

Web designers rule – okay?



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Awarning to readers here: the first part of this article is aimed squarely at web designers — or those who can possibly influence web designers — and may appear at first glance to be a smidgeon too technical for most users. However, if there are times when you cannot read what appears on a given website for a host of reasons (font size too small, font colour blending with background, links in confusing colours), then please read on...

Fads sweep through the internet much like anywhere else. Two years ago, all navigational menus on the world wide web had to have 'rollovers', or little snippets of javascripting code that makes an image change as the mouse pointer rolls over it. Eye candy for the most part, but of limited functional use if the site's users had trouble working out what the navigational elements were meant to do.

Last year, the Fad of the Month (for almost twelve months, alas) became javascripted drop-down menus which appeared from 'hot spots' scattered around the page. Usually, there was an attempt to place them logically in a fashion similar to drop-down menus in regular operating systems like Windows or MacOS, but as the year wore on, more inventive placements of sprouting menus were found. Of course, the user had no choice as to the placement or size of the drop-down menus, and in many instances could not even read the text that 'sprouted', but no matter — web designers rule and that's okay (I can say this with some confidence and arrogance, as a web designer).

This year's fad is much more problematic. Why? Because it has the imprimatur of the august body of web gurus, W3C. For those who are unaware, W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) was founded by Tim Berners-Lee in October 1994 — at around the time of the launch of ALIANet, incidentally — to develop common protocols that ensure the interoperability of the web. This joint initiative promotes universal access to the web, and is a guiding hand in the development of many of the protocols that govern how we use the web today.

And what is the fad? In reality, it is going to be much more than a passing fad. Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) were developed as a simple mechanism for adding style (for example: fonts, colours, spacing) to web documents. Indeed, CSS level 1 was thrust into web designers' hands back in the early part of 1997, but it has taken until now to build browsers capable of displaying CSS in all its glory. As W3C states:

'One of the fundamental features of CSS is that style sheets cascade; authors can attach a preferred style sheet, while the reader may have a personal style sheet to adjust for human or technological handicaps. The rules for resolving conflicts between different style sheets are defined in the specifications.'

If only web designers were aware of this. However, designers have seen the opportunity to force users into viewing a site in the way that the designer would like them to see it (and, admittedly, CSS does help significantly in working around some of the limitations of ordinary html), rather than focus on allowing the user to decide what display properties are most appropriate.

Modern web browsers have the capacity to dictate a base font, and size — and although many users prefer the default Times New Roman 12 point, experienced users (or those who wear glasses to read computer) benefit from adjusting the font to a sharper onscreen font, and to a different size (smaller or larger, depending upon eyesight and content view). Cascading style sheets interfere with this process, and whilst it is possible to negate style sheets by turning off the facility, many designers of sites that extensively employ style sheets are unaware of how their pride and joy will look with CSS turned off.

But back to W3C's aims: 'to allow readers the ability to have a personal style sheet to adjust for human or technological handicaps'. Obviously, vision-impaired users may well wish to override the style sheets proffered and use their own, large, sharper styles. However, it takes some skill to develop a suitable style sheet that may be employed to override all sites visited, and in some instances the style sheet cannot correct mistakes made by the site designer. A solution is to turn off style sheets altogether, negating the usefulness of the whole process.

Pitfalls exist here, though. A common problem experienced with CSS turned off (try Netscape's own website with style sheets turned off for a graphic example) is the propensity of designers to use blue-hued backgrounds and blue text links. Of course, if CSS was turned on, those blue links may well turn yellow, or much bigger and bolder, or even at the top of the page instead of at the foot.

I've been called in on numerous occasions to resolve these kinds of issues on websites that have tried to get too smart by employing CSS to impart a radical look and feel. Try turning off style sheets in your browser and see how different the world can look! It certainly adds a whole new dimension to 'making the web accessible to all', doesn't it? ■