kineo

Avoiding the trap of
clicky-clicky bling-bling

What is clicky-clicky bling-bling?

"All that glitters is not gold." ~ William Shakespeare

For a modern translation, and applicable to our industry: "All that is clicky-clicky bling-bling does not make for an effective learning experience."

What is clicky-clicky bling-bling?

What is clicky-clicky bling-bling? It's eLearning with lots of whiz, lots of bang, lots of clicky-clicky in a attempt to add pizzazz to dry content and to make it more engaging.

But once you unwrap the sparkle, sadly, all you're left with is a load of eLearning junk…

Don't mistake **clicky-clicky bling-bling** for "engagement." It's just shiny wrapping paper covering up a pair of crummy socks with holes in them.

Clicky-clicky bling-bling is fun and seductive. It's fantastic graphics and interesting but convoluted interfaces. It might look like a "fun learning game"—perhaps a multiple choice quiz dressed up like a game show. It might have a lot interaction, in the name of making for an interesting experience

> **Imagine.** A screen with a flashing Next button. So pretty and so blinky, your eye immediately lands on this lovely Next button. You scan the onscreen text and listen briefly to the audio, but then the twitch sets in and you do what you've been yearning to do: you click Next.

> **Imagine.** A graphical representation of a doctor's office. Every item in the office is a clickable hot spot. To learn more, you need to explore the room and click on all of the items. So you start randomly clicking. Here and there you discover a few fun tidbits. The tissue box tells you about airborne viruses; the light switch tells you about the dangers of reading in a poorly lit room. Imagine now that there are twenty objects in the room that you have to click on. It's interactive! It's intriguing! But it's exhausting and face it – there's no point. Fatigue sets in and you move on.

> **Imagine.** An exciting game show interface. Multiple choice questions with background music and scores. It's glitzy. It's exciting. You're beating the clock! You're winning. But at the end of the quiz, you remember nothing except the catchy background tune.

You probably don't have to imagine. You've seen them. You've maybe even built them. We've all done a little of it, haven't we? Time to confess and be cured.

What's happened with these elearning programs? Well, they've been dressed up with "seductive details".

Ruth Clark and Richard Mayer in the industry classic **e-Learning and the Science of Instruction**, explain that seductive details are "interesting but irrelevant material added to a multimedia presentation in an effort to spice it up (Garner, Gillingham, and White, 1989)."
Seductive details are those elements in a program that draw you in, attract the eye and engage the brain. They seduce your interest, but distract from the main point.

Why, oh, why?

Why do designers fall for the seductive allure of **clicky-clicky bling-bling**?

Clark and Mayer provide some insight into why **clicky-clicky bling-bling** happens:

"...consumers may feel that a "jazzier" product will hold the learner's interest better. This is the premise underlying the arousal theory, the idea that entertaining and interesting embedded effects cause learners to become more emotionally aroused and therefore they work harder to learn the material."

Technology has made production easy. What once took months of design and development time can now be created in days, even hours.

Rapid tools and easy-to-use templates make it easy for practically anyone to create a course these days. The eLearning marketplace is filled with templates that make your elearning sizzle! Game shows, interactive exercises, and lots and lots of **clicky-clicky bling-bling**.

But we can't blame the template and tool vendors. Instead we need to look at the producers of these programs. Designers who are seduced by the glamour and hear that games and interactivity make learning fun and take that at face value. Designers who think more is more and pile on content layer on content layer. Designers who don't understand the basics of effective instructional design and are committing what Clark Quinn of Quinnovation calls

"Instructional design malpractice".

Kevin Thorn, an instructional designer and course producer at AutoZone, blames the deluge of clicky-clicky bling-bling (CCBB) on lack of real design skills.

He says, people are:

"Hiding content behind CCBB because there's no real design (instructionally or otherwise)."

It's time, he urges us, to stand up and defend our craft.

Bling isn't inherently bad...

Some bling may not be too bad. Clark Quinn points us to research on extrinsic vs. instrinsic motivation, stating that simple learning games can help with perseverance. That is, by creating a simple game out of a quiz, learners may be more likely to stick with it. This is great if the game is being used for declarative knowledge—facts and information that you want the learner to memorize.

In a review of research on games and simulations Traci Sitzmann and Katherine Ely looked at the role of simulation games in motivation and learning...

"When trainees are intrinsically motivated, they exert more effort to learn the material, enjoy learning more, and are more likely to apply the material outside the game environment."

Although we're not necessarily equating **clicky-clicky bling-bling** with simulations games, there may be something to dressing up content—even a multiple choice quiz—if it may have the effect of intrinsically motivating your learners.

The Ely/Sitzmann study concluded that simulation games were effective and trainees learn more when

"the simulation game was a supplement to other instructional methods rather than standalone instruction".

Karl Kapp, professor of instructional design and technology and Bloomsburg University, reviewed the Ely/Sitzmann study and noted that this could have implications for designers who create standalone quizzes (perhaps game style) that are outside of the context of additional instruction. The better approach would be to include one within the course of instruction.

The dark side of bling...

Clicky-clicky bling-bling shines and sparkles wildly in the sun. These are the programs that make people say **"cool"** and **"wow"** or **"hey, check that out!"** But there's a dark cloud to all this sparkle;

all that glitters is not gold.

Too much clicking is not good for you:

- ## leads to learner fatigue
- ## distracting to the learner
- ## doesn't promote deeper understanding

So let's dig a little deeper into the dark side of the bling.
Clark Quinn says in spite of the perseverance factor discussed above that

"Tarted-up drill and kill is still lipstick on a pig."

Lipstick? Seduction? Arousal? Are you sure this is an article on elearning design?

Drill and kill is one way to get learners to practice your content. And practice, is good, right? Well, not always. When we force learners to practice without context, they've memorized facts but may not be able to apply them correctly in context. This is why Jeopardy Games are for the most part useless as learning tools. Unless you're a noted game show host, you're day job isn't working at a Jeopardy Board. We need to provide more contextual opportunities for drill exercises that will help the learner both retain and apply the knowledge they are practicing.

Karl Kapp in **Gadgets, Games and Gizmos for Learning** (2007), make an argument for casual games as a keystone of learning, but reminds us that we need to write good questions first:

"Well-written multiple choice-questions teach and assess knowledge within the context of a game. Poor questions simply allow the gamer to play the game without learning. Work to develop effective questions to force learning and require learners to think as they play the game."

Distracting to the learner...

Will Thalheimer has written on the **"seductive-details effect"**, and points to research in the late 1980's and 1990's that found...

"that the addition of interesting yet unimportant augmentations can divert learners from learning the main points that are being made."

The same argument could be made about the flamboyant classroom instructor who inspires and excites the classroom, earning rave reviews, but failing to effect any lasting behavioral change in the learners or impart any lasting knowledge.

You know the type: as one wise person put it, they care more about their performance than yours.

Tom Kuhlmann VP of Community at Articulate writes about designers who add background audio when the course content is boring...

"Guess what? If the course is boring, adding audio will only make it boring and danceable. You're best served to spend your time designing the right type of course and spending less time looking for ways to 'jazz it up.' "
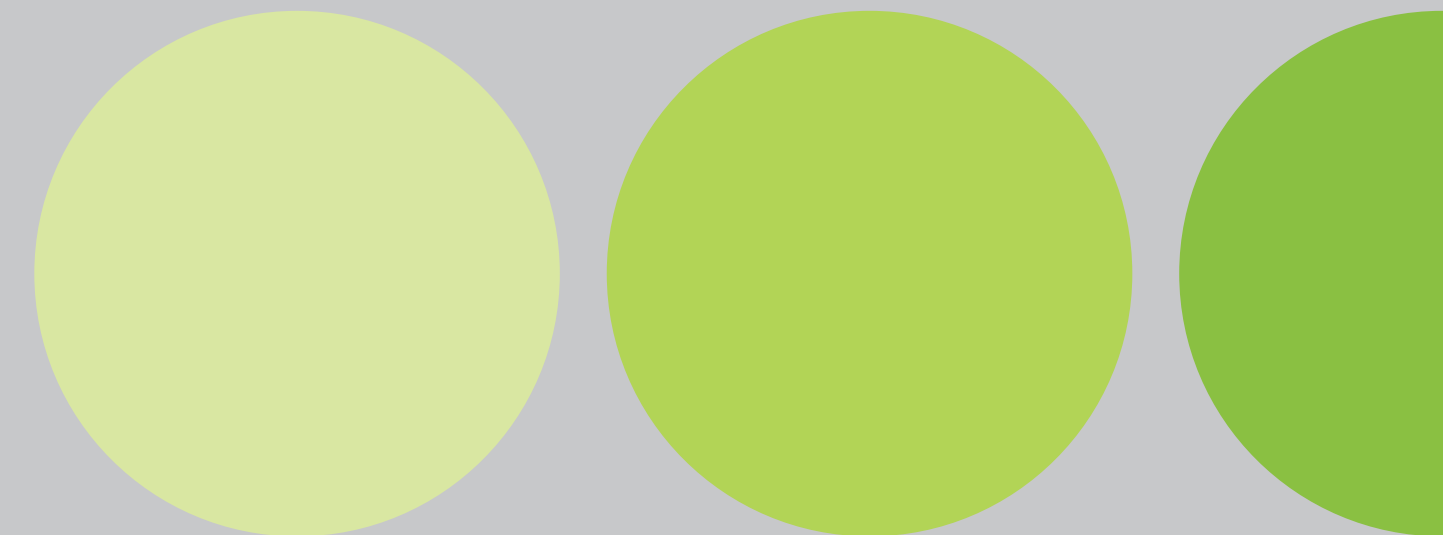
So how can you tell if it's seductive & distracting?

As you look at the design of an individual page, step back and blur your eyes a little bit. If you've been working closely on a project, you might not "see" it anymore. Now, take a look at the screen and see where your eye lands first. Is it the flashing Next button in the bottom right corner? Or is it the important content bit at the center of the screen? Ask an objective outsider to take a look, too. See it through their eyes and pay attention to what they notice.

Pilot your program with some test learners. Find out what stuck with them at the end of the program – check in with them immediately afterwards, one week, three weeks. See what they remember and what they can actually apply.

If all they can remember is the jazzy tune and a few new dance moves, well, unless you are the in-house e-learning designer at a dance school, then you've got a problem.

So is no bling better? And what about the clicking part?

By all means, don't take this to mean that we don't think eLearning should look good. Au contraire! In fact, we believe firmly in the value of good graphics and strong visual identity to your elearning program. Attractive design and visuals do indeed draw the learner in. Learners may judge a book by its cover and dismiss your program in the first few moments if they don't think it looks professional or polished.

Extending your corporate brand identity into your elearning is one simple way you can do this. Does your elearning represent your company? Are you incorporating the color scheme and logo in a strong enough way – one that sends the message that this is our program and we're proud of it?

Find out more about this in our brand-led e-learning guide, click here.

What about your LMS? We love using Moodle and Totara as an LMS solution for our clients, not only because of the great features and the fact that it's open source, but always because we can make it look like almost anything. Ever had someone look at your LMS and say "That's an LMS?"

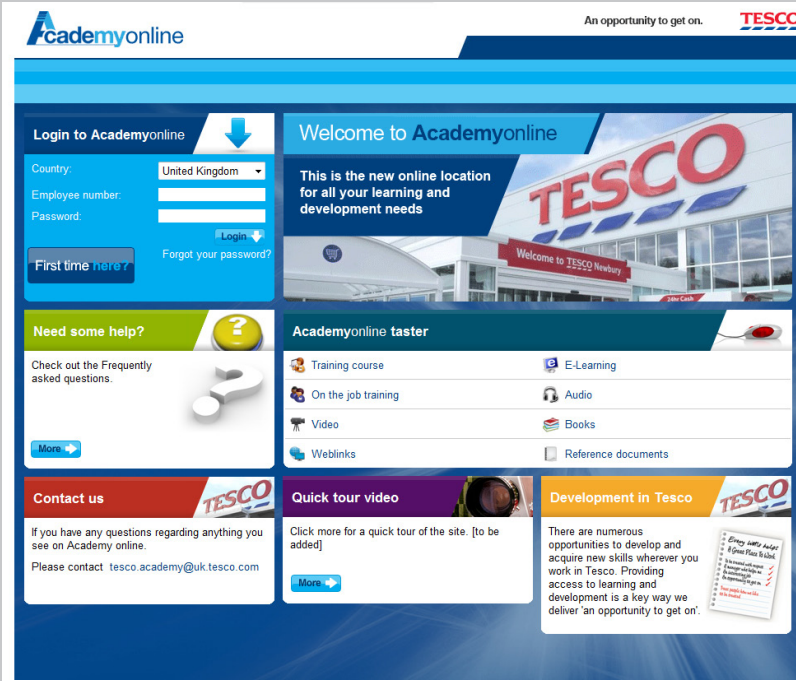Here are a few examples of client Moodles we've created. They lead with simple clean designs that carry over the client's branding and visual identity. Easy to navigate, but colorful and pretty to look at just the same.

Attractive design and visuals do indeed draw the learner in. Incorporating good graphics and strong visual identity will add great value to your elearning program.

Look for Part 2: Tips for good graphical design, working with text, and creating instant interactivity.

Talk to us...

Looking to bring more brand into your e-learning? Lucky us, we get to with some of the world's leading brands, including Coca-Cola, Nike, McDonald's, Google, British Airways, M&S, Tesco, Nikon and HP. They've entrusted us to create learning experiences that live up to their brand.

Works for them – how about you?

Get in touch, we'd love to help.

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We have offices in the UK, US, China, New Zealand, Sweden and Israel.