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BUSINESS FILTER

Building a macroscope

The Boston Globe

May 1, 2006

GOOD EXPERIENCE BLOG

Katy Borner of Indiana University is an expert in information visualization, or displaying large amounts of data in ways that allow us to unlock the hidden meaning. While the Web provides a rising flood of information, our brains can't digest it all and our tools, like search engines, are too primitive to grok patterns, trends, and communities within a social network. So her lab is building macroscopic tools to manage the big picture, such as maps, not of geospatial spaces, but of semantic spaces. "Imagine a map about nanotechnology, showing how it grew out of different areas of research, how it evolved over time, and how other groups joined," Borner said. If you think Google changed everything, think of layering this on top of it.

BUSINESS PUNDIT

Sustained focus

Recently Nicholas Carr blogged a quote from Michael Gorman, the president of the American Library Association, who said, "The Web is a 'hall of mirrors' that provides the illusion of thinking." So if the Web encourages grazing rather than deep inner rumination, BusinessPundit responds by saying focus is a major competitive advantage. Eliminate distractions. Build a culture of concentration. While other companies move from fad to fad, you should question each "new thing" and focus on boring ideas like execution.

JAKOB NIELSEN'S ALERTBOX

Stages of usability

Usability is a measure of how easy software user interfaces are to use. To chart how mature your tech company is as far as usability is concerned, Jakob Nielsen has created stages -- sort of like the Elizabeth Kubler-Ross stages of grief.

Stage 1: The tech guys are in charge. Their philosophy is "A good user is a dead user." Stage 2: The design guys take charge and "use their gut." Stage 3: Someone in marketing starts a skunkworks usability project and is widely derided by the tech and design guys. Stage 4 is where most companies never get: a fully funded usability testing budget to make sure people can use their products effectively.

WIRED

Just think it

Researchers at Carleton University in Ottawa are exploring the possibility of a biometric security device that will use a person's thoughts to authenticate her or his identity, like a password. It turns out that brain-wave signatures are unique to each individual -- even when they're thinking of the same thing. So your computer might show you an image or play a snip of music or video, to which you would think "yes" or "no" while the machine monitors your brain activity. It's complicated, and right now closer to science fiction than fact.

ROUGH TYPE

The great Google float

Nicholas Carr blogs about how J.C. Fargo, the president of [American Express](#), invented the traveler's check and unintentionally earned a bundle on float. As in, "You hold on to other people's money for them, and you get to keep the interest." Today's float bonanza? Google AdSense. Put Google ads on your site, and you share in the ad revenue. The rub? Google

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won't pay you until your AdSense balance is over \$100, which for most sites is a long time -- if ever. Last year, ads on other people's sites earned Google about \$2.7 billion, or 44 percent of its ad revenues. Most of that money probably came from big sites, but all those little guys must be creating a pretty decent float.

THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

The box that changed the world

50 years ago a converted tanker ship sailed from Newark, N.J., to Houston laden with 58 converted truck bodies filled with cargo. It changed the world. Last year the US imported 7.7 million containers carrying \$784.4 billion worth of cargo and container freight moving through the United States should double by 2020. Containers mean that shipping goods worldwide now accounts for just 1 percent or less of retail prices. That means the \$45 pair of shoes you wear cost about 34 cents to ship from Asia to a US store. And your \$2,500 TV? Just \$12.50.■

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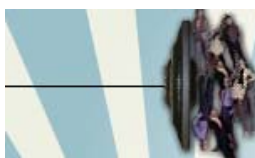
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