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FLAT, BUT NOT SHALLOW

Once the reality is familiar, it is time for the visual world

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Since the first iPhone was launched, every adjustment Apple makes for its acts as a pioneer and has a significant impact on the world. As the first touched-screen smartphone in the world, the first Apple's interface which is the Skeuomorphism style interface was introduced to users as a first step for them to be familiar with a touch operation on a smartphone. After nearly 8 years of developing, the shift from Skeuomorphism style to flat display again begins a wave of flat design where people want the display to be minimalized in detail but still express enough information.

In 2007, the first iPhone was born followed by enormous arguments and controversy relating to interaction with digital products because this is the first touch-screen phone. As a pioneer in this technology, Apple has to find a way that could help users familiar with this new technology. So how can they do that?

Skeuomorphism style in user experience is the answer to this. By referring the real-life objects and materials, designers try to imitate them using colors, drop shadow, faux texture, metaphor, reflections, v.v. with the purpose is to connect designers with users. It is said that is illustration plays a role in mirroring the appearance and basic manual functionality of real things related. With this solution, Apple aimed to trigger users' familiar cognition in the approach of new technology. As a result, accomplishment feeling was recalled when users can learn how to use new technology on their own. This effect also caused an exciting feeling for users that made them use more, leading to an "easy to use" attribute on the iPhone.

However, after nearly 8 years of following this style, and after users start to be natural with touchscreen technology in general and iPhone in particular, it is time for Apple to make a comprehensive change when replacing Skeuomorphism style with flat design. The question is: are there any

problems with Skeuomorphism and why did Apple decide to make this movement to flat design after years of developing?

2013 officially marks a milestone for apply when Jonathan Ive introduce the new iOS 7 using flat design. The time from 2007 to 2013 is long enough for users to get used to touching-glass technology. The more knowledge users know about, the fewer skeuomorphism details they require. Users might not need too many shadows, highlights, beveled edges or visual metaphors in experience display. Moreover, Skeuomorphism started to reveal some of its weaknesses: tacky and clutter in appearance. Besides, this style might not be suitable when displaying on a smaller screen such as a smartwatch where the display area is not much, because this style requires many details and it might be tangled or unclear. That is why this is the right time for Apple to make a revolution for visual display, a flat design. It still uses references from real life but illustrates more minimally and clearly. The flat design would focus on simplicity, utility, useless additional details, shadow, metaphors but still express enough information for users.

By doing so, it could decrease the clutter and tacky in design and interface. As a result, it could assist users in completing tasks due to a fast cognition in items, apps or buttons. Furthermore, it also requires designers to take a serious look at using a hierarchy of objects, colors and expressing information in their designs. That is also the reason why although recent Apple's app and interface designs are more minimal, they are still recognizable and familiar with users without misunderstanding.

Apple is making the right path for users since the first iPhone was launched among many controversies and arguments. It is reasonable to apply the Skeuomorphism style for the iPhone's first display as an essential foundation for users to shift from using physical devices to doing analog tasks on touch-screen devices. Finally, although it met many comments relating to its appearance, the transformation from Skeuomorphism to flat design is necessary and suitable as it can counter the previous style's weakness and adapt what users need for a better experience. It is flat, clarity, minimal, but not shallow.

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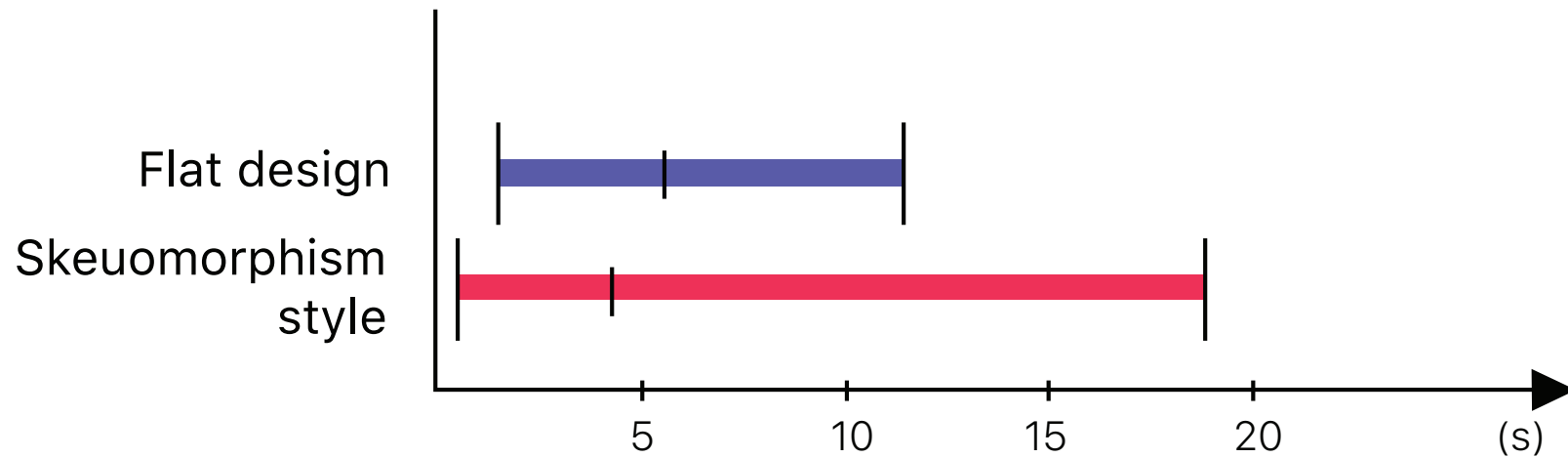
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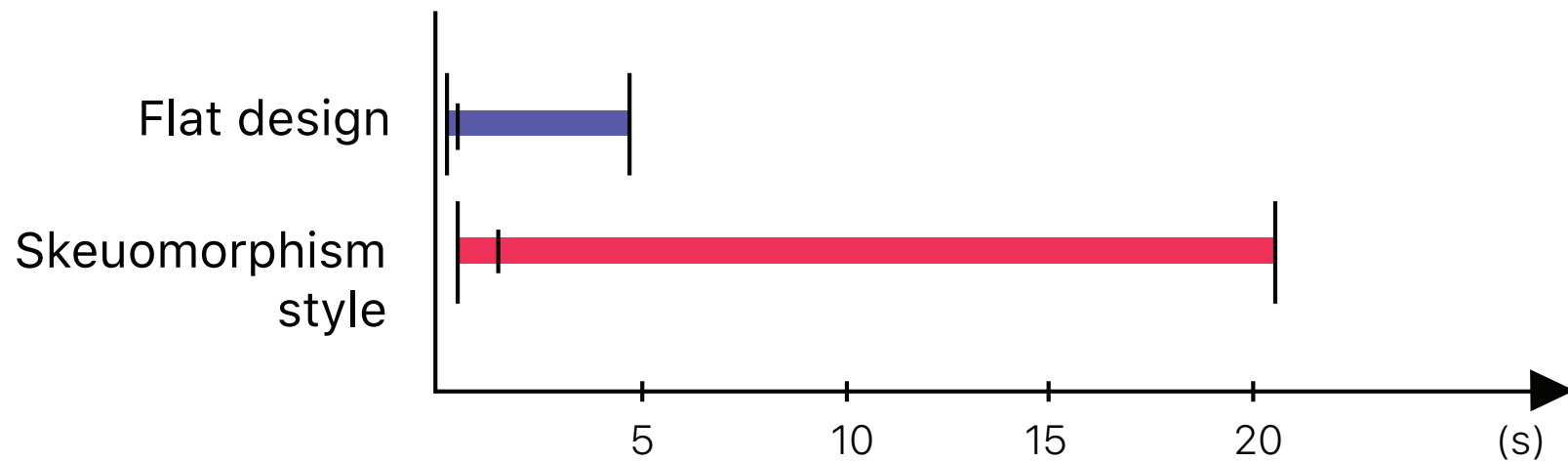
REVOLUTION OF APPLE iOS FROM 2007 TO 2013

(iOS 1 to iOS 7)

A transformation from Skeuomorphism style to flat design

Time to first fixation of users using flat design and Skeumorphism style on Apple iPhone display.

Time from first fixation to click of users using flat design and Skeumorphism style on Apple iPhone display.