Browser craziness and your friendly website designer

I was trying to help friend and occasional cohort Rick Altman develop a menu system for his website. We found that the beautiful menu in Microsoft's Internet Explorer looked somewhat ugly (although it worked) in Netscape Navigator 6. In Netscape Navigator 4, it was downright ugly, so we created a warning that told NN4 users that they were in for a (not necessarily pleasant) "experience".

I also looked at the site with several browsers running on the Mac and the results ranged from perfect to acceptable.

We hadn't counted on Opera, though. With Opera, the menu simply disappeared. The Opera user who arrived a Rick's front door wasn't able to go any further.

The problem, as I wrote to Rick, is that one browser is like a car with rubber tires designed for a concrete road, another browser is like a car with concrete tires designed for a rubber road. But the route we're on is a cow path paved with cow-chips.

Version 3 browsers were incompatible. A site could be designed for Netscape (the market leader at the time) or for Microsoft (still an upstart then). The W3C (WWW Consortium) was promoting "standards" and a lot of us had hopes that version 4 browsers would comply.

%#$@!! standards

Microsoft gave it a good shot. Explorer 4 wasn't exactly in full compliance, but it was a lot closer than Navigator 4. In some ways, Netscape widened the gap with version 4. Meanwhile, Microsoft designed its version 5 to be more compliant with the W3C standards. Netscape didn't release a version 5 so website designers continued to deal with multiple standards.

With Explorer 6, Microsoft has hit a home run in my estimation. The browser closely complies with W3C standards. Nestcape's version 6 is also largely compliant, but the browser breaks functions that worked in version 4. My theory is that the problem is how the browser identifies itself to the HTTP server, but that's not based on anything more substantial than a guess.

Opera, the browser from Norway, has been largely standards compliant from the outset, but it's so totally committed to standards that it sometimes fails where MSIE or NN succeed. So when Opera should be receiving applause, it is cursed.

And that's only the Windows side of the issue.

Most computers in general use (80 to 90 percent) are PCs running some version of Windows. Most of the remaining 10 percent are Macs running System 8 or 9. A few are Macs running OSX (which is really Unix). Microsoft, Netscape, and Opera all have browsers for the Mac but their compatibility and capabilities vary widely.

Add to this the small number of users who are running Unix or Linux browsers (some from companies you've never heard of) and to the vision-impaired users who would prefer that browsers all run in a text-based mode and you'll understand why one size does not fit all.

Unless you have unlimited funds, there simply is no way to make a website that fills everyone's needs — that looks good in every browser.

The pragmatic view

Pragmatists are politically unpopular. So are website designers who design for a single browser, and that's doubly so if the browser happens to be one made by Microsoft.

Well, tough.

I'm not independently wealthy and neither are most of my clients. If we were, I might not be pragmatic. But wishes aren't horses and beggars don't ride on the Internet.

When I examine website statistics and see that 90% of the visitors are using Microsoft's Internet Explorer (version 5 or 6), it's clear where development efforts should go. That's not to say that I go out of my way to make a site that doesn't work for Netscape or Opera or LYNX, but it is to say that if a design decision comes down to something that looks great on MSIE and lousy on Netscape, I'll probably do it.

Cascading style sheets (CCS) are one example of this. Netscape 6 understands CSS, but version 4 is clueless — particularly when it comes to vertical spacing. CSS is the future. It's been blessed by W3C and by Microsoft. Microsoft has supported CSS well since version 5 (and partially in version 4). CSS-based sites look "OK" in Netscape, except for vertical spacing and a few esoteric functions. I can do without the esoteric functions, but I make extensive use of vertical spacing in most of my sites.

The result? Those who view the site with MSIE think it looks great, but those who use Netscape (including some of my clients) think the site's vertical spacing looks lousy. It does, but at most 10% of the visitors see the problem.

Making a site accessible to visually impaired people is even more of a problem. Ideally, every site should be accessible but the problem once again is cost. I can tell you that I create an "ALT" tag for every image and call my site "accessible", but that isn't quite the case.

If a page uses tables to position elements it is, by definition, not accessible. Unfortunately, absent full CSS support by existing browsers, tables are the best solution for most designers. I sincerely regret being unable to make a page that is at once suitable to the client and accessible, but it's the client who pays. In an ideal world, we wouldn't have to deal with this kind of trade-off.

So I'll do what I can to make any website I work on as accessible as I can make it within the constraints set by the client and by good design. What I won't do is spend an enormous amount of my time and the client's money to improve the site so that a tiny percentage of the visitors will be able to use it.

And, yes, I'm sorry about that.

The good news

The Web of the future will run on XHTML or maybe on XML. Both of these languages are far more strict than anything we've seen to date. Better still, they offer the ability to specify one kind of formatting for the screen and another for print.

It won't happen this year or next, but websites will become more standardized and more accessible. When designers find that 90% of the users are viewing sites with browsers that provide for both compatibility and accessibility, sites will be designed for compatibility and accessibility.

Until then, all I can say is what television stations say when the signal goes to pot: "*The trouble is NOT in your set.*" ß

The skeptic wonders

I recently received a warning. It said "A marginally legal but definitely time-wasting scam is floating around. It's 'Cardwish'. You get an e-mail saying that 'someone' has sent you a greeting card, and giving a link to click 'in order to retrieve the card.'"

You've already seen the first obvious sign of a scam. The e-mail says "someone" has sent you a greeting card. If I receive something that says "someone" sent me something, there's no way I'm going to click on the link. If the claim is that someone **whose name and e-mail address I recognize** sent me a greeting, I'll click on it (if I recognize the card vendor) or I'll check out the card vendor before clicking.

The warning I received continued, "When you go there, you are teased through disclosing all your personal information … data that shouldn't be necessary in order to just see a card somebody sent."

Indeed! So there's the next obvious sign of a scam. If any site asks you for personal information, it's the same as if somebody phones out of the blue and starts asking for information. Unless you're a fool, you're not going to give an unknown caller information.

The warning continues, "Then you are asked to pick a charity. You are asked to make a donation to that charity 'in order to see your card.' I didn't get that far, but it's likely the card you finally get is a thank-you card for the donation."

Yeah. Even more likely is that the charity (if it's a valid charity) will receive a tiny fraction of what you've "donated". Be careful out there! ß

Looking for a digital camera? Check this …

Inventor Carver Mead says film is headed for the scrap pile. His company, Foveon, is shipping sensing circuitry for digital cameras. The new technology is reported to be so good that it literally matches film.

Sigma, a lesser-known Japanese camera and lens maker says it will begin shipping cameras with the sensors by the end of February and that the first models will sell for about $3000. Depending on how many manufacturers adopt the technology, prices for cameras with the new sensors could be selling for around $1000 within a year.

National Semiconductor will be manufacturing the chips for Foveon and the initial specs aren't overwhelming – about 3.5 million pixels. That's toward the high end of today's consumer market, but what's interesting is this: Images from the sensor look like they were made by a camera with 7-million-pixel resolution – and cameras in that range aren't available elsewhere for less than about $5000.

Eastman Kodak is reportedly planning to use the new sensors in some cameras and – if that happens – it's a virtual certainty that manufacturers such as Nikon, Olympus, Canon and the other big-name manufacturers will follow.

Photo marketers know that there are more than 5 billion film cameras worldwide and see replacing all those cameras as an immense marketing effort. Digital camera sales are currently running about 8 million per year in the US and another 10 million elsewhere in the world.

Mead was instrumental in developing technologies that led to huge changes in the semiconductor industry. In the 1970s, he developed processes that led to VLSI (very large system integration), which allowed manufacturers to cram tens of thousands of transistors onto a single chip. Single chips now contain millions of transistors. ß