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ByBo McFarland and Curt Cloninger

This issue's head to head takes on a subject which gets most web designers clawing at their mouse pads: USABILITY. Is the internet a huge bank of information looking for its unified front-end, or do such dreams of standardisation completely miss the point?

Bo McFarland, austere usability guru, and **Curt Cloninger**, romantic design degenerate, exchange pistol shots at dawn. Well, sort of...

HEAD 1 - Bo McFarland:

Why usability? Because people use the web. It's that simple. We don't watch the web, as if it were television or film, we want to do something with it. In most cases, we want to find information, make a purchase, connect with another human being, or achieve some other goal. We want the web to do the work for us, and serve our purposes. Function comes first. This is not to say that there is no place for beauty or expression on the web, if that is your defined purpose. But beauty combined with functionality and clarity can result in elegant web design that respects the user's need to get something done.

Optimum usability is merely a matter of ease of use. Ease of use is facilitated by employing design elements and conventions which are already standard across the web and constitute a shared visual language. If you don't care about your users, then you need not worry about usability. If you do care, consider the following:

DEFINE YOUR PURPOSE

Why are people coming to your site? What do they want to achieve? Define your purpose and organise information according to your user's priorities. That's your user's priorities, not your priorities. High on the list are speed and convenience. I doubt many users would say that their primary purpose for visiting your site was to experience flash animations, view your brand imaging or learn your industry's jargon.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Respecting the user starts with knowing who they are. This includes everything from information like gender, age and culture, to level of expertise using the web and connection speed. Not every user is young. Not every user is urban. Not every user has super-high-speed internet access to download nifty graphics. And, despite your hopes and dreams, not every user is cool. Most users come to your site to do something entirely boring... like buy your product.

UNDERSTAND THE CONVENTION

The web is a conversation that takes place within a shared visual language. While you may want to believe that your site is the only site on the web, it's not. People learn how to navigate the web by using other people's sites.* As a result, certain conventions have become the roadmap for web users. Consistent link colours, clear and coherent navigation, sensible hierarchies, are all things that web users have come to expect. If they don't find them on your site, they'll go to someone else's. While these conventions will most certainly evolve, most users will not be bothered with learning entirely new metaphors just to interact with you.

HONOUR YOUR USERS AND CLIENTS

The role of a designer is to translate the client's purpose and the user's purpose into action. The client has a business purpose. Serve it. The user wants to get something done. Help them. Make it easy, make it fast, make it clean. In the end, if the site isn't usable, the user isn't happy. If the user isn't

happy, they don't buy anything, they don't frequent the site, they don't think highly of the company. Don't use your clients' money and time as an excuse for your own self-aggrandisement and expression...unless, of course, that's what they're paying you for.

HEAD 2 - Curt Cloninger:

First, let me say I'm not anti-usability. I just find the current hyper-utilitarian edicts of certain self-nominated web usability experts to contain damaging and presumptive blind spots which often inhibit designers from making effective websites. Lest anyone be confused, an effective website is a website that provides its user with a desired experience.

It's the experience, stupid.

'Usability is always secondary. It's never the most important thing about an experience... I will reject perfect usability if I am not rewarded with a useful, engaging experience.' – Donald Norman

This is coming from Jakob Nielsen's partner, arguably the number two usability guru in the world, and a thinker whom I respect. So what more is there to argue about? Other than usability/information architecture, what are the ways to reward the user with a 'useful, engaging experience'? On the web, the other ways are 'content' and 'design'. All these elements (under the command of the ever-crucial yet oft-overlooked *unified narrative voice*) combine to create a user experience. So which is more important, design or usability? Yes, yes, and yes.

INTELLIGENTLY APPLIED BEAUTY ENHANCES USABILITY

Compare useit.com to 37signals.com. The former inserts no design style whatsoever in order to avoid drawing attention away from its information. The latter overtly inserts a clean and minimalistic design style in order to enhance its information. The former passably avoids failure. The latter boldly achieves success.

THE WEB IS A COMMUNICATIONS MEDIUM, NOT MERELY THE FRONT END OF A DATABASE

To discard the web's interactive multi-media strengths – strengths which allow for a uniquely engaging, visceral user experience – simply because the web happened to start off as a hyperlinked database of physics research papers is short sighted to say the least.

DIFFERENT SITES HAVE DIFFERENT GOALS

There will always be search engines and online newspapers and other text-centric sites. Let them continue to be designed as google.com. I love google.com. But must the Disney World site and the *Planet of the Apes* movie promo site also be designed like google.com? Usability expert, your web is too small.

SITE VISITORS ARE NOT PAVLOVIAN DOGS

Usability experts measure/treasure the quantifiable (could you find it? did you click it?), and they relegate the unquantifiable (how exactly did it engage your soul?) to the trash can. Unfortunately, the unquantifiable may well be the very thing that determines why a person likes a site.

I'm reminded of how Joni Mitchell ultimately recalled her cloud illusions in lieu of her cloud facts. With Walt Whitman, it was the stars: 'When I heard the learn'd astronomer, When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me, When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them, When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room, How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick, Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself, In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time, Look'd up in perfect silence at

the stars.'

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