Objective

To analyze and compare the behavior of two web sites (http://www.nai.com and http://www.symantec.com) and to describe the tasks required to complete a goal, using these interfaces.

Documentation

Goal: To find out more information about the recent Lirva virus. Specifically, I want to know if Lirva could spread to my system via ICQ.

Here is the log of my journey:

- Went to website (http://www.nai.com)
- Clicked link “Virus Information Library”
- Typed “Lirva” in the Search box
- Clicked on the Search button
- Clicked link “Worm Lirva.C (trend)

Task Flowchart for finding information about the “Lirva” virus using the Network Associates site.
Want to find out more information about Lirva virus.

Go to www.nail.com

Site is rendered?

Yes

Click on link "Virus Information Library"

No

Read virus information.

Select one of the links 11 links. For example: "worm Lirva.C (trend)"

Results Displayed?

Yes

Try different search.

No
Log of my journey:

- Went to website (http://www.symantec.com)
- Clicked on the Search link
- Typed “Lirva” in the Search box
- Clicked on the Search button
- Clicked link “Symantec Security Response – w32.Lirva.A @ mm”

Task Flowchart for finding information about Lirva using the Symantec site.
Design Analysis

Significant similarities and differences:

Prior to visiting the websites I knew that both sites provided virus information so my goal was to see which site would disclose the information I needed in a more effective way. I first visited the Network Associates site and my initial impression was positive. The site appeared to me simple, clear and most significantly, the “Virus Information” section was right in front of my eyes. I proceeded to click on the “Virus Library” link, then typed the word “Lirva” in the Search box and clicked the “Search” button. I was then presented with a clear list of results and I selected one randomly. After reading the information I was happy to see that my goal had been achieved. I thought the categorical grouping in this structure was very effective, the labels were very clear which contributed to the efficient navigation through the site.

On the other hand, my first impression when visiting the Symantec site was a feeling of “being lost”. The site was visually appealing and it had a good visual balance but I didn’t know where to start. After scanning all the different options I couldn’t make a decision on where to go. So, I immediately tried to type “Lirva” in the box on the top right corner but discovered that it was a drop down list not a text box. I then located the “Search” link and clicked on it. Now the search box was available and I typed the word “Lirva” and clicked on the Search button. A list of results was displayed and I chose a result randomly and found what I was looking for. I was able to accomplish my goal, but I was not able to create a conceptual model of the site’s structure in my mind. I certainly had an easier time finding the information in the Network Associates site than in this one.

Exhibits “liquid” behavior? From what I have read, “liquid” means having control on how page elements behave. In other words, designers could create liquid interfaces that respond to the environment in which they are displayed. User’s screen resolutions and the sizing of their actual browser windows are unpredictable so a liquid design means building layouts that respond to any size. Unfortunately, neither of the web sites (Network Associates and Symantec) demonstrated liquid behavior. Neither site uses relative values when defining their layout. The page layout does not expand and contract as you resize the window; therefore they are not liquid pages.

Behavior Analysis

Significant differences on completing the task on each site:

Even though the number of steps required to complete the task was the same, the task was accomplished in a more effective way on the Network Associates site. I attribute the success in part to the clear and distinct selection of categories and link labels. Selecting an incorrect path at the first hierarchical level would result in multiple-click backtracks. The use of good labels provides cues about what was arranged behind them and that
supported successful category selection. Clear and distinct labels for navigation elements definitely enhanced the user performance.

Completing the task on the Symantec Web site was not intuitive. The menu structures did not help me to form a conceptual model of the site hierarchy. It seemed to me that the designers did not consider the typical user’s tasks. I came to the web site with a well-defined single task in mind, which by the way I think is a very common task only to find out that I had to figure out a way to accomplish it. I believe the designers need to think about the kinds of tasks that users do on their sites and how they do them. The design should provide users with an efficient and easy way to accomplish their goals (tasks).

Was there a correlation between the number of steps you had to complete and your impression on the site’s usability? No, because the number of steps needed to complete the task was the same on both sites. My impressions on the usability of the web sites was however not the same. In my opinion, the Network Associates Web site was a better site because I was able to achieve my goal without any problems. Completing the task using the Symantec Web site was more difficult. A couple of navigation errors were made before achieving the goal. The navigation errors were:

1) I attempted to type “Lirva” in the drop-down box as I thought that that was the Search box.
2) I selected the wrong category (Latest Threats) when attempting to find information about the Lirva virus because it was the only one that made sense to me.

What were the significant differences between the behavior of the interfaces and what do they reveal? The main difference I noted was the way categories and subcategories are arranged. The labels on the Network Associates site were more meaningful and provided cues to the user on how to navigate the site. I have the impression that the search engine on the Symantec is very powerful; I did not need to narrow my search options in order to find the information I needed. I noticed also that the Symantec site does not follow conventions too closely. For example, displaying a “Search” word and a box near by implies that the user can use the box to enter the search criteria. However, the box near the “Search” word was a drop-down for choosing a location. Overall, fewer choices and categorical grouping combined with meaningful labels on the Network Associate site were in my opinion the keys to a successful design.

Conclusion

Both Web sites provided virus information but the design approaches were different. The goal was to find out if the “Lirva” virus could spread to my system via ICQ? Finding the answer to my question was easier using the Network Associates site mainly because of the good use of grouping and labeling. Finding the same information on the Symantec
site was a little more challenging. However, both sites provided the information that I
was looking for and the answer is that in fact, “Lirva” is a mass-mailing worm that
spreads by IRC, ICQ, KaZaa and open network shares.

In my opinion, the design of the site’s behavior was more important than the visual
design. As I mentioned previously, the Symantec site is perhaps more visually attractive
but that did not help me to accomplish my goal more efficiently. In fact it was the
opposite, the less attractive site made more sense to me and helped me to accomplish my
goal in an effective and intuitive way.