Chapter VI

A Short History of Designing for Communication on the Web

Simon B. Heilesen
Roskilde University, Denmark

Abstract

Web design is important for how we communicate on the Internet, and it also has an influence on computer interface design in general. Taking a very literal view of the theme of “designing for communication”, this chapter examines the development of Web design as a prerequisite for understanding what it has become today, and it concludes by offering some reflections on the future of Web design. In the first part of the chapter, the history of Web design is outlined in terms of the complex interplay of various social, cultural, economic, technological, and communicative factors. This section concludes with the presentation of a framework for Web design that allows for—if not actually reconciles—the many existing approaches to the subject. In the second part of the chapter, it is suggested that Web design, as it has developed so far, may be facing major changes as the requirements of users and the technologies employed to meet them are changing.
Introduction

In most technologically-advanced societies, the Internet has become an extremely important means of distributing, exchanging, and finding information, and the World Wide Web (WWW) has become the all-dominant service on the Internet. The Web browser is the de facto interface to the Net, and through the Web pages displayed in them, the user is able to operate in the digital universe. Increasingly, we are experiencing the world through the Web browser interface. “Web design” comprises not only documents, but also applications of many kinds. As more and more computer programs are becoming available on the Net or are in some way being integrated with it, the conventions for designing Web pages are also having a pronounced impact on user interface design in general.

“Web design” is a vague term referring to a complex subject that has evolved over time. It covers the layout, content, and behaviours of individual Web pages as well as the information architecture of entire Web sites. Normally, it is not concerned with the design of the software that is used for displaying Web pages (browsers and plugins)—other than the technical limitations imposed by different software products and versions. The term “Web design” does not distinguish between documents (static or dynamically-created Web pages) and applications running in the browser window (e-mail, games, simulations, groupware, etc.), nor does it usually distinguish between the various technologies employed to create visual design and content (HTML, XML, VRML, and multimedia applications such as Flash™, Shockwave™, etc.).

Web design obviously matters greatly when we are designing for networked communication—as is evidenced by the already vast body of popular, technical, and scholarly literature on the subject. It is a developing discipline characterized by a great diversity of approaches that in some cases seem to be at odds with one another.

It is our contention that Web design as we know it today is the result of a development involving complex interrelations between many different factors and actors. A consequence of this development is that designing for the Web involves considerations that are sometimes weighted somewhat differently than is the case when designing other kinds of information technology solutions. Another consequence is that in order to understand what Web design has become and in which direction it might be moving it is necessary be familiar with the history of Web design. The aim of this chapter is to explore the history of Web design in some detail in order to arrive at a framework for Web design that allows for—if not actually reconciles—the many existing approaches to the subject.

In the historical account, Web design will be understood as an aspect of the history of the World Wide Web, and it will be interpreted in line with the recent tradition of technology history writing that approaches the subject from the point of view of social and cultural history (Klüver, 1986). Specifically, the historical development will
Related Content

Collecting Consumer Behavior Data with WLAN
[www.igi-global.com/chapter/collecting-consumer-behavior-data-wlan/28727?camid=4v1a](www.igi-global.com/chapter/collecting-consumer-behavior-data-wlan/28727?camid=4v1a)

Integration of Optimization Approach Based on Multiple Wordlength Operation Grouping in the AAA Methodology for Real-Time Systems: LVQ Implementation

The CPS-Based Simulation of Indoor Thermal Comfort Control with Energy Saving