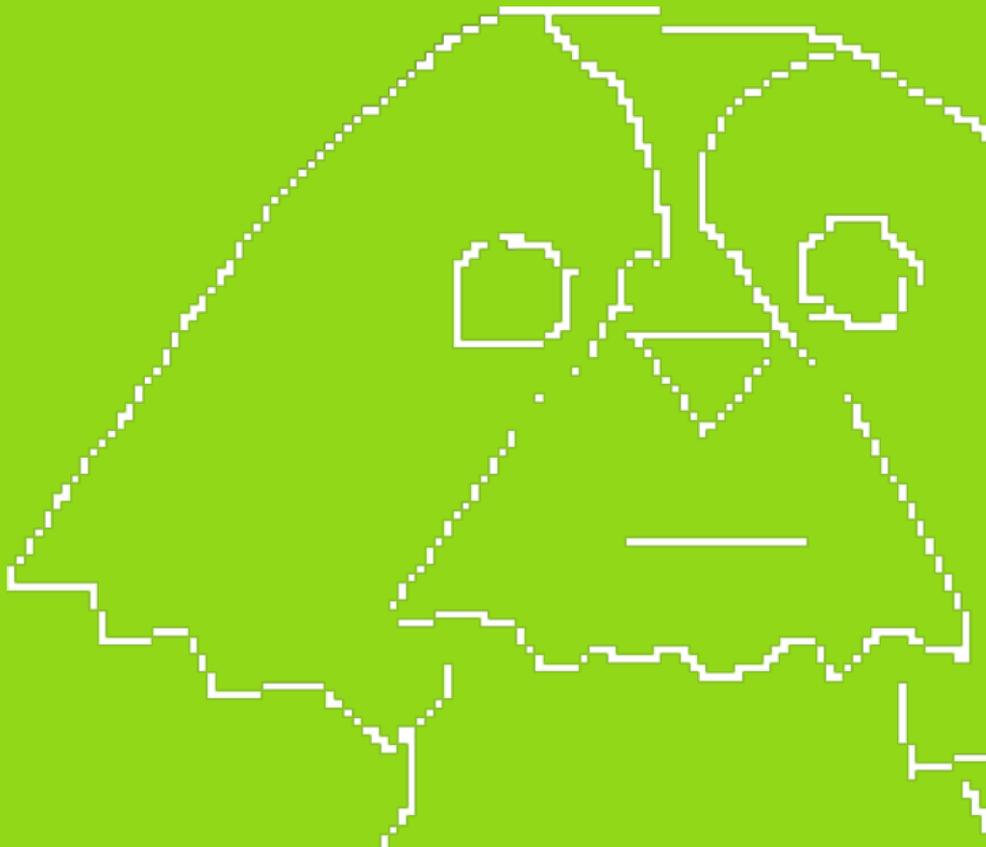


Pragmatic web design

or how not to fetishise
the (new) possibilities
of the World Wide Web

Essay by Marc de Bruijn
MA Media Design
Piet Zwart Institute, 2007



This web site
is under
construction



Since the introduction of the World Wide Web and the first web site by Tim Berners-Lee in the early 1990s, building web sites has evolved from mere hobby to a fully-fledged profession and thriving industry. This evolution has resulted in an abundance of web development applications, an increase in technical possibilities and very distinct philosophies regarding web design.

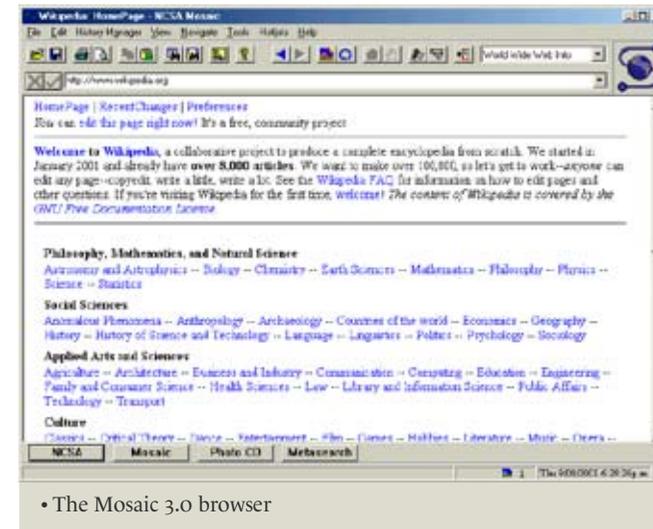
My graduation project – entitled “This web site is under construction” – for the Media Design MA course at the Piet Zwart Institute is an attempt to identify the popular mindsets regarding design on the web and parody them. The project is a generator capable of producing web sites based on the different paradigms – in this case amateur web design, Web 2.0, corporate web design and graphic designers web design. Each of the paradigms has their own distinct visual and structural design aspects, each of the archetypes also has its extremes, which ultimately indicates that most of the paradigms have a deep lack of understanding what the web means as a medium. The generator plays with these extremes to create extravagant exaggerations of the paradigms.

This raises an interesting question: how do designers fail to grasp the web? And if they do so, what would be a good approach to design for the web? In order to answer this question we need to focus mainly on two major paradigms – amateur web design and graphic designers web design – because they form one of the most extreme approaches to web design. Furthermore, in the essay the currently hyped Web 2.0 – being the opposite extreme of amateur and graphic web design – is also analysed. First some historical notes on the World Wide Web.

World Wide Web



The maturing of the World Wide Web has always been a development in conjunction with an increase in technical possibilities. The introduction of the Mosaic web browser kick-started the popularity of the web in the early 1990s. Mosaic was the first widely adopted browser to fully offer the content of the WWW in a convenient way to the user.



• The Mosaic 3.0 browser

*“Mosaic is the celebrated graphical “browser” that allows users to travel through the world of electronic information using a point-and-click interface. Mosaic’s charming appearance encourages users to load their own documents onto the Net, including color photos, sound bites, video clips, and hypertext “links” to other documents.”*¹

In the beginning of the World Wide Web web design was virtually non-existent, because of the technical limitations of the medium. The first version of the World Wide Web was intended as a platform for accessing and sharing (academic) documents.^{2 3 4}

¹ Gary Wolf, “The (Second Phase of the) Revolution Has Begun”, Wired Magazine, 1994, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/2.10/mosaic.html>

² Tim Berners-Lee, “WorldWideWeb - Summary”, W3C, 1992, <http://www.w3.org/Summary.html>

³ Barry M. Leiner, Vinton G. Cerf, David D. Clark, Robert E. Kahn, Leonard Kleinrock, Daniel C. Lynch, Jon Postel, Larry G. Roberts, Stephen Wolff, “A Brief History of the Internet”, 2003, <http://www.isoc.org/internet/history/brief.shtml>

⁴ “About The World Wide Web”, W3C, 1992, <http://www.w3.org/WWW>

*“The WorldWideWeb (W3) is a wide-area hypermedia information retrieval initiative aiming to give universal access to a large universe of documents.”*⁵

The first web site created by Tim Berners-Lee⁶ was an textual overview of the WWW project and some hyperlinks to other relevant material. In the early days browsing or surfing the WWW was very different from what we do now. It was common to arrive on a web site via directory pages or “What’s new” lists,⁷ listing the available web sites by category.

The popularity of the WWW fused by Mosaic stimulated the growth of web sites on the web. At first the majority of the web sites were personal home pages created by amateurs interested in the new technologies available.

Development in hardware (faster connection speeds) and software (Mosaic and other less widely adopted browsers) gradually allowed users to move away from text only HTML pages to web sites sporting images. Still, professional design, or even designing a web site was almost impossible, because one could only use limited formatted text. In the early days the web was regarded more as a file system for sharing documents – this particular vision is very clear in the way the Gopher protocol works⁸ – than as a extremely large and diverse “brochure” one could browse. This soon changed when the markup language of the Web, HTML, was extended and improved to scale with the technological developments (increasing connection speeds, faster computers). The usage of images on web pages increased rapidly and it became possible wrap a page design in tables. This lead to the so-called image-map web sites, or table layouts.⁹

⁵ Tim Berners-Lee, “The World Wide Web project”, W3C, <http://www.w3.org/History/19921103-hypertext/hypertext/WWW/TheProject.html>

⁶ Tim Berners-Lee, “The World Wide Web project”, W3C, <http://www.w3.org/History/19921103-hypertext/hypertext/WWW/TheProject.html>

⁷ Similar to <http://www.nsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/Software/Mosaic/Docs/whats-new.html>

⁸ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gopher_\(protocol\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gopher_(protocol))

⁹ Barry Pearson, “Layout tables considered valuable”, 2005, http://www.barrypearson.co.uk/articles/layout_tables/index.htm

From the mid-1990s company’s started to established their web-presence. At first those web sites were mainly informative electronic “business-cards” – viz. a company logo and some contact details. This was in line with the vision of the web as a platform for free publishing and instant information. Many of the companies extended their web-presence by developing commercial activities (e-commerce) on the web itself. This commercialisation led to the dot-com hype, where millions of venture capital were invested in startups (dot-coms) focused solely on doing business via the WWW.^{10 11} Generally the dot-coms were an attempt to get big and rich in as little time as possible, generating as much revenues as possible focussing on a very small portion of the market – a strategy often referred to as “Get Big Fast”. Successful dot-coms include eBay (1995), Amazon (1994), Netflix (1997) and Yahoo! (1994) which still exist today, but the majority of the startups ended in bankruptcy when the dot-com bubble burst at the end of the 1990s.

One of the main characteristics of this particular period in the history of the World Wide Web is the extravagant nature of the dot-com hype. The Webby Awards, an annual award show for the best web site on the web founded by Tiffany Shlain of “The Web” magazine in 1996, is a good example of the excessiveness of the dot-com hype. The first editions of the gala were attended by fake paparazzi, modern dancers and costumed guests to give the attendees the feeling they were celebrities. The Webby Awards still exist today, but after the dot-com crisis, the extravagance factor of the event has been toned down significantly from 2002 on. The early Webby awards signify the overall feeling of confidence in the Web as a commercial medium that characterized the dot-com hype.

The dot-com bubble collapsed in 2001 and from that moment traditional businesses started to take over the declining dot-com companies and turn them

¹⁰ “Looking back on the crash”, The Guardian, 2005, <http://technology.guardian.co.uk/online/story/0,3605,1433697,00.html>

¹¹ Kent German, “Top 10 dot-com flops”, CNet, http://www.cnet.com/4520-11136_1-6278387-1.html?tag=cnetfd.sd

into their own outlets, but without the business strategies so closely tied to the dot-com philosophy. While the overall situation became more stable, successful dot-com companies continued to exist, but for those companies the time of risky business ventures were also out of the question. During this period Google was established and became a major player on the WWW.

Due to several development frameworks (scrip.aculo.us, mootools, jQuery, etc.), Javascript has become increasingly popular since its introduction in 1995. web standards for writing semantically correct markup as issued by the World Wide Web Consortium (established in 1994, not long ago after the birth of the WWW) have also become important since the beginning of the 2000s.

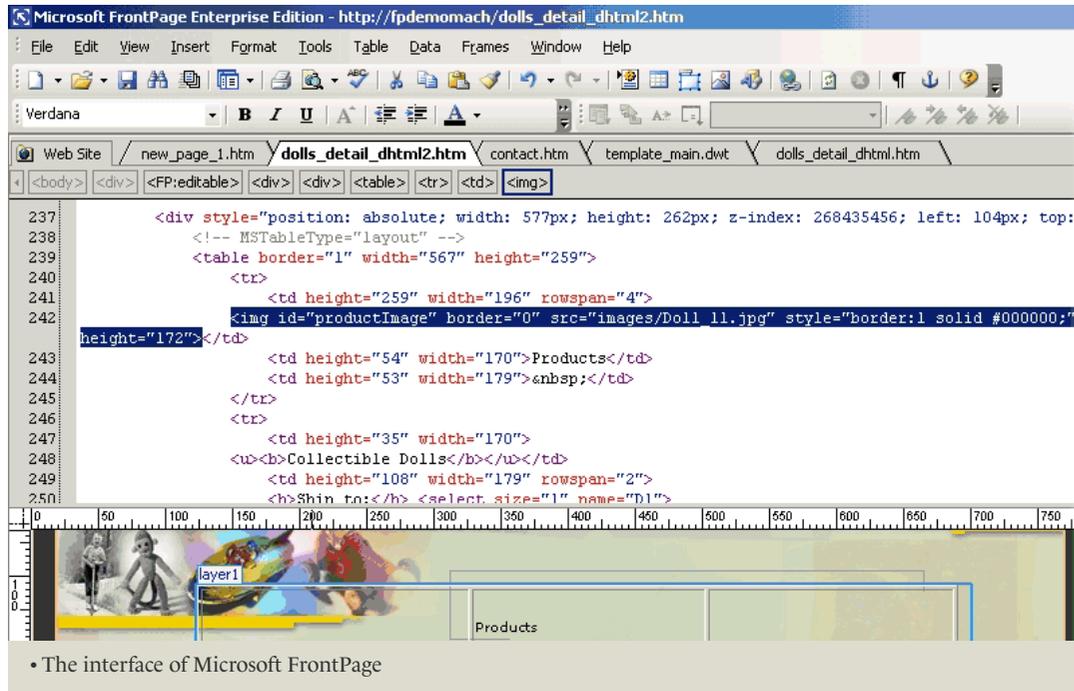
Along with the development of CSS the propagation of web standards became stronger. An increasing number of web-developers started to focus working on both the structural design (semantically correct markup) and visual design, instead of just focussing on the visual side of web design. An organisation – the The Web Standards Project (WaSP) – was founded in 1998 which actively advocates the use of web standards. WaSP is also responsible for the Acid2 test,¹² which tests the compatibility of browsers with “modern” web techniques. When the test was first released no browser was able to display the Acid2 test page properly.

The development of (X)HTML and CSS is still ongoing and will be for the next few years, as the process of approving and implementing new versions of the different languages for the web by the W3C is extremely slow. So this was a short overview of what kind of development the web has gone through over the years. On to amateur web design.

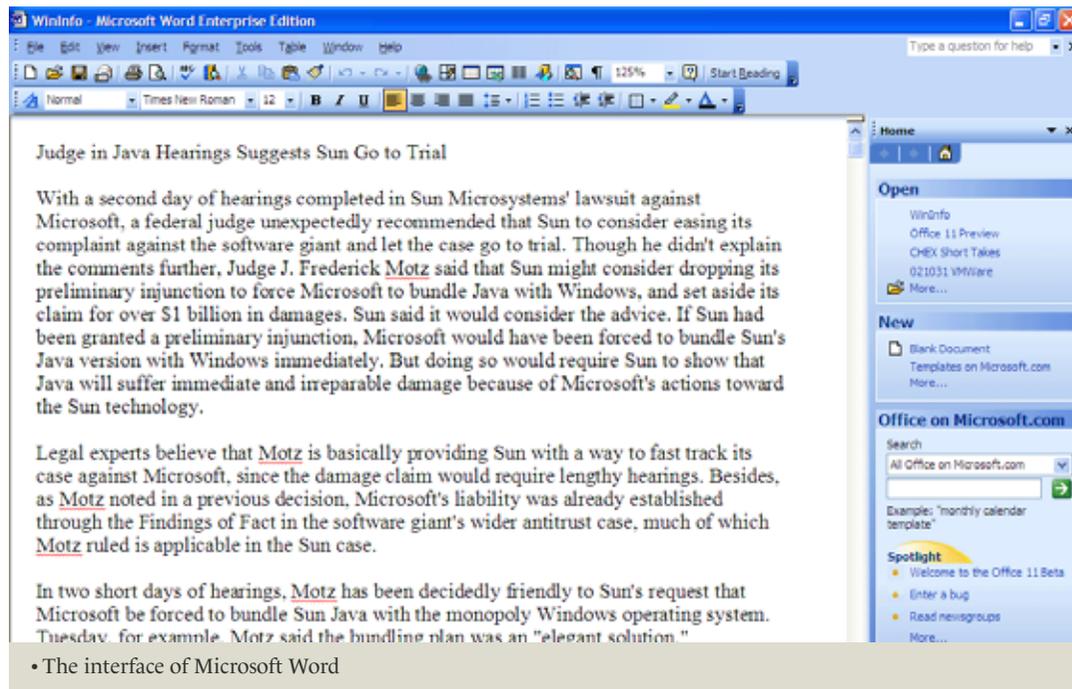
¹² <http://www.webstandards.org/action/acid2>

...My canine guardian angel





Visually it's easy to distinguish amateur web design from professionally produced web sites. But when it comes to markup language amateur web design also has its own distinct characteristics. Amateur web sites are often designed in editors like Frontpage or even with Microsoft Word (which has limited HTML export options). Frontpage and Word are notorious for producing chaotic markup.¹³ A typical Frontpage web page might look simple on the visual side, but the code is a clutter of Frontpage specific meta information, redundant markup and infinitely nested elements. Newer versions of Frontpage and similar applications create, what is often described as “div soup” or “divitis”.¹⁴ A div is an HTML element used to create the structural design of a page. Applications like Frontpage generate divs automatically (just as they generated table rows and cells) and nesting them where appropriate to create a pixel perfect visual design. This doesn't mean however that the structural design is logical in any way, the application just generates more than enough code to ensure that the layout elements are positioned exactly as the user dragged them in the applications document view.



Geocities is a free web hosting service popular for hosting amateur web sites. Their thematically sorted repository of web sites covers an extensive amount of subjects, ranging from gardening and pets to personal revelations regarding Jesus Christ. “Nicholas’ Rainbow Bridge Site”¹⁵ is a good example of such an amateur web site. The web site is built by Trudy Ann Bons and dedicated to her dog Nicholas who died in 2001.

The opening page of the web site features some very distinct amateur web design elements. First of all the usage of harsh colours (red, light blue and dark blue). Images are only used when they serve a purpose.

¹³ Adrian Sutton, “Microsoft Word Is Not A HTML Publishing Tool”, 2005, <http://www.symphonious.net/2005/08/17/microsoft-word-is-not-a-html-publishing-tool/>

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tag_soup

¹⁵ <http://www.geocities.com/tabba1979/>

There is a photo of a dog (Nicholas in this case) and a “button” labeled “enter”. Furthermore the web site has a copyright notice and a visitor counter. The hit counter is another common sight on amateur web sites. Rather than relying on web statistics packages, like Google Analytics ¹⁶ or Mint ¹⁷, hit counters are used to show to the visitor how well visited the web site actually is. The next page shows yet another introduction to the web site, featuring another photograph of the dog. The colour palette has changed again, although the blue text has stayed the same. The background is a line drawing of a dog, repeated infinitely.

The next page shows another introduction, this time only a header in pink “God’s Special Creation My Canine Guardian Angel” and picture of the dog, this time on a purple background. Clicking on “continue” takes you to the actual site. This page is basically a pink page with a header and navigation overlaid on a patterned background of pink wool. The header is an animated title (“NICHOLAS’ RAINBOW BRIDGE SITE MENU”) moving from left to right and back again on an opaque pink background. The menu in the navigation area consists of six buttons introduced by blue text, one of them an animated gif of a dog with moving text on top of it. The rainbow coloured text with a drop shadow indicates that the rest of the buttons were made with Microsoft Word and the “WordArt” functionality ¹⁸ in particular. The rough edges around the individual letters indicate that the images were probably resized and compressed in Microsoft Word as well. The buttons link to a page with a tribute to the dog, a photo album, poems and the inevitable guest book.

The tributes button links to an external page with a background of nondescript clouds, another photo in a wooden frame, a poem and two gifs (one of an angel and one depicting two roses). There is also a MIDI ¹⁹ embedded into the page, intended to play when the page is loaded. The web page has one button, which

¹⁶ <http://www.google.com/analytics>

¹⁷ <http://www.haveamint.com>

¹⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WordArt>

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musical_Instrument_Digital_Interface

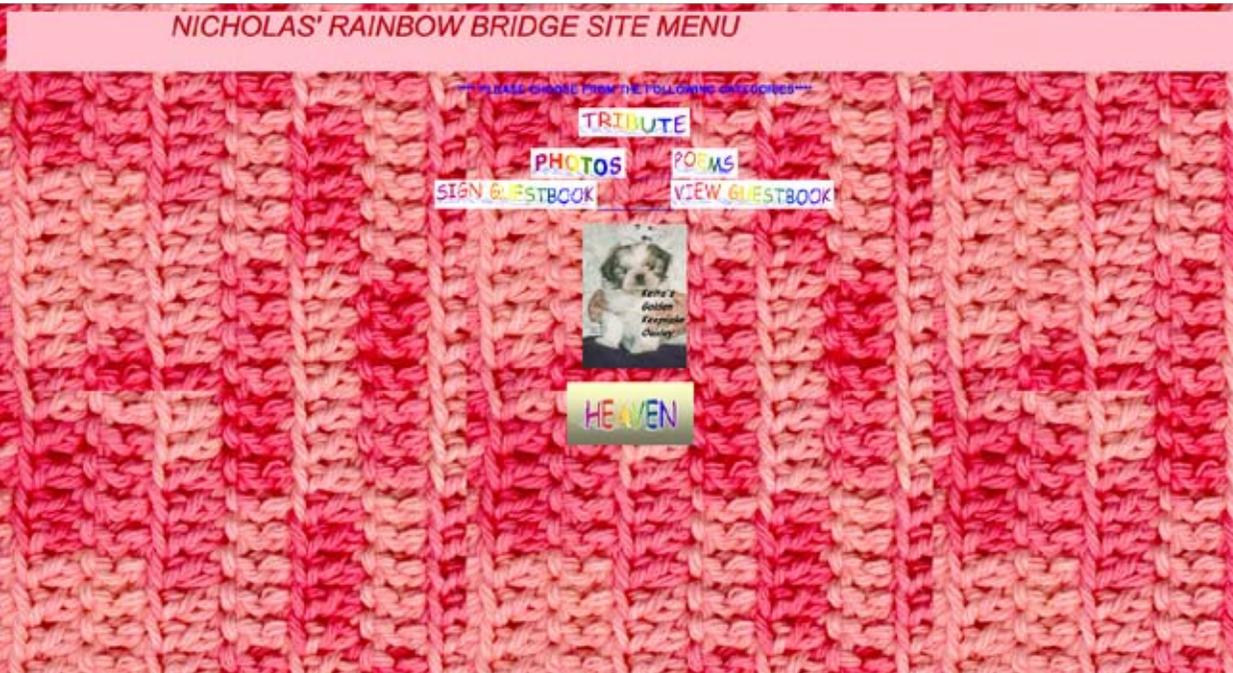


allows the user to go back to the homepage of the external web site, ²⁰ which hosts various tributes, poems, etc. related to pets. From this point on the way to the original site about Nicholas the Dog can only be traced back through the history of the browser or use of the back button. The photo album is a chronological overview of the dog’s life. Each photo has its own page and the user has to click through several separate HTML pages to view all the photos. Each page had more or less the same structural layout, a photo, caption and a continue button. Every page has its own colour though. Clicking “continue” on the last page of the album returns the visitor to another version of the index page, structurally the same, but with a blue and white wool pattern background. The “poetry corner” features six poems. The poems are linked as default hyperlinks – blue, underlined and turn red when clicked on – the seventh hyperlink, a small dash, links back to the homepage. All the poems are set on different backgrounds and have no navigation or links back to the poems page.

²⁰ <http://www.in-memory-of-pets.com>

The poem page has the same structural design as the second introduction page. The guest book is a remotely hosted Yahoo GeoCities service with two separate pages (posting and reading the guest book). Both pages are basically the standard Yahoo Guest book form overlaid on top of the line-drawing of the dog. Both the pages feature advertisements served by Yahoo.

this page. The last option, “Heaven”, takes you to a collection of biblical quotes about pets showing the devotion to the Christian religion of the web sites author, after an introductory statement and quote on a pink page. All the separate quote pages incorporate an option to go back to the quotes section. The site obviously lacks a coherent visual and structural design. There is no



• Index page of Nicholas' Rainbow Bridge Site

• Photo album of Nicholas' Rainbow Bridge Site

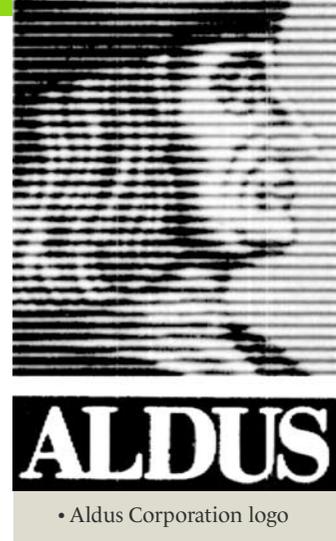
Each of the guest book entries are divided by a horizontal, multi-coloured ruler. The guest book pages are the only pages which have links back to the homepage (all are part of the standard guest book template of Yahoo). The two remaining options on the homepage of the web site are a link to a photo page of the new pet dog of the sites owner. The page has only one column and is sided by a flower pattern. A small gallery with captions underneath the photos has been placed underneath the text. Again, no links back to the homepage are shown on

clear navigation structure, users can sometimes go back to the main content, but also have to use the back button of their browser to get back to where they came from. Visually the web site uses a harsh colour and inconsistent palette and coarse imagery. Overall, there is no unity in the page design. It is not as busy with blinking graphics and “special effects” Javascripts (i.e. flying text, etc.) as some of the amateur web sites usually are. Technically the web site is as unstructured as the visual design.

The first page is a plain document with only the most base HTML necessary. There is a body declaration which determines the colour of the first page. But the body tag isn't closed (like so: `<body>Other content</body>`) at the end of the document. Overall, the HTML web page lacks HTML tags (`<html></html>`) and a doctype which is required when writing valid HTML along the guidelines of the W3C. Not including a doctype and not closing body and other tags can cause unexpected behaviour in different browsers. Amateur web sites are generally developed on Windows systems, with Internet Explorer as the default browser. Internet Explorer behaves very differently from other browsers when it comes to displaying HTML and interpreting CSS and Javascript due to many bugs in the application and a general lack of concern from Microsoft's side to actually properly support HTML.²¹ Despite the rise of other browsers (Firefox, Safari, Opera, etc.) Microsoft Internet Explorer still remains the most popular browser on the market^{22 23} and the weapon of choice for the enterprising amateur web designer.

The actual content inside the unfinished body tags is a mess of different tags for altering font attributes, centering and spacing. The code is almost one continuous stream of data, without the whitespace indentation which is common in writing markup languages, but also in programming and scripting languages.²⁴ The markup of NICHOLAS' Rainbow Bridge Site lacks this structure and the source of the web page is thus quite hard to read. A lot of the markup is also redundant such as the string of unclosed or unopened object, span, style, script and applet tags probably orphaned when deleting something. Orphaned or redundant markup is a common sight in amateur web site. (non-breaking space)²⁵ being a notorious example. , which is basically

an empty space is a character entity which is inserted often in empty table cells. Such superfluous markup is a side-effect of using so-called WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) applications. WYSIWYG editors focus heavily on the visual side of web development. Historically WYSIWY systems were incorporated in word processors (later versions of WordPerfect, Microsoft Word) and DTP (Desktop Publishing) applications used by graphic designers. WYSIWYG is so common in the world of graphic design that most designers don't know another way of creating print-ready designs with a computer anymore. Instead of programming and sending raw instructions to a printer using PostScript²⁶ designers create their designs in strictly visual applications, which produce the files containing the PostScript code for them. Aldus Corporation created the first application for DTP on the Macintosh (and later on other platforms) called PageMaker.²⁷ PageMaker eliminated the technical side of programming PostScript and instead offered a fully visual interface where users could drag and drop objects and control the different aspects of print design through various menu dialogs. Soon after the introduction of PageMaker 1.0, competitors started to appear, most notably Quark Xpress which still exists today. PageMaker became Adobe PageMaker overtime (when Aldus Corp. was acquired by Adobe) and was discontinued in 2001. Adobe replaced with Adobe InDesign. Both Quark Xpress and InDesign are based on the ideas incorporated in PageMaker 1.0. The way PageMaker dealt with design was seen as a revolution in the graphic design and computer world. In that light it's not strange to see that the WYSIWYG DTP doctrine was also applied to design for the WWW.²⁸



²¹ Chris Wilson, "Standards and CSS in IE", 2005, <http://blogs.msdn.com/ie/archive/2005/07/29/445242.aspx>

²² "Browser statistics", BrowserReports, 2007, <http://www.browserreports.com>

²³ "Web Statistics and Trends", 2007, http://www.w3schools.com/browsers/browsers_stats.asp

²⁴ Eric S. Raymond, "Indent style", The Jargon File 4.4.7, 2003, <http://www.catb.org/~esr/jargon/html/I/indent-style.html>

²⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nbsp>

²⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PostScript>

²⁷ Peter C.S. Adams, "PageMaker Past, Present, and Future", 2004, <http://www.makingpages.org/pagemaker/history>

²⁸ <http://lrs.ed.uiuc.edu/students/mcreech/history.html>

HTML and CSS, despite being designed to be simple and easy to write markup and styling languages were perceived by graphic designers as being hard and too abstract, as was the case with writing raw PostScript for example. Writing HTML and CSS is also often mistaken for programming. Also, producing a web-site requires a new line of thinking. Design for printed media is an integrated process, all of the design instructions are contained within a single file. It is not necessary to build the structural design first and later apply the styling later. In the case of HTML one has to build the structural design of the page first in HTML and later style the different HTML elements with CSS code.

These are two separate techniques which work together to create the visual design, in contrast to the integrated approach of DTP applications. To offer designers the same ease in creating designs as had become common in desktop publishing. Three major applications – Adobe Dreamweaver, Golive and Microsoft Frontpage – and several other small efforts have sprung from this urge to create a “DTP application for the web”. At the core all these applications are based on the functionality of PageMaker 1.0, a blank page surrounded by toolboxes, code snippets represented as objects and drag and drop functionality. One can draw squares, insert tables, style fonts, apply effects, all via input menus, dragging resize handles, etc. The positive aspect of this approach is the visual feedback the application provides, users have an instantaneous idea about how the design will translate on paper. The downside however is that while a web site can look perfect in the WYSIWYG mode of the application but behaves unexpectedly in different browsers. Almost every browser is different when it comes to rendering HTML pages, WYSIWYG applications also use a rendering engine to display the visual mode. The result in the WYSIWYG mode isn’t always the same in for example Firefox, Internet Explorer or Safari. This has lead to the phrase WYSIWYG isn’t always WYSIWYM (What You See Is What You Get isn’t always What You See Is What You Mean).^{29 30}

²⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WYSIWYM>

³⁰ Saqib Ali, “XML: WYSIWYG to WYSIWYM”, Free Software Magazine, 2005, http://www.freesoftwaremagazine.com/articles/practical_applications_xml

A notorious example of this is the HTML output of Microsoft Frontpage which is heavily focussed on compatibility with the Trident rendering engine³¹ in the Internet Explorer browser. As a result most web pages generated with Frontpage don’t comply with the W3C standards and fail to render properly in other browsers.

The problem with WYSIWYG editors is that they focus too heavily on the visual side of things and in doing so create an air of effectively creating web sites that work everywhere and without a hassle. The problem is that it is not the case, one cannot create a web site in Dreamweaver or GoLive and expect that the result is a consistent product like it is the case in print design.

A less known application called Freeway – a Mac only web development application – claims to have developed the easiest and best web design software for the Mac and is a very good example of applying the DTP philosophy onto web development.³² The application mimics QuarkXpress by having roughly the same application behaviour (one undo level, same keyboard shortcuts, etc.) The interface design also echoes some of the features from several QuarkXpress releases (zooming, the property inspector, etc.) The user is given a blank canvas and is able to draw and write on that canvas, Freeway takes care of converting this design into HTML. In earlier versions the generated results were – sometimes very large – image-maps³³ so that HTML pages looked the same in every browser, in more recent versions Freeway supports CSS and claims to write valid XHTML and CSS.

³¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trident_\(layout_engine\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trident_(layout_engine))

³² <http://www.softpress.com>

³³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image_maps

simply because the release of the applications are far apart or companies choose to wait to incorporate “new” technologies because they want to push their own alternatives – as is the case with Microsoft’s own version of Javascript, JScript, or ASP, the company’s proprietary alternative to PHP or JSP – or don’t want to get caught up in the short-lasting hype of a new technology.

Another disadvantage of pursuing the DTP metaphor in web design is the fact that WYSIWYG applications have to create a lot of extra code to correctly render the HTML page as it is designed by the user. A lot of extra markup is used for example to style multiple words with a bold, large, coloured, serif font.

An effective way of doing this would be for example:

CSS:
<pre>.mark { font-weight: bold; font-size: 3em; color: #FF0000; }</pre>
HTML:
<pre>A lot of extra markup is used for example to create multi- ple headers with a bold, large font</ span>.</pre>

WYSIWYG editors produce far more markup to accomplish the same:

HTML:
<pre>A lot of extra markup is used for example to create</ b> multiple headers with a bold, large font.</pre>

This snippet of markup language is harder to read and doesn’t separate the design elements from the markup itself, as the combination of CSS and HTML aims to do. While more recent releases of WYSIWYG applications will sport CSS capabilities there will still be the need for the developer to jump into the code to streamline things. Because it’s quite hard for a software application to maintain clean code when only the visual mode of the application is used. The problem is that most users of WYSIWYG software aren’t at all familiar with writing HTML and don’t care about streamlined code or invalid markup.

The most common tool for amateur web developers to use is the aforementioned Microsoft Frontpage,³⁹ now replaced with Microsoft Expression Web which aims at a more professional audience.⁴⁰ Dreamweaver is used more by professionals and designers. GoLive is a relatively less known application and more popular with graphic designers due to its focus on strictly visual side of the design. One reason why Frontpage has become a popular tool due to its inclusion in the Microsoft Office suite and the free release of a slimmed down version of Frontpage 2.0, which came together with Internet Explorer 4.0.

³⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microsoft_frontpage

⁴⁰ <http://www.microsoft.com/Expression/products/overview.aspx?key=web>

Another reason is the Microsoft ecology most users “live in” when it comes to computers. Most amateur web designers work with the Microsoft Office suite daily, have a flavour of Windows installed on both their home and work machines, etc. For them the fact that the majority of personal computers come Microsoft Windows pre-installed is just natural, the combination of PCs and the Windows OS kind of belong together. Frontpage is designed with Microsoft Office applications in mind.

By offering almost the same interface as in Word, Frontpage is presented as the “Microsoft Word” of web design. Making the practice of web designing appear as easy as writing a letter. When treating web design as writing a letter one both defies the possibilities and conventions of the web. The problem with all WYSIWYG applications is that it treats the web and design for the web as something different, either as writing a letter or as designing for print.

To come back to the analysis of NICHOLAS’ RAINBOW BRIDGE SITE, this web site in particular doesn’t seem to be designed in Frontpage, because of the lack of meta information in the source stating that the generator is actually Frontpage. Instead the various commented sections (“<!-- following code added by server. PLEASE REMOVE -->”) indicate that the site was built using Yahoo! PageBuilder ⁴¹ an online application which looks like a very simplified Frontpage when it comes to the interface. Codewise the application isn’t able to produce valid, coherent markup as can be seen in the example of NICHOLAS’ RAINBOW BRIDGE SITE (the HTML markup can be viewed on the next page).

HTML:

```
<BODY background="tinytzu.gif">
<!-- following code added by server. PLEASE REMOVE -->
<!-- preceding code added by server. PLEASE REMOVE -->
<FONT FACE="arial" SIZE="5" COLOR="red">
<CENTER><marquee behavior=alternate BGCOLOR=PINK
DIRECTION=RIGHT><i>TASCIA'S NICHOLAS MILUV</i></b></
center></marquee></a><center></center>
<center><b><FONT SIZE=5 color="blue">DEDICATION<BR><F
ONT SIZE=3>This website is dedicated to my cherished com-
panion Nicholas who graced my life for 12 1/2 years.<br>
He was my child, best-friend, loving & loyal companion
and, yes, my Shih Tzu dog.<br>He entrusted his life to me
.... fully & freely.<br>Although I gave him so much .... he
gave me <u>so</u> very much more!!<br>He was the light
of my life .... the sunshine on my shoulder!!<br>He was the
absolute <u>epitome</u> of gentleness, faithfulness,
kindness, and innocence.<br>He loved me .... and, I loved
him.<br>He gave me a reason to live.<br>I miss him so very
much.<br><br>Please .... enjoy your visit at my gentle little
boy's "Rainbow Bridge Site"<br></center>
<center><a href="introtribute.html"><br></center><!-- text below gener-
ated by server. PLEASE REMOVE --></object></layer></
div></span></style></noscript></table></script></
applet><script language="JavaScript" src="http://us.i1.
yimg.com/us.yimg.com/i/mc/mc.js"></script><script
language="JavaScript" src="http://geocities.com/
js_source/geov2.js"></script><script language="javas
cript">geovisit();</script><noscript></
noscript>
<IMG SRC="http://geo.yahoo.com/serv?s=76001080&t=11
80652143&f=us-w66" ALT=1 WIDTH=1 HEIGHT=1>
```

⁴¹ <http://geocities.yahoo.com/v/pb.html>

Most amateur web sites are more of a collage than a purposive design. There are a great many web sites offering free buttons, Javascripts, animations, etc. which are a welcome source for many amateur web-developers.

Of course it's easy to pick on amateur web design. Because the design work is done by amateurs one can not expect fully semantic, valid markup and an elegant, accesible design. There are however a lot of semi amateur web designers who make money out of producing such web sites.

Meyvis web design ⁴² is a good example of semi-amateur web design. The web site is more structured than NICHOLAS' RAINBOW BRIDGE SITE. When it comes to web design services they offer different packages (ranging from starter to professional) for as high as € 495,-. Those prices might be not that steep but if you look at the quality of what they're selling, or even the quality of their own web site.

The frontpage alone returns 63 errors when validated by the W3C validator. While a lot of them are minor issues, some of the errors actually have an effect on how the browser renders the web site.

The top navigation is enclosed in a table and because of the usage of nonstandard attributes (border="2.5" and bordercolor="black") the table renders with a huge border in Firefox. The structure of the web site is made up out of tables.

Such table layouts have been popular since the adaption of tables in the Mosaic browser in 1994. Although tables aren't intended to be used in the layout of a web page, but just for representing tabular data, table-based layouts formed the majority from 1995 and onwards. WYSIWYG HTML editors like the aforementioned Dreamweaver or Frontpage make generating table layouts easy. Table



• Meyvis Webdesign as rendered in Microsoft Internet Explorer



• Meyvis Webdesign as rendered in Mozilla Firefox



• Meyvis Webdesign as rendered in Apple Safari

⁴² <http://www.horeca-in.com>

layouts are as popular as framesets ⁴³ in the world of amateur web design. Meyvis web design lacks the frames, but has an impressive bulk of nested tables. In HTML nested tables look like this:

```
HTML:

<table border="1">
  <tr>
    <td>
      <table border="1">
        <tr>
          <td>
            <table border="1">
              <tr>
                <td>
                  Actual content
                </td>
              </tr>
            </table>
          </td>
        </tr>
      </table>
    </td>
  </tr>
</table>
```

The reason why people nest tables like this is because they don't know of another way to insert block elements. WYSIWYG editors make it easy to nest tables like so, the users just has to position the cursor in an empty table cell to create another table inside the cell. The reason why this practice is less common when people handcode HTML is because it's hard to maintain an overview of the table structures when successively nesting such elements. Adjusting or removing particular nested tables by hand in code only mode is quite a daunting task, especially after they're filled with data.

The rest of the navigation has shuffled due to incorrect positioning and the web site actually looks different in each browser. Internet Explorer shows the intended design. The pages are designed with Dreamweaver, this can be determined because the web site makes use of Javascript widgets ⁴⁴ unique to Dreamweaver.

The visual and structural design is downright bad. The Comic Sans MS font is used throughout the web site, which gives the whole web site an aura of cheapness. Overall the web site is quite rough, the multiple colour schemes features colours which do not match.

That said, on a technical level a lot of graphic designers don't differ much from amateur web designers. In most cases the visual design looks better and is tested in different browsers so that it looks consistent on all platforms. Graphic designer's typically choose two different approaches to accomplish consistency in web design.

The first is tweaking the web site long enough in a WYSIWYG editor like Dreamweaver (or GoLive, because it has a familiar interface, due to its inclusion in Adobe Creative Suite) of until it renders successfully in all major browsers. In this case designers rely solely on the visual mode of these applications. In this case graphic designer's are just like their amateur equivalents, producing awful, chaotic markup as described above. A good example of this is the web site of the Premsela Foundation, a Dutch platform for design and fashion. ⁴⁵ The source for this web site is a chaotic mess of CSS, badly indented tags, nested tables and invalid markup. Despite these problems the web site renders correctly in all browsers.

⁴³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Framing> (World Wide Web)

⁴⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_widget

⁴⁵ <http://www.premsele.org>

Another way to achieve consistency is using the self-contained Adobe (formerly Macromedia) Flash format. Flash became a widely adopted file-format during the 1990s as Internet connections speeds and the need to deliver so-called rich media applications via the Web increased. Quickly Flash replaced Java as a container for web sites, web-applications and other multimedia completely. In 2006 98% of all the users of the WWW had the Flash plugin installed.^{46 47}

The Flash format offers designers a familiar way to design web site, although the application is mainly meant to design (interactive) animations. The interface of Adobe Flash is reminiscent of both a vector-based drawing application and an animation suite. Apart from enabling designers to easily design and create a consistent web site with more bells and whistles than available in HTML, but without having to code (although Flash has its own scripting language, ActionScript), there are several drawbacks of using the self-contained format. First of all, Flash web sites are not indexed by search engine bots. The problem is that modern search engines rely on indexing the content of web sites for their search databases. This means that when you've built a web site about "boats" in Flash it's less likely you'll be found through a search engine than when you would have built that same web site in (even shoddy) HTML.

Another drawback is that having your whole site in Flash renders the interface of the browser impossible. The back, forward, stop, etc. buttons become unusable, because a Flash web site is typically one file which gets loaded in its entirety as opposed to HTML web sites which are composed of many interlinked documents. To add injury to insult, text in Flash is typically not selectable – so users won't be able to copy and paste – and printing is also quite impossible. Reloading a page makes the Flash animation start again, so when you've worked your way to elaborate intro animations this whole procedure will start anew.

⁴⁶ "Flash Player Penetration", Millward Brown, 2007, http://www.adobe.com/products/player_census/flashplayer

⁴⁷ "Adobe Flash Player Version Penetration", Millward Brown, 2007, http://www.adobe.com/products/player_census/flashplayer/version_penetration.html

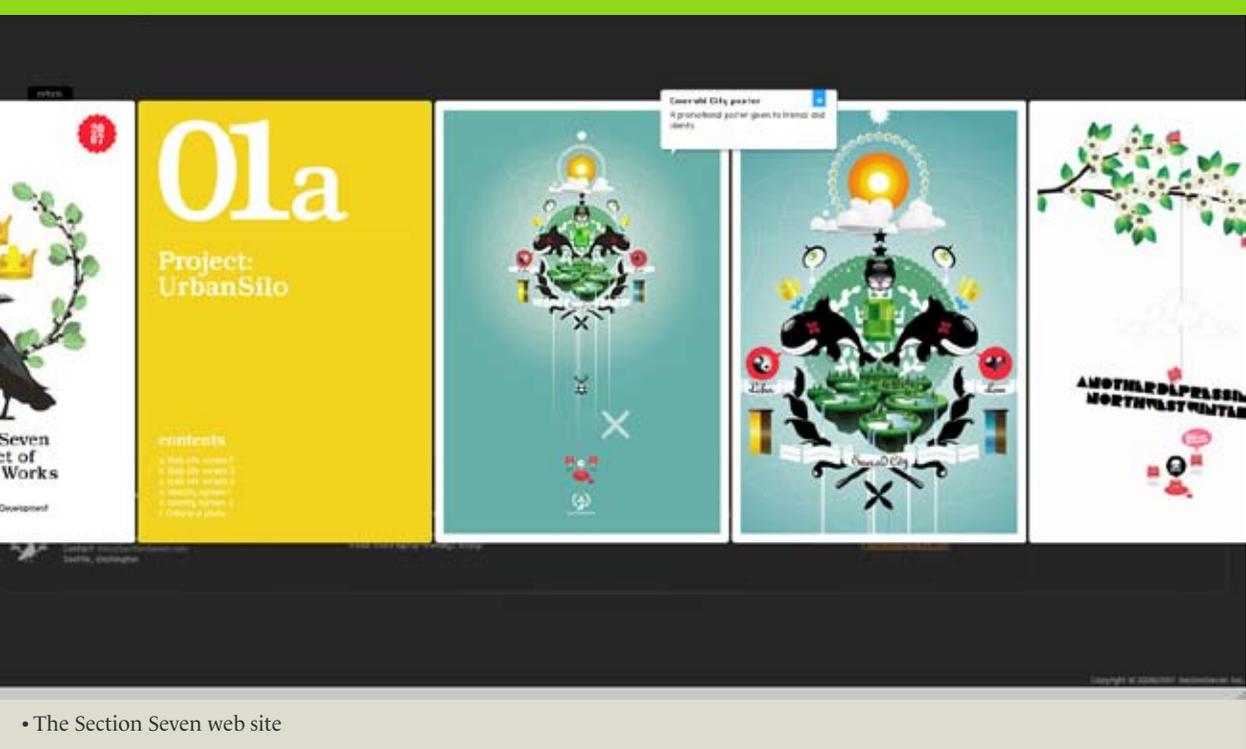


Apart from the technical limitations of Flash as opposed to HTML there are also a number of bad practices less likely to happen when designing HTML pages instead of Flash. Designing web sites in Flash is likely to trigger "design abuse" as Jakob Nielsen calls it.⁴⁸ Design abuse is a practice where designers try to invent "new ways" of navigation. Popular effects in Flash are animated objects and custom scrollbars.

A good example of Flash utilized as a full blown web site is Section Seven.⁴⁹ Every time you reload the homepage of the web site, you need to watch the same "Loading" animation over and over again, although the user might have visited the web site earlier. The web site itself is styled as a book which folds open when clicked upon. Sections of the book become larger when hovered upon and fold out when clicked. All the work is represented on very small panes and show very small pixel text when hovered over. The text is not selectable nor resizable, making it very hard to read for people with problems regarding eyesight. The only way to scroll through the content is to use the mouse, which is a smooth process. But if the user is not careful and hits the area on the bottom of the page the "Updates" menu is triggered, abruptly halting the scrolling action. Overall, the web site looks very pretty, but from a usability standpoint the new way of navigating through the web site is more of a nuisance than a benefit. Also, the flashiness of the navigation takes the focus away from what the site tries to be, a portfolio. The explicit dynamics distract the user from what really matters, the content of the web site itself.

⁴⁸ Jakob Nielsen, "Flash: 99% Bad", 2000, <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20001029.html>

⁴⁹ <http://sectionseven.com>



• The Section Seven web site

Both the described ventures in web design show a lack of understanding the World Wide Web as an independent medium. Any person who deems himself a web developer should have at least some understanding of the history of the WWW. Of course this is less important in the case of web sites like NICHOLAS' RAINBOW BRIDGE SITE. But when one starts monetising amateur web design, like in the second example of Meyvis web design, a better understanding of the medium becomes more important. Because otherwise the only thing one can do is delivering broken products. Imagine a graphic designer sending a finished project to a printer in an ancient file-format and expecting it to be printed as it appeared on screen during the creation of the project. This may sound ridiculous, but this exactly the approach of many amateur web designers. By not adapting the many technologies of the WWW or not staying up to date, the only thing to expect is broken web sites which fail to render properly in multiple browsers.

The same roughly applies to graphic designers who either “perfect” a web site in a WYSIWYG editor for multiple browsers but still fail to comprehend the markup beneath the visual presentation. The tag soup created by WYSIWYG editors makes it quite hard for search bots to properly index the web site for search engines. Designing and delivering a web site solely in the self-contained Flash format is an even worse practice. While the level of consistency is maintained in every browser one relies on a plugin which users have to install and is intended to deliver animations, games or video. Furthermore using the Flash format typically breaks the function of the browser (back and forward buttons, “find in page” search, selectable text, etc.) and tempts designers to create extravagant navigation which doesn't necessarily makes it easier for users to use the web site (<http://www.tokyoplastic.com>, <http://www.24-7media.de> or <http://www.2advanced.com> are good examples of this). Stripped bare of all the superfluous effects and animations the Flash web site could also have been a static PDF containing a one page brochure available for download via a link on the web site.

Amateur and graphic designers web design in “This web site is under construction”

The way amateur web designers and graphic designers approach is satirised in my project “This web site is under construction”. The project is a generator which produces web sites based on popular paradigms in web design. Amateur and graphic designers web design are two of the other mindsets available in the generator, the others being corporate web design – large companies also have a very distinctive approach to web design, often posing as portal web sites⁵⁰ – and the Web 2.0. When the amateur module is selected the generator will produce amateur looking web sites as described above. The structure, images, colour

⁵⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_portal

palette are completely random. Code wise the markup is the tag-soup one would expect from amateur web design. The “graphic designers web design” module is highly visual, sporting the characteristics described above – whole texts are represented as images – instead of selectable, indexable “HTML text”, Flash is used for elaborate navigation elements, etc.

Web Two Dot Oh.





• A selection of Web 2.0 company logos (<http://flickr.com/photos/stabilo-boss/101793494/in/set-72057594060779001/>)

Recently the “Web 2.0” became a “buzz word”. The term was popularised by Tim O’Reilly and John Battelle at the first Web 2.0 conference in 2004.^{51 52}

Basically the Web 2.0 is an umbrella term for a number of things. Although the 2.0 version number implies that the Web 2.0 is about a new version of the World Wide Web, it is actually more about a alleged second generation of web communities and services, each with a focus on sharing and collaboration between users. Web sites identified as Web 2.0 projects include Wikipedia, YouTube, Skype, Flickr and del.icio.us, but also online productivity suites like Google Docs and Google Spreadsheets (bundled in Google Apps).

Some of the Web 2.0 initiatives have attracted the attention of large companies like Google and Microsoft. Google Docs, for example, is a service formerly known as Writely, developed by Upstartle, until it was acquired by Google in 2006. Similarly YouTube, a video sharing web site, was also bought by Google in 2006. Because of these investment developments and the hype surrounding the Web 2.0, some critics already speak of a new dot-com bubble.^{53 54 55}

The visual style of the Web 2.0 is quite distinctive and therefore has become subject to mockery and satire.^{56 57 58 59}

Since the Web 2.0 is a quite recent development in web design there are more resources to be found on the visual aspects of the paradigm in contrast of amateur web design which isn’t such a narrowly defined category.

51 Paul Graham, “Web 2.0”, 2005, <http://www.paulgraham.com/web20.html>
 52 Tim O’Reilly, “What Is Web 2.0, Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software”, O’Reilly, 2005, <http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-2.0.html>
 53 “Fears of another internet bubble”, The Economist, 2005, http://www.economist.com/business/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_QQNVDDDS
 54 Heather Havenstein, “Web 2.0: A new dot.com bubble in the making?”, ComputerWorld, 2007, <http://www.computerworld.com.au/index.php?id=1434654886&eid=r80>
 55 <http://bubble20.blogspot.com/>
 56 Pierre Francois & Ian Gilbert , “Ingredients for Web 2.0 Success”, 2006, <http://notabug.com/w2>
 57 Alex ‘Pit’ La Rosa & Fabio Fidanza, “Stripe Generator 2.0”, <http://www.stripegenerator.com>
 58 Michael Arrington , “bullshitr Is Good For a Laugh”, TechCrunch, 2006, <http://www.techcrunch.com/2006/08/20/bullshitr-is-good-for-a-laugh>
 59 “bullshitr”, 2006, <http://emptybottle.org/bullshitr/>

Ben Hunt from webdesignfromscratch.com has written an analyses on what the visual and structural characteristics of Web 2.0 web sites are.⁶⁰ He boils it down to fifteen points (some are very minor):

Simplicity

Web 2.0 web sites are all about simplicity and focus. Noise (superfluous objects) have been eliminated, instead the focus is on representing the content.

Central layout

A lot of Web 2.0 web sites are centered in the user's browser. According to Hunt this is a statement of "boldness".

Fewer columns

Again simplicity is key, as is boldness. Fewer columns focus the attention on the text. Also, pages feature fewer text, because the attention curve of an average user too short to be able to pick up a lot of the actual subject matter. Instead snippets of texts are highlighted, something which relates to his next point; "bigger text".

Bigger text

Bigger texts help maintain the focus on the important parts of a web site. It shifts the focus of the user to the "must-read" sections.

Bold text introductions

The same goes for bold introductions, which are typically used to communicate the main message of the company to the user.

Separate top section

Top sections define the start of a page and should deliver a bold statement about the web site – what is the name, colours used, navigation.

Solid areas of screen real-estate

In relation to distinctive top sections are the other important areas of a web site – footer, sidebar, navigation. All those sections should be highlighted and it should be made clear from the design where the user should go next.

Simple navigation

Navigation should also be clean and simple. Links should be made clear with contrasting colours and an underline. Navigation bars should offer not too many options and be technically simple – no infinite multi-level menus.

Bold logos

As with everything else stated above, logos should also be bold and clear. This explains the tendency have short brand names, preferably with a reference to real words – Riffs, Flickr, Yahoo!, Wiki, Skype, etc. Strong, short brand names give users a feeling of trust and robustness.



• Web 2.0 logo, mockingly summarising the visual characteristics of the Web 2.0

Strong colours

The usage of strong colours (yellowish green, bright pink or bright blue, etc.) helps to divide the web site in clear sections, but also gives the web site certain atmosphere of freshness. Also, contrasting colours are used, black text (or a similar tint) on a white background, or the reverse are popular colour schemes. Strong colours are not about creating the wrong colour combinations with the

⁶⁰ Ben Hunt, "Web 2.0 how-to design guide", 2006, <http://www.webdesignfromscratch.com/web-2.0-design-style-guide.cfm>

Star flashes

Star shaped vignettes are also quite popular. They often indicate that a product is new, is updated or that the web site is in beta. The beta indication is quite a common sight on new services and therefore often mocked as well.^{62 63}

The Web 2.0 style of design can be seen as the other side of the spectrum, whereas amateur web design and typical graphic designers web design from the other side. Web sites identified as being part of Web 2.0 are typically something more than just a web site. Most Web 2.0 web sites intend to be a platform, Wikipedia,⁶⁴ digg⁶⁵ and Riffs⁶⁶ being good examples of this.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is the well-known online encyclopedia generated by a large userbase from all around the world, instead of being compiled by a central editorial board as is the case with conventional encyclopedias. Wikipedia is defined by its users content-wise and most decisions are made democratically via elaborate voting processes.

“A common question is how such apparently useful content can be generated by an army of distributed volunteer editors. This paper discusses part of the answer: despite the seeming potential for anarchy or chaos, a sophisticated set of processes have emerged.”⁶⁷

⁶² “How Web 2.0 Logos are drawn”, 2007, <http://www.hongkiat.com/blog/revealing-methods-of-drawing-web-20-logos>

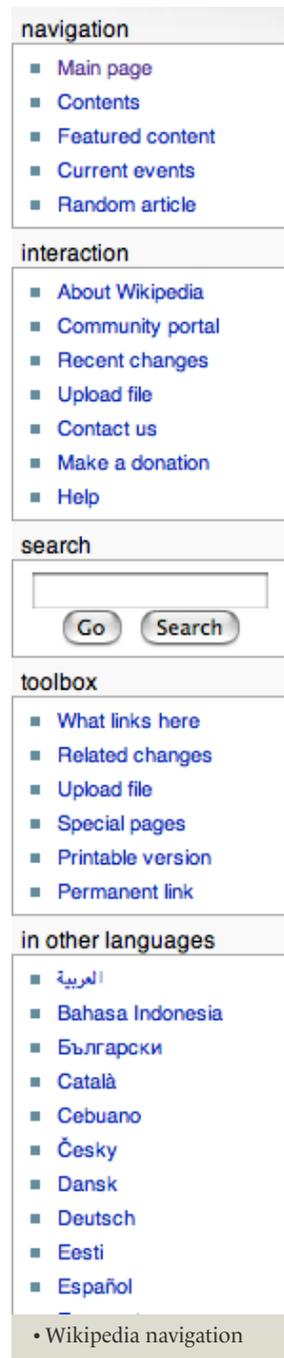
⁶³ Alex P., “Web 2.0 V2 Logo Creatr”, 2006, <http://h-master.net/web2.o/index.php>

⁶⁴ <http://wikipedia.org>

⁶⁵ <http://www.digg.com>

⁶⁶ <http://www.riffs.com>

⁶⁷ Fernanda B. Viégas, Martin Wattenberg & Matthew M. McKeon, “The Hidden Order of Wikipedia”, IBM Research Visual Communication Lab, 2007, http://www.research.ibm.com/visual/papers/hidden_order_wikipedia.pdf



In order to support the collaboration on a massive scale various technical features have implemented. Most notably the extensive versioning systems which allows users to undo edits from vandals and revert to previous versions. Apart from technical systems Wikipedia sports a variety of rules and guidelines to ensure a smooth collaboration. For a lay user the whole infrastructure can be quite daunting to get used to. Apart from the technical learning curve, there's also a whole social ecosphere, with its own regulations, to get used to. One cannot expect users to understand what the abbreviation “3RR” means⁶⁸ or that it's discouraged for persons with a Wikipedia article to edit their own entry.

From a design standpoint the web site lacks the characteristic Web 2.0 polish mentioned before. In fact, all the points about simplicity, rich surfaces, etc. are not present. The overall style of Wikipedia is dry, simple in visual appeal but complex in structural design. The whole site looks and actually might be designed – given the nature of Wikipedia, everyone is able to edit – by means of a democratic process. The structure itself is quite complicated (the left side bar alone has over 20 navigation elements) which fits the complexity of the operations users can perform. The overall design takes some getting used to and it's possible that this is the aim of the developers of Wikipedia. Because Wikipedia is envisioned not so much as a regular web site but rather as an online application/platform (a Wiki). This might explain the steeper learning curve, but it doesn't justify the dry, formal design.

⁶⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Three-revert_rule

On a strictly technical level all the available services (the versioning system, site-wide templates, etc.) are quite advanced although the execution interface-wise isn't what it should be. This might be the result of the democratic processes which are in place when it comes to content, but also the design of the encyclopedia. "Democratic design" is hard, because radical changes cannot be made without going into a process of extensive peer review and voting.

This system works for content, although such disputes can run for a very long time and the consensus reached in the end isn't always the best solution, but a vague shadow of what once was a strong article or idea. Sometimes there is a need for a benevolent design dictator – or a small group of people – who determine the overall visual style of the encyclopedia, the details could be left to the democratic processes. The overall impression of Wikipedia is that the design seems to be defined by the tech people who implement all the features and



• The Wikipedia Main Page

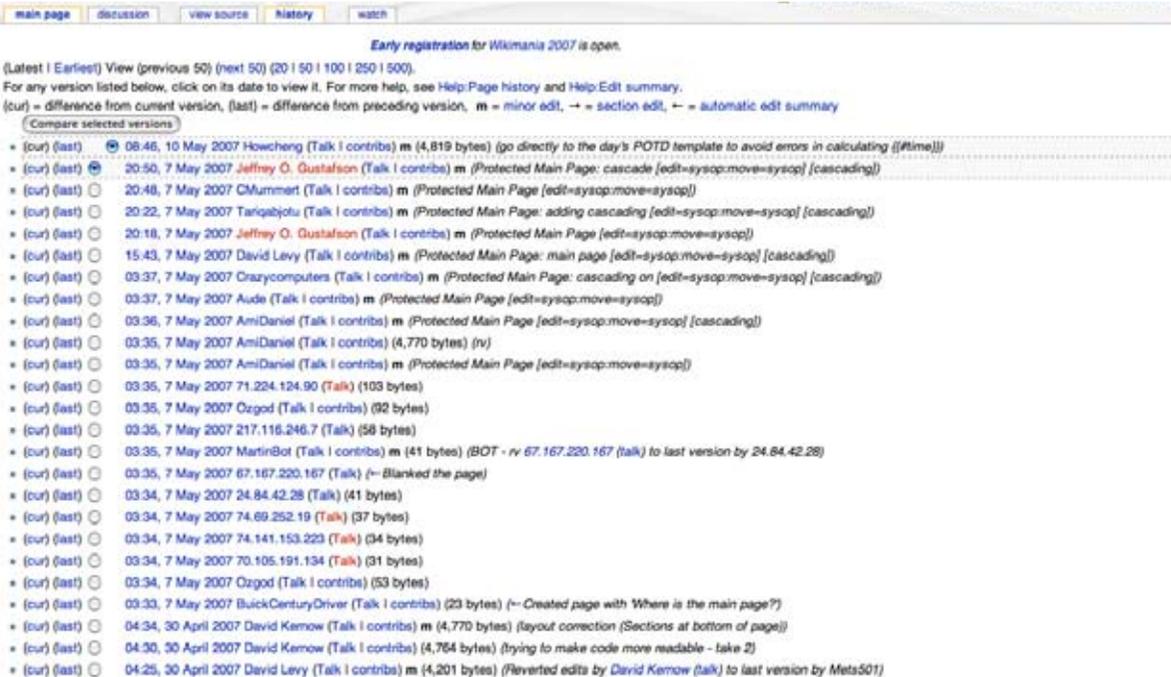
design a functional, yet dry interface around it on the one hand and the democratic system of generating content on the other hand.

Riffs.com

Riffs.com is a very archetypical Web 2.0 web site, it's even in "alpha" instead of the "beta" classification, in a way that it's almost a visual caricature of the paradigm. The web site features almost all of the aforementioned visual traits. Drop shadows, rounded corners, gradients and a bright colour palette. The use of whitespace however is quite limited and the overall interface of the web site feels quite cluttered (lots of buttons and navigation buttons).

Furthermore the web site is presented as a social platform, social recommendation in particular. As with other services, like Twitter,⁶⁹ many people ask themselves what's the use of reading what other people do or what their opinion

⁶⁹ <http://www.twitter.com>



• The page history/version system of Wikipedia



• The glossy main page of Riffs.com

is about various subjects.^{70 71} The problem with the site is that it's cluttered, every object has its own little box. It seems that the designers wanted to include every Web 2.0 visual thing that is currently available.

The problem with most Web 2.0 web sites is that they identify heavily with the stylistic conventions as set out by prolific Web 2.0 web sites. Of course there's nothing wrong with high contrast web sites, simplicity and balanced whitespace, but overusing graphical effects like gradients, drop shadows, reflections and whatnot doesn't help to eliminate the idea that Web 2.0 web sites are all alike. This makes the Web 2.0 prone to mockery and satire, which is not a good thing, because in essence the philosophy of many Web 2.0 ventures are quite valuable – online application suites (Google Docs) being a good example. Of course the term Web 2.0 has been subject of mockery when it was introduced and subsequently hyped. So there is a lot of criticism regarding the word

⁷⁰ Joanna Bawa, "What's all the Chatter about Twitter?", 2007, <http://www.usabilitynews.com/news/article3852.asp>

⁷¹ "Twitter, What's the Point?", NewsVine, 2007, http://finalcut.newsvine.com/_news/2007/05/03/698658-twitter-whats-the-point

Web 2.0, the things it might or might not encompass and the visual style of web sites regarded as part of the Web 2.0.^{72 73 74} Whether the criticisms are valid or not, the fact remains that a lot of the services developed under the influence of Web 2.0 are in fact useful. Problems exist however on a case by case level. Riffs for example, tries too hard to be a Web 2.0 application by adopting all the visual attributes.

Furthermore Jakob Nielsen also warns that Web 2.0 web sites often "neglect good design".⁷⁵ What he means by this is that most of the WWW users (90%) aren't interested in spending a lot of time using and contributing to Web 2.0 initiatives but rather use the Web as a tool and search for very specific information. Also, developers often get all wound up with the technological side of the Web 2.0 – collected under the umbrella term AJAX⁷⁶ – like dynamic Javascript effects, creating new ways for users to navigate, etc. while ignoring the basic requirements of a good web site. Web 2.0 web sites are too often designed from the technical possibilities rather than using a functional, usable design as a base. Also the focus on designing new interfaces and a fresh user experience often gets in the way of realising an actual usable web site.

*"Good practices include making a site easy to use, good search tools, the use of text free of jargon, usability testing and a consideration of design even before the first line of code is written. Sadly, said Mr Nielsen, the rush to embrace Web 2.0 technology meant that many firms were turning their back on the basics."*⁷⁷

⁷² Russel Beattie, "wtf2.0", 2006, <http://www.russellbeattie.com/notebook/1008838.html>

⁷³ Scott Schiller, "Don't believe the (Web 2.0) hype!", 2005, <http://www.schillmania.com/content/opinion/2005/10/dont-believe-the-web-20-hype>

⁷⁴ Jeffrey Zeldman, "Web 3.0", A List Apart, 2006, <http://alistapart.com/articles/web3point0>

⁷⁵ "Web 2.0 'neglecting good design'", BBC News, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6653119.stm>

⁷⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/AJAX>

⁷⁷ "Web 2.0 'neglecting good design'", BBC News, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/6653119.stm>

The Web 2.0 in “This web site is under construction”

The Web 2.0 is the second module in “This web site is under construction” and incorporates many of the visual characteristics described above. The module features an extensive library of glossy logos, all with the typical nondescript names (ruft, flutr, etc.), gradient 3D headers and the high contrast or pastel colour palettes. Also included is a Javascript effects library which is used for applying animations and effects to different elements in the generated design, randomly.

The generator “This web site is under construction” tries to uncover what’s wrong with pursuing the dogmas of the different paradigms mindlessly. By returning results which are a grotesque mirror image of the actual web sites fitting the selected paradigm. To make the generated results more interesting users are able to mix the functions belonging to different modules in conjunction with each other, thus creating mixes of the different modules. Imagine for example an amateur design with strong Web 2.0 elements. The result could be a web site features the rough aesthetics of amateur web design in combination with structural Web 2.0 aspects like the blog format, huge tag clouds and animated objects. The main goal of the generator is to show what the flaw is in the paradigms it parodies.

Be pragmatic.



So in light of the two extremes – amateur web development (this includes the escapades of many graphic designers) and Web 2.0 web design – what would be pragmatic web design. Both approaches have some merit. Web development by graphic designers often has a design as a base which is well thought about, albeit well thought about from a print perspective, but nevertheless thought through. The Web 2.0 typically follows the way of semantical, W3C compliant (X)HTML and a focus on technical and structural design of a web site.

There something wrong with both paradigms however. Amateur web design focusses too much on the visual side of web design, applying ideas which might work in print design, but fall flat when used in web design. They fail to understand the medium as something different from static print design. The choice of Flash as a consistent web site container is evidence for this. Web 2.0 is all about the new possibilities of the WWW as a medium, but takes it to the extreme by fetishising the technological aspects and alleged visual style of the Web 2.0.

When it comes to pragmatic web design content is the most important asset of a web site. Web sites should be designed with the content as a centerpiece, not as a filler used after exploiting all the technical and visual possibilities. Instead of burying the content under fancy effects, new interfaces, the visual and structural design – especially the structural design – should have a relation with the content or the content should be the base of the structural design.

Furthermore, developers should regard themselves as such, and not exclusively as designers. Developers should know HTML inside out and know the importance of semantic markup. The DTP model can't be applied to the web and the only way to write a well structured web site is to get involved in the markup language itself and not by using a WYSIWYG editor.

Design web sites with users in mind, or in other words, don't wrap an interface around technology without extensive user testing. The way you envision user interaction on paper isn't always the most realistic scenario.

Pragmatic design isn't something which doesn't happen on the web, there are several examples which incorporate the elements as described above.

Notable examples are JeffCroft.com, AndyRutledge.com, Last.fm, etc.

The problem is that these web sites make up for just a very small portion of the World Wide Web.

SimpleBits.com

A good example of pragmatic web design is SimpleBits.com. SimpleBits is a small, American web design company run by Dan Cederholm and working for companies like Google (Blogger) and MTV. The web site features Cederholm's portfolio, blog, publications, t-shirts and some personal information.

The structure of the web site is roughly divided in three sections (header, middle, footer). The header is the area for the SimpleBits logo and navigation.

The two column middle section of the web site is used to focus on the most important content. When the user arrives on the web site this middle section is made up out of recent blog posts. On the right one can browse a portfolio selection, a list of products, events, recommended places on the net and some information how Cederholm contributes to a healthier planet via 1% for the Planet.

⁷⁸ The left column of the middle section starts with a small introduction about the web site and offers a link to more information. Beneath this block the actual blog starts. This blog can also be reached via the Notebook navigation item, this brings you to another page, again with a two column middle section,

⁷⁸ <http://www.onepercentfortheplanet.org>

which incorporates the searchable blog archives (by keyword, category or month) and a list of "hyperlinked" friends and colleagues. The page also features an introduction explaining the functionality of the page to the user. Back on the main page there are two types of blog posts, one is a regular blog entry while the other are links to external resources. These link entries are denominated by a blue header and preceded by a blue star. Clicking on the link takes you to an external web site. The regular entries are larger and feature more options. The user can click on either the grey title or the post info ("Posted by Dan on M/D,Y, number of comments, link to publish a comment, etc.) Clicking these links take you to a single post view where the full post and the comments are shown (if there are any). The comment section is separated clearly from the actual blog post. Each comment is wrapped in its own, numbered "speech balloon". Hierarchically the web site has four header levels. The first header is used for the blog titles and introduction title ("Hand-crafted pixels & text.") The blue links of the link posts form second category of headers. Thirdly, a green subheader is used to divide topics in the left column in the middle section. Lastly, to divide sections in the middle left and right and footer column an uppercase, slightly wide-spaced header is utilised. The footer is used to display secondary information – viz. links to blog archives, photos, books and copyright information.

All the pages of SimpleBits.com have the same structural design as the weblog section. Throughout the web site the middle section is always divided into two columns with the left featuring the main content and on the right secondary content. In the case of the "Work" page the left column has information on the available services and design philosophy of SimpleBits, while the right column is made up of the actual portfolio. Choosing from a project in the list of work takes you to a separate page which is the only template in the web site which uses a three column layout in the middle section. Left has images and technical information about the project, the middle column is a project description and the right column is a collection of shortcuts to other work.

Hand-crafted pixels & text.
Simplebits is a tiny web design studio founded by designer and author Dan Cederholm. We create simple, readable interfaces balanced with a standards-based methodology, and we're based in Massachusetts, USA. [LEARN MORE](#)

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A nice profile of the new Cork's co-founder-in-chief, Gary Vaynerchuk, over at ABC News.
- Blaise Agüera y Arcas: Photosynth demo**
"Using photos of oft-snapped subjects (like Notre Dame) scraped from around the Web, Photosynth creates breathtaking multidimensional spaces with zoom and navigation features that outstrip all expectation." Incredible stuff from the TED conference. Via Dustin.
- Creating wood grain texture in Photoshop**
Using built-in filters and a single background color, this simple little tutorial worked like a charm.

Gone Fishing
We're packing up over here for a little trip to San Francisco for @media followed by a few days of vacation. The whole family is coming with me, and we're excited to see everyone there. See you there!

LATEST FEATURED WORK

- MTV.com
HTML/CSS development
- AIGA
HTML/CSS development
- Cork's
Co-founder

OUR PRODUCTS

- IconShops
Simple little icons to go.
- T-Shirts
Hand-crafted threads.

SPEAKING EVENTS

- @media 2007 (America)
May 24-25, 2007 - San Francisco
- @media 2007 (Europe)
June 7-8, 2007 - London
- An Event Apart
August 27-28, 2007 - Chicago

RECOMMENDED

- Dreamcast - Where we host our bits
- Web - Visual Elements for Creatives

MY CORN'D JOURNAL

- The main page of SimpleBits.com

Using the structure described above prevents the user of the web site to become confused. The navigation elements, shortcuts and important information are always positioned in the same places. The structure of the web site isn't the only characteristic of the clearness of SimpleBits. Apart from the clearly designated content areas, the visual design is also crisp and balanced. SimpleBits uses a colour palette of soft, pastel brown colours (or cream white) and the header is greyish blue. The only real colour accent is the green SimpleBits logo in the header. The colour of the text is dark grey (almost black) with the exception of headers, which take their green colour from the logo, and links, which are brighter shade of blue as opposed to the grey blue of the header section. The web site uses little images. Apart from the logo, a drawing of blocks in the introduction and some icons in the right column and footer. The site appears to be made up just out of coloured blocks, but this is not the case. The top of the header section is decorated by a small, abstract banner of alternating dark and light blue rectangles. The navigation, introduction and bottom footer all have a background image which subtly suggests a beveled surface.

Focussing on the technical side of SimpleBits. The web site runs on Movable Type, a proprietary weblogging software developed by Six Apart. As with most weblog software Movable Type uses HTML templating system⁷⁹ to wrap the design of a web site in. The complete web site is written in valid, semantical markup. When looking at the source of the web site one can see a clearly structured document. All of the necessary HTML backbone elements are their. The different sections of the web site are clearly indicated with a descriptive name. The header is a div element which contains both a div called "logo" and one called "nav". The two types of entries in the main section have separate, a normal entry is just called that while a link post is called a "entry quickbit". Without reading all of the markup it's safe to say that somebody with little or no knowledge of the production process of the web site (but with sufficient understanding of HTML and CSS) could go into the code and alter portions just by logical deduction. In the case of the tag soup web sites as mentioned earlier it's virtually impossible to purposely alter a design just by looking at the code, there's bound to be a lot of trial and error involved.

structure, including training or seminars.

- Publications — On any of the subjects sprinkled throughout this site, Dan Cederholm has written peculiar books covering standards-based web design.

Web Standards

Simplebits is built on a foundation of web standards — valid, structured code to produce pages that will look great on modern browsers yet still functional and usable on older ones. Utilizing web standards leads to real results:

- Decreased bandwidth and server space
- Improved accessibility to all browsers and devices (including those with disabilities)
- Increased separation of presentation layer code from content
- Simplified updating of look and feel
- Faster page loading
- Lower costs

Philosophy

Keep it simple. The web is a vast and ever-changing place. Simplify your message and goal. Make it readable, useable and attractive.

FROM THE NOTEBOOK

Search the Notebook

- Gone Fishing
- Cork's finds a few more
- Compartments
- A few sites I've been enjoying lately

BOOKS by DAN CEDERHOLM

- Bulletproof Web Design**
Improving usability and protecting against worst-case scenarios
- Web Standards Solutions**
The Markup and Style Handbook

SNAPSHOTS

Site redesign
Inc.com
Site redesign
SH Publishing
Site design
Unstuck
Site design
Blue State Digital
Site + logo design

Copyright © 1999-2007 Simplebits, LLC. All rights reserved.
XHTML, CSS, RSS feeds. Notebook powered by Movable Type. Hosted by DreamHost.

- The bottom section of SimpleBits.com

Overall the web site doesn't feature new, "inventive" ways of navigation, superfluous Javascript animation, glossy frills or any other of the characteristics of the Web 2.0. Of course SimpleBits is not a "web application" or "social platform" such as Wikipedia or Riffs.com, but visual and structural design characteristics of the Web 2.0 are also applied to smaller web sites similar to SimpleBits.

So why is SimpleBits a good example of pragmatic web design? SimpleBits doesn't sacrifice clearness by applying an array of visual and animation effects in order to appear as technically highly advanced web site and does it without being boring. In fact it's all about finding a balance between all the aspects in a design. The reason why the visual style of the Web 2.0 has been mocked quite a bit is partially because of the excessive usage of all the visual traits which have become so typical for the Web 2.0. Glossy buttons, headers, drop shadows, reflections stars, bright, contrasting colours all have their own visual attractiveness when used with caution and sparingly. SimpleBits succeeds in applying this and not overdoing it, like a web site like Riffs.com does.

But apart from the balanced visual design, the technical side of the design should be up to par. So pragmatic web design ideally should involve hand coded and clearly structured markup (HTML and CSS). And web technologies should be applied where they are appropriate. So web sites build completely in Flash are out of the question. Flash can, however, be utilised as a media container for streaming video, web applications or non obtrusive animations. And when using relatively new technologies like AJAX or Javascript effects libraries it should be done with knowledge of the framework one is using.

All in all, pragmatic web design can be described as an attempt to find a sensible balance between the technical and visual aspects, without sacrificing both the attractiveness and usability of a web site. While most paradigms focus mainly on one of those two aspects and regularly take it to the extreme, pragmatic web

design should find a way in the middle, combining beautiful and elegant visual and structural design with top notch technical design.

Marc de Bruijn

MA Media Design, Piet Zwart Institute

Rotterdam, May 2007