Colors in User Interface

Introduction

The use of right color for the right context goes a long way in ensuring a good user experience. While designing the layout of the application it is very important to ensure that careful consideration is given while choosing the colors, their shades and other details.

Considerations while using colours

Limit the number of colours

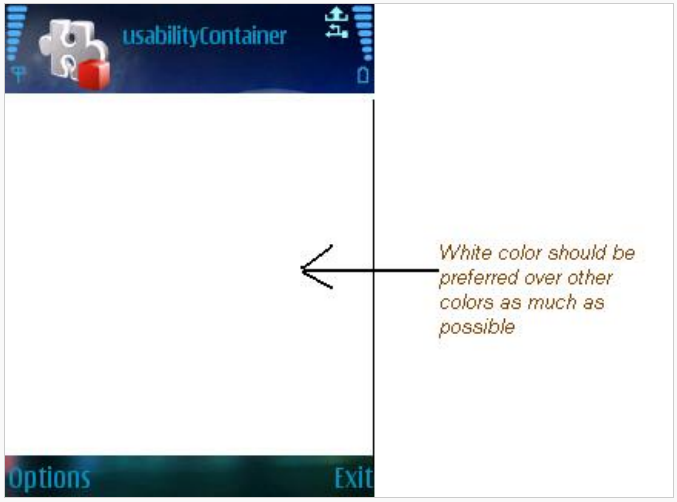
The amount of colors used in a user interface should be kept within reasonable limits. With colours generally less is more, as lesser colour gives the UI a neat uncluttered look.

Example of wrong colour usage

Example of right colour usage

Single colour backgrounds look nicer

When designing colours for user interface you should also think of other aspects of colors. Almost 10% of males have some kind of colour vision deficiency. So coding only with colours might not be a good idea. Maybe it would be a good idea to design the UI in black and white or at least try that it works without colours!



Example of white coloured background

Colors are also culture related

Different cultures have different meanings for colours. For example, green is associated with heaven (Muslims) and luck (U.S. and Ireland) [www.colormatters.com Details from colormatters.com].

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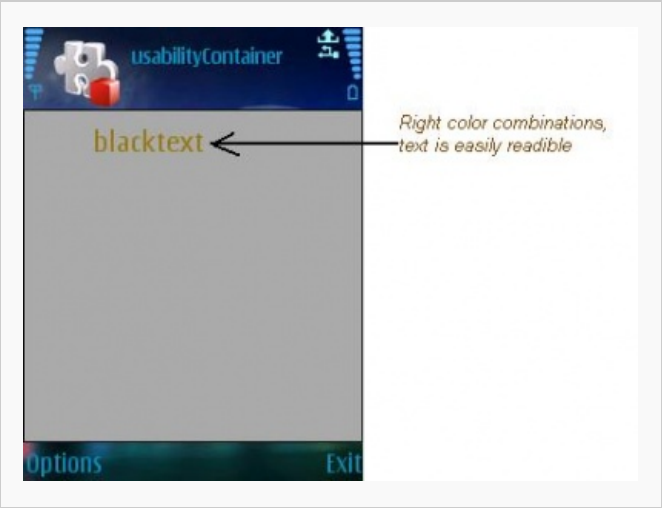
Importance of colours

Colours can be used to get viewers attention

You should be careful with the usage of colors to attract the user's attention. If there is too much colour to be noticed it won't do what it's supposed to do any more. The information that needs attention gets quite easily if too many colors are used or if the wrong color combinations are used.

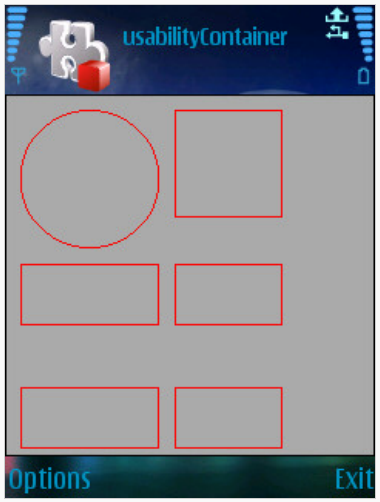
Example of text getting lost



Example of text clearly visible

Use distinct shapes to get attention

You can catch the viewer's attention with shapes, too, for example. A round shape among rectangles will be noticed. You shouldn't rely on colour coding only, because not everybody can distinguish all colours. Using shape coding might be a nice addition.



Circle gets noticed amongst the rectangles

Highlight & underline important things

Things/features/information that is more important should be highlighted, or written with different colours/fonts so that the user can notice it immediately. Also catchy colors like red, yellow can be used for this purpose.

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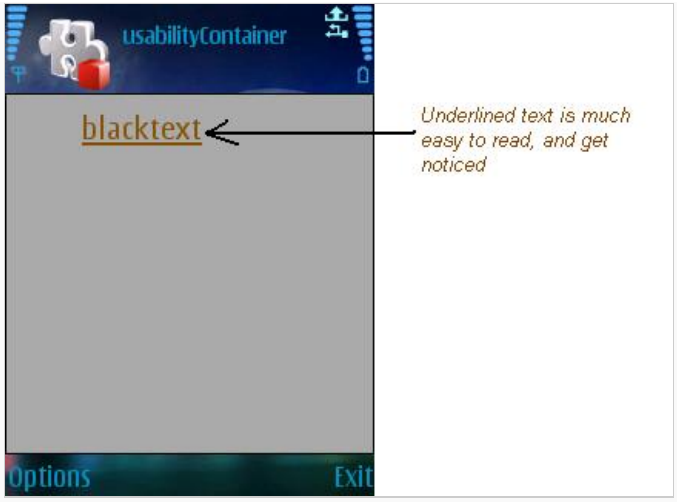

Underlining the text makes it more noticeable

Enable skin

Enable the skin to take make use of the background wallpaper image of the selected theme. This makes the UI look much more elegant as compared to a white patch of coloured rectangle.

Example of a skin enabled container

Perception of colours

Different colours are perceived differently and are often associated with specific ideas, so it is very important to ensure that the right colour is used, otherwise you might end up offending the sensitiveness' of the user if wrong colours have been used.

Human mind has a way of connecting things that are alike. Things that are coloured with the same colour or that are the same shape are easily associated. That's why you should be consistent with the colouring and using different shapes. Use blue for links, black for other parts of text and red for important information and add shapes, underlining etc. to inform that there is something special there.

Cold colors (blue, green and purple) seem to be further away from the viewer than warm colours (red, yellow and orange). That's why they should be used as background colours. Colours like red for instance are often perceived as signs of danger, and should be used when denoting an error case or a fault condition etc. In case of games they can be used to depict action, violent scenes etc.

Text should be written with a color that distinguishes from the background. So, yellow text on white background can be stated a bad idea. You might see the text but reading it is very energy consuming. The best combination for readability is black text on a white background.

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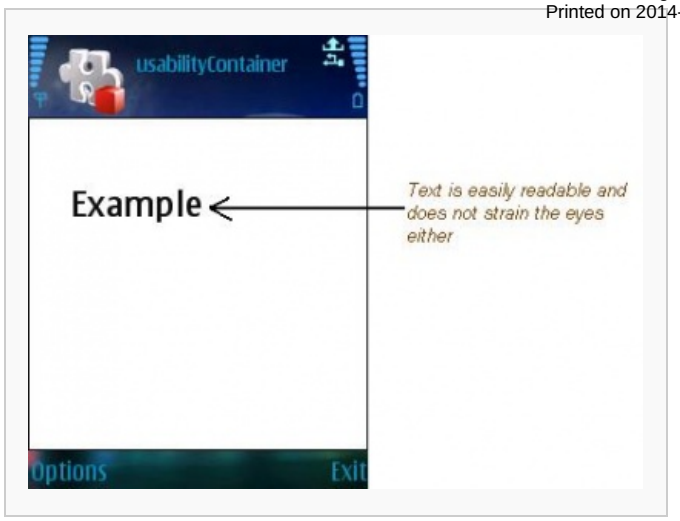
Yellow colored text is visible but straining



Example of text clearly visible and not straining either

Colours have many roles in a user interface, for example to get attention and to make the UI more vivid. The most important role is making the UI into a harmonic whole. That can be achieved by careful design.

Proper contrast

Make sure the colour combinations for foreground and background provide sufficient contrast. E.g. use a black text on a white background.

Additional Resources

More information about colours can be found from www.colormatters.com.

- General usability issues
- Web Safe Colors

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