Jacob Nielsen: Is He Missing The Point?

… A *Multimedia Designer's Roundtable* Article

In his famous article, "Flash, 99% Bad," Jacob Nielsen makes the claim that more often than not, Flash undermines the usability of a site. While it's true that many Flash sites have user interface problems that make them all but unusable, is it fair to generalize that almost all of the Flash sites in existence "...constitute a usability disease?" Is Dr. Nielsen mistakenly finding fault with the Flash technology when many other sites that don't use Flash at all have the same usability problems? Or is it possible that Dr. Nielsen is too old-fashioned to recognize and understand how the Flash movement is fostering a new generation of interactive designers and user interface designers who don't like to think inside the box or follow conventions and standards?

Flash: The New Standard

The numbers don't lie: 98% of the online community totaling over 500 Million Users (http://www.macromedia.com, 2003) have a version of the Flash Player browser plug-in installed in order to view Flash content. Most Flash-enabled sites require users to download the flash player plug-in if they don't have a recent version, so it's easy to see how the technology has become so prolific. But if Dr. Nielsen's claims were true, and end users were so negatively affected by bad Flash usability, wouldn't it stand to reason that at some point they'd stop downloading newer versions of the plug-in and support for the technology would gradually fall off? If the user experience is so inherently flawed and negative due to the Flash technology, users would eventually give up on the technology. In reality, the numbers get bigger every day. This writer finds it hard to believe that all 500 million of the installed user base of the Flash Player plug-in were tricked into downloading and installing the software, or continue to upgrade to newer versions in spite of increasing dissatisfaction with the implementation of Flash on the world wide web.

Yet another testament that Flash is here to stay: in January of 2003, Apple Computer announced it's newest generation web browser, Safari. Safari was designed to support web standards, and key among the many scripting languages, codecs, and plug-ins that were built into Safari from the ground up is the Flash Player. Yes, that's right, Flash content sans plug-in. Look out Nielsen, 500 million users with the plug-in installed and another 1 million and counting surfing Flash content on a browser that supports the technology straight from the factory.

Dissenting Opinions

One could choose to look at Flash with a glass-half-empty viewpoint the way Dr. Nielsen does, seeing irregularities as design abuse. On the flipside, one can also choose to see the glass as half full, interpreting irregularities as innovation. The web has so long been a slave to the bandwidth that carries it. Dr. Nielsen's own site, *www.alertbox.com*, is a classic example. There is much content here, but the interface is bound by the constraints and conventions of HTML. As a proclaimed guru of graphical user interface, Dr. Nielsen's web site leaves much to be desired in that department.

The Flash designers that Dr. Nielsen criticizes as abusers are really just innovators trying to break out of the shackles of blue underlined hyperlinks and Arial, Verdana, Sans-Serif `<font>` tags. Sure, many of them are young, inexperienced, and immature as designers, but their underlying goals are to innovate, create, and expand the functionality and scope of the world wide web. Flash is, of course, not the only way to expand or innovate. Many sites do a great job just using HTML. There are also other technologies like CSS and Active QuickTime which open up new territory for site design and development; the point is that trying and failing is at least better than not trying in the first place.

Where Dr. Nielsen sees gratuitous animation, Flashers see the opportunity to present their message in a way that's more communicative than a table with formatted text. Using Flash, they can incorporate motion, embedded typefaces, sound, and video and still stream it effectively over a 56k modem connection. They can reinforce their concepts with sensory information never before available over the web. Type on a screen is no better than type on a page, and often-times much worse... reinforcing type with motion and sound increases the communication power of the world wide web.

Where Nielsen sees a decrease in the granularity of user controls, Flash designers see a total web experience that looks the same in any browser. They see users experiencing their typography the way they intended it to look, without being mangled by lack of control of fonts on client machines, or inconsistencies in browser type rendering settings. They see the ability to design sites that are layered, complex, and multidimensional as opposed to the traditional linear and hierarchical models.

Perhaps nonstandard GUI elements do "reduce [a user's] feeling of environmental mastery," but they also add to a site's explorative value. Some of the most effective Flash sites are designed as holistic experiences that entice the user to explore and discover. Flash sites often take the approach that a web site is a journey, not a destination.

Recent versions of Flash have taken great strides to incorporate web fundamentals like forward and back buttons, and standard UI components. Although the integration is far from perfect, the items are there. It's the designer's decision whether or not to incorporate them.

The main argument Dr. Nielsen makes against Flash is that it tends to encourage design that is radically different from traditional web design standards. In this author's opinion, Nielsen is suffering from a causality defect; Flash doesn't encourage or discourage design abuse; it is only the instrument. And regardless

of this fallacy, would it kill us to break from standards that were based on technologies now outdated some 5 times over?

The web has been around in it's current form (more or less) for over 10 years, and HTML has changed only slightly in the past 5 years. Web designers have pushed current markup and scripting languages to their absolute extremes and have found them to have serious design limitations. Flash seeks to tear down these barriers and enrich and enliven the web experience. Although it's still immature in it's implementation, Flash is leading a digital communication revolution that we need to embrace and nurture to maturity for the betterment of our digital lives.

A Digital World

Nicholas Negroponte is a name that is synonymous with electronic communication and digital lifestyles. He pioneered the famous MIT Media Lab and has been the world's leading proponent for a shift from traditional medias to electronic ones.

In his famous work, *Being Digital,* Negroponte talks about a future where information will be distributed as bits of digital information and end users will assimilate and interact with this information in mediums of their choice. Negroponte envisions a world where the New York Times will exist only as digital data, and will be distributed to users instantly all over the planet. The users will then determine whether to print this information to paper, listen to the information as audio data on various home and portable devices, read the data on any number of digital displays, or interact with it in ways that our technology has yet to dream of. Written in the early 1980's, this idea was a radical one indeed. But in the midst of today's digital lifestyle, it seems like the next logical extension of our current technologies. How long before traditional distribution of cassettes, compact discs, and other audio formats cease to exist and we simply download all our music from subscription services or record label websites? How long before newspaper printing is considered too great a hazard to our fragile ecosystem and newspapers convert their operations to digital distribution methods? It could be sooner, it could be later, but when it happens, multimedia technologies will pioneer the transitions from a bi-modal society to an entirely digital one.

Flash is the beginning of the technologies that will revolutionize the world. It's already capable of distributing media in 4 distinct formats:

• Audio
• Static Text on Screen
• Animated Text on Screen
• Independently Formatted Printable Text

Imagine how this technology could be used to enhance the media experience of any newspaper web site: Headlines are animated in a "ticker" or other dynamic display. Stories can be read straight from the screen. A separate, independently formatted version of a story can be printed on any home/office printer for a traditional reading experience. The story can be read aloud by the web site as the user listens while engaged in other tasks… and that's just scratching the surface. Flash can be integrated with other technologies like PDF, MP3 devices, and PDAs and cell phones that are text, audio, graphic, and video capable. Our ability to assimilate, organize, repurpose, and publish information increases exponentially with technologies like Flash.

Only time will tell if Flash is here to stay. It may prove to be a powerhouse in the digital information revolution, or it may fade away in time as other technologies rise to take it's place. Regardless, it represents the scope of future digital communication.

Jacob Nielsen's criticisms of Flash are well-reasoned and valid. His contentions are irrefutable at face value, but show a general lack of foresight and understanding of the newest digital frontiers. Flash is nothing more or less than a powerful tool that can greatly enhance the distribution of information on the world wide web. It can be used to house content in multiple media formats using a single development technology. It offers new experiences for both designers and end users, and has fewer limitations than previous web authoring environments and technologies. As a relatively new phenomenon, there is a learning curve for both developers and users, but the it's potential necessitates that we embrace it.

Nielsen and other critics would have us write this technology off because it doesn't resemble the online world they've been living in for so long. To do so would be a shame and would surely be a decision to stagnate the future of digital communication in our society.