

Look backwards



Or, those who forget the past are condemned to ... uh, how does that go again?

The terrible miniseries “Wild Palms” showed a future not too many years away in which nostalgia had become so intense that men were wearing fin-de-siècle, high, detachable collars once more.

I don't propose that we become that beholden to the past, but I'd like to suggest that, if we forget about what has come before the current (Internet) era, we're going to pay the price.

The past I refer to isn't the 1890s, but the fall of

1994, before Netscape ruled the earth. Most people accessing what little Web there was were using 14.4 kilobit-per-second (kbps) or slower modems; many hundreds of thousands of users had access only to lynx, a text-only browser.

You might think we've come a long way in the 18 months since then—but that'd be only partially correct. Although 28.8-kbps modems have plummeted in price, penny pinchers can still buy 14.4-kbps ones for under \$100; and the use of lynx, although small compared to Netscape, has grown massively, to encompass as many as a million people.

Never assume

It's become fashionable to assume that the audience you care about is only the audience that can view animated GIFs and run Java applets, and has enough bandwidth to download full-screen graphics. The few people who can't do this, you can ignore.

The fashionable wisdom has no common sense behind it, however. Just look at some numbers. If Mac users represent a disproportionate 20 percent

of current browser usage (as many reports indicate), only a few risk-takers among them can run Java applets at the moment; Java is supported only by the beta of Netscape 3.0 for Macintosh, and, as of this writing, it will still be in testing for a few more weeks.

Although America Online users will make Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator available by summer (Windows) and fall (Mac), the service's current reported six million users can't do anything fancier than clicking on an image map or entering data in a form (and even that's erratic at times).

Another anecdote about making assumptions regarding how people use technology: several months ago, my dad, who's now an avid Netter, was trying to find a resource on the Web. I told him to bring up the Location dialog box in Netscape and type in the resource's URL (the `http://` address). He had no idea what I was talking about. I discovered that he was using Yahoo and other search services, plus good bookmarking, to find things rapidly.

Now, my dad's a smart guy—and I'm not saying that just because he might be reading this; hi, Dad!—but, by the time he started using the Net, it

had evolved to a point at which URLs were somewhat extraneous. When I started, I had to URL uphill in snow ten feet deep in both directions; but his experience was with rich tools that directed him to a variety of resources in any area he was interested in. (Of course, the minute I told him how to use URLs, he started doing so, but it's unclear whether that bought him that much more.)

Another assumption is that "mailto:" URLs work most of the time. These are the URLs for which the form is:

```
<a href="mailto:adobe.mag.editor@adobe.com">Mail the  
Editor of adobe.mag</a>
```

That assumption, which I shared until recently, is linked to the fact that those of us using the Net easily configured the confusing SMTP and POP settings required to get this working. I did it so long ago and have updated Netscape so many times in between, using the same settings, that I probably

haven't changed these values for a year.

In fact, from what I've determined informally, many users (maybe it's even 95 percent of them, but who knows?) have no idea how to configure these values. Clicking on a link with "mailto:" in it generates an incomprehensible SMTP mailer; Netscape brings up a dialog box into which the user can enter values—but what values go there? Most regular computer users have no idea. A computer columnist I know, who probably has 15 years of technical work in the industry behind him, had no idea at all what SMTP was (for the record, it stands for Simple Mail Transfer Protocol; POP refers to point of presence).

Text-only viewers

Hopefully, I've beaten the assumptions out of you, and you're prepared to deal with the awful reality of text-only design. It's not that awful, honest. Since you're reading this column in a very graphics-rich and somewhat bandwidth-intensive environment, perhaps you won't be sympathetic to those users who choose to view few or no images—but you should be.

First off, based on the relatively high percentage of readers using lynx (a few percentage points of the total number of users, varying by site), there are probably in the neighborhood of a million active lynx users, which is a significant constituency. Those users have to deal with a UNIX shell, so they're more likely to be technically sophisticated; working in a university environment; or living overseas, where a PPP connection might cost several times what a UNIX terminal access with lynx would cost.

Secondly, a very high number (relative to the national proportion) of visually impaired people use the Web in text-only mode. At Film.com, one of my company's clients, we've received a few nice letters from folks with impaired or no vision, thanking us for providing text alternatives for navigation. Given the nature of the Net, I expect that virtually all visually impaired folks will wind up online through desire, subsidies, or both.

Third, some people are going nuts at the amount of graphic material they're forced to download, and they just say no. Millions of users of online services are using bad browsers and, to save time, choose not to display

images. Millions of people still have modems slower than 14.4—and they just don't wait for heavy graphics.

Making it talk text

There are two ways to make your work read backwards: through design and through ALT tags.

On the design front, any navigation elements should be echoed in text. If you choose to use button bars or complex images to guide people to different areas, all of these choices should be echoed in some fashion.

You could also create a separate text-only site, though this can be a lot of work. (This is the approach used recently by *adobe.mag*, which had taken some flak for not providing for text-based readers.) My firm's client Film.com had an alternate text-only site (text.film.com) that is created on the fly: when a user goes to the text-only site, the graphics-rich pages are stripped, rewritten, and then spit out to the user in a form that works best on a text-only or graphicsless browser.

If you choose to use individual buttons or images for navigation, you've got a nice alternative: the ALT tag. The HTML tag for inserting an image, IMG, has several attributes—subfields for specifying extra details. For instance, SRC (source) is the attribute that provides the location of the image; HEIGHT and WIDTH specify the image size in pixels. The ALT attribute, for “alternate text,” can be filled with whatever text you want to be displayed to a user who omits images (or can't display them).

For instance,

```
<IMG SRC="/images/briefs.gif" height="30" width="72"  
alt="Go to Briefs Section">
```

would display the image “briefs.gif” to those who view graphics, and the text—usually displayed inside square brackets—to text-only readers, like so:

```
[ Go to Briefs Section ]
```


If you want to be extra-sensitive to these users, you should code every image with an ALT tag, even if it simply says, “no function” or “pretty picture.”

In the PageMill or SiteMill applications, you can specify the ALT value by typing the text into the “alt” field. With the image selected, click on the “Image” button (the rightmost of the three options) in the Attributes Inspector. Enter the text into the “alt” field and (crucial!) hit “Return.”

Loyalty

Since one of the critical tests of a successful Web site is a good volume of satisfied, repeat visitors, anything you can do to bring incrementally more people into your recidivist group is good, as long as it only requires incrementally more work. Making your site text-only-friendly could give you a relatively large percentage increase without requiring that you do the same percentage of additional work to make the site meet those users’ needs. 🍷