

W4A – International CrossDisciplinary Workshop on Web Accessibility 2004

Workshop Report

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1. INTRODUCTION

Layout and structure are key to good visual design. They are the conduit for both the content and the graphics. Moreover, they are important for disabled people (e.g. dyslexic users) and specifically visually impaired users, as they need to be quickly and easily interacted with. The workshop aimed to address layout, structure, and presentation from the viewpoint of accessibility and good visual design; where these are in opposition, the workshop aimed to facilitate discussion between interested parties so that a solution (or at least the beginnings of a solution) can be formulated – in effect we ask the question ‘Does Accessible Mean Dull?’. We support inclusive design; however, how can this be the case if users have differing needs? The organizers also assert that no one should be hindered when interacting with layout. Will making layout accessible hinder sighted or ‘conventional’ users?

Conventional workshops on accessibility tended to be single disciplinary in nature. However, we were concerned that a single disciplinary approach prevents the cross-pollination of ideas, needs, and technologies from other related but separate fields. The workshop was therefore, decidedly cross disciplinary in nature and brought together users, accessibility experts, graphic designers, and technologists from academia and industry to discuss how accessibility could be supported. We also encouraged the participation of users and other interested parties as an additional balance to the discussion. Views often bridged academia, commerce, and industry, and arguments encompassed a range of beliefs across the designaccessibility spectrum. Our aim was to focus on accessibility by encouraging participation from many disciplines, represented in the following discussion and paper abstracts.

2. DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHTS

2.1 Accessibility

Designers do not think about accessibility in the same terms as either users or accessibility practitioners. Most designers are focused on the creative process and perceive that accessibility will constrain their design and creativity. Indeed, it was agreed that accessible design is good design and accessible pages do not need to be Vanilla flavored and dull. In fact there are already a number of examples of good accessible websites like Oxfam and

eBay. However, even the good intentions of those that do consider accessible design to be good design can produce inconsistent results because users are individuals and wish to control their own experience to meet their specific needs. User experience must also be taken into account because in some cases the design is accessible but the user is still not having a good interaction experience. Accessibility is not only utilitarian; it is also about comfort, ‘feel’, and enjoyment. Many users may wish to adapt the page to their own requirements and therefore tools and designs which support this ‘adaptation’ will become of increasing importance. Designers need to become aware that their design may be changed and adapted by the user and so they should start to design with this challenge in mind. While guidelines work hard to address users’ needs, web adaptation technology must also be used to control page look and feel. Adaptation and flexibility seems to be the focus of this session.

Hanson, V.:

The user experience: designs and adaptations
<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/990657.990659>

Petrie, H. et al.:

Tension ? What tension ? – Website accessibility and visual design
<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/990657.990660>

Mirabella, V. et al.:

A no-frills approach for accessible Web-based learning material
<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/990657.990661>

2.2 Design

Many web designers move from print media to web design and this pre-gained experience in creating static designed artifacts forces them to see design as fixed and immovable once created. A designer creates and controls the development of what is in effect a piece of art and therefore once created should not be changed or violated. It can be difficult to convey that users often require web pages to adapt to their needs, and the fact that this sometimes goes beyond art. However, designers create art and the accessibility community should not make the mistake of trying to constrain this creativity. In fact accessibility practitioners need to understand and accept that rich media like Flash, scripting languages like Javascript, rollover buttons, complex images, and animations are not going away, and neither

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should they. Designers have been forced into using workarounds (like image spacers) because the accessibility technology did not provide them with a technological solution. It is, then, the responsibility of the accessibility community to support designers by providing solutions, technical demonstrators, and dialogue.

Regan, R.:

Accessibility and design: a failure of the imagination
<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/990657.990663>

Bohman, P. et al.:

An accessible method of hiding HTML content
<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/990657.990664>

Stone, R. et al.:

Proving the validity and accessibility of dynamic webpages
<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/990657.990665>

2.3 Guidelines

Conforming to guidelines is necessary but not sufficient to provide accessibility; they are also an important factor as a starting point for design, and a means of testing after creation. Previously guidelines were feared and not particularly testable but movement is now being made towards standards harmonization between guidelines sets (WCAG, 508, DDA, etc) and making those sets testable in a more rigorous way. Guidelines need to be quickly adaptable to new technologies and best practice, and it is important to have the ability to quickly include guidelines for different activities like search engine results navigation and the semantic delivery of information. From the designer's perspective education and outreach are important factors for guidelines incorporation. The challenge has moved on from guidelines creation and publication to making designers aware of guidelines and facilitating their use by a dialogue with design practitioners, not accessibility experts.

Brewer, J.:

Web accessibility highlights and trends
<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/990657.990667>

Leporini, B. et al.:

Designing search engine user interfaces for the visually impaired
<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/990657.990668>

Seeman, L.:

The semantic web, web accessibility, and device independence
<http://doi.acm.org/10.1145/990657.990669>

2.4 Research Challenges

The workshop closed with a panel session and free discussion.

This session provided an enjoyable and productive dialogue and the following challenges were highlighted:

1. Adaptation, for instance through client-side tools, is a possible solution to meet the differing needs of users; however designers must also realise their designs may be changed and they need to design flexibility in mind.
2. Well-designed sites are more accessible, the responsibility of the accessibility community is to provide examples to demonstrate this.
3. Accessibility is a design challenge.
4. Guidelines are important, and so is standardisation; however, the participants agreed that it is necessary to use guidelines as part of a range of accessibility measures.
5. Rich media is not going away, so the challenge is not to ignore or not use it, but to try to make it accessible and usable by different user groups.

Finally, the session identified some future directions and challenges that need to be addressed:

1. The Semantic Web and next generation Web are becoming popular, and the 'semantics' demonstrated to be useful in certain domains, so from the accessibility perspective we should ask the question : how can the semantic web contribute to create accessible Web pages? Can this be in the design stage, in the delivery, or via client side tools?
2. Transforming Web pages into a more accessible form will move the responsibility from Web page designers to tool designers, so the question should be how can we provide supporting tools to aid the design effort?
3. Different user groups will require different adaptation and transformation techniques, so the challenge is to identify the needs of the user groups and transform and adapt accordingly.
4. Designers do not like the idea that their creativity will be constrained, and do not like to be told how to design pages, or how their artifacts need to look. Therefore, how can the accessibility community communicate with the design community to eradicate misconceptions from both parties?

3. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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