 3 Increases motivation and engagement



Good visual design reduces irrelevant cognitive processing

Simply put, an effective visual design organizes and presents information in an intuitive, consistent, and appealing manner so that students can focus their attention on the content itself, rather than on making sense of the organization of the content. A cleaner, more polished design also reduces the amount of information the student has to take in all at once, enabling them to focus on what is important. Let's look at a before and after example:

Before

GAME PLAY LIBRARY

The following page includes a library of games and 'playlists' that correspond to each MODULE. As a game designer, it is important that you play ALL types of games. Your goal is to mine game mechanics and apply them to **THE MAIN QUEST**, your final project.

Since most these games are soft-board games, table-top games 'ported' to digital media, they are fully documented. If you really want to understand game design, play the games then read the rules and look for patterns in design. For instance, Dominion has a hand limit of five cards versus hand limit of six in Thunderstone. What would happen to the game economy if hand limits were increased or decreased in either game?

These games are all free but some may require registration.

Choose any or all games to play, then share your experiences in the [discussions!](#)

MODULE 1

Playlist #1 - Euro - Econsims:

- [Carcassonne ↗](#)
- [Settlers of Catan, The ↗](#)
- [San Juan ↗](#)
- [Vegas Showdown ↗](#)

Playlist #2 - Complex Euro Econsim:

- [Agricola ↗](#)
- [Puerto Rico ↗](#)
- [Saint Petersburg ↗](#)

After

Game Design

Game Play Library

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Module 1

Playlist 1 - Euro - Econsims

Playlist 2 - Complex Euro Econsim

- [Agricola ↗](#)
- [Puerto Rico ↗](#)
- [Saint Petersburg ↗](#)

Playlist 3 - Simple Conflict Systems: Area Influence & Auctions

Playlist 4 - Puzzles & Hidden Information

These two pages in a Canvas course have the same content on them, but the second one has a better visual design applied. And what a difference it makes! The effective use of imagery, colors, icons, header styling, and expanders makes it much easier to understand the hierarchy of information and navigate the content.

Good visual design improves perception of credibility and value.

It turns out that students DO judge books by their covers. Research has shown that aesthetics play an important role in shaping the way that users judge the credibility and value of content. It's not a big leap to assert that when a learner finds content to be credible and valuable, they are more likely to engage and interact with it. Take, for example, the following before and after Canvas course pages - which one feels more credible to you?

Before

Daily Agenda

Daily Journal Question

What term means information in the form of facts and figures?

(Copy the question in your Science Notebook and answer it)

Plan for the Day:

- Scientific Method discussion
- Review terms and steps
- Finish Guided notes ([Introduction to Biology](#)) ↓
- Develop Experiment as a class
- Exit Ticket Scientific method

Learning Targets:

- I can identify living and non-living things
- I can identify the steps of the scientific method and put them in order

HW:

Finish developing experiments for tomorrow

After

Daily Agenda August 2

Daily Journal Question

What term means information in the form of facts and figures?

(Copy the question in your Science Notebook and answer it)

Plan for the Day

- Scientific Method discussion
- Review terms and steps
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Learning Targets

- I can identify living and non-living things
- I can identify the steps of the scientific method and put them in order

Homework

Finish developing experiments for tomorrow

“

Design and aesthetics have a profound impact on how users perceive information, learn, judge credibility and usability, and ultimately assign value to a product. To dismiss design as merely visual is to make a fundamental mistake. Style does not replace substance, but style and substance in balance work much better.

(David & Glore, 2010)

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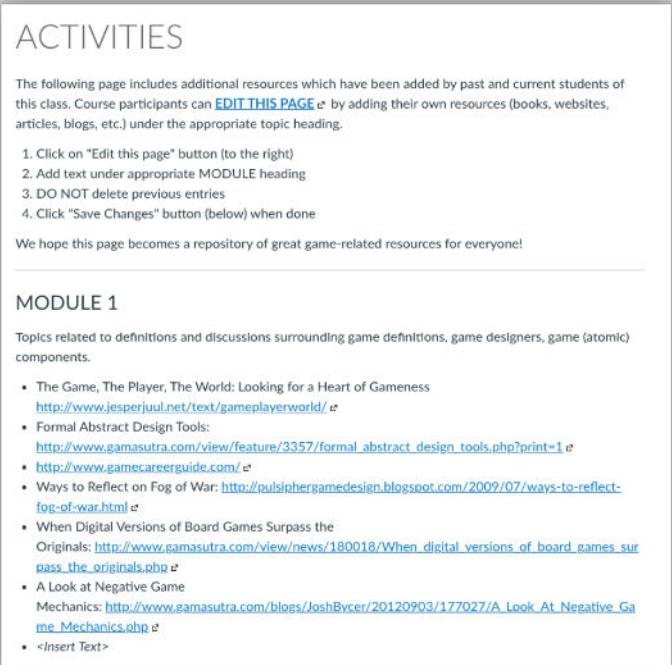
Good visual design increases learner motivation and engagement.

Studies have shown that the aesthetics of an online course, including the layout and the use of images, are important factors in motivating students to engage and persist in the learning process (David & Glore, 2010).

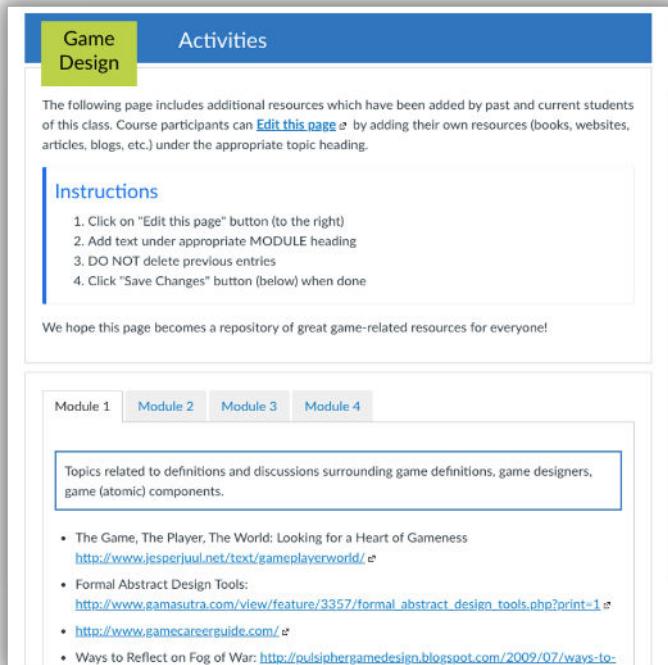
When learners find an online course appealing and easy to use, they are more likely to interact with the materials and maintain interest. So it seems that beauty is more than skin deep.

Let's take a look at a final before and after example to drive home the idea that good design can make a difference. With which set of activities would you be more likely to engage?

Before



After



DesignPLUS Makes Good Design Easy.

The challenge is that good design often requires advanced HTML or CSS skills and a lot of time - neither of which are always available to course designers. Making good design easy was the motivation behind the creation of a set of tools known as DesignPLUS - originally developed at Utah State University and now offered as a cloud-based solution by Cidi Labs.

DesignPLUS is an advanced course design toolset that plugs right into Canvas to allow course designers to easily create and style highly polished and engaging content -- without requiring any advanced technical skills.

To learn more about how you can easily transform your Canvas courses to be more polished and engaging, visit cidilabs.com, where you can schedule a demo, request a sandbox, and more!

Perhaps our customers describe it best.

“ Using DesignPLUS is the best, fastest and easiest way to make a Canvas course stand out with pizzazz and engagement! **”**

- Instructional Designer at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

The screenshot shows the Canvas LMS interface. On the left is the navigation bar with icons for Account, Admin, Dashboard, Courses, Calendar, Inbox, History, Commons, Help, and Rubrics. The main area shows a course titled "Conference Demo Course > Pages > Update Existing Example". The page content includes a title "Week 1" and a section "Introduction to Game Design". To the right, a large floating window titled "Design Tools" is open, displaying a sidebar with "Institutional Themes" (Apple 2, Basic Bar 1, etc.) and a main panel with various design elements like "Colored Headings 2", "Medallion", and "Flat Sections 1". The bottom of the window shows code snippets and editing options.



“ Students deserve to be presented with high-quality content and DesignPLUS design tools make that possible. Implementing consistent course design across entire degree programs is much easier with the assistance of DesignPLUS **”**

- Assistant Director of Quality and Assessment at University of North Florida

“ With DesignPLUS, we have been able to raise the bar regarding the fit and finish of our Canvas courses. We manage 6 instances of Canvas globally and don't have a full-time instructional design team. Utilizing the templating tools and getting DesignPLUS in the hands of teaching staff has been a game-changer. **”**

- Global Chief Information & Digital Learning Officer at OneSchool Global

References

- David, A. & Glore, P. (2010). The Impact of Design and Aesthetics on Usability, Credibility, and Learning in an Online Environment. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, Volume XIII, Number IV, Winter 2010.
https://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/winter134/david_glore134.html.
- West, D., Allman, B., Hunsaker, E., & Kimmons, R. (2020). Visual Aesthetics: The Art of Learning. In R. Kimmons & S. Caskurlu (Eds.), *The Students' Guide to Learning Design and Research*. EdTech Books.
https://edtechbooks.org/studentguide/visual_aesthetics.