Designing Icons for "Sliss"

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Principles for designing icons for use in Sliss

While developing the SLISS concept, it quickly became clear that a series of perhaps 50-60 icons would be necessary for testing purposes. Searching the Internet produced some suitable images, but few suitable icons.

It had been suggested that the icons should use the scalable vector graphics format (SVG) to provide true scalability. The initial icons were therefore produced using a suitable SVG background with JPEG or PNG images overlaid and saved as SVG files. But these icons were later found not to work with all browsers. Eventually, we moved to the saving the icons as PNG files, which is the Android default and they have worked fine.

The SLISS methodology recommends that the icon files are initially prepared with a 630x630 pixels size, for later scaling by the software to smaller sizes as required, and that the launcher icons be prepared with a 144x144 pixels size – the Android size for its largest launcher icons.

If an icon has too much detail, it might not show clearly on a low-resolution smartphone screen, so, the designer has to keep this in mind.

There are some ***basic design principles*** that need to be applied when developing icons for this purpose.

In the Bible there are approximately ***450 separate stories*** and, in addition, other important modules that might be included in a set of passages. Usually, though, the sets of stories used are much smaller, perhaps 30, perhaps 100. But, how ever many there are, the icons have to serve the purpose of accurately distinguishing among the full set of stories and other modules.

There is a great need to have Christian artists design sets of icons. One group working with sign languages has Deaf people designing more than a hundred icons for use with chronological Bible sign language stories. Really good sets of icons could have a huge worldwide impact.

Basic principles of design

In designing icons for the purpose of accessing Scripture, there are multiple considerations. Here is an initial summary:

1. **Accurate**: the icon must accurately reflect something that is known from the Scripture passage(s) and must try to avoid things that are unlikely to have been true.
2. **Acceptable**: the icons must be acceptable to the ethnic group for whom it is being prepared.
3. **No words**: the icon pictures must communicate all that is needed without using any words.
4. **Clear & distinctive**: the icons must be quite clear as to what they are portraying, so there must be sufficient contrasts within the image.
5. **Consistent style**: there should be a consistent style for any set of icons
6. **Colourful**: the icons must make good use of colour in order to be more easily recognizable.

Accuracy

Some pictures drawn for children's Bibles contain things that cannot be concluded from the Scriptures. Carefully study the Scripture passages and any background information to try and come up with several possible designs, before deciding on the final choice.

It would be inaccurate to portray the people of biblical times as looking like Europeans or North Americans; they were more likely to have black hair, medium-dark or olive skin and a particular style of clothing. Like the Scriptures themselves, icons should be checked by a consultant.

Acceptable

Clothing or lack thereof may make an icon design acceptable or unacceptable. Colour may be one problem, but see that section below.

Does not contain any words

The whole SLISS concept is aimed at people who either cannot read (including many or most Deaf people and all illiterate people) or who don't know the chapter and verse numbers for particular passages in the Bible. Therefore, icon designs must not use words.

Clear and distinctive

Some of the early icons had too much detail or not enough contrast, so that it was difficult to decide what the icon was illustrating. On a high-resolution screen, this was less of a problem, but on low-resolution smartphone screens, like those that are prevalent in some parts of the developing world, this could be a more serious problem.

Consistent style

Because of the way the test icons were made, there was no consistent style. As a result, when 10 or 12 icons are displayed on a single screen, they don't look like a set.

Colourful

Colour, used well, is very important for icons. I have seen a collection of icons that were basically black & white line drawings without any colour and too much detail. Colour is there to make icons distinctive and interesting.

But care must be taken because different colours have different meanings in different cultures. For example in the West, black can be associated with evil, red with danger, amber with caution, green with OK and white with purity. Whereas in the East white is associated with death rather than black in the West.

Colours can also have very significant (and divisive) meaning politically. So icons need to be tested among the target audience.

Discussion of some icons

Now I will show some icons that were developed for testing SLISS and talk about their pros and cons. They were all designed by using a white background with a black border and images found on the Internet were added. The images themselves are well drawn and appropriate to the topic to be represented. This discussion, then, is not a criticism of the images, but rather their suitability when used as part of an icon for a particular Bible story or navigation aid.

1   2   3   4

The first icon was the only one of the four icons that was used as a navigation aid. It is used as the introduction to DOOR International's evangelism set of 32 signed chronological Bible stories in Ghana sign language. It was constructed from the common background and two images. The blue fish design is a very good way of visualizing evangelism and the flag image is a good way of linking to Ghana. However, when the icon has to be displayed at a small size on a low-resolution screen, the fishing line would probably be lost. Having just one image would also have been better.

This second icon represents the story of Jesus calming the storm. When the picture is displayed at its full size, it is a good picture to illustrate the particular story for children. If one were being strict about the content, one would have to note that three of the four people had brown hair. But for use as an icon, it is too detailed and does not have enough contrast to adequately represent the story on a smartphone screen. It is also a very different style from the first icon.

The third icon is again a completely different style, but is very clear and a pleasant design. It also shows up well as part of an icon. The drawing looks simple but is skilfully drawn. The skin colour is appropriate for a middle-eastern person, as is the black hair and the head covering for a woman. So the icon has a lot to commend it. But it is somewhat cartoonish, with the head and eyes being much larger than normal. The distorted sizes may lead to some ethnic groups thinking that there are people with such proportions. The eyes are also not the colour expected of a middle-eastern person.

The fourth icon is again a very different style. It is a clear drawing, but it does not use colour, so it is not taking advantage of this very significant feature of icons. In addition, it represents Noah's ark more like a boat that was designed to move forward through the sea, rather than an ark that was only designed to float. Noah's ark was probably more like a huge raft.

Summary of pros and cons:
- None of the icons contains words, so they all get high marks for that.
- There is no consistency of style among these four icons, so low marks for that.
- In three of the icons (2-4) there are minor problems with regard to accuracy. Other images which were considered had more major problems.
- In one case (2) the icon was not clear and distinctive.
- In one case (4) colour was not utilised.
- In one case (3) the relative size of features may not be acceptable or may lead to confusion in some ethnic groups.

Graphics artists and designing sets of icons

For SLISS to fulfil its potential of getting the Bible message across to users there is a **great and urgent need for good, accurate and suitable sets of icons** to be produced by graphics artists.

Today I was told a story about Cameroon. For their literacy books they had expatriate artists, who were drawing the pictures, but when they got a Cameroonian artist, it transformed the illustrations; now they were drawn in the style a Cameroonian would visualize them.

This story suggests that being of the right ethnic group has value in designing icons. And this is why Deaf people need to design icons for use by Deaf people.

One thing I discovered, while I was living in a rural community in Ghana during the seventies, was that the culture there was much closer to Biblical culture than Western cultures are. And I had plenty to learn from my Ghanaian friends, particularly about carrying loads, looking after animals, evil spirits, etc.

So the question arises as to whether a Western graphics artist can do a good job in creating the necessary icons.

- You need to be a good graphics artist.
- You need to choose a style for your icons and use that for a whole set.
- Do not include any Western artefacts, such as house designs, or kitchen implements, but for a particular biblical story search for pictures relevant to the time and country.
- If the icons are aimed at the people of a particular part of the world, talk to people who have lived in rural situations in that country, in order to find out what styles of art they prefer. For example, using a picture style that does not show mouth or eyes, may give the impression that they are ghosts. Or again, a group's art may be mainly seen in how they decorate their mud huts while the much is still wet. This may help define your style.
- You need to read the passage of Scripture carefully, trying to set aside your preconceived ideas. We need, rather, to try to imagine was it was like for the biblical characters in this or that situation. For example, regarding Joseph's coat of many colours, you might try to find out what dyes were used for colouring cloth.

Where can I find a list of biblical chronological Bible stories?

You can search the Internet for *story bible list*. You would find:

http://dans.faithweb.com/150stories.html
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_Bible_stories
http://www.preparingforeternity.com/br1914/brhc182.htm
http://www.biblestudygames.com/biblestudies/biblestories.htm

Other searches, for example for "chronological bible stories", would yield further results.

There are missions that specialize in translating chronological Bible stories (CBS), because by using CBS, they can have a much greater impact on communities that have never previously heard the Gospel. Such missions often have some standard sets of stories and would know which icons they would need first.

If a graphics artist volunteered, saying that he or she wanted to design icons for all the stories in the Bible, I would ask one mission if I could use their list of stories to give direction to the artist. And I would add on extra modules that others use.