

01.03.01 It's impossible to design effective Web experiences without taking human emotion into consideration.

Emotion is a big part of who we are and how we interpret the world around us. If an organization makes an online resource easy to navigate, an individual might have a good experience. If an organization makes their Web enterprise easy to relate to, however, the way is cleared for an individual to have an even greater experience because he or she is able to participate emotionally with the Web enterprise. Dr. Harris continues:

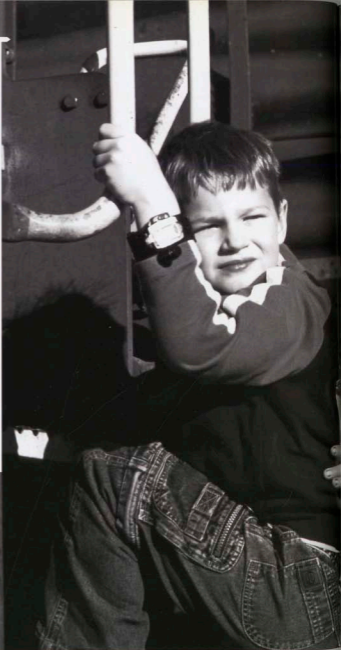
"Emotions are an integral part of the appreciation of media. [...] What we feel while watching or listening is a central part of the whole [experience]. If the emotional aspect is absent, we miss an important dimension of the experience."

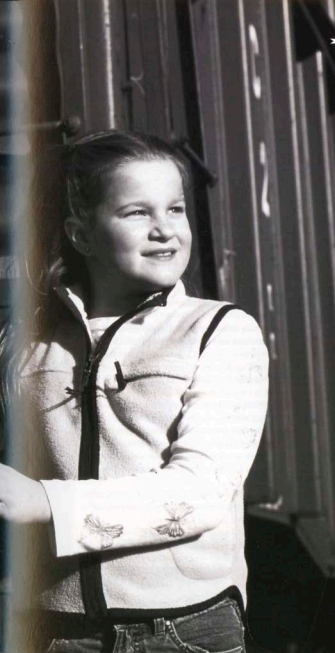
In *The Media Equation*, Reeves and Nass state:

"Media have evolved to capitalize on fundamental human responses to them. [...] By trial and error, people who design media are gradually discovering the intricacies of how media work [on the human psyche]."

It's inevitable that Web enterprises will come to embrace emotional design sensibilities such as those that have evolved in television and in other media industries. In the case of the Web, however, it shouldn't have to come through as much "trial and error" as has been the case with traditional media. There are well-established psychological principles in television, radio, and print mediums that, according to Dr. Richard Harris, "apply equally well to all media." Dr. Harris concludes:

"Our relationship with the media is [...] profound. [This] is precisely because it meets some of our deepest psychological needs and contributes naturally to our ongoing psychological development."





#### 01.03.02 The Web is a vehicle for emotional fulfillment.

The Web can help us complete tasks more efficiently, but what is perhaps of even greater significance is that it can make us feel more complete emotionally. We look to the Web to help us find this emotional completion in many ways:

- > We're empty and seek fulfillment.
- > We're overburdened and seek enjoyment.
- > We're under stimulated and seek intensity.
- > We're overwhelmed with our own lives and seek catharsis.
- > We feel ordinary and seek to experience the emotions of a life that's more dramatic.

#### 01.03.03 We seek to fill an emotional void on the Web.

All people who go online are seeking the same thing—every single one of us. Perhaps you're thinking, "That's not true! With all the possibilities on the Web, how can we possibly know what an individual person is seeking?" It's true that there are variations in the primary needs, but there's a commonality in the secondary need.

All people seeking a restaurant to spend an evening at, for example, are seeking the same secondary fulfillment. They may *feel like* eating steak, or they may be *in the mood for* good conversation—two very tangible and distinguishable desires. They do, none-the-less, have the same secondary desire—the emotional fulfillment that accompanies the process of satisfying these primary needs. Although many Web enterprises may represent restaurants that offer the same tangible opportunities for consumptive or social fulfillment—which are primary—the ones that speak to the "feel like" and "in the mood for" components of the need will generate the greatest response.

The reason is that people go online to find more than mere tangible items like information about places that serve great steak or that provide environments conducive to good conversation. They go online to build emotional confidence that the choices that they're making will lead to the fulfillment that they believe these tangible choices will bring them. It's not merely a practical hunger that they're trying to satisfy but an emotional hunger as well. They wonder, "If I choose this restaurant, will I have a good time?"

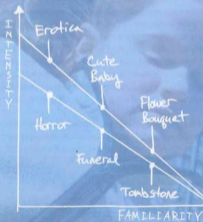
When considering Web experience design, it's the quality of our effort to identify, amplify, and satisfy these emotional hungers that will ultimately lead people to choose our Web enterprises in the search to fill their primary needs.

#### 01.03.04 We seek enjoyment on the Web.

These days, life is very stressful. We work our minds as hard in the information age as our forefathers worked their bodies in the industrial age. Our brains are very active analyzing, experimenting, problem solving, and reflecting [trying to make sense of things] all day long. It's important to understand that, although our computers are great "business tools," when we go online our computers play more than just a business role. They suddenly become windows by which we travel through time and space to take in the experiences that the universe has to offer.

Although we may have practical tasks to perform, there's a part of us that wants to transform these tasks into opportunities to have fun. We want to find, tap into, and pursue interests that are more than just practical, even if they are, well—practical. When we talk about the "entertainment value" of an online resource, we're talking about the degree to which a Web enterprise makes routine operations rise above the level of the mundane—even if the purpose of the Web enterprise is not necessarily to entertain.

#### 01.03.05



#### 01.03.05 We seek intensity on the Web.

How much we enjoy a Web experience depends on the degree to which we find it arousing. Is it just "good," or is it "really, really good"? Is it merely "bad," or is it "terrible"? Reeves and Nass use the word "valence" to refer to the judgment we make about something being either good or bad. "Arousal" is used to indicate the level of intensity that we attribute to the valence. They state: "Valence and arousal are essentially biological." Taken together, they're the "two basic dimensions of emotion." Reeves and Nass offer these examples:

"Flowers, a cute baby, and erotica all have positive valence, but they have distinctly different levels of arousal: Erotica ranks highest and flowers, lowest. Similarly, a funeral procession and mutilated bodies are both negative, but only [mutilated bodies] will produce significant arousal.

"As things get arousing, they also are more likely to be either good or bad. **Neutrality, it turns out, is not a big part of excitement.** It is also difficult to find material that is extremely good or bad and totally un-arousing—it's hard to be blasé about highly valenced material."

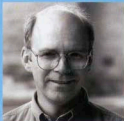
Reeves and Nass have done an exceptional job explaining how we get excited. What's even more significant is their reason for why getting people excited is important. When we get excited about an experience we have, we pay closer attention and tend to remember the details of that experience more than we would if the experience had been blasé. In a nutshell, **excitement can be used as an effective memory aid.** Isn't this one of the chief aims of any online marketing or communications initiative—to make a message as memorable as possible? As it turns out, designing our online resource to be emotionally engaging isn't a luxury—it's a necessity. Of course, people in sales and advertising have known this for many years, as Reeves and Nass plainly state in their book:

"The basis for the success of websites, in addition to their usability and efficiency, is often the potential to arouse. This may require changes in the ways that websites are evaluated."

This is something that both usability and experience design specialists need to understand.

# SPOTLIGHT ON:

## DR. BYRON REEVES



Dr. Byron Reeves, a professor in the Department of Communications who conducts psychological studies at Stanford University, is one of the most frequently quoted authorities regarding the psychological effects that various media have on people. Together with collaborating researcher Dr. Clifford Nass [also of Stanford], he wrote *The Media Equation*, which documents their extensive scientific studies.

Their book has provided some of the most intriguing revelations regarding human-computer interaction published to date. Their studies have ranged from gauging people's sense of social connection through media, to measuring how their level of enjoyment influences long-term memory. The following are his answers to some questions I posed based upon the ideas presented in this chapter:

**Lenker:** How is the Web's role growing in the way people are forming their social, emotional, and intellectual identities?

**Reeves:** The most important development since the Web's inception is the fact that it is now able to carry symbol systems that are capable of influencing social and emotional responses. Now that bandwidth limitations are not so constrained, the utilization of multimedia elements, rather than mere words alone, is having a significant effect on people's ability to find emotional and social significance online.

**Lenker:** Why are people so interested in interacting with Web media?

**Reeves:** Shopping, for example, is inherently a social experience. More than mere economic transactions, it involves social transactions. The cues that *people* add to a transaction are tremendous. When we use Web media to introduce a greater manifestation of these very human social cues, people find more enjoyment in and put more confidence in the online resources.

**Lenker:** What will contribute the most to making Web enterprises of the future more successful than those of the late 1990s?

**Reeves:** I actually think that it won't so much be a matter of making interfaces better, although that in itself is important, but it will be a matter of making content more effective for people.

**Lenker:** How do you respond to critics who say that trying to make online resources behave socially and emotionally will always result in experiences that are bogged down in excessive dialogue?

**Reeves:** The thing that these critics don't realize is that just because social and emotional cues are incorporated in a virtual interaction with an online resource, that doesn't mean that these cues need to be intrusive. These critics are in reality probably reacting to examples they've seen where experience designers try to make their Web enterprises social in an excessive or inappropriate way. Trying to "yuk it up" too much, or being a little too clever with dialogue, are examples of this. Being successful at incorporating social cues isn't about doing *everything* that can be done, but doing what's appropriate. This can be measured through researching feedback from representatives from the target population.

The key to success is in how we design and program these systems to behave. We shouldn't design them to "run off at the mouth." We want to be as appropriate in an interaction as would be expected in real life. The point is that when we decide that we're going to attend to social features, what we're doing is deciding to have more of a tangible presence for the purpose of gaining more social control over people's impression. Just as in real life, this is something that must be worked at and refined over time.

**Lenker:** Can an online resource still succeed if social cues [...]



Read the entire interview online at:  
<http://www.trainofthoughts.com>

Learn more about Dr. Byron Reeves at:  
<http://www.stanford.edu/%7EReeves/>

Buy *The Media Equation* today at:  
<http://www.trainofthoughts.com>

01.03.06 We seek catharsis on the Web.

It's important to understand that one major way people seek emotional satisfaction when they go online is through a notion taken from psychodynamic theory known as *catharsis*.

Catharsis is the emotional release of tension that we feel when we watch others [in media or otherwise] experience or express something that we ourselves are inhibited from feeling or expressing in real life. Closely associated with this notion is the notion of vicarious release, whereby we live out our own fantasies through the lives of others. We live vicariously through those we know; like our children, for example, when we push them in sports to achieve goals that we ourselves were not able to achieve. We can also live vicariously through fictionalized characters such as those in fantasy role-playing games such as EverQuest. In both cases, we have the opportunity to experience catharsis if the stimulus that we're experiencing is sufficient to draw our minds into the illusion and trap us there. Richard Harris writes in *A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication*:

"Many emotions are enjoyable to experience vicariously. Many TV sitcoms show people in embarrassing situations that are really only funny when happening to someone else. TV characters may do things we would like to do but have moral or ethical proscriptions against."

01.03.07 We seek drama on the Web.

Sigmund Freud said, "We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things." What Freud is saying is that for people to get excited about something, it has to rise above the drone of everyday life.

For most people, life seems typical, drab, and sometimes downright boring. The cure for this sense of the mundane is *drama*. The mechanism that is the vehicle for the range of emotions that we experience through catharsis is known as *dramatization*. We're fascinated by the intrigues of the seedier side of life—thus the popularity of romance fiction and reality entertainment. Often people go online to add a more interactive dimension to the drama they experience through television or films. The Web offers organizations the ability to allow people to choose the aspects of a storyline that they want to dramatize. Krome Barratt writes in *Logic & Design in Art, Science & Mathematics*:

"Dramatization is the process of making an experience more exciting, vivid, emotionally stirring, and memorable. [Dramatization is] achieved by emphasizing some aspect of an experience at the expense of others. Selection, abstraction and hierarchy are of its essence, and these to be reordered, grouped and juxtaposed to maximum effect. [...] Drama is a meeting and rivalry of human antithesis. In counterpoint, two contrasting themes which share a common space-time scale discuss, compete, debate, argue, fight for their point of view."



**01.03.08 Sterilizing Web experiences is a seriously flawed experience design strategy.**

If the only way people can experience intense enjoyment is through rising above the drone of everyday life, how can it make sense to ask Web enterprises to standardize on a design status quo that strips out every component that can lead to emotional fulfillment?

When we sterilize the material that our Web enterprises present, it puts MORE burdens on the people interacting with them, not fewer. Is this a practical approach to designing Web experiences? Hardly. As I mentioned in 01.01.03, it's actually quite difficult to pay attention to things that bore us to death! People want more out of their consumptive, social, and emotional exploration on the Web than merely getting it over with. **They want to find satisfaction throughout the experience, not merely as a result of the experience.** This notion seems so intuitive; how has our industry gotten so far off track?

## 01.04 *Grappling with Our Misdirection*

The bottom line in developing effective Web experiences is that practical considerations are just one of the several categories of considerations that must be employed in the design of online resources that properly address a visitor's consumptive, social, and emotional needs. Sure, we want people to know where to type in their credit card numbers when transacting with our Web enterprises. I don't argue points such as this. But before they're going to care about where to enter in their credit card numbers, we're going to have to somehow help them care about what it is we're trying to sell them! In light of this, why is it that many usability consultants give preferential and sometimes *exclusive* consideration to the practical aspects of experience design and then condemn those of us who attempt to design more holistic experiences?

One explanation lies in the word *attempt*. Historically, most who have attempted to go beyond mere practicality with Web experience design have failed. The fact is that amateurs design most online resources, and we're ALL amateurs when we start. The industry has only been viable since about 1995, for heaven's sake! Many organizations simply haven't attained enough insight to do a proper job of designing effective Web experiences yet. Many, in fact, have innocently or naively created online resources that appeal to their own, unrefined sense of aesthetics. As a result, the experiences they design use media and interactivity inappropriately to emphasize the wrong types of things.

The practical result is that their online resources are hard to navigate, take forever to download, and in the end haven't succeeded in using media or interactivity to add much value to a person's overall experience. We've all been guilty of this, but this is no time to give up on our ideals. It's time to apply ourselves as serious students of the arts and sciences whose disciplines we employ in our pursuit of crafting appropriate, elegant, and effective Web-based interactive multimedia. We can do better than we have done in the past. We've learned and are learning from our mistakes. The purpose of this book is to aid in that learning process. :-]

01.04.01 *Our industry will evolve just like every other industry has before us—through the natural selection of a free-market economy. Do bad television shows, commercials, films, or video games ever get produced? The answer is yes—but they don't last long because they prove to be ineffective. More successful efforts rise to the top and extinguish the others. And although certain projects will always stand out as both positive and negative examples, eventually all efforts will settle into an overall equilibrium where quality is more homogenized. It will be the same with Web enterprises. Let's just make sure that that homogenized equilibrium isn't as boring as usability standards are currently constraining it to be.*

In light of this, it seems inappropriate for usability consultants to tell designers to stop using rich media and interactivity based on the fact that others have used it and have failed. Can you imagine where the entertainment industry would be if, for example, sci-fi movies were never allowed to evolve into a legitimate art form simply because some early attempts weren't very convincing?

No; usability consultants shouldn't be pressuring Web enterprises to quit trying to make online experiences more dynamic, engaging, and therefore more meaningful. Instead, these experts should instead be drawing upon their own experience with and wisdom regarding the studies of perception, cognition, emotion, persuasion, and the philosophy of aesthetics (if any) to show Web enterprises how to properly employ the more elegant aspects of experience design.

The laws of natural selection do apply to the Web just as they do to real life; and the fact is that natural selection favors the strong and the beautiful. The Web enterprises that see it this way will be the ones that will not only survive, but thrive.

01.04.03 We must qualify our experience design recommendations with appropriate analysis.

To put it simply, good design is good design no matter what it consists of—be it simple or elaborate. The same can be said for bad design. But what makes a design good versus bad? What are the criteria? The purpose of this book is to explore these questions.

In order to judge the quality or value of an experience design, we must be at least somewhat familiar with the various disciplines that are employed to formulate that design. In our exploration of these disciplines, it's important that we keep an open mind. The important thing to remember is that there's no one solution to every problem. Our solutions should be *situationally appropriate*.

Is HTML text better than rendered-graphic text? Are full-color animated images preferable to monochromatic stick figures? The answer is—it depends on the situation. What's the purpose of the online resource? Who are the primary audience sets and subsets? What's the nature of the content? How engaging is the content on its own? How difficult is the subject for the average person to comprehend?

The answers to these types of questions have a lot to do not only with determining how content elements relate to one another, but also with how the content chunks themselves are put together.

01.04.02 We must stay on the road of progress and out of the ditches of mediocrity.

My gripe with those who condemn the use of sophisticated media and interactivity on the Web is that they offer nothing better than a fleshless skeleton as an alternative. They're in effect pressuring the industry to exchange one set of mediocrity for another—to drive from the ditch on one side of the road right smack-dab into the other!

The Web development world is oversaturated with consultants who are experts at efficiently getting people to relevant content but are amateurs at helping people either relate to or make sense out of that content. Why is this? For every usability expert advocating sterile, stifling Web experience design, there are at least as many credible design and interactivity experts advocating experiences that reach deeper inside people. It's an injustice on the part of usability experts when they group design and interactivity experts with the amateur crowd and blanketly condemn all attempts to employ high-concept media or sophisticated interactivity.

We can do better than we have done—and we will. Not because we *limit* the scope of our work, but because we *refine* the quality of our understanding. We must therefore do the hard work that's necessary to hone our abilities to represent our ideas on the Web with passion, meaning, elegance, and clarity.

01.04.04 As Dr. Donald Norman says, humans are 'active, creative, social beings.'

Dr. Donald Norman of the Nielsen/Norman Group offers some good insights in his book, *Things That Make Us Smart*, that should give other usability consultants some food for thought:

"We humans are thinking, interpreting creatures. The mind tends to seek explanations, to interpret, to make suggestions. We are active, creative, social beings. We seek interaction with others. All of these natural tendencies are thwarted by the efforts of the engineering approach to efficiency. The danger is that things that cannot be measured play no role in scientific work and are judged to be of little importance."—Chapter One

"If we are to be able to use [digital media] easily and efficiently, the designers have to provide us with assistance, with an understandable, coherent structure. Design should be like telling a story. The design team should start by considering the task that the artifact is intended to serve and the people who will use it. To accomplish this, the design team must include expertise in human cognition, in social interaction, in the task that is to be supported, and in the technologies that will be used."—Chapter Four

"It is also the social side of technology that is least well supported. After all, the technologists are not social scientists or humanists; they are researchers and engineers. They can be excused for not understanding the social side of their handiwork. However, they [can't] be excused for not acknowledging their own lack of understanding and having some social experts join their team."—Chapter Eight

## 01.05 Summary

Yes—people use online resources, but we're more than mere "users" and are motivated by more than mere practical considerations. Far from it. As people, we have very complicated and interrelated, consumptive, social, and emotional motivations which we desire to somehow satisfy through more holistic online experiences.

- > What do these motivations lead us to desire?
- > How can we satisfy these desires through Web experience design?
- > What are the broader cognitive, social, and emotional principles that we must consider?

Web enterprises must begin to grapple with and answer questions like these if they're ever to pave *experiential pathways* that are not only easy to follow but also are natural, meaningful, and enjoyable for people to journey along in pursuit of their goals.

