

Web 2.0: an idea not a look

As a web designer I have often been asked to produce something Web 2.0. It is at this point that I start to get depressed. Web 2.0 seems to have become a mantra for modernity on the web for those who have little understanding of the inexact arts of web development. Do I at this point begin to discuss SOAP, HTTP requests and the finer points of web services? Not if I want the contract I don't. It is at this point that I have to fish for what the client actually means. Nine times out of ten he or she (usually he – female clients tend to be much more to the point) then tells me about such and such a website with rounded corners and that special sort of blue colour, and can he have one that looks a bit like that.

This brings us to the crux of the matter. Hot air in copious quantities has been said and written about Web 2.0, and most of it is at best confusing. As one delves into the bowels of the internet to try and grasp the elusive meaning of Web 2.0, it all becomes terribly confusing. Some suggest that a concept it has no meaning at all, as it employs exactly the same technology as Web 1.0. However, the general consensus would seem to be that Web 2.0 refers to the rapid growth of web services and the explosion of many-to-many publishing sites.

It would appear that there are two distinct elements to Web 2.0. Firstly, we witnessed the widespread development of interactive technologies such as blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, and web services, fuelled by enhanced hardware both in terms of higher spec computers for the end user and the rapid development of broadband. This in turn led to an increasing propensity for computers to 'talk' to each other in ever more sophisticated ways. For business this has meant an increasing capacity to share data with relative ease and for individuals the exponential growth of online social networking. The reality of Web 2.0 is probably that it is an idea rather than a tangible set of technologies we can point to. It is the idea of a more interactive internet. If Web 1.0 can be seen as analogous to a magazine or a brochure, then Web 2.0 is better seen as a conversation or a workplace.

Somehow, in all this, some people appear to think that Web 2.0 has a specific 'look', and that perception seems to revolve around the idea of rounded corners, even though sites such as MySpace and Facebook tend to have a decidedly rectangular look. The growth of rounded corners is less to do with Web 2.0, and much more to do with the transition from table-based websites to CSS styling, allowing web designers greater overall freedom including the capacity to provide small background images for elements of their sites; creating rounded corners. And then of course there is Web 3.0.

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