

usability review

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about

Client

Plymouth State University

Project name

Scriblio

Client representative

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Methods used for review

This review is a combination of a heuristic review and an expert design and usability review based on the experience of the reviewer, a cognitive walkthrough of the application, and comparison to standards and best practices.

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summary

What was reviewed

Plymouth State University's implementation of Scriblio (<http://library.plymouth.edu>) was used for the review. However, only the structure of the application, its functionality, concept, value, interaction design, and usability were considered.

Aspects of the system that are implementation-specific, such as the site's theme (color palette, layout, typography, etc.) and site-specific content, were not evaluated.

Note: This review was performed in approximately three days, and as such, is not as comprehensive as it could be. Further evaluation would likely result in far more detail.

Impressions

In a few words, Scriblio raises the bar for OPAC vendors everywhere.

Scriblio can and should be seen by commercial OPAC developers as a new paradigm that must be met in order to ensure future success. The bar has long been set so low for library vendors that it is my strong belief that the first commercial vendor to rise up to the standards of system design established throughout the web in e-commerce and other systems will, quite frankly, annihilate its competition.

Scriblio succeeds in a number of areas where current alternatives fail. It is not only one of the best library systems on the web, it is one of the better e-commerce and knowledgebase systems.

Because Scriblio is free and is an open-source system, commercial vendors will have much to compete against. Libraries that are able to use Scriblio, which requires WordPress expertise and an organization that can support the needs of an open-source system, are at a distinct advantage. Such organizations can provide a superior catalog system to their end users without the expensive overhead of licensing and maintenance fees charged by commercial vendors.

Scriblio is certainly guilty of a number of typical usability issues, each of which is covered in this review, but all of them can be resolved easily, especially given the enthusiastic nature of open-source communities. I believe there will be no shortage of developers willing to roll up their sleeves to improve and evolve the system as it matures and grows in popularity.

Any organization that is willing and can support the open-source Scriblio would be wise to equip themselves with the appropriate staff and subsequently cancel their contracts with commercial vendors once and for all.

Herein is a review of Scriblio, broken down by conceptual positives and potential issues, as well as by section.

concept: positives

There are quite a few very positive things to say about the concept of Scriblio.

Faceted browsing and system-wide search

On a typical library site, browsing can be a chore. Search functions often only support searching for catalog items. This means there is often no way to search for information on renewing books, RSS feeds, and so on. Categories (subject headings) are typically identified and listed according to Library of Congress standards rather than friendlier methods of organization that are more supportive of a user's mental model. And links to related content or items are often non-existent, decreasing the level of findability within a library catalog.

(**Note:** I use the term “category” in place of “subject headings” and similar terms throughout this report because most library users have a limited understanding of library terminology and will generally identify subject headings as categories.)

Many library systems adhere to an “implementation model”—a design that reflects the underlying system (in this case, a system established by the Library of Congress) rather than a user's mental model. This usually results in a catalog organized according to a strict hierarchy that must be navigated node-by-node. To the contrary, Scriblio offers **faceted browsing**, which is to say that a user can pick and choose how they navigate their way through the system's hierarchy. Scriblio therefore provides a very open method of browsing that will be highly beneficial to users and is superior to many, if not most, library systems.

Scriblio does this in several ways. First, it draws no imaginary lines between items and content in its search functionality. If the information exists on the site, it can be found via search. Second, and more importantly, each and every page offers links to related content, subject listings, databases, new titles, and more. And since category pages (accessed by clicking a category link on the Resources by Subject link) list all the options for content within a category, including books, databases, reference material, and web sites, users are able to find related content very easily.

Friendly URLs

There is nothing intrinsically “friendly” about URLs, but much can be done to simplify them for users, and this has been done in Scriblio. Instead of lengthy, obscure query strings, in many cases, Scriblio URLs are short and concise, so much so that one can tell what to expect on a page simply by reading its URL (e.g. <http://library.plymouth/by-subject/music>). Among other benefits, this means that URLs are more meaningful (as when sent to others via email), bookmarks are easier to manage, and the URLs can even be used in marketing material more readily.

Built on WordPress

Because Scriblio is built atop the open-source blogging and content management system WordPress, developers and content contributors can easily create new pages and posts, update the system, apply a

new theme (color palette, layout, etc.), edit and update content, and so on. The ease-of-use of WordPress makes Scriblio one of the simplest front-end systems available for library catalogs.

In short, libraries get all the benefits of WordPress without all the heavy lifting of building a catalog system.

Self-evident design

Many web applications suffer from a lack of quality instructive elements, despite that these elements can be the key to a user's understanding of a system. The best systems, in fact, are designed well enough that instructive elements are simply not needed. The design itself is clear and understandable enough that users simply don't need instructions.

Due partially to the faceted browsing approach and partially to many other design decisions, many of which are discussed in this document, Scriblio meets this noble goal quite well. The self-evident design requires very few instructive elements.

concept: potential issues

My main concerns for Scriblio going forward are outlined below.

Scalability

Scalability is a big concern. It is assumed that WordPress can indeed support a robust catalog, but there are other issues related to its maintenance. Particularly:

- **Categorization:** How will categories be managed over time, and how are these categories enabled and/or supported for new Scriblio users? If a finite set has been established and is used as a default set within Scriblio implementations, this may be a moot point, but if categories can be created endlessly, it could easily become difficult to manage which items and content go into which categories. Additionally, multiple versions of the same category could be created inadvertently (e.g. "Communication" and "Communication Studies"), which could cause confusion for administrators and decrease findability within the system for users.
- **Comment moderation:** WordPress offers the ability to either moderate comments or allow them to be posted freely. If comments are to be moderated, the process of moderating comments could become unwieldy for libraries with large communities. There are pros and cons to moderating comments, and the default setting should be carefully considered (users often leave default settings in place, so defaults should always be decided with care).
- **Spam:** With the ability to add comments comes the risk of spam. Appropriate measures must be taken to alleviate this, as spam and otherwise undesirable comments could adversely affect a community's perception of a library. As a library's catalog grows, this becomes even more of a concern.

Appropriateness of commenting

Currently, commenting appears to be an option on almost every page of the Scriblio system. This can be problematic for several reasons.

First, in addition to concerns about spam and otherwise undesirable comments, there is also an innate risk that that comments will become less meaningful over time.

To put this in context, consider this comment from the Resources by Subject page:

“Can you delete the May 21, 2007 date from this and other pages?” (Posted by “daberona”).

Once the date has been removed from the page, this comment no longer has any value. This will be true in many cases, with many comments, but it is unreasonable to assume or expect that Scriblio administrators will systematically wade through comments throughout the site to check for things that need to be removed.

Also, comments appear in ascending order by age, so the newest comments always appear at the end of the list. Since the system itself will far outlive the usefulness of many of the comments, there is a risk that the oldest comments—the ones that appear first on a page—will quickly become stale and irrelevant to most of the users who visit the page.

Second, commenting is not necessarily appropriate for all the pages in the system. It is a wonderful feature with great value on product pages, where comments can help a user see what others think about an item or get a better sense of its purpose and scope, but it is less useful on higher-level pages such as Resources by Subject and Ask a Librarian. Here, the comments offer little or no benefit to users, and thus should be removed.

By default, Scriblio should offer commenting on only those pages where it truly offers value to end users.

home page

Getting into specific pages, sections, and design elements, here's a breakdown of issues related to the home page.

Author credit

The credit at the end of the post on the home page (e.g. “By Anne Kulig”) can cause some confusion. First, it may fool a user into believing the post is about something that was written or otherwise created by that person (the user, after all, does not know Scriblio is operating like a blog and will therefore not expect to see the names of the people who write posts).

Second, the link leads to a page titled “Author Archives”. Because “authors” have a different and much more common meaning in a library context, it should be made clear that “author” in this case means “a person who contributes to the content of the site”.

Recommendation:

1. Change the label “By <author name>” to “Posted by <author name>”
2. Change the title of the Author Archives page to “Posts by <author name>”

What's missing

One thing is missing from the home page that could be very helpful to users: a Sign-in option.

There is a link to do this on another page, but the #1 thing most users will do on the home page is search or sign-in. Moving the sign-in entry to the home page would make this more efficient for users. And since many users will bookmark the sign-in page, allowing sign-in on the home page will help promote the content there.

Recommendation:

1. Create a sign-in method on the home page

sign-in

In the sidebar of every page is the word “Meta”, which is followed by a Login link. The term Meta has no relevancy to end users, and as such, could cause confusion about the purpose of the Login link beneath it.

Also, links are most effective when phrased as verb-noun pairs (“Log in”), rather than as objects (“Login”). And as mentioned previously, it is better to include the sign-in entry on the home page itself rather than link to it.

Finally, the My Account section of the sidebar contains a link to “Renew Books”, but a more generic sign-in link should also be offered.

Recommendation:

1. Replace the term Meta and the Login link with the Sign-In entry fields.
2. If this cannot be done, remove the term Meta and add a “Sign In” link to the My Account section of the sidebar.
3. In either case, move the My Account section of the sidebar to the top of the navigation. This will expedite the process of signing in without detracting from the other navigation options.

navigation

Following are issues related to the persistent navigation, which appears in the left-hand sidebar of every page of Scriblio.

First, the positives:

- The sidebar navigation overall is very useful and appropriate. It provides links to relevant sections of the site and remains consistent throughout the site.
- Verb-noun combinations (for example, “Find” > “Databases”), which are superior to object-based phrases (e.g. “Calendar”), are used throughout the navigation.

“Get Help” section

The Get Help section of the sidebar navigation contains links to both “Ask a Librarian” and “Ask the Infodesk”. Both take the user to similar pages with slight differences in content, but since “Infodesk” is listed separately, it’s difficult to know which link provides the information the user might be seeking.

Also, the landing page for both links contains a form that offers a “Website” field, despite that it’s unlikely this will be a common asset for a library user. This information is not needed by the library, and is likely to confuse users, as this information is irrelevant to the questions that will be asked via these forms.

Recommendation:

1. Combine the two landing pages.
2. Replace the two links in the Get Help section with a single link that reads “Ask us” or similar.
3. Remove the Website field from the contact form.

search / browse

There are quite a few positives to mention with regard to searching and browsing in Scriblio. As previously mentioned, a typical library site supports searching only for catalog items, which means a user looking for information on the location of the library, for example, cannot find it by searching. In Scriblio, however, search works for the entire system.

Further, the faceted browsing approach used in Scriblio surfaces a breadth of information in a very appropriate manner, making it relatively simple to locate much of the information on the site as a user explores the site while doing research or performing other tasks.

More positives are outlined below.

- RSS feeds are available for most content, including categories, items, and so on. This makes it very easy to users to get updates on a variety of very specific needs.
- The “Share This” page (accessed via the Bookmarks and Share link on most site pages), is comprehensive. It offers methods to bookmark pages within the system using various social networking sites and bookmark managers, email the page to someone, subscribe to RSS feeds, and translate content into various languages. These options enable users to organize information while doing research and get updates on very specific content.
- Search results pages show descriptions of the items listed. This helps users determine what to click next and will help increase a user’s confidence as he navigates the site.
- Search results pages offer tags, which link to related categories and searches. These links will help users find a larger variety of resources very quickly, which can be quite helpful when doing research.
- Searches can be narrowed using the options in the right-hand sidebar on a search results page. This offers flexibility and power to users without forcing them to use a complicated mechanism for search in the first place.

Following is a breakdown of issues related to searching and browsing.

Quick Search field

On a positive note, when a search produces only one result, the user is taken directly to the landing page for the result rather than a search results page with only one item listed. This saves users a click, and avoids the ugliness of a page with only a single result listed. It appears to “just work”, and users will appreciate this.

Unfortunately, however, the search field in the sidebar is difficult to spot at a quick glance, possibly due to the styling of the search field on the PSU site, and possibly due to its’ small size.

Recommendation:

1. Increase the size of the search field in the sidebar.

Remove the styling so the input field is more standard in appearance. Against a background color, a white input field is more noticeable, as it creates a higher color contrast.

Tags

Tags are an essential part of the faceted browsing model employed by Scriblio, and it’s wonderful that they exist and are readily offered on many pages throughout the site.

That said, the term “Tags”, as on the Databases page, will be fairly meaningless to many users, despite the popularity of the term on Flickr and other sites.

Recommendation:

1. Consider using the word “Keyword” instead of Tags, or simply relabeling the Tags section as “Related”

Search results pages

The results pages are filled with useful information, but the downside to this is that there is almost too much information. In many cases, the descriptions and Tag sections and so on can take up a lot of room and make it difficult to quickly scan a page.

Recommendation:

1. Consider truncating the descriptions and adding a More link (e.g. “ ... [\[More\]](#)”) that links to the product page for the item.
2. Consider showing only a few tags—perhaps three or four—and offering an “All tags” link instead of showing all the tags on the results page.

Also, there is a section at the top of the results page that offers the following instructions:

“Click [x] to remove a term, or use the facets in the sidebar to narrow your search.

What are facets? Results sorted by keyword relevance.”

The introduction of this term accomplishes nothing for the user or the library, and it requires a link to a definition of the term “facets”.

Recommendation:

1. Replace the term “facets” with “links” in the instructions (i.e. “Click [x] to remove a term, or use the links in the sidebar ...”)

2. Remove “[What are facets?](#) Results sorted by keyword relevance.” This link and statement will be unnecessary after changing the term to “links”.

Product pages

As mentioned earlier, it’s great that each product page offers the ability to add a comment. This enables users to read the impressions of others and gain insight about the usefulness of a resource.

It’s also very useful that each product page prominently displays the location, call number, and status of the item, offers a description, and offers links to relevant subjects.

There is only one small issue to address: the “View record in LOLA catalog” link lacks context and will be meaningless to many, if not most, library users. (This appears to be PSU-specific, but it is worth mentioning regardless.)

Recommendation:

1. If possible, remove the link
2. If removal is not possible, add a “What’s this?” link at the end that links to a Help snippet about the LOLA catalog. This is not an ideal solution, but it will at least help give users some context.

RSS options

There is doubtlessly a lot of value for students who take advantage of RSS feeds while using Scriblio. But at this point in time, most web users have no understanding of the meaning of RSS, and as such, will not understand the value of the RSS Feeds link on each page.

Recommendation:

1. Change the label “RSS” to “Subscribe”. This tells users who are unfamiliar with RSS what can be done, and users who are familiar with RSS will recognize this as a term associated with RSS feeds.
2. Offer “chicklets” (buttons for various readers) on the landing page. RSS-savvy users will already have readers with which to subscribe, and this will create a one-click method of subscribing, and this will enable users who are unfamiliar with RSS to learn about the sites and desktop applications they can use to subscribe.

Ask a Librarian options

The Ask a Librarian page offers all the right information. It gives users a way to call the library, email them, visit in person, and even chat with a librarian online. But the page contains an excessive amount of text, and this can force users to read quite a bit to find the information they need.

The following recommendation is a guideline for all pages within the site, not just Ask a Librarian.

Recommendation:

1. Consolidate the text down to a list of bullet points for each section of the page. For example, “Come See Us” should simply provide directions to the library, along with library hours. Exclude any text that doesn’t directly support a user’s goal to find usable, actionable information.

conclusion

Overall, Scriblio is a solid, robust, and very easy to use system. With a few tweaks to the design to correct the relatively minor usability issues outlined in this review, the system will offer even more value for end users.

OPAC developers everywhere should study Scriblio, learn from it, and start meeting the bar that Scriblio has set.