

So who's at fault, anyway?

Blame the web browser software — or perhaps the web designer



Ivan Trundle

Manager, systems
and publishing

I took part in an interesting discussion last week that revolved around the vexed issue of web-browser software crashing due to poorly-written code — the debate pivoted from the issue of poorly-written code in the web-browser software itself to the matter of poor html markup in web documents that then cause crashes or errors. The end-result is the same: frustration levels experienced by the end-user rise to extraordinary levels, and the transmission of data contained within that vital web page fails or is compromised.

So what can be done? Who is at fault? Should web-browser software coders be forced to make a better mousetrap? Hardly likely — I think that we have all come to expect that with endless lines of code, most modern-day software capable of doing a complicated task will crash all too frequently. Wishful thinking encourages me to believe that one day all software developers will see the light and make their software simpler to build, simpler to debug, and simpler to use. The advent of wizards, helpers and other associated agents only exacerbates the problem — software is most certainly not getting any simpler to use, no matter what the marketing people tell you — and 'feature-bloat' is forcing even the printed manuals to be abandoned in favour of the ubiquitous online computerised 'help'. I look forward to the day when new software arrives on the market that not only takes up less space, but also has less features!

Jakob Neilson [<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/>] is one person among many who attempt to analyse software usage trends across the internet. His latest testing has shown conclusively that fewer and fewer people are upgrading to newer web-browsing software: take-up of the latest web-browsers has slowed to an all-time low of one per cent per week. This, however, is old news — more-recent news suggests that take-up of new software is even slower, and unlikely to achieve true market saturation experienced in the heady days when web-browser software actually cost money.

Why is this so? In the early days of the web experience of the internet, a typical user was not only proficient at downloading new web-browser software but was also desperately waiting for a new version to arrive. Each new version promised an ever-expanding feature set that the typical user of that era wanted to use to enhance the web-browsing experience. Those days are all but over. Most users these days either don't know or

don't care for the latest upgrades. And when one considers that it is all-but impossible to fit the average browser software onto a floppy disk these days, the only opportunity for upgrading is by laborious downloading directly from the 'net. I also believe that the net community is becoming less concerned with the tools and more with the content.

At the other end...

Web design has stagnated over the past few years, and most users (visitors to websites) prefer a website user-interface that is less-cluttered, faster, and more navigable. The back-to-basics mantra is all-pervasive, especially since few people have the time to sit and wait for that precious navigation image-map to download. Plenty of text links, small navigational buttons, and a clean and simple-to-use web design are all hallmarks of good design. This is something that was common knowledge years ago, but seems to have been forgotten in the rush to embrace java-scripting, image maps, stylesheets and pictures galore. Sure, the fancy sites look pretty to the CEOs on the local network, but pity the poor user struggling at home with a simple phone line, 28.8K modem, and an ancient 16MHz processor. Lets face it: many businesses cope with less, even now.

And this is where some more interesting statistics crop up. A website that proclaims to know the answers, StatMarket [<http://www.statmarket.com/> — though there are others, too], is busily collecting statistics on the configurations of internet-connected computers. Some compelling data is available on the configuration of computers browsing the web.

An interesting dilemma surfaces at this point. Here at ALIANet we have endless discussions about what is the minimum standard user equipment and configuration we should be considering when building ALIANet web pages. If only ten per cent of our intended audience use a web browser or computer configuration that precludes the user from viewing our pages comfortably, should we redesign our pages to suit? The statistics from Statmarket show that a significant seventeen per cent of the potential web audience have a maximum screen resolution of 640 by 480 pixels. Bearing in mind that many web designers assume a screen resolution of 800 x 600 pixels, seventeen per cent of the potential audience will be affected. If only more web managers and designers would take this and other user factors into consideration when building their website... ■

NEWSPAPERS WANTED

- Bound volumes or long runs. All 19th and 20th century Australian and overseas newspapers
- Also popular MAGAZINES (e.g. *Life*, *Look*, *Women's Weekly*, etc.) to 1970

PAPER WORLD

Alan Waters, Paper World Pty Ltd
Level 1, 48 Clifton Street, Prahran, Vic 3181
Ph: (03) 9529 6888 Fax: (03) 9529 6388
E-mail: alan@paperworld.com.au
(Member of the Ephemera Society of Australia)

Libraries Alive!

The practitioners' consortium - an independent Australian consulting company creating library services for the 21st century. Verve and zest in information management?

For details please contact

Ian McCallum

on (02) 6257 9177 or email at ian.mccallum@alianet.alia.org.au