

The State of Web Site Usability (May 2003)

Southeast Michigan Chapter of the Usability
Professionals' Association

May 29, 2003

Keith Instone

instone@user-experience.org

<http://user-experience.org/>

© 2003 Keith Instone

Who am I?

- Information Architect, ibm.com User Experience team
- Former IA Consultant, Argus Associates
- Retiree: HCI VL, usableweb.com, CHI-WEB, CHI volunteer
- Computer Science → HCI → Hypertext → Web usability → IA
- State: Ohio

The Information Architecture of my talk

The State of Web Site Usability?

The State of the Web?

The State of Web Sites?

The State of Web Site Usability?

The State of the Web?

What does "World-Wide Web" mean? (Roy Fielding, 1996)

- The Project
 - Collaboration on a Global Scale
- The Protocols
 - URI, HTML, HTTP
- The Applications
 - Clients and Servers
 - Browsers, Agents, Proxies, Gateways
- The Information
 - For every topic, there is at least one fanatic

Site Genres (from The Design of Sites)

- Personal e-commerce
- News mosaics
- Community conference
- Self-service government
- Nonprofits as networks of help
- Grassroots information sites
- Valuable company sites
- Educational forums
- Stimulating arts and entertainment
- Web apps that work
- Enabling intranets

My State of the Web

- Collaboration on a Global Scale
 - “Semantic web”: idea stage, pockets of progress
- Protocols & Applications
 - Technology: done (pieces fit together reasonably well)
 - Style sheets (for separating content and presentation): almost there
 - Browser usability improvements: dead
 - XML, RSS, portlets, etc. for building experiences from components: working now, with effort
 - Site-building tools (“usable out of the box”): lots of work needed here
- Information / Genres
 - Evolution is kicking in (if there is money to be made/saved, usability is improving)
 - Patterns, aka copycat web design: more copying of the usable features, less of the cool ones
 - Each genre is at a different state: “Web Apps that Work” seems to have the most challenges

The State of Web Sites?

- The boundaries of web sites are getting fuzzy
 - Old days: Build a site and get traffic there
- Web technology like RSS, XML makes it easier to take the content to the user and not require the user to come to the content
 - Tim Bray's "Bye-bye Home page?" (tbray.org, 5/25)
- Personalization technology means writing the rules to dynamically generate the experience

Weather Channel goes beyond its domain to reach "Convenience users"

The screenshot shows the Weather Channel website interface. At the top, there are logos for Netscape, Google, and various services like Mail, AIM, Radio, and Maps. A prominent banner for Ameriquest Mortgage Company is displayed, advertising "MORTGAGE RATES AT HISTORIC LOWS! PERFECT CREDIT NOT REQUIRED!". Below this, there are navigation tabs for "Weather Home", "My Forecast", "Weather Maps", "U.S.", "World", "Severe Weather", "Travel", "Recreation", and "Photos". A search bar for "Get Weather Forecast" is present, with a "Go" button. The main content area is divided into several sections: "Toledo, OH" with a 3-day forecast (Currently 66°F, Wednesday 73/54, Thursday 66/47, Friday 70/55); "Weather News" with "Today's Worst Weather" and "Today's Weather Summary"; "Weather Maps" with a "Current Temperatures" map of the United States; "Travel & International" with links for road conditions, airport conditions, and local airport conditions; "Severe Weather" with a "Read local severe weather" link; and "Amazing Photos" with a link to "Winter • Tornado • Lightning". On the right side, there is a vertical advertisement for Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barbara Walters, featuring their portraits and the ABC logo.

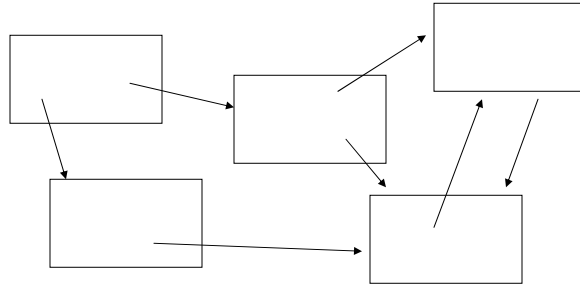
IBM -> KnowledgeStorm -> Yahoo!

The screenshot shows the Yahoo! Small Business IT Solution Center interface. At the top, there are logos for Yahoo! Small Business and KnowledgeStorm. A prominent banner reads "Franchise Solutions Start a Business!". Below this, there are navigation links for "Home", "Business Technology", "IT Solution Center", and "Detailed Solution Report". The main content area features a search bar for "IT Solutions by Keyword" and a section titled "IBM Start Now e-Commerce Solutions by IBM Corporation". This section includes links for "View company financials and background from Hoover's", "Printer friendly version", "E-mail this report to a colleague", "Save this report", "View company report", "Begin new search", and "Return to search results". A "Contact this Company" button is also visible. On the left side, there are navigation menus for "IT Solution Center", "KnowledgeStorm Users", and "IT Solution Providers".

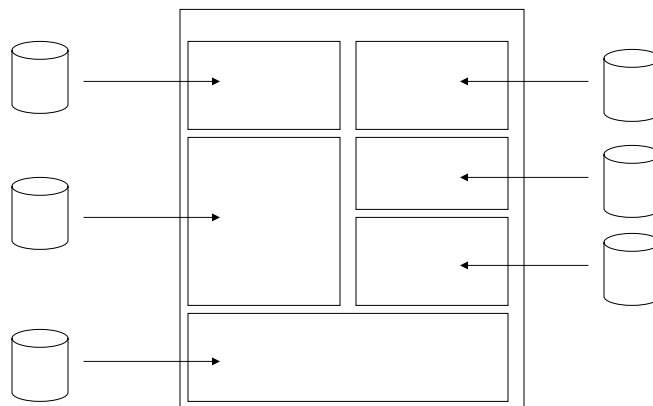
Borders does not need its own site after all

The screenshot displays the Borders.com website homepage, which is integrated with Amazon.com. The top navigation bar includes "BORDERS STORES", "INSIDE BORDERS", "TOP SELLERS", "KIDS", and "UPCOMING EVENTS". A promotional banner offers "Super Saver Shipping FREE on orders over \$25". The main content area features a search bar, a "Welcome to BORDERS" message, and a "Hello" greeting with a sign-in link. A "Top Sellers in Books" section highlights "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix (Book 5)" with a "Book Description" and a quote: "I say to you all, once again—in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord". A "Father's Day Gift Ideas" section promotes a book by Tom Robbins, "Villa Incognito". The left sidebar contains a "SEARCH" box and a "BROWSE" menu with links for Books, Music, DVD, Video, and All Amazon.com Stores.

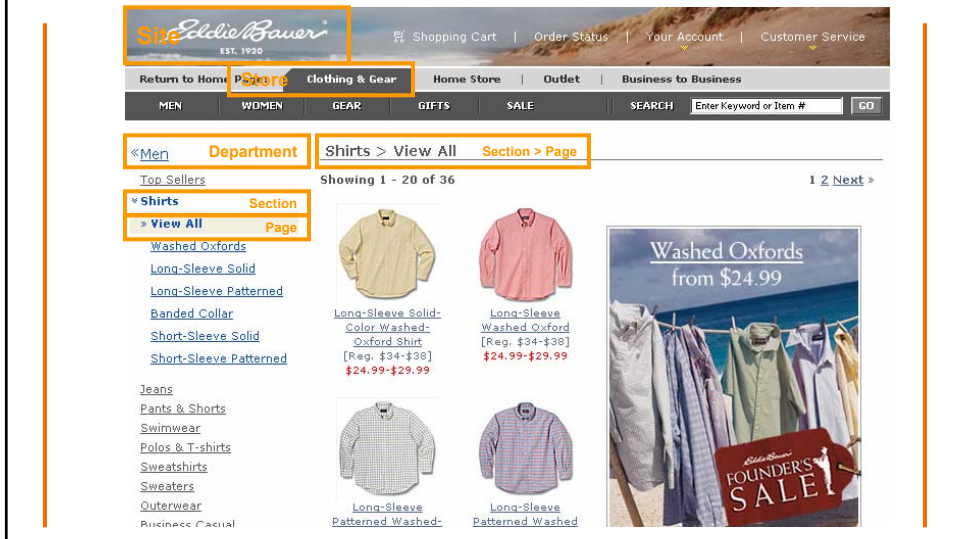
The Navigation Metaphor: Where am I? (Within and between sites)



The Subscription/Personalization Metaphor: Why is this here? Where did it come from?



Where am I? Site > Store > Department > Section > Page



Who am I? Why is this here?



My State of Web Sites

- We are pretty good at building *sites*
 - Methodologies, UI best practices, business models, task support, etc.
- We have a lot to learn about building *personalized, integrated experiences*
 - Portal, portlet user interfaces
 - Cross-site designs (not just cross-branding)
 - Which ones to build? User research goldmine...
- The future will be more about experiences and less about sites, so we need to start doing some things differently

The State of Web Usability?

- HCI / usability people are deep into the web (not the case in 1998)
 - Students are doing research
 - All practitioners have experience in it, many are specializing
- Jakob Nielsen as the guru (but fading)
- Lots of good books written by “us” and being bought by “them”
 - Usability for the web
 - Don’t make me think, Homepage usability, Web bloopers: coffee-table-esque
- Bottom-line focus
 - Technical platform integration simplifies content, UE integration
- Patterns
 - The Design of Sites book
 - People are tired of reinventing the wheel
 - We are also starting to understand what works and what doesn’t
- In general, everyone “gets it” – now people need help **doing** it

Where should we be going?

- Business school (old news for some)
- Technologists (corporate developers is an old home)
 - New: W3C (User Interest Group)
 - New: Grass roots (open source)
- Content managers (where I have been hanging out)
- “User Experience Trade” (not profession)
 - We do not have to agree, we just have to work together
- Teaching methodology & design
 - More than just giving “ad hoc” design advice
- Conducting research and translating to design guidelines
 - Bridge the research/practice gap

Conclusions

This page intentionally left blank