Frames to the left, frames to the right...

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A new fad is sweeping the web world at the moment, and it is ugly. We have seen quite a few fads over the past few years, and whilst some can enhance the end-user's experience, this one rarely does. Yet, strangely enough, more and more sites insist on wrapping up their site in frames. For the uninitiated, frames are used to divide your web browser into discrete sections, displayed all in the one browser window. Each frame can display a unique html document, and invariably one of the frames has a navigational panel that changes the content of another frame, depending upon the selection.

The current fad involves putting a scrollable frame within an entire frame, so that the user has to navigate with elements on both sides of the predominant window. This leads to problems if your window cannot be made large enough to display all of the frames with content, and the resultant scroll bars appear to force the user to scroll from text-block to text block. A classic example of this can be found at a number of conference sites: one site even had a sponsor listing in a scrollable window, which would not have pleased the tail-ender at all.

There is absolutely no reason these days to use frames, and tests have shown that users cannot follow the logical navigation elements presented in such a format. Additionally, most web browser software has trouble in properly identifying frame sets, thus thwarting attempts by users to bookmark relevant material, or forward a URL to others. Users with smaller-than-normal monitor screens also have trouble with frames, in that the frames often do not fit onto the pixel-deprived environment of a Palm Pilot, or WAP-enabled phone. In short, framed pages become tedious and clumsy to interact with.

The mere fact that URL identifiers stop working when using frames should be compelling enough for designers to avoid them like the plague. A prominent local frame-bound website (belonging to a fledgling energy company) requires the loading of six separate html pages just to see the main screen — and if your monitor is not capable of displaying 1000 horizontal pixels across your screen, then the information must be browsed by constantly scrolling across *and* down. Usability problems are compounded when textual information is scattered across the framesets — invariably these websites fail to achieve any level of disability usability (check http://cast.org/bobby/ to test your favourite website's rating), and in many cases even simple navigation is made very difficult by sprinkling information around a web browser window.

One recognised failing of framed pages is the inability to be absolutely certain when printing that the current frame has been identified and selected. Nor is it always assumed that the entire set of frames can be printed together, resulting in a loss of often important data. Indeed, many printers are even incapable of representing horizontally-scrolling text on paper at all.

But even with these issues being well-known amongst the web community (and a few more, such as the inability of many search engines to identify and link properly to a page within a frameset, and the problems associated with users opening new windows with frame subsets, as happens when working with multiple windows), more and more examples appear daily. Some are ludicrous, some are laughable, and some are downright user-unfriendly. All have undoubtedly impressed the chief executive of the company to such an extent that the designer has been given the go-ahead to carry on — regardless.

What is missing in all of this is the mechanism for real users to provide feedback and force changes if required. There are websites that make the procedure of offering feedback simple, and there are those that do their utmost to prevent feedback. If you get stuck in searching for a culprit to send constructive advice to, there is always 'webmaster@ [domain name]', where '[domain name]' may be substituted with the domain in question. And, believe it or not, you may find that the webmaster is quite responsive to constructive comment. I have been pleasantly surprised by a number of quite major websites (both in Australia and overseas) that have responded very quickly to comments about the practicality of accessing certain pages. Readers may be surprised to hear that even the major corporations can act quickly in response to such approaches — but in so many cases they have simply not tested their site on a diverse population of users. This is often in marked contrast to print material, television advertising, or billboards, which is extensively researched and tested prior to being launched on an unsuspecting public. ∎