

RSS, Blogs and the Web Pendulum

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Did you ever think about why RSS feeds have evolved and become such a ready standard? It seems like it happened overnight. One day we are all writing screen scraping routines to harvest information and the next day we suddenly have access to an XML feed that gives us all the information we need? How did that transpire exactly? And when did the blogosphere reach such critical mass? I think it's another pendulum swing.

The Rich Media Cycle

When flash first started gaining in popularity it was due to the visual impact. Suddenly you couldn't have a web site without a "splash screen" - an interminable movie animation with scrolling words and images that made me want to stick an ice pick in my left temple. Then we added music - mostly "Ode to Joy" with that single layer sound like a cheap digital watch alarm. The animations themselves followed the tried and true axiom that "if you *can* do it, you *should* do it." Shortly after that the "skip intro" button made it's appearance and our torture mercifully came to an end. Now of course, these forays into the absurd where Walt Disney seems to throw up on your screen seem nonsensical. But did we learn anything?

One thing we should have learned (but probably did not) was that **information is king**. People use the internet for information. They shop on line, bank, research, connect with others. They are *not* generally looking for an artistic experience. Visually stunning sites are great marketing tools - but marketing is only a small part of *what the internet is* for most people. That is why the number 1 rule for visual programming is, "Does it enhance the purpose of the site?" It's great to have an all flash shopping cart, but if it takes 10 more seconds to load and doesn't provide any more functionality than the HTML shopping cart you should rethink it.

Still, we liked our gadgets and plowed on. Pretty soon the useful information got sucked into the widgets. The sites themselves were subjected to the "graying" of the Internet - where the text was all gray and small, but surrounded by nifty half borders and visually-appealing-but-hard-to-grab-onto-with-your-mouse scroll bars. The already cluttered web was now not just a sea of information, but a junk yard of "neato" visual obstacles.

Suddenly, RSS appears. Now, even if I have a really visually rich site I can summarize it into a "feed" that a user can use to encapsulate my site - making his or her browsing more efficient. Blogs start popping up like ipods at a geek convention. Being mostly a text based medium, blogs are perfect for RSS. The impetus of the web may be shifting slowly back to information. You can't listen to a major news organization's coverage without hearing a story on how blogging is changing everything.

Personally, I think this is how the web pendulum swings. It goes from productive and informative to cutting edge and entertaining, then back again. As each new technology is "oversold" the market has to come back a bit to what makes the web really useful. As it returns from the bleeding edge to it's roots in information, it retains some of the things that pushed it out there to begin with (like rich media applications). At some point perhaps blogs or RSS themselves will reach a white noise level making them

despised and less useful. Until then, I think I'll keep my RSS reader at the ready.