

INTERFACE REDESIGN: AESTHETIC.COM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aesthetic Solutions contracted with INP Associates to create a new interface layout for their website (<http://www.aesthetic.com>). User testing results, combined with history of user complaints concerning the current interface design prompted this redesign. Common user complaints were the inability to find information on the website, confusing and distractive graphics and colors, excessive length of pages and the necessity to scroll to the top of the page due to the lack of navigation buttons at the bottom of the page. The interface redesign targets these issues, as well as others, offering solution that addresses and resolves the problems.

This report is organized into four major sections, with appendix containing screenshots of the current home page and sub page design. The sections are:

- **Analysis of Current Interface:** The current interface is deconstructed into component elements and the strengths and limitations of the existing design are addressed.
- **Redesigned Interface Wireframes:** Digital wireframes, showing placement and arrangement of interface elements, are presented for both home page and sub page.
- **Analysis of redesigned Interface:** Improvements in the proposed interface are discussed, as well as how the new interface addresses limitations in the existing design.
- **Implementation Options:** Three approaches to implementing the redesigned interface are presented, with a consideration of their advantages and disadvantages. The recommended approach is specified.

The redesigned interface offers a number of advantages over the existing interface, including the following:

- Local navigation links are visible ‘in the fold’
- No scrolling is available on the left side of the page, as local navigation links are part of a pop-up menu of global navigation buttons on top
- Page lengths are shorten to reduce the scrolling
- Balanced page layout is used to allow for easier navigation
- Consistency among graphics and links is increased to reduce clutter and visual ‘noise’
- Overall look of graphics and colors is improved to create aesthetically pleasing design
- Navigation from the bottom of the page is available
- Related items are more logically grouped in the interface
- Access to search functionality is available on every page

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT INTERFACE

The interface for Aesthetic Solutions (see Appendix A) is designed with the usage of frames. The scrollable framed page on the left contains the local navigation bar. The top frame has global navigation buttons and the logo. The central frame is used to display the contents of subpages.

The interface of Aesthetic Solutions uses a mixture of fixed-width and variable-width elements, with variable-width being the dominant component. Fixed-width elements are used in global navigation bar at the top. Local navigation bar on the left and contents framed pages use predominantly variable-width layout.

The site uses excessive graphics that takes additional time to download. The site also uses excessive visual markers and bold colors to emphasize some information. The first page is a splash page that contains only graphics and a text prompting the user to get in by clicking it.

Interface Elements

The Aesthetic Solutions interface contains the following elements, some of which will be used for redesigned interface.

- Global navigation buttons
- Frames
- Subnavigation HTML text links
- Graphics
 - Logo
 - Global navigation buttons
 - Animated GIFs for product software
 - Clip art
 - Blinking titles
 - Splash page

Strengths

The site adheres to some principles of interface design and to some of the Gestalt rules of visual perception.

- *Consistency*: This site maintains consistency in the location of some interface elements throughout the home page and subpages. As an example, the global

navigation buttons and logo maintain the same position. The top frame used applies the principles of consistency and alignment through the website.

- *Repetition:* Repeated logo on every page helps to establish a brand identity while at the same time reinforcing the users that they are at the right site.
- *Gestalt principles:* Gestalt principles of proximity and similarity are applied to organize the global and local navigation bars. The global buttons are located closer to each other than to other elements and, based on proximity rule they are visually perceived as a related group. They also have similar appearance due to their shape, color and font. Subnavigation links (see Appendix A, Figure 3) in the same section are also located in close proximity to one another and have the same colors.

Limitations

Limitations in the current interface center primarily on page layout and use of graphics and colors. The use of frames is one of the major drawbacks in interface design of this website. Although frames provide for easier software development and maintenance, they represent significant problems for the user. These are some of the limitations of using frames:

- *Inefficient use of screen real estate:* for smaller windows, a logo, a navigation bar, and page contents can use up half the window or more. In some cases, the users with a smaller resolution display may not even be able to scroll the pages.
- *Problems on small screens:* On small screens, such as mobile phones and PDAs, only small portion of site content is displayed.
- *Navigation problems:* The Back button in the browser does not always behave as users expect. The History does not show subpages within a frame, so browsing back to previous pages could be very confusing.
- *Inability to bookmark subpages:* Bookmarks do not work as users expect. It is not possible to bookmark a subpage, only a homepage can be bookmarked.
- *Confused printing:* Many browsers cannot print the framed pages appropriately. The print command usually prints the most recently selected frame. It could be very confusing for the users, as it is a global navigation frame, not a content frame that they are trying to print.

The other major limitation of this website is the poor use of graphics and colors. The site uses excessive graphics and too many different colors that make the site look too cluttered and busy. The use of excessive amount of graphics also distracts the user's navigation.



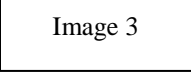
Using many highly contrasting elements also lead to an unbalanced and confusing display. It is unclear what information is intended to be emphasized by using highly contrasted fonts on almost every line.

Among the other significant limitations in interface design of this website are:

- *Lack of balance:* The elements on the page are not well-balanced (e.g., home page, see Appendix A, Figure 1). The graphics and text often do not line up. The poor-balance layout is one of the important reasons for users' frustration in trying to navigate the site and locate the information they are looking for. The asymmetrical layout here does not provide for aesthetically pleasing design.
- *Too much 'dead space':* Some pages have too much wasted space due to the lack of content available on these pages (e.g., Products page, Appendix 1, Figure 4).
- *Long pages:* The excessive length of some pages (e.g., Home page and sub pages of Community section) provide for necessity of scrolling in order to navigate. This could be too frustrating for the users, since they just want to have an overview of the site for example, when they go to Home page.
- *More 'gutter space' between subnavigation links.* Currently subnavigation links look too close to each other with the 'dead space' below them. The subnavigation bar could be a little wider as well.
- *Cropped right-side of the website at lower resolutions:* At resolutions lower 1024 x 768 the right side of the content frame page is cropped due to the two factors: use of frames (mentioned above) and variable-width layout. This issue has a strong impact on navigation.
- *Lack of search functionality:* There is no link on pages that provides search for available products.
- *The use of splash page:* The use of splash page slows down the user as he or she is attempting to reach the home page. It is an annoying feature, as it takes too long to download and it will turn a lot of users away from the site. Content of the home page alone can be used to tell users where they are and what this site is about.

Home Page

Logo	Products	Services	Support	Gallery	Community	About Us
-------------	-----------------	-----------------	----------------	----------------	------------------	-----------------

<input type="text"/>	<input type="button" value="Search"/>	Featured Products				
What's new?		World Visions	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
Link 1		Component Library 1.0	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
Link 2		Component Visions	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
Link 3						

[Products](#) | [Services](#) | [Support](#) | [Gallery](#)
[Community](#) | [About Us](#)

Send comments to: Webmaster@aesthetic.com
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Sub Page

Logo	Products	Services	Support	Gallery	Community	About Us
<input type="text"/>	World Visions	Products				
<input type="text"/> Search	Component Visions					
Current Releases	Component Library					
Free Downloads	World Visions	Image	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
Link 3	<u>Link 1</u>	Image	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
Link 4	<u>Link 2</u>	Image	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
	<u>Link 3</u>		Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
	Component Visions		Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
	<u>Link 1</u>		Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
	<u>Link 2</u>		Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
	Component Library		Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
	<u>Link 1</u>		Sample text	Sample text	Sample text	Sample text
<p>Products Services Support Gallery Community About Us</p> <hr/>						
<p>Send comments to: Webmaster@aesthetic.com All content on this website is Copyright © 1998 Aesthetic Solutions Inc. All Rights Reserved</p>						

ANALYSIS OF REDESIGNED INTERFACE

The redesigned interface for Aesthetic Solutions offers a number of benefits over the existing interface design and addresses the limitations identified by users of the current website. One of the significant improvements in website redesign concerns the elimination of frames. The use of tables instead, allows for better navigation and helps resolve the resolution issues for users with low-resolution and small screens.

Creating the HTML text navigation at the bottom of the screen serves a useful function on long pages. When users have to scroll to the bottom of those pages, the bottom navigation system allows them easier navigate the site without scrolling back to the top of the page to find the proper link. The HTML text navigation is also consistent with top global navigation buttons. The text navigation is also used here to reinforce location in the site by bolding and unlinking the label for the section on section header pages.

To fill up the 'dead space' common in original interface, the subnavigation links containing links, images and descriptions were moved to the center of the page. This not only eliminates the waste of space, but also produces a well-balanced layout. More 'gutter space' between subnavigation links also benefits to better-balanced design. The placement of e-mail address and copyright information at the bottom of the page helps to fill in some 'dead space' and provide consistency in navigation links.

Elimination of frames and the use of both fixed-width and variable-width elements help to control the right side of the screen and prevent its cropping. It also helps to solve some of the issues mentioned in Limitations section of Current Analysis Interface, in particular, the issues of printing, bookmarking and navigation.

Elimination of multiple colors and use of subtle colors instead for background and graphics creates a more aesthetically pleasing and professional looking website. It also allows users easier and faster find the information and locate the important links. One of the improvements in this respect concerns the aligning of links and graphics that also serves a purpose of better navigation.

The final improvements concern the logical grouping of page elements and enhanced access to search functionality. Grouping Services section with the rest of the global navigation sections follows the rules of logic and proximity. As for enhanced access to search, the inclusion of search box on every page is a definite improvement, as users no longer have to click every link on navigation bar to find the product they are looking for.

IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS

The redesigned Aesthetic Solutions interface can be implemented a few different ways, with each approach offering different advantages and disadvantages. One of the approaches is the design with the use of borderless frames. Using borderless frames has two main advantages: there are more pixels left over for the content, and there is one less interface element for users to ponder. Another advantage of this approach is that the certain items such as logo and global navigation remain on the screen at all times. The disadvantage of using frames in the design is that there are still issues with navigation when Back button or Search functionality does not work as expected. The bookmarking feature may not work either. Even though there are more pixels left over for the content with the use of borderless frames, it will not completely solve the problem for users with smaller displays.

Another approach is the use of tables and fixed-width elements. The elimination of frames allows for better navigation. The users no longer have to scroll the subnavigation on the left. Subnavigation menu is embedded into the global navigation at the top of the page and represents a pop-up menu. The use of tables and organizing the images and links into columns help to improve the navigation and create a better idea for the user what the site has to offer. The left column of the page contains information on new releases or downloads and a Search box, the center of the page contains the page heading and its content with the text (e.g., product descriptions on Product sub page, see Wireframe Sub Page) in the right column. The bottom of the page contains the HTML text global navigation links and mailto: links. Again, this approach improves the navigation and solves the problem of scrolling long pages. The advantage of using fixed-width elements is that it works well for the majority of users. It offers the most control over the layout so that the users with low-resolution monitors are able to see the entire page without cropping. The disadvantage of this approach is however, is for users with high-resolution displays, as their main complaint is that there is excessive white space surrounding the page.

The third approach is similar to the second one, except for instead of using fixed-width elements, it uses both fixed and variable-width elements. The left and center columns would be fixed-width, while the right column would become variable-width, expanding to fill the available window space. The benefit of this approach is that the 'dead space' is no longer an issue; the users with high-resolution screens will be able to see more page content. However, at higher resolutions line lengths (in the right column) could also become uncomfortably long. As in the previous approach, organizing the page content into tables will allow for better navigation. Also, using moderate colors and graphics will help to avoid distraction and confusion of users in navigating the site.

Of the three approaches described, the third approach is recommended. This approach helps to improve the navigation and search functionality of the site. It allows more content to be visible in the browser window for the vast majority of users. It also helps to shorten the page.

APPENDIX A, FIGURES 1 AND 2:



Figure 1: Home Page Top (1024 x 768 resolution, 19 inch monitor, window maximized)

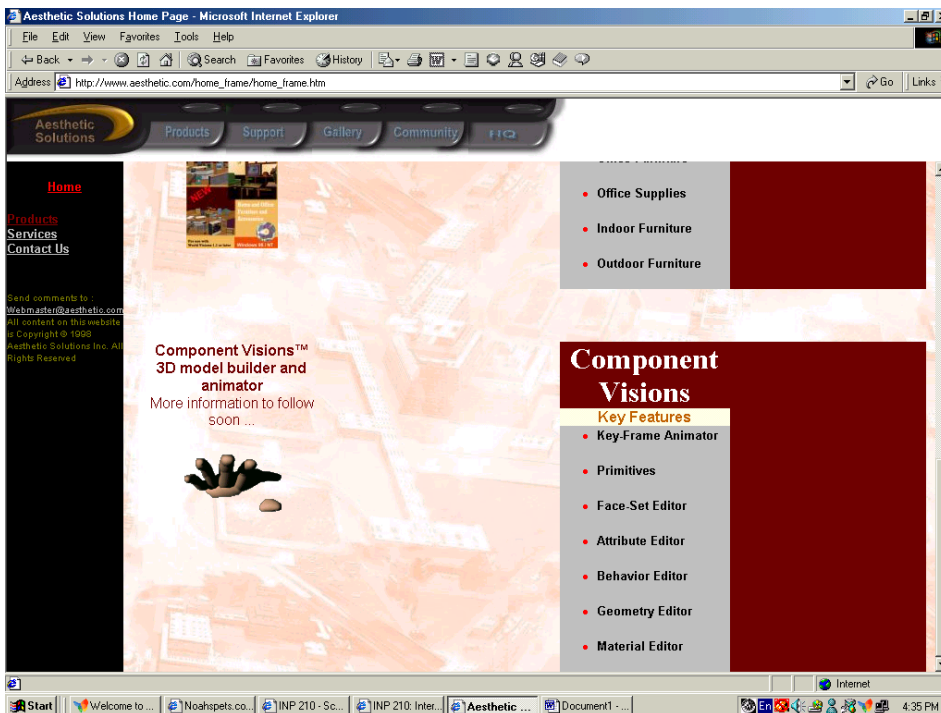


Figure 2: Home Page Bottom (1024 x 768 resolution, 19 inches monitor, window maximized)

APPENDIX A, FIGURES 3 AND 4

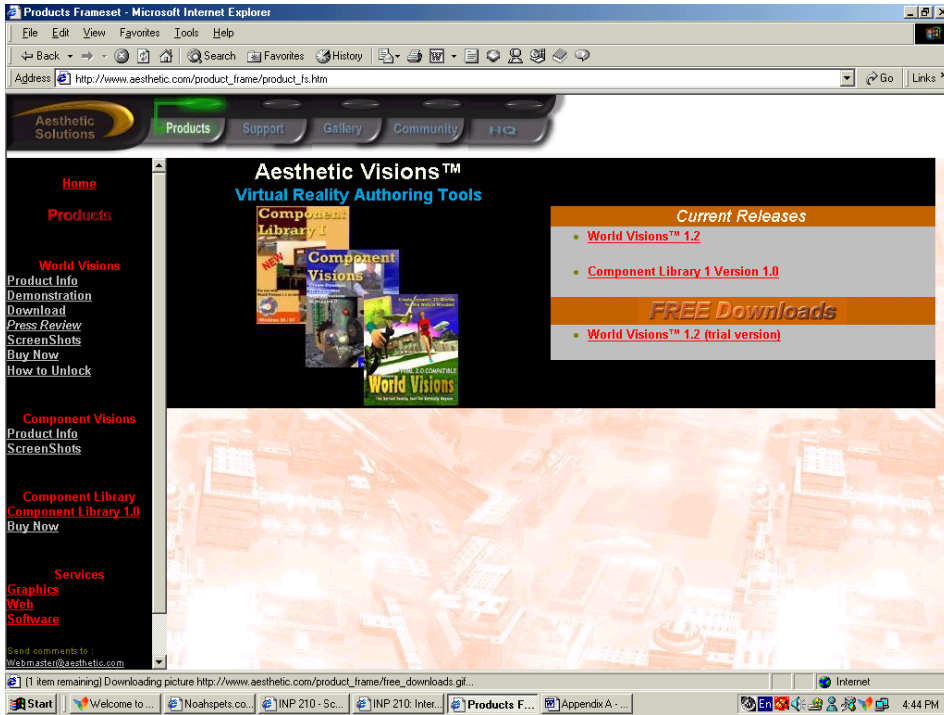


Figure 3: Products Section Header Top (1024 x 768 resolution, 19 inch monitor, window maximized)

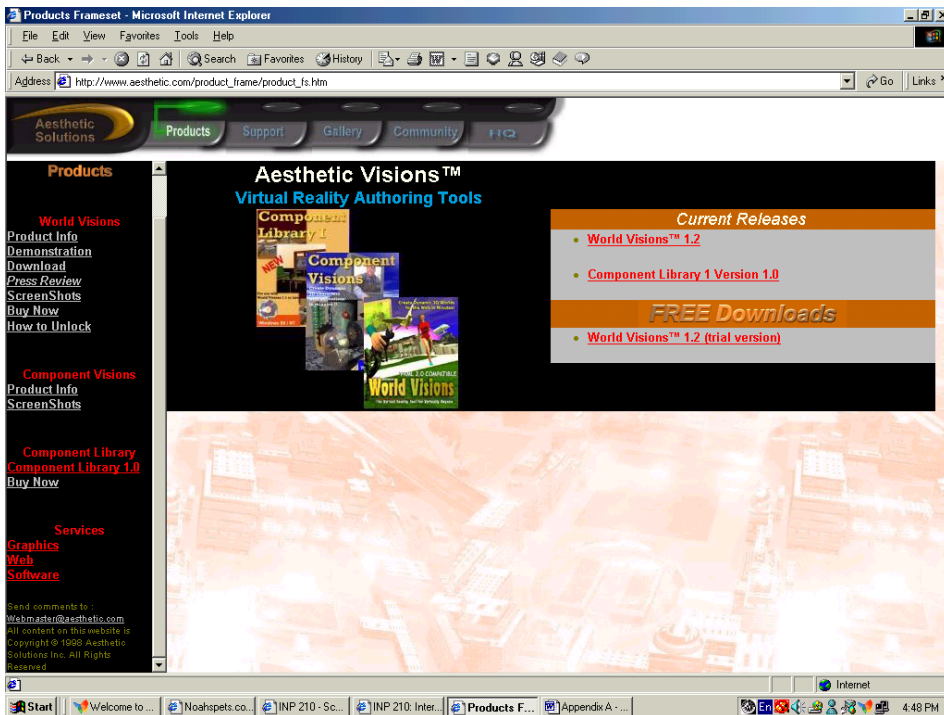


Figure 4: Products Section Header Bottom (1024 x 768 resolution, 19 inch monitor, window maximized)

