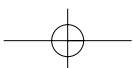
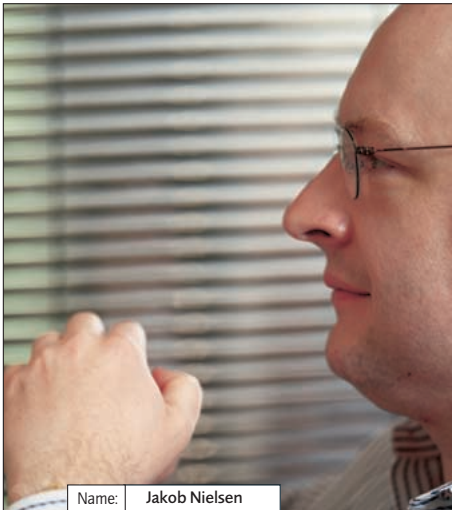


“MY BIGGEST CONCLUSION WHEN WE DID THIS FLASH PROJECT WAS THAT THIS FEELS LIKE 1985 AGAIN, WHEN WE DID OUR EARLY MAC STUDIES... LIKE FINALLY REAL INTERACTION DESIGN, NOT JUST WEB PAGES”





Name:	Jakob Nielsen
Job title:	Principal, Nielsen Norman group
Company:	www.nngroup.com, www.useit.com
Goal for five years time	"I would just like everybody to truly follow recommended usability processes. That would be my goal. I would like to be done with that so we can move onto the advanced things"

# Flash Forward

JAKOB NIELSEN HAS A NEW FAVOURITE APPLICATION: FLASH. IT'S STILL PLAGUED BY BAD PRACTICE, BUT IT HAS GIVEN HIM NEW HOPE

Last time *Cre@teOnline* spoke to Jakob Nielsen, the web design world was in a sorry state. It was the end of 2001; bust time, 9-11, layoffs, uncertainty. *Flash* was at version 5. We were imploring

BT and Oftel to sort out broadband. Sony-Ericsson announced its colour screen and GPRS phones and we yawned a considerable yawn. And Jakob was searching in vain for an extra one per cent of good *Flash*, so he could say it was only 98, rather than 99 per cent bad.

What a difference a year makes. Sure, the industry is not out of the woods yet financially, but there's enough work around to keep most newly pared-down agencies busy. There are a million broadband users in Britain and growing exponentially. We're paying attention to Vodafone live! and new services from Orange. And *Flash MX* has given Jakob Nielsen a cause for hope.

"There's still a lot of criticism of design mistakes, but I think the difference is that relative to a few years ago, where *Flash*, I would say, was mainly used to annoy users and get in the way of what they wanted to do, there have been two changes that have happened this year," Jakob begins.

"One is the technology change, which is the *Flash* software itself has had some usability improvements in

terms of integration with hypertext. The back button finally works, which is so important, the bookmark things, it works with screenreaders for users with disabilities which is really important," he continues. "There are standard interface components, like a scroll bar that looks like a scroll bar, buttons that look like buttons, which is also very, very important for usability."

Besides technical improvements to *Flash*, there's a shift in emphasis by *Flash's* developer, which also pleases Jakob. "I think the real improvement is the change that Macromedia had in their strategy, they repositioned *Flash* as an application building toolkit," he says. "All of a sudden that means that it's now intended to build useful stuff which means that usability becomes the prime directive, because functionality and features need to be really easy to use so they make sense."

Sounds a little like he's evangelising the software. Surely the Jakob of old wouldn't have any of this 'God save Macromedia' stuff? In fairness, his famous anti-*Flash* invective was geared more towards the software's users. These days, the bombast has been tempered. There's still a lot of 'meaningless *Flash*' about that 'doesn't do anything for the user,' but there's a sense of optimism.

"I think it's just that the future of *Flash* is to do useful design, and that means it's worthwhile working on that



Photography: Martin Burton

Jakob Nielsen finds himself looking forward with a certain amount of optimism



## JAKOB ON...

MEMBERS OF THE CRE@TEONLINE FORUM ASKED FOR JAKOB'S VIEWS ON WIRELESS, BROADBAND, CHEAP USABILITY TESTS AND WEB STANDARDS. HERE'S WHAT HE TOLD US:

### ON BROADBAND

"The first important comment about broadband is that a lot of people don't have it," he proclaims. "It's important not to get too excited that some people have it, then you forget about the many people who don't."

But then again he says what we currently call broadband is more of a 'medium range solution', useful until we get transfer rates closer to those of Ethernet. Until then though, designers should consider that today's broadband user is likely to 'snack' for content online. For designers, the challenge, according to Jakob is this: 'Can you create that kind of instant gratification-type services that are really fast, really quick, kind of one- to two-page views, just give me something quickly now? Because that'll be more appealing to people,' he says.

### ON WIRELESS, XHTML AND CSS

Jakob has done very few studies of wireless. "We did one a few years ago on WAP phones, and at that time the conclusion was that they were so miserable that they were not worth doing," he recalls. There will be a study of wireless once more services roll out further down the line, though. In the meantime, what will new standards like XHTML and CSS mean to wireless communication and the rest of the Internet?

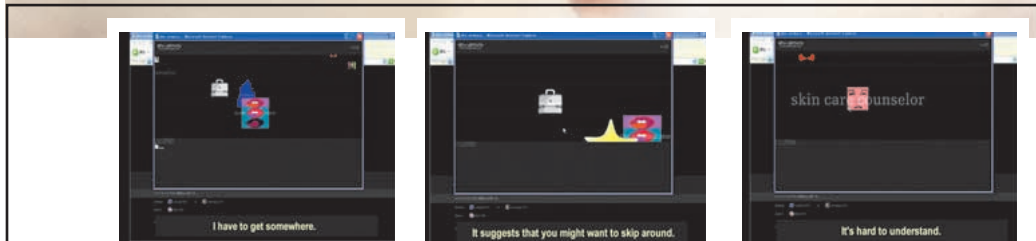
"I don't think they'll solve this mobile problem, because I think they work within kind of a range, and that's very good," he says. "It will solve Mac vs PC or IE vs Netscape, all those kinds of things." But always remember to build a separate stylesheet for pages likely to be printed, he says. "There are some things you would eliminate, like some of the standard navigation features because they're to be clicked on, not to be read."

### ON THE EXPENSE OF USABILITY TESTING

How can you sell usability to clients reluctant to pay for it? Tell them that usability testing can, on average, double the effectiveness of their websites.

"You're better off spending, say ten per cent of whatever you have on usability," Jakob recommends. "It's better to do 90 per cent of the work and get it right, than do 100 per cent and do it wrong. That's kind of the simplistic view of it. But you get so much more out of whatever you do."

And if you can't carry out a detailed usability study, don't resort to using your colleagues as guinea pigs. They're still much too close to projects. "I would rather three people off the street than five people from the company," he concludes.



The study has an accompanying DVD. In this clip, a Japanese user's self evident frustration with a site's motion graphics are translated at the bottom of the screen: "Don't have gratuitous motion"



and providing guidelines for how to do it better," he reports.

Behind his new hope is the new Nielsen Norman group study is a study entitled Usability of Flash Applications and Tools: Design Guidelines for Flash-based Functionality on the Web. It's a usability study of 46 *Flash*-based web applications from around the world. The report finds that companies' return on investment is improved by 56 per cent if their *Flash*-based applications are easier to use, even on the most basic level. The report is also happy that we no longer have to rely solely on browsers as a framework for web-based applications. Using *Flash MX* it is now possible to build user-friendly, highly-functional online presences. Of course, for designers to get this right there are guidelines to follow – 115 in total. But evidently, it feels like we're making progress.

"My biggest conclusion when we did this *Flash* project was that this feels like 1985 again, when we did our early Mac studies," he says warmly. "Like finally real interaction design, not just web pages. Important as they might be, they're still just moving

around articles. But to actually do things, that's really what's interesting. Features are what's exciting. I always want to emphasise only the most important features, not every feature. That is the more engaging and compelling type of interface that's going to be possible now."

### FLASH AND ACCESSIBILITY

There has been some doubt among some in the industry that *Flash MX's* accessibility features don't go far enough. After all, the accessibility icon in the interface is quite subtle, to put it mildly. Jakob believes, however, that the software has done pretty much all it can do for accessibility technically.

"I think it's pretty far along in the technical side, but that side is not really the most important," he warns. "We did compile our biggest study specifically on accessibility with some blind users and some low-vision users, and the real problem is now a lot of the designs that are done with *Flash* don't have really good textual descriptions. So when you hear a *Flash* text description read aloud on a screen reader, it'll



For the Flash Applications and Tools study, 46 web applications were tested. Users reported varying levels of understanding, but found some seemingly simple tasks difficult. The Mini USA site's tester couldn't figure out how to get onto the site at all, while for the Bose Sound Advisor site, the tester couldn't release the sofa he'd dragged around the virtual living room. Despite this, Jakob is pleased that functional rather than frivolous *Flash* sites are now being built

often say things like button, button, button, but what does each button do? Nobody bothered writing a little alt text for these buttons because it was not necessary in the past."

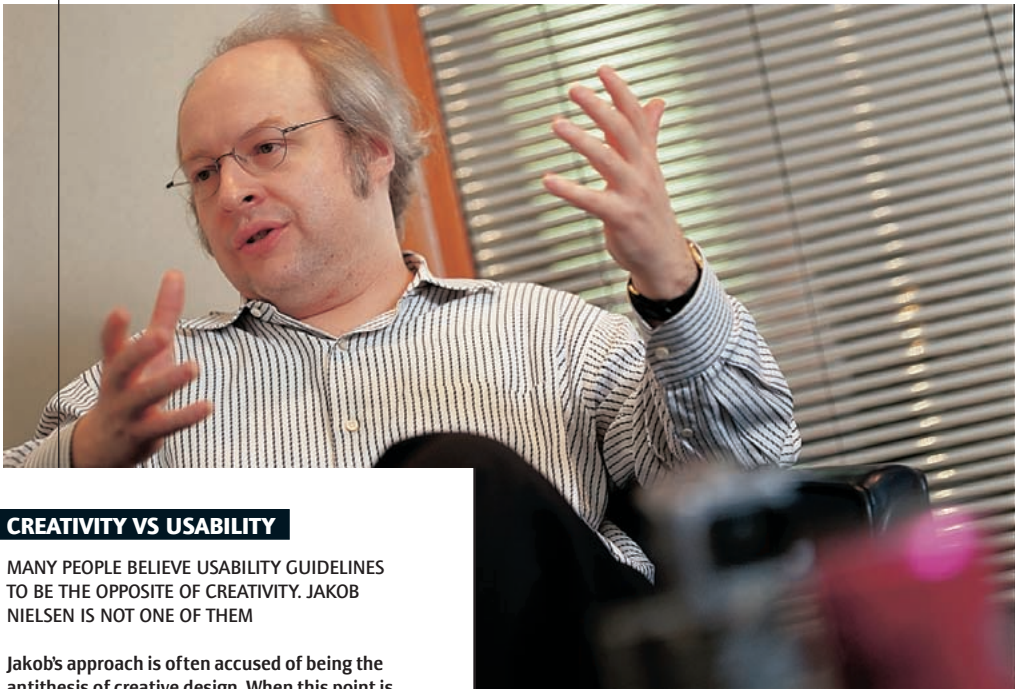
He continues: "Similarly, another problem that we came across is that the tab order was completely illogical and confusing. Things were being read in a completely jumbled sequence. Now again, in the past, why would anybody have bothered to do a *Flash* design to specify the reading order? It was viewed as two- rather than one-dimensional design. But the point about accessibility is that you have to think about multiple different dimensions of your designs. So there's two-dimensional visual representation, but then there's one-dimensional auditory representation too. So the sequence in which things are read is incredibly important for usability. And because it was never an issue before, these guys never bothered doing it, but they've got to think about it now." That is, according to Jakob, the next step: the move from technical accessibility to usable accessibility.

### WHAT'S PAST, AND WHAT'S TO COME

For Jakob, 2002 was a great year for usability. Usability conferences were well attended, designers were talking about it, clients were asking about it. Things are getting better.

"We're not as close as I'd like us to be, but we're getting better," he's happy to report. "Things like the change in strategy for *Flash* is a great example that companies are gradually following more and more the usability guidelines. People are doing more user testing. We do get big audiences coming to [usability] events despite the fact that the industry is in bad shape. That's very encouraging."

So what's next for Jakob Nielsen? Well, perhaps this time next year he'll be in town with a set of usability guidelines for mobile phones and wireless devices, depending on how the technology pans out. There will of course be more examination of *Flash*, usability and accessibility too. But if he were to be back in town at the end of 2003 to speak to *Cre@teOnline*, what would he like to have been able to report about the year that was?



### CREATIVITY VS USABILITY

MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE USABILITY GUIDELINES TO BE THE OPPOSITE OF CREATIVITY. JAKOB NIELSEN IS NOT ONE OF THEM

Jakob's approach is often accused of being the antithesis of creative design. When this point is put to the usability guru himself, he responds by saying that it's not true. As far as he's concerned, it's just another constraint, just as is screen size, bandwidth, computer platform and so on.

You may or may not accept those constraints, but if you do reject them, they're still there," he adds. "So you're going to have a design that is less useful in the real world. "I think a lot of designers who think that way are frustrated artists. They don't really appreciate the distinction between art and design."

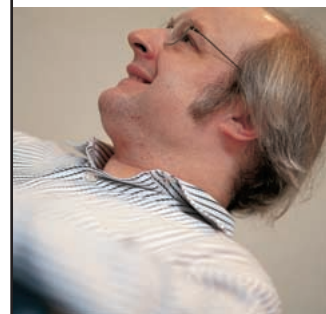
For Jakob, art is something you don't use: you simply appreciate it. A design has a purpose, which if not served, is not a design.

He continues: "I don't think those constraints are suffocating. I think they are certainly limiting relative to no constraints, but I think they allow a very large number of different designs to exist within them. So I still think there's a lot of room for creativity, for finding a good solution within those constraints. That's the real challenge."

"What I'd really like to see is that we revive the Internet as an exciting place that people think is worth going to," he responds. "We had that a little bit, in the earlier days with a lot of interesting new services coming online, but those services were basically unsustainable, because they didn't have any business models. I'd like to see it happen with a business model this time. There's so much more that can be done in a simple way that makes sense to people, and to have a simple way of collecting the money. That's the hard part that we don't really have right now. I would really like to see that happen." ■

TEXT: GRAEME AYMER

**"PEOPLE ARE DOING MORE USER TESTING. WE DO GET BIG AUDIENCES COMING TO USABILITY EVENTS DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE INDUSTRY IS IN BAD SHAPE"**



An extract from the Nielsen Norman group's recent *Flash* usability study and video clips of Nielsen speaking are on the Exclusive Online section of the *Cre@teOnline* website at [www.createonline.co.uk/e034](http://www.createonline.co.uk/e034)