Better browsers?
Or better websites?

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Should we laugh or should we cry? One of the first press announcements that I read this year decreed that researchers at the University of West Florida have created a pageless web browser based on concept mapping (concept maps, a learning tool created in the 1970s, use diagrams to illustrate how a topic is related to other subjects). Apparently the US Navy and NASA are funding the project. Which does not surprise me in the least.

With the advent of Netscape 6.0, a good deal of interest has been generated in the development and application of web browsers for the first part of the 21st century. There is little doubt that development of web browsing software has long gone off the rails, and followed the trend of almost all other software: on a well-trodden path to bloatware. Those with a memory for such things will remember and marvel at how computers once had the capacity to store an entire operating system on a single floppy disk, and still leave room for word-processing or spreadsheet software. Even early web browsers were small and compact enough to be fast and easy to use (I still have a copy of Mosaic 1.0), yet even the so-called lightweight browsers of today (iCab, Opera) are now growing suspiciously large to accommodate an ever-growing feature set that users allegedly demand.

I say 'allegedly' because I have yet to meet a user of web browsing software that has complained about the lack of features embedded in the code of his or her favourite browser. Indeed, most users I know quickly dismiss websites that demand features unavailable through their web browser. This should be of concern to web designers, but unfortunately there is often a serious disconnect between designers and users.

Many of the e-lists that I subscribe to discuss the ineffectiveness of websites almost daily, and whilst I take a keen interest in users who complain that their favourite website is now unusable or almost impossible to extract the information that they want, it seems that the bulk of their complaints stem from poor software at both ends, combined with a lack of communication between the user and the website owner.

Poor software is indeed a problem. Standards are forever growing and changing to the extent that few web browser users today would have a pleasurable experience in using first-generation web browser software — websites have moved on, and indeed most demand that end-users have software that is less than five years old, or is capable of dealing with the myriad of features that are presented. However, it is also true that most end-users take little interest in updating their web browser software any more. In the heady days of web development back in the late 20th century, internet users were keen to adopt the latest software available to them to browse the web. The landscape has changed significantly these days, and it is rare to find anyone who is eager to try the latest and greatest web browser, unless the browser in question is smaller in size, or faster to display pages, or cheaper (in other words, cheaper than free!) — or any of these factors combined.

The reliance of users on software that is not contemporary places a considerable burden on web designers who wish to push the envelope (to be on the bleeding edge of technology). I would argue that many web designers do not consider this an issue at all, judging by the complaints that are aired on e-lists that I subscribe to. This creates a problem for the end-user in that their voices are not always heard. Certainly, end-users who cannot access a website are often tempted to dismiss the issue as being peculiar to their own conditions, but in most cases this is simply untrue. I could name a large list of big company websites that simply do not work at all, and could cite an even larger list of websites that do not work in the way intended, thus obscuring the intent of the site altogether.

However, as an affected end-user, there is a way of getting the message across. Users should complain about sites that they cannot use, and complain loudly (but politely). There should be no need for users to install extra plug-ins into their browsers just to be able to view a website, or the content contained therein. Users should not be disadvantaged by having older software, nor should they be disadvantaged if they choose to use settings allowable within their web browser that render certain sites unreadable (as an aside, I once had to troubleshoot for an end-user who had set his browser preferences to display white text instead of the usual black, and combined this with a preference to have a white background as well...). But where do we complain to?

If a website has an e-mail address that identifies the web manager, then use it — documenting the problem as you see it. If there is no identifiable e-mail address, then the site should probably be dismissed as unworthy of comment in the first place. However, there is usually a way to second-guess what the address should be, even if it is not visible. Most websites have the following valid addresses linked to their domain: 'webmaster', 'postmaster', and 'root'. For example, webmaster@alia.org.au will find its way to the owner of the website, or an identifiable real person, as will postmaster@alia.org.au, and root@alia.org.au. This is not always foolproof, however, and further investigation may be required to find out exactly who to complain to — but I will discuss how to do this in a forthcoming article. ∎