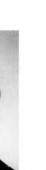# The demise of the web designer

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In the process of interviewing candidates for web developer positions, it is always interesting to discover emerging attitudes towards the 'bells and whistles' approach to web design. I suggest 'emerging', because the candidates that make it to the shortlist are invariably young, fresh from university or elsewhere, and full of ideas about the future of the web.

Invariably some candidates trip up when asked about frames (*inCite*, July 2000) and proceed to describe how frames are the best thing since sliced bread or plastic corks. Yet in the real world, it is amazing to observe how so many (from web developer to chief executive officers and managing directors) create websites that utilise frames and ponderous graphics, without realising that search engines will trawl these pages and send users to pages with no navigational elements at all. Of course, the hapless CEO will be unaware of the problem because in general there are too few CEOs using the web — but there is no excuse for the web developer.

Another question that raises candidates' eyebrows is one of styles, and style sheets. Style sheets (or CSS — cascading style sheets) are an attempt to allow greater control of the 'look and feel' of a given website through the implementation of either site-wide or page-specific styles. The intention was to give web developers the ability to dictate the colours, fonts, sizes and positioning of all elements on a given web page. In theory, this is a wonderful thing for designers. However, in practice, it fails miserably — in many instances. Why? Because what a designer would like you to see is not always congruent with what you would like to see. For example, I browse the web with style sheets turned off — pages load faster and I can see the text in a font and size that is suitable for me. With style sheets off, some sites (including Netscape, believe it or not) are almost impossible to view and navigate. Style sheets, when built well, can do wonderful things to the look and feel of a website. However, it is extremely rare for web developers to create a comprehensive set of style sheets that degrade gracefully for those of us that are either incapable of, or merely wish to avoid, stylesheets.

I was asked the other day why we do not utilise style sheets on ALIAnet. The simple answer is that style sheets are an imposition, just like untagged graphics (I will revisit untagged graphics in a future article). This imposition forces users of a website to view it through the designers eyes, with scant regard for the users preferences. For example, I view web pages through my browser with 9-point Geneva, a font specifically designed for screen renditions — and at a size (9-point) that is compact and able to fit the most information onto a given screen without scrolling endlessly. The fact that others in this office are incapable of reading computer screens with anything less than 14 point type is an indication that we are all different, and have different needs. I also have a preference for sans-serif fonts, which are more-easily rendered on screen clearly than the venerable default Times or Times New Roman (both of which were never intended to be displayed on computer screens, but I digress here).

All of this paints a picture of little progress in the 'bells and whistles' department. Certainly, the rush to deploy new web browsers with new features on the desktops of the world has slowed dramatically over recent years. And plug-ins to enhance or provide specific features have also dropped off in popularity — so much so that many users simply do not bother to apply plug-ins because of the time and effort required to install them (not to mention the registration process).

But it is not all bleak. One of the more encouraging trends to emerge over the past year has been the advent of 'common elements' of either navigation or structure in website design. Most good sites now contain fewer or smaller graphics, more streamlined navigation, or search engine tools that actually work — or a combination of all of these.

The success of most enduring sites over the next few years (I hesitate to suggest a longer time frame) will be measured by how much others copy the same elements of design, and offer the same method of navigation. Eventually, one could safely predict that all major websites of a certain genre will all have the same 'look and feel'. This bodes well for the end-user (from information professional to casual user) but is probably not such encouraging news for the web designer! ∎