

eb design in the age of uncertainty

In this month's column I will be taking a closer look not at specific ways to create HTML techniques, but how to make your web site more viewer-friendly for both MacOS and Windows surfers.

Before you begin to design your website, you need to consider not only how it will look, but also consider navigation and interactivity. You must keep in mind that no two browsers will display your work of art the same way, and they won't be able to take advantages of cutting-edge technologies, regardless of which platform you are designing your site for. Take for example that Netscape Navigator will correctly display your carefully created highlighted images that you made using JavaScript programming language, while Microsoft Internet Explorer will ignore it, and depending on the type of JavaScript code you use, may even cause errors when the viewer passes their mouse over the images, causing a very unpleasant experience. Not only will this happen using a Macintosh, but on a Windows computer as well. It seems that both Netscape and Microsoft have different views on how browsers display HTML code, and what features they will support.

Planning out your site is the key

Now that you may have a general idea of the topic of your site, or maybe you already have a site that is currently on-line and you are thinking of re-designing it or adding more features, you will need to blueprint your site. This will enable you to add all the content that you need while getting an idea of the total package, thus allowing your site to grow without backing yourself into a corner and making your site look thrown together. While you are planning out your site, you should also think of what value-added features you will like to add. This can include a vast array of goodies, including animation, audio, video, Java, JavaScript, Flash, frames, tables

and so on.

However, somewhere you will need to draw a line regarding much you want to include and decide whether or not your target audience will benefit from from these features. Usually, this will mean that you will create your site for a particular platform or even a specific browser. While there is nothing wrong with this approach, it could mean that you will create a site that potentially will be unusable to many viewers. Many sites on the Internet are designed to be viewed by one type of browser, and they are either unaware or don't care that users that choose to use another type of browser will be unable to use their site, and could lead to a loss of business or enjoyment. But the sites that give the viewer a choice of what the site contains, and give options to download certain browsers or plug-ins, are the sites that will get repeat visits, for they have taken the time to insure that their site can be viewed across many platforms using many browsers.

Looking good at any cost

So, you may next ask how to make your site look good for everyone. Well, the answer to that question is still unknown because there are many platforms that use the Internet: MacOS, Windows, Sun, SGI, UNIX and so on. While this is what makes the Internet so great, it can cause headaches for web designers. The best piece of advice is to take the time to look at your developments on as many of these platforms as possible, and view them through the most popular browsers as well to see how others will be viewing your work.

Many surveys have been conducted regarding the internet user population which report that over 60% of the surfers use Netscape Navigator, and 60% use Windows. But the surveys have reported that well over 70% of the sites designed were created on the MacOS, thus causing even more headaches. One of the first problems you may run into is how the images you create will display on different operating systems due to the differences in color lookup tables. This can lead to incredible horror, especially after you have spent countless hours creating that "perfect" image on your Mac, only to have a look on your friends Windows machine and see that it appears quite horrible. Other problems that will encounter include the use of type, since both the MacOS and Windows have different default fonts installed on their system, and also have different point sizes set as the default in their browser (see my August Edition column for a little more info on the FONT tag). This can lead to unwanted effects if you are trying to wrap type around images.

Microsoft Internet Explorer has decided that it will support a different standard of JavaScript, and numerous sites that you visit that has script

customized for Netscape Navigator will not work or may even cause error messages. Tables can also cause a great deal of problems across platforms and browsers since the default screen resolution is different, which can cause unwanted effects such as items not aligning properly. It could even cause more problems than that if a background image is used along the left-hand side, and a table is built around it for navigation. Web pages that use techniques such as these may display with unwanted effects on another system.

Putting it all together

While you are in the planning stages, take a look around at what others are doing, and see if some of the features could benefit your site. Then, after you plan out your site, find out what special plug-ins, helper applications etc. will be needed to view all of your features, and exactly what browser will correctly use those features. As a rule of thumb, if you create a site that takes advantage of browser specific features and add-ons, you should always create an alternative page of content, or have a way for the viewer to download the necessary components in the opening section of your site.

One of the best places that you can begin your research is at lynda.com <<http://www.lynda.com>>. This site will give you some general tips on the specifics of creating a site that will benefit the majority of viewers. While you are there, you can download color tables that will help you create browser-safe non-dithering images in your favorite program, as well as information on the best book available on this very subject, Designing Web Graphics 2, by Lynda Weinman. This book is by far the best single source for learning how to prepare images and media for the web. If you are serious about web design, this book is a "must have." But, if you are just creating a web page for yourself, or for a friend or relative, many resources are available on the Internet to explain more in-depth ways of creating a site that is both functional and pleasurable to a vast majority of browsers and platforms.

Further Resources:

Web Reference @ <http://www.webreference.com>

HTML Goodies @ <http://www.htmlgoodies.com>

BrowserWatch @ <http://www.browserwatch.iworld.com/stats.html>

HTML Standards @ <http://www.w3.org/pub/WWW/MarkUp/>

Hot Tip:

Designing a web site on a Macintosh has many advantages. You'll have the luxury of access to some of the best tools available for HTML and graphics creation, but also the ability to view your site as a Windows machine will

without spending thousands of dollars. Simply pick-up a copy of either Insignia's SoftWindows (which by the way, you can get a used copy of version 2 from the Usenet Newsgroups for under \$50) or Connectix's VirtualPC, both for around \$150. This will enable you to look at your creation before you publish on the web, and insure that many users of many different operating systems will be able to enjoy your work of art.

Remember, it's up to you how you design your web site. But, to have a site that is both functional and effective, knowing the limits of the different browsers and platforms could be the difference between a good web site and a great web site.

These are just some of the many ways you can add a bit more life to your new or existing website and you can experiment with these tips to produce just the right look for your site. If you are interested, you can visit my newly redesigned website at <http://junior.apk.net/~rjl/> to take a look at some of my current work, which now includes animation, JavaScripts, mouseovers and audio to get a few design ideas to help you get started.

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