



* A decade in web design

Paul Douglas looks back at the highs and lows of the last 10 years for the web industry

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As the clocks rang in the year 2000, things were looking good. The dotcom boom was in full swing and web designers were the new rock stars. But then, barely before the champagne had time to go flat, things took a nasty turn. The boom turned into bust as investment disappeared and tech firms went to the wall.

Boo.com, launched in autumn of the previous year, was one victim, going bankrupt in May 2000 after spending its way through more than £80million. Over the following two years, around \$5trillion was wiped off the market value of tech companies. Pets.com folded in November 2000. eToys, with an IPO share price of \$80, was to go bust in March 2001, and internet currency site Beenz.com went under in the same year.

Paul Wyatt (paulwyatt.co.uk), designer and writer, describes the start of the decade as one "where everyone became a web designer and

the world and his wife had a good idea to make a million on the web". But it wasn't to last.

Paul Boag, creative director at Headscape (www.headscape.co.uk), remembers the time well: "I first started in the web back in 1994," he says. "By the turn of the century I was working at a dotcom company at the height of the boom. I remember being told that I would soon be a millionaire. Even at the time this struck me as insane. Like so many dotcoms, the company I worked for was built on hype and had no real business case. It was obvious to me that in reality the company was worthless."

Born again

But out of these ashes would come a reborn, more efficient industry. "The dotcom bust left a lot of talented people out of work, and in this downtime they started to experiment and innovate," says Boag. "We soon saw dramatic shifts in how the web is built, including the birth of the web standards movement and the reinvention of JavaScript."

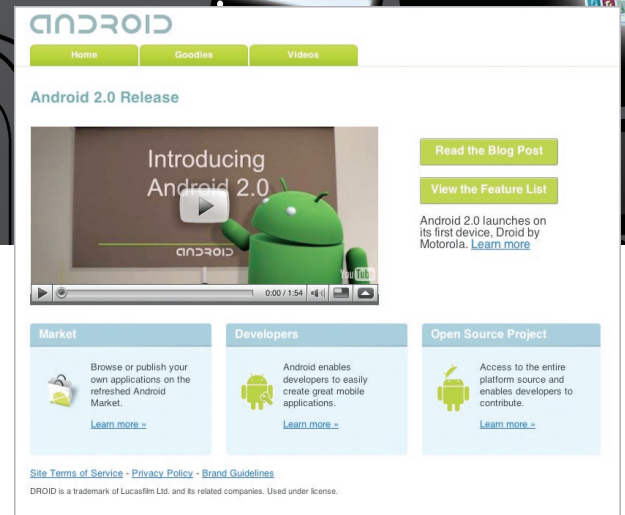
"What we're left with is a much more stable platform. It's easier and cheaper than ever to build great web apps without the need for external investment. What would have cost hundreds of thousands to develop back in 2000 is now available free through third-party APIs and libraries."

"The web has truly matured over the past decade," agrees Usman Sheikh, managing director of Contrive Digital (contrivedigital.com). "We've seen businesses starting to





App, app & away Ajax has been instrumental in making web apps useful and accessible to all



Robo top Google's Android platform has provided an exciting challenge for a new generation of web developers

>> understand and harness the power of the internet to support their operational and commercial objectives. Ecommerce is no longer a luxury only the larger retailers can afford. With great open source and feature-rich platforms arriving in the market, we've seen smaller retailers give the big boys a run for their money."

Dynamic sites

"I think the most significant change in web design this decade has been the evolution to building

dynamic sites," says Chris Coyier of CSS Tricks (css-tricks.com). "A friend of mine is an IT guy/web admin at a university, and he has students coming to him all the time asking for help building sites for a project. He just tells them, 'Go to WordPress.com and you'll have a site up in no time'.

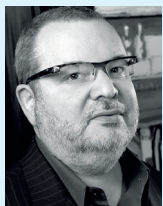
"That answer in the early 2000s would have been 'I hope you're up for learning some HTML. Now, open Microsoft FrontPage...' The process was confusing and the student would have probably given up. Today it's almost a no-brainer."

But there is a downside to this, as Craig Grannell (www.snubcommunications.com), a regular contributor to .net, points out: "Because of the relative simplicity of the likes of WordPress, there's still the assumption that web design is simple and therefore designers should be charging about a fiver for an all-singing, all-dancing website."

Shane Mielke, creative director at 2Advanced Studios (www.2advanced.com) agrees: "Flash templates, while a useful and cost-effective solution, have degraded the credibility of those of us who design and develop custom solutions for clients. I think the adoption of WordPress and templated portfolio communities has also marked a low point as there seem to be fewer unique personal sites being released with that wow factor that was present earlier in the decade."

Flash had a bit of an image problem at the start of the decade, being viewed as inaccessible

Interview "A new crop of web design stars were all about standards"



Jeffrey Zeldman

Job title Co-founder

Company Web Standards Project

URL www.webstandards.org

Blog www.zeldman.com

"When we started The Web Standards Project in 1998," says Jeffrey Zeldman, co-founder of the project and creator of Happy Cog, "the only 'web standards' were http:// and the like. HTML, CSS, and so on were merely 'recommendations'.

"A minority of web designers and developers aligned themselves with the fledgling Web Standards Project, and that was the first wave. But it wasn't until 2000, when browsers began supporting web standards in earnest, that people started to see the possibility of designing a site one way (instead of 12), or using HTML, CSS and JavaScript as powerful, accurate creative tools.

"Between 2000 and 2001, all the major browsers began seriously supporting web

standards. This made standards-based design possible. This was the second wave. But not many people were paying attention, and non-standards-compliant, browser-specific design was still very much the 'industry standard'.

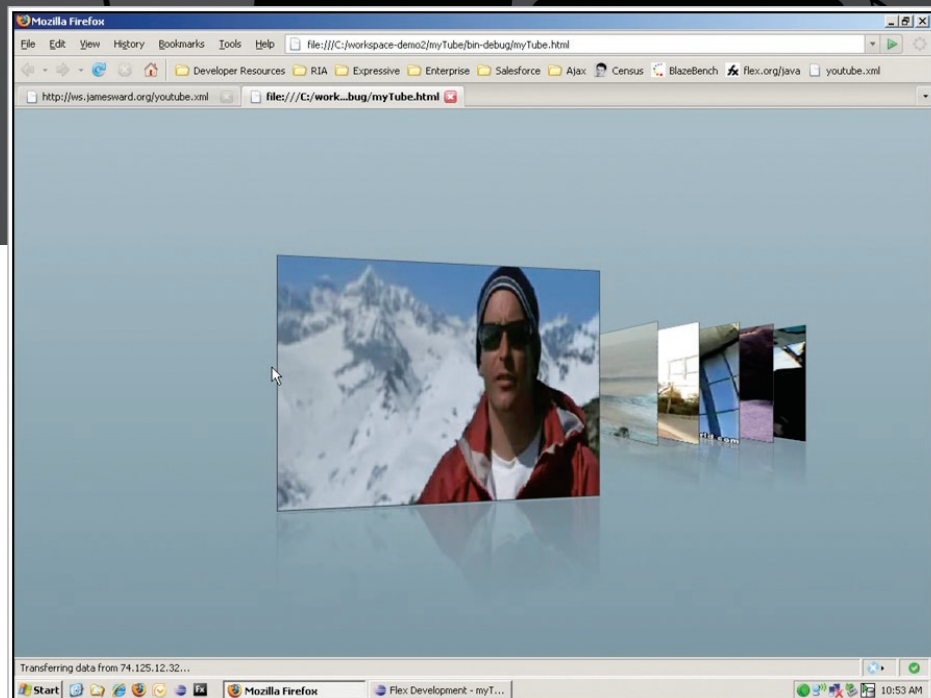
"Enter the third wave. A *List Apart* magazine, the first edition of *Designing With Web Standards*, about a dozen leading-edge designer/bloggers (including Dave Shea's CSS Zen Garden, Eric Meyer's Meyerweb.com, Dan Cederholm's SimpleBits.com) and thousands of self-proclaimed standards evangelists carried the message to their agency heads, to their clients, to their in-house IT and creative directors. That third wave was powerful: by 2004, a substantial minority of designers really got web standards, were sharing expertise on blogs and demanding greater standards-compliance from browsers.

"A new crop of web design stars was rising, and they were all about web standards. Firefox and WebKit in Safari supported standards to a high degree and made standards-based design that much more plausible and tantalizing, and, as they ate into IE's market share, ultimately pushed

Microsoft into supporting web standards to a higher (IE7) and higher (IE8) degree.

"In the meantime, 'Web 2.0' was exploding, and apps are crafted from web standards plus Ajax with a PHP or Ruby (or other) back-end. So the boom in web apps and social networking was also a boom in web standards (such as CSS, HTML, XML and JavaScript). As more designers fantasised about quitting their client services jobs and making a living via product development (à la Basecamp, Flickr, Twitter), more and more emphasis was placed on lean, semantic mark-up and smart, cross-platform, cross-browser code.

"So it was a combination of advocates compelling browsers to support standards; evangelists making standards attractive; web applications taking off; and Firefox and WebKit kicking ass. Smartphones powered by Apple WebKit and Opera Mini (not to mention Google's version of WebKit) are giving all of this interest in standards extra juice, as consumers expect powerful apps on their phones, and developers build those apps with web standards (knowing they are supported by the latest phones)."



Flex appeal Flash has gone from strength to strength over the past decade, bolstered by a number of technological developments, including the introduction of the Flex framework to assist rapid app development

and a waste of bandwidth. “There was a tendency for designers to get carried away and create experiences that alienated those without the faster connections,” remembers Rob Corradi (www.robcorradi.com), creative director at NeonState.

“Flash is still overused and poorly used, although not as much as it was in the mid-2000s, when lots of idiots suggested that Flash should be ‘it’ for web design,” adds Grannell. “Flash has always been great for certain things, but I was

“In the last decade, the single most important thing that happened with regards to web design was when Flash video was incorporated in the Flash authoring tool in Flash MX 2002 and Flash Player 6,” says Rob Ford, founder and principal of the Favourite Website Awards (www.thefwa.com). “This finally enabled creatives to do what they had been fighting with for years, easily adding video to their projects rather than trying to embed video players. Without this development, YouTube would

“The most significant change has been the evolution to dynamic sites”

Chris Coyier, CSS Tricks

relieved when JavaScript libraries started taking over from Flash when it came to UI elements.

“Bandwidth hogging and waste remains a huge issue, though. Many designers are fat and lazy, pumping out bandwidth-intensive output that works fine on their set-ups, but that could be faster and sleeker with relatively little effort.”

“These days there can still be a lot of waiting around watching preloaders spinning – designers’ work often seems to swell to fill the width of whatever pipes it travels along,” says Corradi. “However, at least Flash is now mostly used where Flash is best, and has become the platform for online video and unique interactive experiences.”

“Flash continues to go from strength to strength,” agrees Mike Jones, founder of Pixadecimals (pixadecimals.com). “With the introduction of the Flex framework to assist rapid app development, the ability to deploy Flash content to the desktop through AIR and support for devices, Flash is the media of choice when it comes to offering rich immersive experiences and application-orientated solutions.”

not be what it is today and the web would be a very different place.”

“Flash has really withstood the test of time because of the diversity in how it’s used: microsites, games, banner ads, applications, video playback,” says Mielke. “Every year it improves, adapts and morphs its uses on the internet. I believe it’s also the main reason why front-end developers have pushed harder to develop other techniques like Ajax, which gives us even more creative options.”

Standard compliance

Is there an automated app that will make web designers’ lives easy? Not any time soon, says Ryan Carson of Carsonified (carsonified.com). “Almost all truly great web designers are still hand-coding. No one has been able to create a piece of software that solves this problem: how can a WYSIWYG editor truly produce standards-compliant, semantic and accessible markup?”

Jakob Nielsen is confident of improvements in accessible sites: “If improvements continue at

Usability and accessibility

Jakob Nielsen, principal of usability consultancy Nielsen Norman Group (www.nngroup.com), says that the decade has shown substantial growth in usability. “Every year our test measurements show that sites are a bit easier to use on average than the previous year’s sites. At the start of the decade, users failed about as often as they succeeded when trying to accomplish new tasks on the web. Today, users roughly succeed twice as often as they fail. We’ve turned web usability around from being miserable to merely being bad.”

“The change here is that standards-based design is now the norm, rather than something to shout about,” adds Craig Grannell. “Accessibility and UX are the next things that will soon vanish from something to boast about to something you just do.”

“I think web standards have finally stopped being a ‘dirty term,’ says Pixadecimals’ Mike Jones. “There are so many established processes and solutions for making web-based content compliant and accessible that there really is no excuse any more not to adhere.”

Thankfully, usability and beauty are no longer mutually exclusive, as Paul Dawson, experience director at EMC Consulting (uk.emc.com), formerly Conchango, explains: “Until relatively recently, there were no truly beautiful websites that were also truly useful and functional. It’s really only in the last year or two that we have started to evolve design styles that are elegant and interactive – mostly using the Ajax suite of tools – and also allow integration to deep, dark technology that provides us with the useful aspect of what we need. I’m delighted that we’re finally getting there.”

“We’ve all had our backsides kicked about this one – and quite rightly, too,” admits Paul Wyatt (paulwyatt.co.uk). “There was a time when accessibility and standards were very low on the Q&A checklist. A philosophy of ‘throw it up there and see if it stuck’ was very much in evidence in the early part of the decade. Fortunately, with legislation being introduced, this is now a key priority before a website goes into wireframing and then design and build. Advertisers aren’t stupid, either – the more accessible your website, the bigger your audience will be.”

the current rate, we’ll achieve maybe 80 per cent success rates by 2020. Getting rid of the 20 per cent of failures will require substantial usability advances, which will probably take more than 10 years. But improving the web’s usability quality to the 80 per cent level can be done without breaking a sweat: sites just have to follow the basic usability guidelines that were documented at the beginning of the current decade.” Following advice that’s already 10 years old? Ought to be a piece of cake.

“The next decade will also finally see the mobile web turn mainstream,” Nielsen



The low points that linger

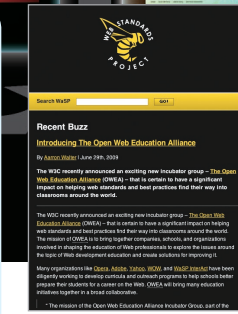
There are still sins that linger on, warns Brendan Dawes, creative director at magneticNorth (mnetwork.com): “The idea of overlay ads was and is evil. It’s an ad concept perpetuated by morons. And trends such as jumbo footers and sites with increasingly large fonts drive me crazy. We’ve got to move on from taking inspiration from print. I swear to God I’ll soon need a monitor the size of a wall if fonts get much bigger.”

Along with bad use of Flash, Dawson of EMC Consulting (uk.emc.com) is less than complimentary about Fireworks – “for the abominations that this tool created, in its automated styling of graphical elements that influenced a whole generation of truly terrible-looking websites around 2001”.

And then there’s IE6. “The fact that we’re entering a new decade with IE6 still hanging around like the smell of wet dog makes every decent web developer die inside a bit,” says Margaret Manning, CEO of digital communications agency, Reading Room (www.readingroom.com).

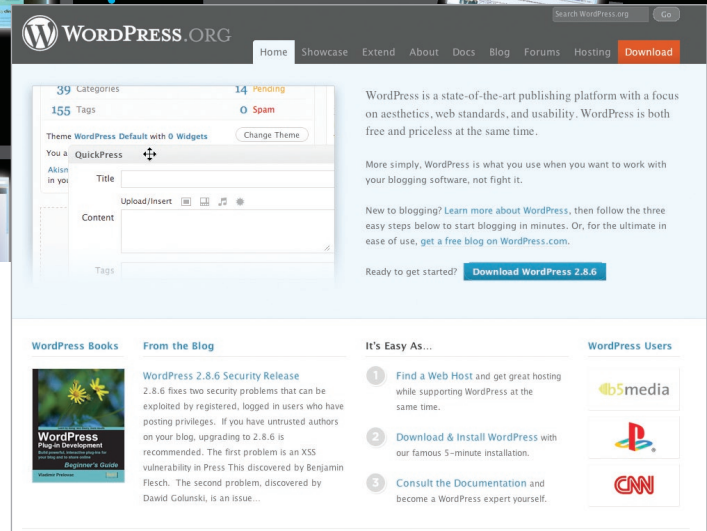
“Take a ten-day schedule for developing the front end of a website and you can easily spend at least two of them working on IE6 fixes and work-arounds. It hangs over a development like a big grey cloud. Every web developer should have a small brick wall built on their desk – because sometimes hitting our heads against it would be more productive and enjoyable than making things work properly in IE6.

“IE6 has been holding the web back ever since the browser wars were reignited in the middle of the decade – and it will continue to do so for a few years yet.”



Above The Web Standards Project has fought for the guidelines that make the web so accessible today

Right WordPress has been criticised for stunting creativity by encouraging people to follow similar templates



continues. “Right now, mobile sites are still beneath contempt. A recent study by Nielsen Norman Group found that users only succeeded 38 per cent of the time when trying to access sites on mobile phones. In other words, the current mobile success rate is even worse than it was for desktop use in 2000. When we asked British users to find out ‘what’s on BBC1 tonight at 8pm’ using their mobile phones, they took 199 seconds to find the answer. Much worse than our study of WAP users in 2000, when the same task only required 159 seconds. We have gone backwards in mobile usability!

“What we need is for companies to start designing dedicated mobile sites that are optimised for these more constrained devices. The old web ideal of ‘design once, view anywhere’ has failed and should be discarded.”

User interaction

“The biggest change is likely to be in the way people interact with content,” adds Craig Grannell. “In whatever a ‘typical’ browser evolves into, a lack of precision will lead to different interface design, with accessibility at the forefront. We’re already seeing this in the shift from desktop machines to mobile, where a prodding finger is way less accurate than a mouse pointer, but also in the way you directly interact with content rather than doing so in an abstract way via a pointing device.”



Above Boo.com was one of the most high-profile victims of the dotcom bust. Ten years later, ecommerce is thriving

Left Smartphones, while at the forefront of technology, still only have a 55 per cent web access success rate

Grannell also warns against the design-once mentality: “Information will increasingly be accessed across hugely varying devices. While I don’t think we’ll get back to the bad old days of designing for every device, mobile will be increasingly important, and even when devices evolve in terms of underlying power, people will still want fast, efficient web experiences on the go, rather than sluggish, time-wasting experiences.”

Rob Corradi agrees: “As we’re about to enter a new decade in which new platforms emerge almost yearly, designing and building to standards and thinking multi-platform is more important than ever. With netbooks, smartphones, consoles and more, all with different processing power, different screen sizes and input methods accessing what we make, one size no longer fits all.”

“Ten years is a lifetime in terms of the web and technology,” adds Shane Mielke. “I think you’ll see web-enabled phones, watches and PDAs become items that potentially control every electronic item we own. I think we’ll see ‘web design’ as it’s currently defined start moving away from just websites viewed on computers and grow to encompass other media. It really is exciting because it means a constant evolution for everyone and the opportunities to work on projects for TV, computer, cellphone, and so on, where currently we’re limited to our own little niche of the internet.”

“Mobile, mobile, mobile,” says Margaret Manning, CEO at Reading Room. “While I think there may be some rough times ahead, it’s undeniable that mobile is where we’re all going. I think there are some really interesting design and usability challenges coming up – we’ve all got used to the luxury of working in lots of space on large screens. Mobile shakes things up a bit – in the way we design and in what we give to the end user.”

“Everyone is going to say mobile, of course,” says Brendan Dawes. “For me it’s not really about that, but more about context. I want the thing I use to interact with the web to know what I’m doing, where I am and to simply work like magic. Yeah. Magic. Let’s have more of that.”

WWW. What does the next decade hold? Share your views and predictions at forum.netmag.co.uk

