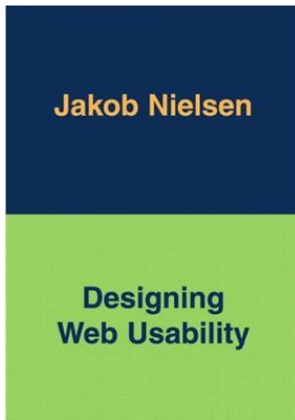
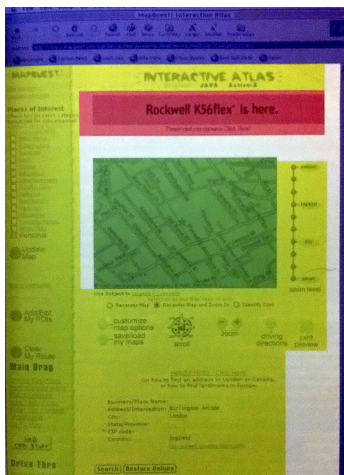


Designing Web Usability by Jakob Nielsen

Book report by Kari Dahn · MAID, University of Reading · Oct 24, 2011



The front cover. The rest of the title – *The Practice of Simplicity* – is on the back in almost the exact same manner.



A website where “most of the screen-space ends up being used for distracting machinery that is extraneous to the content the user came for” (p. 18).

Jakob Nielsen has been called a guru, a pioneer, world's leading expert of web usability. *Designing Web Usability* was published in 1999, written with a goal of “changing web designers’ behavior” (p. 13). Nielsen emphasizes the importance of taking the needs and preferences of the users into account in website development. Users are in an active mode when browsing the internet (compared to for instance when watching TV): They decide where to go and what to devote their attention to. If they don’t easily find what they are looking for on your website, your competitor’s website is only a mouseclick away (Nielsen 1999; p. 9). And there you have it: you’ve lost a potential customer. Therefore: A website should be designed with the user’s premises in mind.

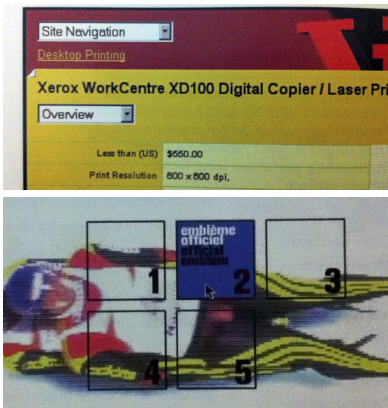
It is clear that the world wide web has changed since 1999. To what extent is this book still relevant? Nielsen himself has written that many of the concepts and methods found in this book will still be useful for many years. The ground principles of usability remain the same, but how they are implemented might change. I will now go quickly through the main chapters of the book.

PAGE DESIGN Page design concerns the surface appearance of websites – the most immediately visible part. Users are rarely on a website to enjoy its design – the design is there to provide people easy access to the content. Web pages should therefore be dominated by content of interest to the user. Two rules of thumb are: content should account for at least 50% of the space; navigation should be kept below 20%. Furthermore, one should design for freedom and movement. The user fundamentally controls where he wants to go on the web – and would not appreciate feeling constrained.

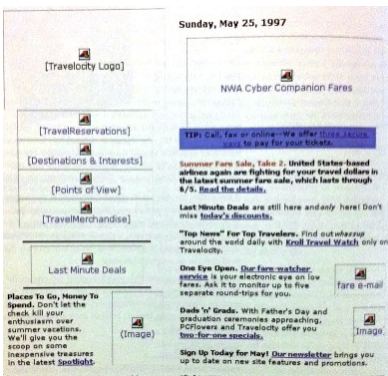
Today’s web designers are not limited by pc-screen resolutions and response time the same way as they were in 1999. On the other hand, handheld devices are now reality, and these factors become relevant once again. People usually don’t have the patience to wait for more than 10 seconds, according to Nielsen’s research – so avoid huge images. Also, do not define sizes in fixed pixel measurements (px, or pt for font-size). Use percent (or em for font-size) so that it adjusts itself in relation to the user’s screen.

PAGE CONTENT Users are goal-driven and sometimes impatient when reading on the web; they rather scan the content than actually read. Nielsen presents various principles for writing for the web, for instance: be brief – write concise sentences, make the text shorter (without sacrificing depth of content), present one idea per paragraph, use hyperlinks for “more info”, use meaningful headlines, consider bulleted lists for breaking up the flow of uniform text blocks, emphasize relevant words, and so on. Or, preferably, hire a web editor.

SITE DESIGN Site design is about providing the user with a logical and intuitive navigation system that reflects the site’s structure and hierarchy; the information architecture. The site design should reflect the users’ view of the site and its information and services – not the organizational chart. The user will at all times want an indication of (1) where he currently is, (2) where he can go next, and (3) where he has been (p. 198). Nielsen also promotes the importance of having a well-functioning search feature, which should be available for users at all times. Many users are more search-dominant than link-dominant, especially in situations when they are looking for something specific.



Two examples of site navigations that, in Nielsen's opinion, are not very kind to users. One has to click the menu / hover over the numbers to be able to see the full set of choices (p. 194, 197).



What a website might look like for visually impaired users. The benefit of ALT-tags is obvious.

INTRANET DESIGN This chapter focuses on various principles for developing intranets, which differ from external websites in content, goals, users and technical constraints (p. 264). Usability problems on a company's intranet will directly result in lost employee productivity.

ACCESSIBILITY Disabilities – whether they be visual, auditory, speech, motor or cognitive – should be taken into account both for economical (they concern a large customer base) and ethical reasons. The chapter provides an overview of various issues, accompanied with guidelines and illustrations. Semantic structuring (H1, H2...) and ALT-attributes are some examples of things that make it easier for visually impaired users.

INTERNATIONAL USE The web knows few geographical boundaries. When designing for internationalization rather than localization, one needs to communicate in a visual language that will work well across borders – an enormous job. Translations are one thing, but there are many things people from other countries might interpret differently than you, having different backgrounds and expectations. User testing will be crucial here.

FUTURE PREDICTIONS 10 years after, this chapter is especially a fun read. Nielsen writes that “the web anno 1999 is just scratching a surface relative to what's possible” (p. 376). He presents some personal predictions – some very far-fetched, others actually seem to have come true. He has earlier in the book spoken warmly about Style Sheets, which are today taken for granted. He was also eager to point out the cons about using frames – they are today almost extinct.

A highly relevant topic is the convergence of different medias. Why not have various media in one single medium, he argues. This will be possible with the ever-improving technology. Furthermore, he writes that “most current media formats will die and be replaced with an integrated Web medium in five to ten years” (p. 372). However, in the chapter's conclusion, he admits that the exact changes are extremely difficult to predict. “The only prediction that is guaranteed to be true is that the only constant is change” (p. 372).

CONCLUSION / ENDING In the concluding chapter, Nielsen sums up the success criteria for a website with the acronym HOME-RUN:

- High-quality content
- Often updated
- Minimal download-time
- Ease of use
- Relevant to users' needs
- Unique to the online medium
- Net-centric corporate culture

You cannot afford to neglect usability. Nielsen believes in design Darwinism. On the web, users experience a site's usability before they even consider doing business with a company – it's an inversion of the traditional trade model where customers pay first. The successful companies will therefore be the ones with HOME-RUN-hitting websites. Good design practises will survive.

References

Nielsen, Jakob (1999): *Designing Web Usability: The Practise of Simplicity*. Peachpit Press.