

# Up for a little ambient intimacy?

Webb's web



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## Not just for twits

It's great fun writing this column – honest! I can browse the web widely, find interesting things and write in an opinionated way. The only real problem is that when I write about something, it will be a minimum of four weeks until the column is published in the next edition of *inCite*. This can have one of two effects – sometimes there'll be an event or a deadline that will have passed by the time you get to read about it, or maybe what I'm writing about will have sunk into the mire by the publication date. I was thinking about this when I came across Twitter (<http://twitter.com>), which seems at first glance to be a pretty silly application. It's a service that lets you post a message to your friends saying what you're doing (cooking breakfast, reading a book, going home after a night out), and if that's all it did you might wonder how it would survive more than a few minutes. But (as they say on TV), there's more! You can send the message (up to 140

characters) to all the people in your address book, and they can elect to receive the updates on the web or as an SMS on their mobile phone. And you can post your message to Twitter via SMS too. It's become popular at conferences, for example when a group is organising where to meet for a seminar or a dinner, or there's been a case of someone having an asthma attack and receiving first aid advice. Now, the main issue is whether it's going to be around as you're reading this. Maybe all the Twitterers will have become bored and moved on to the next big thing, or perhaps it will have become so popular that the servers have collapsed and no Twittering is possible. But I doubt it. My guess is that even if it doesn't grow and grow, the idea will be picked up by another entrepreneur and it will morph into another product. Already, it's been mashed up with Google Maps to create Twittervision (<http://twittervision.com>) where you can see what people all over the world are Twittering about. You shouldn't be surprised to hear that a term has been coined to describe this sort of behaviour – ambient intimacy.

some businesses by surprise. They're finding (particularly in North America) that popularity of a website doesn't necessarily translate into financial success. The site in question may attract hundreds of thousands of users from many countries, but a canny advertiser will realise that it's not worth their while to promote a product or service that only appeals to a student in Calcutta rather than an affluent small businessman in Austria. Meanwhile, the website still racks up the bills in infrastructure and bandwidth. It's a challenge.

## Online reading patterns

It looks like we're going to have to rethink a lot of assumptions about user behaviour on the web. The Poynter Institute presented the results of its EyeTrack07 study in March, and surprised the audience with the claim that the percentage of story read online was much larger than that read in print. More significantly, once an online reader identified something that they were interested in, almost two-thirds read all the text. See their report at [http://www.poynter.org/content/content\\_view.asp?id=120458](http://www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=120458), and take some time to look around their site – it's quite interesting.

## Blueprints for the future

When I was at the National Library in the last age, one of our tasks was to prepare an IT Strategic Plan every few years. I'm sorry to say that they weren't used much (apart from being given to visiting salesmen) but I always found the process invaluable. I see that the NLA has continued to improve the quality of its documents over the years, and the latest one at <http://www.nla.gov.au/dsp/documents/itag.pdf> is an IT Architecture Project Report that sets out how it will achieve its aims in providing services from its collections over the next three years.

## When success can be a problem

It appears from several stories on the wires that the world-wide nature of the web is still catching

## What are people looking for?

You might recall that AOL last year released (for research purposes) an anonymised data set representing three months of search queries from half a million users. They withdrew quickly when some alert journalists found that with a little sleuthing they could identify some of these users. Tsk, tsk. What's perhaps as interesting is the overall analysis of the top search terms, which started with Google and then went on to eBay, Yahoo, yahoo.com and so on. The top ten search terms were either major site names or URLs. This was reported at [http://blogs.business2.com/beta/2006/12/searching\\_for\\_g.html](http://blogs.business2.com/beta/2006/12/searching_for_g.html) and led to a discussion on the habit of people typing URLs into the search window. Now, there's nothing wrong



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with this – it does give you a result, with an extra step – but it does show that the search engines maybe need to raise awareness of what they're actually offering.

### Meaningful names

Which all brings us to the subject of semantic URLs. Put simply, these have 'logical' component parts that describe the page in question. Of course, some content management systems have their own strange format that means nothing to anyone else, but there are still ways to improve the situation, and it will help you move up the search engine rankings. The discussion following the original article at <http://www.robertnyman.com/2007/03/16/the-importance-of-a-semantic-url/> shows that some people are in the habit of navigating to the desired page by guessing its name, but I wouldn't go that far.

### More on colour

I wrote in my April column about colour blindness and what you can do to cater for people who suffer from the condition. If you're looking for more general information, here's a resource that'll help you make better decisions about the use of colour, and particularly how to contrast text with either a plain or patterned background: <http://www.informit.com/guides/content.asp?g=webdesign&seqNum=277&rl=1>.

### Now you see it

Even when they were the universal bad guys – the Microsoft of their day – IBM was always known as a place that did some really cool stuff, often in secret. It's good to see that they're more open about it now. The Collaborative User Experience group at the Watson Research Center is doing some very interesting work on visualisation, illustrated by the Many Eyes product at <http://services.alphaworks.ibm.com/manyeyes/browse/visualizations?q=austen>. Tag clouds are becoming more common, but what they've done here is explore some quite different modes of visualisation.

### Non-geographical features

And another way to look at things is shown at Worldmapper (<http://www.worldmapper.org>). This is quite intriguing, and starts with a mapping projection that indicates the relative area of each country. From there it proceeds to illustrate different features such as population, progress in international justice, and wealth (where some countries are absolutely bloated). It's the sort of illustration that takes a bit of explanation but once you get your head around it, it's dramatic.

### Tag – you're it!

Still having fun cataloguing my personal library on LibraryThing: I noticed that the latest report from the Pew Internet Project says that 28 per cent of the online population in the USA have tagged some content on the internet. Interviewed by the Project, David Weinberger discussed why tagging (starting with del.icio.us and Flickr) has taken off, saying that it's partly to bring our own sense of order to the net (don't you have a system of folders for your e-mail?) but also because of the social aspect: the way that we can see how other people have described the same objects and the possibility of forming groups around shared interests. I'm not sure about the second point, but maybe I can find some group to share that opinion. The report is at [http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Tagging.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Tagging.pdf).

### All you need to know

We had a minor security scare at work last month (which we sorted out fairly quickly), but as a result I found out about Zone-H. The rather dramatic name hides a remarkable site that has tons of information about all sorts of internet security matters. From news and advisories about viruses, trojans, hacking and other matters, to relevant news items about geopolitics and digital warfare, it's all at <http://www.zone-h.org/>.

### Check it out

Anyone who sends out batches of e-mails should be aware of the chance that they will be mis-identified as

spam by some system or other. And because there are so many anti-spam systems, it can be difficult to decide whether a particular e-mail is at risk. The Spamcheck site at <http://spamcheck.sitesell.com/> claims to be able to vet your e-mails to ensure that they get through, but I'm not so sure. I tried it with two e-mails that had been blocked by different spam checkers and neither was flagged by Spamcheck. But it's probably worth a look.

### A pet project

Many research groups have been addressing the question of discriminating between human users and spambots to make sure that only the more desirable of those two groups can access websites and all the riches therein. One of Microsoft's contributions is ASIRRA (at <http://research.microsoft.com/asirra/>), the user is invited to tell the difference between cats and dogs. It's a brave effort and it should fool the bots, but I do think that cultural differences may prevent some people working it out.

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