

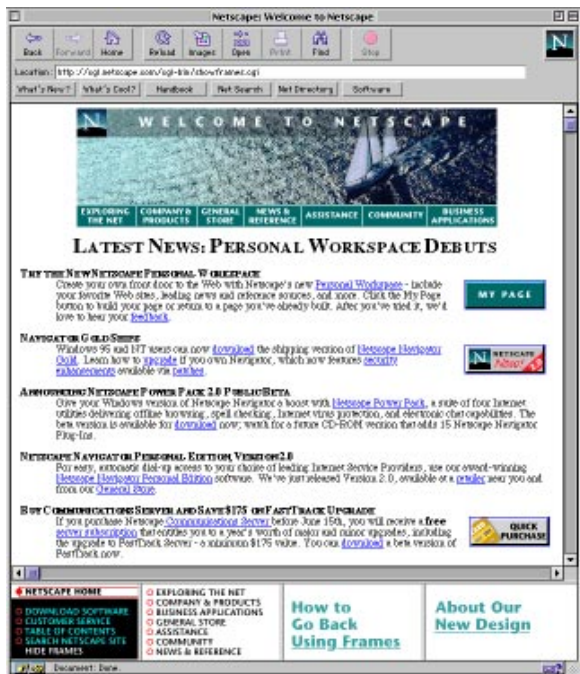
Framing the solution?



When Netscape redesigned its home page recently, the most noticeable change for non-designers was the addition of “frames” (as an option, not as the default, for reasons discussed below) on its home page, which is *http://home.netscape.com*. Frames aren’t a vaunted new technology, or something that marketing folks and company presidents go on and on about the way Sun Microsystems does about Java or

Macromedia does about Shockwave.

They’re a workaday addition to a designer’s arsenal of making pages more manageable, reducing download times for users, and creating an environment that seems interactive and CD-ROM-like, rather than passive and Coke ma-



chine-like (where you hit a button and a can comes out).

Netscape tried to keep its whole frame structure backwards compatible, as it has done with most of the newfangled tags and structural changes it's made since the release of version 1.1 early in 1995. Frames are built into what are called "framesets," which can be nested like HTML tables. In fact, the coding of frames should seem very sensible to those who have mastered the hand tagging of tables. Frames provide some very nice additional capabilities, however, including the ability to specify the exact size, in pixels, of a frame (with a table, you can't control the actual display dimensions).

The backwards compatibility comes from consistency in coding. Framesets and their contents should be entirely enclosed with a `<frameset>` pair. Another tag called `<noframes>` is used to enclose a normal, non-framed HTML page.

Browsers like Netscape 2.0—well, at this writing, only Netscape 2.0 supports frames—will read the `<frameset>` information and ignore the `<noframes>` information. The reverse is true for the non-frame-enabled browsers; they ignore everything to do with frames, and display only information not enclosed in frame tags. (It's a bit of a hack, actually; browsers are written to simply ignore tags they don't understand, so the `<noframes>` tags aren't read and understood by the browsers that don't do frames. The frame tags are really markers for frame-enabled browsers.)

Let's look at what Netscape's done with its new design option. The home page is divided into five frames: the main frame contains the text and related info, while the four subframes are nested inside a second frameset definition. The smaller frames are computer-screen shaped and contain information

about the overall organization of the site.

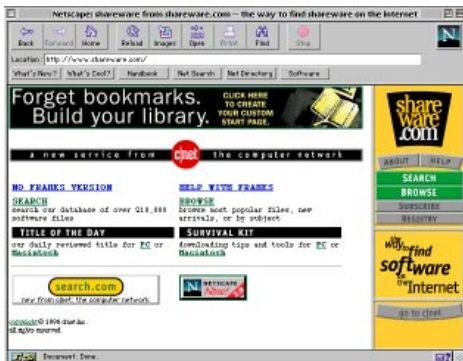
By using the subframes, you can negotiate yourself to any other location in the Netscape site without either returning to the home page or scrolling to the bottom of the page. That certainly removes a lot of the annoyance of running around a complex site.

Another nice example of the utility of a framed site is Shareware.com (<http://www.shareware.com>), which I've written about before in another con-

text. Designed relatively recently, Shareware.com uses four frames: one for its main search and results window, another for an imaged set of buttons, a third for some logos, and a small one with a link to c|net, which runs the Shareware.com site.

Shareware.com offers a search feature inside the main frame, so once again, the interface travels with you as you go through the paces.

Unfortunately, while both of these sites show

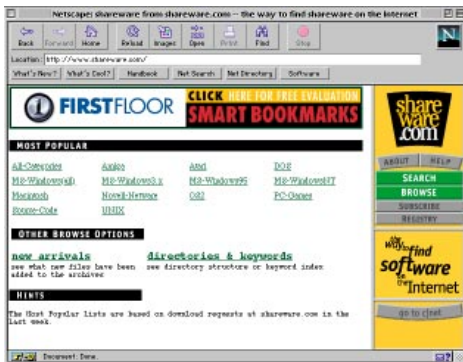


frames off, they also demonstrate a key failing in the current implementation of this new feature. In fact, both a framelet at the bottom of the Netscape home page and a choice in the main frame of the Shareware site are linked to explanations of how to navigate using frames—which calls attention to the occasionally unintuitive user interface that frames add.

The crucial flaw is that, unlike regular Web pages, a framed page changes the meaning of the Back button. Instead of being used to return you to the

previous thing you were looking at, the button becomes a ticket to the page *before* the page with frames even appeared. Clicking Back takes you to surprising territory. I find myself doing this over and over again, because I've been conditioned to click Back to get to the thing I've just seen. This kind of training is hard to overcome (just ask Pavlov's Dog in *alt.skinner.woof.woof.woof*).

To navigate backwards using frames, you have to hold down the mouse button on a Mac or single-click



the right button under Windows to get a popup menu in that particular frame. You then select Previous Frame from the menu. Confused yet? Another point that's less than clear is that, instead of using the Page Up, Down, Home, and End keys on a Mac or PC to move from one frame to another, you use the Tab key to highlight each frame in turn.

This is so far removed from the clear and almost superintuitive idea behind hyperlinks—click and you're there—that it raises concerns about how many people can actually follow the logic.

Enter Acrobat 3.0. (Okay, let me make two things clear before proceeding: I'm not an Adobe employee—I just write for them—and Adobe owns a few percentage points of Netscape. Thus the confusion of the modern age, in which companies with mutual financial interests may hedge their bets and pursue competitive goals to reach the same place.) Acrobat 3.0—code-named "Amber," but since the code name is all over Adobe's Web site, it's no secret—and frames collide in some regards and enhance each other's features in others.

With the Acrobat Plug-in for Netscape—and don't you worry, we'll be talking a lot more about this in the weeks to come—you can display PDF files inside of Netscape. (Presumably, if you're reading this magazine, you're doing exactly that right now.) These files can contain hyperlinks of any kind, as well as internal links to other pages within the same document. Your readers can access just a single PDF page in a document as opposed to the whole thing. And in the future you'll be able to use Acrobat to create in-line text and graphics instead of using HTML tags or rendering type.

Since you'll be able to provide an entire layout, rather than just simulate one as you have to do now with frames, perhaps PDF files will supplant frames. The latter can be put to great use, but there's something inherent in the interface implementation that makes what should be an elegant addition somewhat clunky. On the other hand, the use to which Netscape puts frames on its own site shows how powerful the snailshell metaphor is (you carry your home on your back—or, in this case, your home page). Microsoft will soon be entering the fray, as they've said they'll add support for frames in a future release of

Internet Explorer (for Mac and Windows).

Frames were supposed to be a method for improving user navigation. Instead, they've turned into shoals that a user's conceptual framework crashes against and breaks up on. 🍷

URLs

Netscape

<http://home.netscape.com>

Shareware.com

<http://www.shareware.com>