

Problems in the web design: user's view

Introduction

People use Internet more and more for finding information, so it's very important that the web page satisfy the demands of users. It has to attract their attention, to lead them through the information, to motivate them to come back again and, in the first place, to give them quality information.

It's very difficult to give general instructions on how to make a good web site. The organization and design depend on the material that is being presented and also it's a matter of taste. However, with all types of web pages there is a need to pay attention to certain elements.

Original content is the key to a good web page

Presentation is very important element of good web design. There is no substitute for good content on a Website. Individuals and organizations alike can make a unique contribution to the World Wide Web.

Simply share what you know and think about the things that interest you. It doesn't really matter whether it's needlepoint, or motorcycle engines, or landscape architecture, or Unix tricks. After all, you think it's interesting, so it's a good bet that there are other people who think so, too. Building a good web page means putting some of yourself into your Webspace.

Fast-loading pages make Web-surfers happy

The thing that most people don't like about the Web is slow-loading page. Fast-loading pages make for more and happier visitors to the Website. The key to building fast-loading pages is to send less data. One solution is to build relatively small pages, and then use hyperlinks to connect these smaller pages into a larger Website. The other solution is to reduce the size of the graphics files.

The Web is not "What-You-See-Is-What-You-Get"

The Web is not "WYSIWYG". Well, actually, what you see is what you get, of course. The problem arises when you mistakenly assume that what you see is what everyone else gets. The problem is that there are millions of Websurfers out there who don't use your favourite browser, your video card, your screen settings, or even the same kind of computer as you.

Not everyone browses graphically. There are at least a million people in the world who, whether of necessity or by choice, don't browse graphically. That's a lot of readers. Because of that there is a need to build the pages that convey their message and navigate easily, even without graphics.

Sizing up the Browsers

When you're creating a web page, size matters. There's limited space to work with, and page elements take up standard amounts of space. It's a land of constraints. Unfortunately, each web browser has its own playing field with its own quirks.

We focus on

- Windows
- Macintosh

And on the following browsers:

- Netscape Navigator 3 and higher
- Internet Explorer 3 and higher

Offset

When you slap something into a web page, it doesn't appear right next to the edge of the web browser window. There's always a buffer between the window edge and the object. Unfortunately, this buffer isn't always the same, as the table below shows.

Key:

IE = Microsoft Internet Explorer

NN = Netscape Navigator (Communicator)

Win = Windows (98, 95, NT)

Mac = Macintosh

Browser	Horizontal offset	Vertical offset
IE 5.x (Win)	10	15
NN 4.x (Win)	8	8
NN 4.x (Mac)	8	8
IE 4.x (Win)	10	15
IE 4.x (Mac)	8	8
NN 3.x (Win)	10	15
NN 3.x (Mac)	8	8
IE 3.x (Win)	10	16

Measurements in pixels

Of course, there is a way to override the default browser offset:

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<BODY MARGINWIDTH=0 LEFTMARGIN=0 MARGINHEIGHT=0 TOPMARGIN=0>
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Using these attributes on the <BODY> tag means that your horizontal and vertical buffers will become zero. The bad news is that this does not work in Navigator 3.x, so you'll still have the default offset in that browser.

Canvas size

"To what size should I design my page?"- It's the eternal question.

The table shows the maximum canvas sizes at disposal for each resolution. These measurements were taken with the browsers in their default states after installation, with all those annoying toolbars showing. Many people never turn those things off and browse the Web through very small windows. In tests the Microsoft Windows taskbar at the bottom of PC screen was visible.

Browser	640x480 width	640x480 height	800x600 width	800x600 height
IE 5.x (Win)	600	275	760	395
NN 4.5+ (Win)	604	294	764	414
NN 4.0x (Win)	604	294	764	414
NN 4.5+ (Mac)	592	309	752	429
NN 4.0x (Mac)	582	315	742	435
IE 4.x (Win)	600	275	760	395
IE 4.5x (Mac)	563	318	723	438
IE 4.0x (Mac)	574	321	734	441
NN 3.x (Win)	600	270	760	390
NN 3.x (Mac)	582	306	742	426
IE 3.x (Win)	613	276	763	396
IE 3.x (Mac)	598	317	758	437

Measurements in pixels

Here's a highly annoying complication: When Microsoft Office is installed on a PC, the Office taskbar is automatically added to the right edge of the desktop. It's 43 pixels wide, which makes the overall canvas width 43 pixels less than what is listed above. There are lots of different numbers. It's not immediately clear which width and height you should design pages for.

Recommendations:

After analyzing the numbers and taking the Office taskbar into account, there are a few recommendations based on different scenarios.

Scenario designed for	640x480 width	640x480 height	800x600 width	800x600 height
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All browsers, both platforms (with MS Office taskbar)

557	270	717	390
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All browsers, both platforms (with MS Office taskbar) — ugly horizontal scrollbar showing or no right-hand offset in NN & IE				
567	270	727	390	

All browsers, both platforms (no MS Office taskbar)

563	270	723	390
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All browsers, both platforms (no MS Office taskbar) — ugly horizontal scrollbar and no right-hand offset in Mac IE 4.5				
574	270	734	390	

4.0+ browsers, PC platform (no MS Office taskbar)

600	275	760	395
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Measurements in pixels

- Playing it safe with the first recommendation means a relatively small canvas, but at least you'll be sure everyone can see your content.
- Focusing on browser versions 4.0 and higher (with MS Office taskbar) doesn't gain anything over designing for all versions.
- Focusing on all browser versions just on the Windows side doesn't gain anything either.

In summary, there are no easy answers about canvas size.

Reader-friendly web page

A reader-friendly web page is one that:

- Designs for readability first
- Relies on structural markup tags to highlight content
- Uses color sparingly and appropriately
- Avoids visually taxing, chaotic, competing presentations

Most people find reading from a computer screen inherently more difficult than reading from paper. The pages that visually overstimulate a reader are not only more difficult to read, but much more likely to result in eyestrain, fatigue, even headaches.

Not everyone who hits your page will have the latest and greatest in true-color technology. Some readers encounter the page while running minimal or monochrome video, while others employ browsers with limited or no color support, and still others are physically incapable of seeing certain colors. Designing a readable web page implies designing for monochrome first, and then adding color support. Thus it's crucial to create pages that are readable without color or font tricks. By implication, it's important to rely primarily on structural markup tags, rather than color or font size, to visually organize a page's contents. The color is best used as a secondary means of highlighting and emphasis.

Our eyes are basically "hard-wired" to respond to different signals in different portions of our visual field. Because of the basic distribution of different kinds of visual receptors inside our eyes, there is simply no way to juxtapose text and animation without having them compete with each other visually. Animations are certainly popular, but pages peppered with motion are nearly impossible to read. In this context, "animation" refers to motion of any kind: scrolling text, blinking text, animated gifs, and server-push animations. They all make a page inherently more difficult to read.

Focusing on readability doesn't mean abandoning aesthetics. Careful use of well-balanced, well-contrasting colors, correctly applied, can be a very effective way to help organize a page visually.

New technologies on the Web

Progressive technologies on the Web like CSS, DHTML, ASP, Flash, ... offer lots of possibilities in the web design, but they are not used so much in Croatia. The reason for this situation is that in Croatia there is still a large number of users with an old version of a browser or with some other browsers that don't support these new technologies and also a lot of people are not enough informed about the possibilities of these technologies.

Design guidelines

The guidelines below are widely accepted throughout the web site design industry, and will help make the page more attractive, and user friendly.

- First, main page (including HTML, graphics, etc.) should be under 80KB in size, and at the maximum should take 20 seconds to download at 56k.
- The designer should tell the visitors what the site is about with the main page and he should grab the user's attention, otherwise the user will leave.
- Don't require more than four clicks on the scrollbar to get to the bottom of a page.
- Always put contact information on your site so that people can e-mail you with complaints, suggestions, and compliments. Try to reply to all e-mail within 48 hours.
- The more often you update your site, the more visitors you will get. Change your site at least once a week. You don't have to spend hours modifying the entire site -- just 10-15 min/day will do.
- Content, content, and content. Your site can't be like everyone else's, it can't just be a couple of pictures that you stole off another site and called it "Bob's page." It has to be unique and provide interesting content that you can't find anywhere else.
- Make sure that you properly promote your site. Visit sites that have a theme similar to yours; check out how they've made their pages, learn from their mistakes, and offer to exchange links.
- On the web, it's not "Build it and they will come." It's "Promote it and they will come, and keep promoting it, and they will keep on coming." Once you stop promoting your site and updating it with fresh content, people will stop visiting.
- Test your site with different browsers, screen resolutions, and color settings. If you must have a web page for the newest browser(s), then offer visitors to your site an alternative. Making your entire site for only the newest browsers will cut your visitors by 10% or more.
- Make sure all the links on your web page work.
- Make sure all the images on your site work. It gives your visitors a poor first impression if images don't load, and they will often leave. One common mistake is that the path to the images looks like this: ``.
- Check and recheck your spelling, especially if you're trying to run a business over the Internet. Use a spell checker. Having lots of mistakes makes your site look like an amateur made it.
- If you are selling something through your site, state it up front on your main page; don't force people to go down four links before finding out that you are selling something. If you are selling

more than a handful of items, create separate pages for each product group or family. Give a picture of the product(s) that you are selling. Tell people why they need it. Assure them that their credit card is secure, and offer an address and phone number.

- Keep your site consistent throughout. Don't have a different background color on every page, or a different navigation scheme. Try to have at least one small icon on every page on your site, somewhere at the top preferably, so that people will know they are still at your site.
- Make navigation on your site easy. Have navigation links at the top, bottom, left or right side of the page. Use tables instead of frames.
- If you have to use Java on your site, offer your visitors an alternative right up front. Java can be slow and buggy, and it tends to crash browsers.
- Try to keep the number of clicks required to get from your main page to any other page on your site down to four. If it's more than that, you may have to re-consider your navigation scheme.
- Do not have sound "autoplay" whenever someone visits your web site. Having music auto-play can even crash some browsers.
- Keep the number of 468 X 60 banners on each page down to a maximum of 2.
- Make sure all the text on your site is easy to read. Avoid "busy" background images that draw the attention of the visitor away from the text.
- In general, use anything outside of a white or black background with caution. White backgrounds are used for sites with a lot of text content, while black backgrounds are usually used to achieve an effect of "coolness."
- Don't get too discouraged early on. Everyone has to start somewhere. Keep working on it.

Conclusion-As Simple as Possible

The virtues of simplicity are well known among experienced systems designers. And many of the things that are "right" with simpler software systems are also applicable to web pages and site designs.

- Simpler is easier to use.
- Simpler is more stable and less prone to error.
- Simpler is more compatible.
- Simpler is easier to maintain.