

# Multiple pathways

## Providing options by “multipurposing” Web sites



*“Your destiny lies along a different path than mine.”*

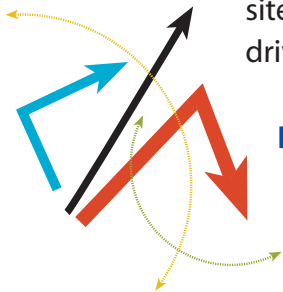
—Ben “Obi Wan” Kenobi, to Luke Skywalker, *Star Wars*

Do you carry a compass in your head, know exactly where you are at all times, and possess the ability to give accurate directions to complete strangers? If so, stay out of my car.

Wait ... I take that back. I *want* you in my passenger seat ... heck, I'll let you drive! Ask anyone who knows me, and they'll tell you that, when it comes to geography, I'm directionally impaired.

When it comes to the Web, however, I can't afford the luxury of "unexpected adventures" (my mother's term for discovering new neighborhoods by getting lost). If I'm designing a site, I need to make sure my visitors will be able to easily navigate the paths I've created, and know exactly where they are at all times. Unlike people getting lost in cars, Web viewers can easily transport themselves somewhere else by hitting the "Back" or "Home" buttons in their browsers.

But that doesn't mean my site has to be organized as straight and narrow as a Nevada highway. In fact, I'm a big proponent of "multipurposing" Web sites—creating multiple paths to accommodate visitors who might not be driving the same model browser that I use.



### Being a friendly dictator

In my last column, I stressed the importance of *control* in Web design, specifically as it related to typography (see "[Power struggles](#)" in the [January 15 issue](#)). When I discussed my ideas with a friend, he called me a

dictator and implied that overbearing designers like me were responsible for shifting control from viewers (who can set up fonts, text sizes, and background colors in their browsers) to large, Darth Vader-esque Web publishers and other evil empires.

Although I think that typographic control by designers and other advances in Web technology will ultimately favor viewers' reading experiences, I had to admit that he had a point. If you've run across sites requiring multiple plug-ins, impossibly large graphics (anything over 80 to 90K, *max*, for an entire page), or a cacophony of <BLINK> tags, it's highly likely that you've never gone back to them.

It's important to keep in mind that most people are still Web surfing on 14.4-kbps modems using older (and often faster, less feature-bloated) browsers. If you want them to return to your site, or order products on-line, or tell their friends about your work, you need to treat them right by offering a number of options for viewing your content.

Figure 1



## A three-pronged attack

Let me illustrate by using one of my own sites, *eSCENE* (really, this isn't just a shameless plug!). As a journal of short fiction, *eSCENE* is targeted at readers, writers, teachers, students, and others who enjoy reading high-quality stories. As you can see, this list spans a wide spectrum of Web viewers, from budget-conscious teachers with limited computing power to college students with new PCs and T-1 access in their dorm rooms (lucky devils!).

In order to make them all feel welcome, no matter how they view the site, I decided to create three versions of my content that follow three paths through the site: graphics-heavy ("espresso"), minimal graphics ("cappuccino"), and text-only ("decaf") versions chosen from the opening title page (see Figure 1).

I selected this approach for a couple of reasons. When I'm wandering around the Web, I don't always keep the "Auto Load Images" option (Netscape Navigator) or "Show Pictures" option (Microsoft Internet Explorer) turned on,

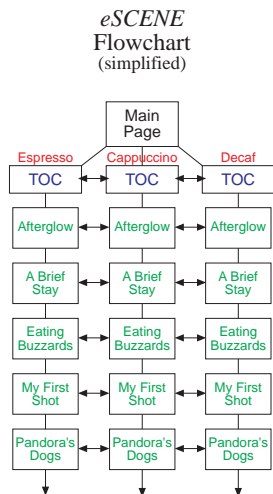
because it slows me down. The Web is slow enough as it is, without my having to wait for 125-K images of people's pets to download. When I find a site that I want to explore further, I turn on the graphics option and browse its contents. When people arrive at the *eSCENE* pages, they don't even have to take that step, if they don't want to; they can simply jump into whichever mode suits them at the time.

Another advantage lies in the ability to track how people are accessing the site. Are visitors heading for the graphics-heavy version, then bailing out to the text-only version? That could mean that my graphics are taking too long to load. Are visitors primarily flocking to the minimal-graphics and text-only versions? Perhaps I should focus less on detailed graphics for next year's edition. If you can see how people are responding to areas of your site, you can improve the experience for them when you update the pages.

### **Getting from here to there**

When I decided to offer three versions of the site, I knew I would be in for

Figure 2



extra work. However, I was surprised at how little additional effort was required—once I tackled it from the right directions.

By far, the first and most important step to take is to outline your site. If you're the type who always hated to create outlines in school (I was), you'll just have to buck up your courage and dive into it headfirst. One of the keys to successful Web design is organization, and the best way to be organized is to start with a good outline or flow chart (see a section of my *e*SCENE flow chart in Figure 2).

Although it may seem as if you're wasting your time outlining when you could be doing more exciting stuff like creating graphics, this step will save you more hours than you can imagine. Just as you can't build a road without knowing where it's going, you can't build a site without knowing its structure. You can probably "get by" without an outline, but if something unexpected comes up in the middle of the process (maybe the client wants to change the content, or emphasize a different area of the site), you'll have to start rebuilding from the begin-

ning. If you're like me, you just don't have the time to go through all *that*.

To avoid the repetition of creating three different versions from scratch, I worked backwards—from my view, at least. I love creating, optimizing, and testing graphics, so it's no wonder I wanted to get started on them right away. However, I quickly discovered that by beginning with the text-only version (marked-up to conform with HTML 2.0 specs), I only had to make copies of the “decaf” files and then add in the HTML code for the graphics at the top and bottom of each page in order to create the “cappuccino” and “espresso” versions. Building from the ground up saved me countless hours of reworking and experimentation.

### **Seatbelts optional**

I've said this before, but it's worth repeating: One of the great advantages of the Web is its architecture for creating options—whether those options are different fonts, different graphics, or even different content. Visitors aren't limited by the linearity of books or the time schedules of television.

Figure 3



Although I created *eSCENE* with three separate paths containing the same information, I not only made sure to let my visitors pick which graphics option they preferred, but also made it easy for them to jump between paths at will (see Figure 3). By taking a little extra time and effort, I was able to “multipurpose” my content, while providing ways for viewers to always know their location within the site. Hopefully, this encourages them not to bail out of my pages—unlike some of the people who have ridden in my car. 🚗

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