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iTunes v10.0

As tempted as I was to critique Confluence, I decided to show some restraint and take a shot at the new version of iTunes that Apple recently released. This was an interesting choice for me, since I'm a huge fan of Apple products and I generally find them to be very well-designed. However, I have a couple of bones to pick with iTunes 10. For simplicity's sake, I'm only going to comment on a couple of interface elements, since this post could quickly become a long-winded affair if I wanted to comment on every aspect of iTunes.

The Good

General Interface
In the past, iTunes has had fairly good visibility, and this version is mostly the same way. The music controls are highly visible, round buttons at the top, which are shaded to look like buttons and take advantage of our learned idea of virtual buttons. The volume slider is right next to the music controls. The feedback for both of these elements is pretty good, since you will hear the music play, pause, skip tracks, or get louder or softer. The volume slider has decent mapping, since the speaker diagrams clearly show that sliding the button to the right will make more noise, and sliding to the left will make less noise. It makes sense to put all of the music-related components together and to have them be as highly visible as they are in iTunes, since one of the primary purposes of iTunes is to play music. The currently playing song and information about it are also placed in a highly visible position in the window--the top center. The buttons to change the music listing views are also highly visible and have good feedback and mapping. Once a button is clicked the viewing pane changes (see the changes in the slideshow), and what's more, the graphic on each button looks like the layout that's displayed when it's clicked. The search bar is a smart design element with high visibility (with both the magnifying glass that signifies "Search" and the grey text that describes the function of the bar), and good feedback (results instantly show after the user types anything in the bar). If a song is currently playing, a little speaker appears next to the song, making for good visibility and feedback. The shuffle and repeat buttons at the bottom have good visibility and mapping, since crossed arrows indicate mixing up and arrows in a loop indicate, well, a loop. Each button turns blue when their associated features are active, providing good feedback. Finally, the navigation pane on the left is split up into highly visible related categories that tell the user what can be done in each category. The category currently being viewed is highlighted so that the user never has to guess where he or she is in the application.

Genius Mixes
This may be one of my favorite panes of the application because it feels so easy to use to me. The genius mix categories are all highly visible with album art from representative artists of each category. Mouse over any category, and the names of the representative artists pop up underneath, as well as a large play button, making for good feedback and affordances. The mapping also makes sense: want to hear music similar to Muse? Click on the pane that shows their album cover mixed in with those from similar artists.
The Bad

Little Arrow Next to Songs
You may notice in iTunes that if a song is currently playing or if you select any song, little arrows pop up by the song name, artist, album, and genre. What do these do? They have horrible visibility, mapping, and affordance, although their feedback eventually led me to discover what their purpose is. Just by looking at the arrow, you wouldn’t really know what it’s for. There’s no logical mapping; my first guess would be that clicking the arrow would go to the next song or something, since the arrows pointing right sort of map to "next" in my head. The arrows don’t even afford clicking, since they don’t even look like buttons. It turns out the clicking one of the arrows will take you to that song, artist, album, or genre’s page in the iTunes store.

Icons in the "Now Playing" Display at the Top
If you look closely at some of my slideshow pictures or at your own iTunes application, you’ll notice that if you’re currently playing a song, three little icons pop up in the song information display. The one on the left is an arrow in a circle. The one second from the right is what looks like an atom. The one all the way on the right is a curved arrow that points left in a circle. What do any of these do? The atom is fairly easy to figure out once you notice the repetition of the atom throughout the application and its association with creating a genius playlist. However, the other two icons have low visibility and poor affordances. They barely look like they’re supposed to be clicked, and their design doesn’t clue the user in as to what they do. Fortunately, their feedback is instant. The icon on the left transforms the song information display into an equalizer readout when clicked. The icon on the right brings you back to the currently playing song if you’ve scrolled away from it. None of these are obvious simply by looking at the icons.

Add New Playlist Button
You may notice that there is a little plus sign on the lower left hand side of the application window. I get that it means "add something," but what? Add a song? A movie? The button affords little and has poor visibility, since it doesn’t describe what exactly it’s for besides adding something. Like the other ambiguous buttons, immediate feedback indicates that the button creates a new playlist.

The Ugly

The Icon
My least favorite part about iTunes 10 is the new icon. Sure, the CD is going the way of the dinosaurs, but the music note in front of a CD was what I looked for when I wanted to play music on my computer. Now I have to look at a cheap-looking, cartoony music note. The icon just doesn't look elegant enough to be the face of a piece of Apple software and doesn’t seem to fit in on my dock with the rest of the Apple applications. They’ve also destroyed years of brand recognition with this radically new icon.

Colorless Menu Pane
The application looks so plain and dull, now that the icons are all grey in the left-hand pane. In previous versions of iTunes these icons used to have colors and I could pick what I wanted with a simple glance because the colors differentiated each option. Now I have to stare at each icon and read its description to make a selection, something that adds time to my already-packed schedule.

Traffic Lights
This redesign is the strangest one to me. Why did Apple choose to turn the maximize, minimize, and close window buttons on their side? Every other application has them laid out horizontally. This flies in the face of the repetition principle of design. Furthermore, since my group project may deal with helping individuals appreciate the difficulties of colorblindness, I've realized that for someone who's colorblind, this design change is awful. Every other application's close button is on the left, the minimize button is in the middle, and the maximize button is on the right. But now that the orientation has been switched, how will they know which one does which? Sure, when you hover your mouse over the buttons a little x, underscore, and plus sign pop up for close, minimize, and maximize, respectively, but the visibility is extremely low.

Proposed Improvements

Overall, I can't see why Apple changed iTunes so much. I liked the previous version of iTunes more. As a fan of minimalism I can appreciate the minimalistic tendencies in this new version, but I think they took it too far. Something about the new icon and the vertical alignment of the window control buttons unnerves me. The top side of the window is also smaller as a result of the shifted window control buttons; I'm used to grabbing the top of the window to move it, and now it feels like I have to aim for a really small bar to select the correct window, even if I know I can select any part of the gray portion at the top to drag the window.

For starters, I think they could easily improve the "show in iTunes" arrow if they changed the arrow to the little bag that is the iTunes Store icon. This would promote repetition and would clue users into the fact that the arrow has something to do with the iTunes store. Same thing goes for the equalizer button. If they just made it look like a little equalizer, the icon would itself provide much more visibility as to what it does. Finally, I think it would make more sense to move the little plus sign that adds a new playlist under the "Playlists" category in the left sidebar (see last image for a mock-up).