

What is interactivity?

Everyone talks about interactivity on the web, reckoning it to be just about the most important thing about a website; but what exactly is it, how important is it, and how do I get it?

The World Wide Web by its very nature has always been interactive in that it involves computers 'talking' to each other, but interactivity must mean more than that. Outside the cyber world, social scientists have always talked about interaction and interactivity; it is the basis of sociology, anthropology, economics and many other disciplines. In the real world, interactivity is simply the process of people interacting with one another; human interaction. This meaning seems to be more and more becoming the meaning of interactivity on the internet. People use instant messaging services and chat rooms to interact in real time either in or across cyberspace, and are increasingly using web pages in similar ways.

The basic level of interactivity on a web page that differentiates websites from static media such as books and magazines is the email link. You click the link and, hey presto, your email client opens with the address already in and all you have to do is type your message, click your mouse and you have sent a message to the website owner. That, however, seems very basic. The next step from that, and possibly the most common form of interactivity on websites is the email form. You fill in all the fields and click send, and an email has been sent to the website owner without the need to open your email client. For most users this is little different to the previous method, but it is more inclusive. Anyone using a computer can send a message even if away from their own computer and thus their email program. I recognise that this is less of a step forward than it seems as many people use online email programs such as yahoo mail and hotmail. I suppose all of these things are interactive but only in terms of being given the capacity to send someone an electronic letter.

The concept of interactivity in the media began in the 1980s with interactive books. By making choices at specific points the reader determined the course of the story, and this concept has been developed and is the basis of many modern console and PC games. The human being is no longer a passive recipient of the messages from the artefact but plays an active part in shaping those messages. The thinking behind this aspect of interactivity is the reason why modern computers for home and small business use are all built to an open architecture (i.e. the owner of the computer can install whatever programs she likes, and customise the computer as she sees fit). In terms of electronic goods this is unique. Try to imagine an open architecture DVD player or radio; it isn't possible. Many of the things we refer to as interactivity are just that; the capacity to actively interact with the machine. Using the dark arts of advanced web technologies, webmasters create a space where we can run through simulations of specific activities with choices at different points (just as in video games), and this can provide a very rewarding and active user experience. In other words there is the idea of human-machine interaction.

The other key element is human-human interaction through the computer by leveraging the power of the World Wide Web. This is evidenced by the development of Web 2.0; a world of machines constantly talking to each other on our behalf as we conduct debates and discussions the social networking sites.

I am still not sure what interactivity means, but it all seems very worthwhile, and I am sure it helps with my online shopping. I know it is studied academically, and I know that it is a buzzword in the world of web developers, but as a social scientist that

designs websites, I can't help thinking that interactivity is the capacity of some websites to allow people, in the very broadest sense, to do stuff, rather than just read and look at the pictures.