

# The Web vs. Design: “Usability” & the Homogenized Future

*by Gunnar Swanson*

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# The Web vs. Design: “Usability” & the Homogenized Future

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A WHILE BACK, ONE OF MY GRAPHIC DESIGN STUDENTS took a salary of almost 30% less than he was offered elsewhere to go to work for Razorfish in San Francisco. “Why would I want to work for a middle-of-the-road Silicon Valley design firm when I could work for the hottest web design company in the world?” he asked me. I couldn’t argue. A few months later he recruited a classmate.

The second student moved on after a few months. The first student lasted about a year before moving to New York to work for RG/A. That adds up to a wonderful resume but my students’ experience with experience designers<sup>1</sup> wasn’t quite as wonderful. They expected to work long hours; that was no problem. They didn’t expect the glory jobs; that was no problem. They expected to work for the team and for clients’ needs. . . .

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<sup>1</sup> “Experience design” is a phrase used by Razorfish, Sapient, and many other design firms to explain a sort of design where the end product is not an object. The web, bank teller machines, and a range of other forms have more to do with transactions and a user’s experience than with the designed thing. One can, of course, argue that the same is true of books and magazines, though.

The phrase –user experience— is also common among people whose job is to avoid many of the functional problems of many websites. It is somewhat ironic, I believe, that they are not looking for richer human experience. In fairness, their goal may be to avoid horrible experience for the user but the their solutions always seem to involve thinner, blander, and more generic experiences and I have found many “user experience specialists” to be hostile to aesthetic experience. See note 2.

What my erstwhile students didn't realize was that the cool work that attracted them there had also attracted a lot of new, better-paying clients who wanted e-commerce sites. These young web designers found themselves doing more and more static, formulaic work and being less and less happy.

If Jakob Nielsen<sup>2</sup> had his way they'd be doing nothing that resembled graphic design. Website owners are listening to what Nielsen has to say. Is mundane and pedestrian work under the flag of "usability" the future of the web?

A year or two after my graphic design student took lower pay to follow his web dreams, several of my multimedia students declared to me that they were not interested in the web. They looked at most of what was out there and saw nothing that made them want to have anything to do with this boring, ugly, plodding monster. I suggested that they go listen to the radio for a few hours or watch "Total Request Live" on MTV and then tell me whether they like music.

What is it that makes the web, that place that seems to be the future of graphic design, so boring? Part of the answer might be found in the radio analogy—the medium is dominated by people copying each other's formulas. The same can be said for print graphics, though, and the moments when designers say "I don't want any part of graphic design because it's all junk mail and underwear ads" are fewer and farther between. The web has something else that haunts us. What evil lurks in the hearts of dhtml and Flash animations?

Despite our rhetoric about form following function (well, maybe it is just the old folk like me that bother making those noises anymore), print graphic design is often a veneer of style. In most cases non-designers make the basic choices about structure and the like but somehow designers find some level of autonomy adding visual spice to the pot. On large web projects, teams or team leaders make basic decisions about the nature of the project including how style issues play out and graphic style doesn't define the feel of a website as much as it does a brochure. Graphic designers often feel helpless when they find themselves in the role of visual dishwashers for the Information Architect chefs.

What does that do for graphic designers or, perhaps more important, what does it do for graphic design? It depends, of course, on who runs, leads, or guides

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<sup>2</sup> Jakob Nielsen's website, [www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com), and his books have made him the guru of –usability— on the web. His talks and private consultation push companies away from any sort of idiosyncratic websites toward a simple set of rules that concentrate on text and avoid the visual.

The goal of every web user is, if Nielsen is to be believed, to find a given piece of information with as few clicks as possible or to find a particular item, pay for it, and get done in the shortest amount of time. In the interest of web efficiency he has proposed that the entire web should be considered as one big application and thus should have a standardized interface. There should be no more design on the web, Nielsen believes. One might assume that he also believes that the reason people go to stores is to get a particular item as quickly as possible, get it paid for, and get out; thus all shops should be exactly alike.

the teams. Leaders will be people with an understanding of the overall process but that could be someone with a background in design, computer programming, business administration—you name it. As the man said, go to an architect with a problem and you'll get a building as a solution; the background of team leaders will greatly affect outcomes. As a graphic designer, I can't help but hope for someone with a design perspective in charge.

But what happens when a graphic designer gets that broad understanding needed to lead the team? Does she lose an important point of view, co-opted by technological and bureaucratic forces or does she find new ways of dealing with design? Can designers retain an advocacy for design standards while dealing with a team of people who may have no sense of or interest in aesthetics or deep user experience? When faced with functional ("That won't work on 28% of browsers"), statistical ("13% fewer people click through if we do that"), and aesthetic/experiential problems, can a project manager maintain an advocacy for design standards or will the things that are easy to quantify and explain always dominate?

How can designers gain experience in dealing with varied points of view and complex projects? What are the potentials of new technologies from a design standpoint? The way we answer these questions will shape the future of the web and the future of graphic design.

What happens to designers when so much of graphic design has dematerialized? If one can't fall back on the joy of the object because the point is another's experience, what does that do to our joy in the process? Does all of this require a new kind of designer? How do we make sure that doesn't mean a designer in name only? Does doing meta design—designing what will happen when a database meets a unique request generating a different (and unpredictable) "object" 250,000 times a day—require a different mind than that of a graphic designer?

Some of the problem may lie in thinking that large team projects are the singular future of design or even of the web. When Jakob Nielsen and others talk about the web as a singular thing, I wonder if they'd make the same claim for print. Should all print material aspire to be the Wall Street Journal, a car repair manual, paper sample brochures, or a rave flyer? Why shouldn't screen-delivered design be just as diverse as paper-delivered design? The web is not just the home of giant sites; it's the place where all sorts of sites abound.

Where is the interesting future of the web? As tools for the web change, how will that change opportunities to design for the web? Things that would have required writing (or appropriating) some rather obscure code a short time ago are now as easy as the routine work of preparing print files for publication. The dream of animation that works over a slow modem and vector graphics is fulfilled with

Flash and LiveMotion and Scalable Vector Graphics is an official standard.

We think of new design on the web taking place at the “cutting edge” of technology but the “cutting edge” of print design isn’t usually at the limits of press technology. Hasn’t ease with the tools allowed new opportunities for aesthetic advancement in print? Will designers embrace technical limitations and find a new aesthetic there—a sort of technoRetro? Is it time for the crudeness of “vanilla” html to be embraced as an aesthetic as punk graphics did for bad Xerox or Zuzana Licko’s early typefaces did for crude bitmaps?

Or will we be trapped into thinking of the web as one narrowly defined thing instead of seeing it as a universe of experiences? Will we misunderstand the Nixon-era advice and “follow the money” and lose ourselves in the process?

I seem to be asking many more questions than I have answers. Where should web design go? All I know is that I’m not waiting for Carson to play it for me on TRL.

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