

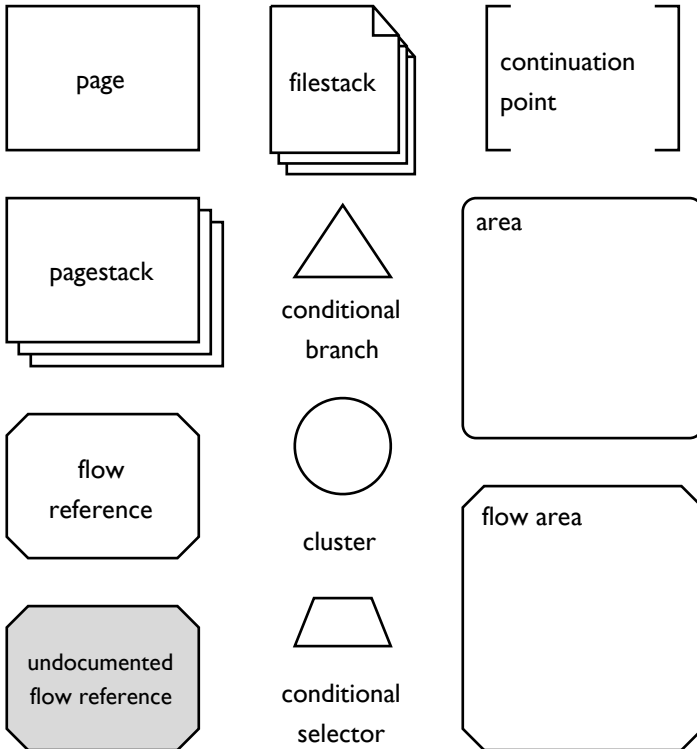
Slate

<http://slate.msn.com/>

23 March 2002

diagram by Jesse James Garrett

LEGEND



For more details on the use of these elements, see

<http://www.jjg.net/ia/visvocab/>

NOTES:

(1a) This cluster serves as a persistent "toolbar" throughout the site.

(1b) TOC pages typically provide access to articles published in the last seven days. If less than five articles in a category have been published in the last seven days, the TOC provides access to as many additional articles as are needed to bring the total up to five.

(1c) Search results provide access to those articles matching the user's search criteria.

(1d) The home page provides access to articles published in the last seven days.

(1e) If the user is on a TOC page, the system provides access to the discussion index; otherwise, the system takes the user to the discussion thread specific to the page the user is coming from.

No matter how you look at it, publishing content on the Web daily is a lot of work. From an information architecture perspective, a daily Web publication presents challenges and possibilities no newspaper editor ever had to face. As one of the longest-running daily publications on the Web, Slate has dealt with these issues for years. But it is unclear whether the site's current architecture is the result of calculated refinement or simple inertia.

The architectural decisions here demonstrate one key assumption about the site's content: the 'shelf life' of any given article is about seven days. Navigating to a piece during those first seven days is fairly easy; after that, it becomes very hard.

At a glance, the high-level architecture seems fairly straightforward. But a closer look reveals that the five primary 'sections' exist only in the tables of contents. These categories appear nowhere else on the site -- not even on the articles themselves. Furthermore, the classification of articles into these categories only persists for seven days from the date of publication. After that, the section to which a piece belonged is forgotten.

Note the absence of an 'archive' area. The only access to articles more than seven days old is through the advanced search page. In place of a browsable archive, Slate offers canned searches by "department" and by author. The author list page works well enough, though such a feature would only be useful in the event that a user already knew the name of the author of a desired piece; but if that were so, the search interface would be sufficient.

The department list page has a greater burden to bear. As the only persistent classification scheme employed on the site, the department list is the only element that can provide the reader with a sense of the range of content and subject matter covered on the site. But the page currently falls far short of this goal. What the user faces here is nothing more than a very long list that makes no distinction between limited-run features like "Campaign '98"; occasional, semi-regular features like Michael Kinsley's "Readme"; and ongoing staples like "Today's Papers".

This problem is only exacerbated by the fact that, by and large, the department titles are too clever by half. Even the savviest user could be forgiven for having trouble remembering whether Slate's roundup of opinions from movie critics was filed under "Critical Mass" or "Summary Judgment". The cute titles would be fine if the site provided some sort of context for what was to be found inside; as it is, providing a plain list of titles like "Flame Posies", "Varnish Remover", and "In the Soup" does little to help readers find specific items or even get a general sense of what the site has to offer.

© 2002 Jesse James Garrett / Boxes and Arrows
<http://www.boxesandarrows.com/>

