

# Friendly face of the web

What an exciting 10 years of digital user experiences we have had. The extent of this evolution becomes clear when you compare today's web sites with those from *Revolution's* early days. Also clear in hindsight is our original naiveté in the world of web design and the underestimation of the importance of user experience. The change in technology, and our willingness and ability to use it, has been a fascinating journey and promises to be in the future.

Cast your mind back, if you dare, to the pre-Boo.com days, when many graphic-heavy sites were designed for their creator's ego rather than the end user's benefit. Popular web design practice involved splash screens and emphasised aesthetics rather than content and good user experiences.

Around 2000 the bursting dotcom bubble sounded the death knell for several web-based companies that were combining dodgy design and fanciful business plans. This coincided with the first high-profile manifesto for improving usability, Jakob Nielsen's book *Designing Web Usability*. Fortunately, many of the issues cautioned against then are as rare as Googlewhacks today: frames, splash screens and the gratuitous use of animation on sites.

As the dust has settled during the past few years, a true appreciation for serving users' needs has developed. Although visually unexciting, aspects such as search and user-generated content have emerged as the killer experiences on the web. And designs, though restrained, remain attractive.

A new maturity has come over users as well as businesses in the digital world and designs have improved. Gone are the pitched battles of usability versus creativity. Both can co-exist happily and generally do on the more popular sites. Technology has also come to our assistance, particularly in the form of better browsers and the pervasiveness of broadband.

## The road ahead

So where is this user experience trend going? We are clearly entering a new phase in improving user experiences and there are three key challenges in the near future:

1. Findability and search. People have learned to love the serendipitous nature of finding what they are seeking with some help from search engines with cute names. As Google's AdWords revenues attest, these are not just engines of search but engines of the internet economy, and are the basis of a vibrant sector of web advertising.

But all is not well in the world of search. First of all, the highly intuitive search engine results makes the search experience

within most sites pale by comparison. At the same time, this has fed a sense of impatience among users, few of whom venture beyond the first page of search results. Thanks to user-generated content and Web 2.0 there is a lot more content to sift through. Could this risk diluting the findability of the 'quality' information?

There is also the thorny issue of making information, often non-textual, findable anywhere through various locations, devices and platforms. Information architecture continues to rise in importance as we aim for 'Ambient Findability' of content.

2. New Interactions. We have gone full circle in what we expect to happen on our computer screens. With traditional client server software we learned how to manipulate things fluidly, such as cutting and pasting text in word-processing packages. Along came the web and we learned a new set of behaviours, especially patience as we waited for new pages to load.

Now we are re-learning that fluidity can be fun – and efficient. Web sites and applications increasingly apply dynamic interfaces to give users a smoother experience. On one hand, this is clearly good, avoiding page reloads and encouraging users to explore information based on the factors that matter to them. When multiple factors need to be considered in parallel, such as with financial quotes or consumer products, letting consumers find the right product based on their criteria can increase confidence and conversion rates. On the other hand, many users will find these powerful new interactions difficult to use unless they are created with care. With power comes responsibility, and as user-experience professionals we have an important part to play in making sure these new interfaces are as intuitive and accessible as possible.

3. New platforms and connections. Being connected to the world of information is no longer just a matter of having a PC and a mobile phone. Tim Berners-Lee's vision of a semantic web could have profound implications on the number and type of devices that communicate with us, and each other. As our need for constant connectivity grows it will require interfaces on a whole new range of products integrated into our homes, modes of transport, clothes and lifestyle.

All of this requires greater sophistication in understanding and improving the user experience. Methods such as eye tracking help us refine what we've learnt from traditional usability testing to optimise page layouts and calls to action. User Vision has applied this method to a variety of media including sites, advertisements and marketing emails to help clients ensure their marketing messages and purchase paths are as effective as possible. Leading companies are also exploiting the rich set of data available from the web to track behaviours through web analytics and split server or A/B testing in a way that allows them to fine tune their online offering for maximum profit.

Such greater insights will help us address user experience challenges, and we look forward to helping ensure tomorrow's digital designs are as usable and accessible as possible.



**Chris Rourke**  
director  
User Vision

“With power comes responsibility. We have an important part to play in making sure that new interfaces are as intuitive and accessible as possible”