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CHOOSE FONTS TO CATER TO YOUR NEEDS

EASIREAD - YAU SHAU MEI SAMMY

SAYING NO TO A CARBON-COPIED LIFE STARTING WITH FONTS

When we open a document on the computer, we often take no heed of the font and go straight to reading the content. However, for people with dyslexia, fonts and layouts directly affect their comprehension. Sammy, a Communication Design graduate of the PolyU School of Design, is one of the victims. Looking back at her A-Level days, she said that it was extremely demanding for her. She was a very slow reader, and it took her a lot of time to understand everything. By the time she finished reading an article, she would have already forgotten the first sentence. Her learning was hampered as a result, and she was unable to secure a place at university. Surprisingly, it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. She did a Higher Diploma in Design, which let her deal with more pictures than words. Her results improved significantly. Finally, she was able to go to university.

Finding the right way leads to good results. Along with her classmate So Shun Hei, Sammy developed Easiread, a smart font and layout application.

The application is designed to take care of three kinds of problems: word recognition, reading fluency, and visual pressure. When browsing websites on Google Chrome with this application, users can enlarge words, adjust the spacing, change the background colour, use a digital ruler to read line by line, print the adjusted text, and save the settings for future use. Do not underestimate these seemingly minor adjustments. Sammy pointed out that a lot of people with dyslexia confuse "b" and "d", so fonts that accentuate the properties of different letters are useful. In addition, some fonts may cause dizziness, so there is a need to redesign the layout. Spacing between lines and words can interrupt comprehension and reduce reading fluency as well.

"The scientist Albert Einstein once said that it is foolish to judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree. Countless different kinds of people exist in the world. If you measure everyone by the same yardstick, you risk stifling and wasting talents.

Yau Shau Mei Sammy, who has dyslexia, decided to develop an application which allows users to choose fonts and layouts to cater to their needs. It would let people with different reading needs browse websites in their own ways, making reading a truly fun experience."

To obtain useful data, they invited children with dyslexia of different severity to participate in an experiment over the last year and a half. They found that letting the children adjust the layout themselves reduced the reading time by 20%. They were also more willing to read after that. Moreover, Hei pointed out that the application is not just useful for people with dyslexia, but also those with colour vision deficiency and those who are sensitive to bright white backgrounds.

"Our aim is to make it work for everyone. Everyone has different reading habits, so we hope to enhance the reading speed and reading fluency through customisation."

Along the way, a lot of people have asked how they could make profits. Sammy confessed that they have not really thought about money. "Right now we're just hoping to get more data from users to understand their needs. And then, maybe we can try to add PDF support to the application, develop the application to support more languages, and implement a character recognition system to let readers render printed texts in the most suited fonts and layouts." Although there have been quite a lot of adjustments to do with the designer, they have realised the difference between needs and the actual application, and learnt to compromise and strike a balance. "We can already see the light at the end of the tunnel, and now we're ready to launch the application. We've found schools for conducting free trials."

The application has been turned from a graduation project into the core of a company. Apart from solving technical problems, there were also legal issues that needed attention. Sammy and Hei had had no experience in running a business, so they had to learn how to turn ideas into concrete plans with the help of Good Seed. "A lot of tutors have helped us. They also trained us to present our project with just a few words: to enhance everybody's reading experience." Simply put, it is combining design and technology to let people create the best reading experience for themselves. Bluntly put, it is a protest against a carbon-copied life. Why must everybody use the same piece of paper and the same type of font of the same size? For Sammy and Hei, it is more ideal to let everybody design their own reading layout. "Schools tend to give more time to kids with special needs, or they ask teachers to read the whole passage to the kids. That doesn't solve the root of the problem." They hope to give more autonomy to the children and reduce the labelling effect and sense of helplessness. Some children have different needs, but it does not mean they are worse off.

"I've been there. I don't want kids with dyslexia to label themselves or think that they just can't do it. I've had the experience myself, so I can make the design better. Similarly, I hope people can take the initiative to figure out what to do when facing difficulties. I myself made a breakthrough with my design," said Sammy. Hei, who was not so into reading, said he had always thought white backgrounds were too bright, so he tends to adjust it to something more yellowish these days.

"Are people really repulsed by words, or is it just the layout? I used to not like reading, but now I've realised that it's really important for gaining knowledge."