Overlays and the Optimal User Experience

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The concept of *flow* as a human condition is attributed to Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi ¹ whose book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990) is considered the primary text in this field of research. At one time or another, most of us have experienced flow – a state of such focused concentration and absorption that our minds are virtually free of our bodies and we lose track of all worldly concerns such as time, hunger, and physical comfort. Athletes, artists, writers, and even software programmers often refer to such experiences when they are fully engaged in their craft and operating at the peak of their abilities.

If we generalize and simplify just a bit from Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of pure flow, it is reasonable to say that there is a certain level of flow that is possible in our daily interactions with popular media. It is commonplace to “lose oneself” in a great book, or to be nonplussed at the realization that one has played a highly immersive video game through the night and into morning. The cinema itself, with its massive screen, darkened interior and enveloping sound system is designed to transport us into the fantastic world projected before us, allowing us to forget where we are if only for an hour or two.

So what about the Web? How much flow have we come to expect from this burgeoning medium? Do we, as users, sit down at our computers and prepare to lose ourselves in the world of information that awaits us? This is not so difficult to imagine when the Web is replicating traditional mediated experiences, such as playing full-screen video or interactive content, it begins to feel a bit flow-like, but I would argue that it is in the replication of these more common experiences (watching TV, playing games, etc.) that flow is more attainable since our minds are somewhat predisposed to engaging in such content via their traditional means of delivery. However, when it comes to information retrieval, decision-making, knowledge building and discourse on the Web, we’ve never really expected that the notion of flow was even possible.

Kevin Kelly, author of the *Whole Earth Review* and Executive Editor at *Wired* said, “It’s really amazing that all this stuff [on the Web] is here. It’s in 5,000 days, all this stuff has come. And I know that 10 years ago, if I had told you that this

was all coming, you would have said that ‘that’s impossible’.” ² And he’s right, of course. We had no idea the Web would be the way it is today when we first began to imagine what would happen ten years later.

It is in this context and with a bit of hope and optimism that I feel that the Web will attain the capacity for flow. To be clear, I’m not talking about losing track of time while surfing the Web. My adapted version of Csikszentmihalyi’s flow is simply to say that there can and should be unhindered and uninterrupted immersion in the stream of information we are able to receive and act upon. A stream that knows enough about us and the nature of our information needs to react in real-time and always be presenting us with the next logical step in our journey. Free of bounces back and forth between search results and disconnected pages; and devoid of the inevitable “log-in to see this” dialogues, this new vision of the Web is more like a seemingly endless conversation with an expert; a two-way dialogue that builds in complexity and scope as it progresses. It will change our models for education, e-commerce, and development within our professions.

My belief that this is entirely possible within the next iteration of the Web (maybe it will be the defining characteristic of “Web 3.0”) is based upon certain indicators that are quickly becoming the standard design patterns* of the modern Web coupled with the natural inclination for all media to evolve to modes of more immersive experiences (witness the 3D television hype circa 2010).

One of the primary indicators of a move towards keeping users in the flow is the move away from pop-up windows to in-context overlays. Overlays, according to Bill Scott ³ and Theresa Neil ⁴ in Designing Web Interfaces ⁵ are objects that are lightweight, unobtrusive, fast to load, and visually integrated into the design of a site, which are useful for gathering user input, displaying more information, providing instruction, or asking questions. You’ve probably become familiar with overlays if you browse online photo galleries, use NetFlix.com regularly, or “look inside” books at Amazon.com. An overlay opens up a floating information object that allows you to interact with information directly or browse through a related or more specific set of information without having to leave the current page and therefore not having to wait through page reloads and “hub and spoke” navigational models (Figure 1).

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² [http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/kevin_kelly_on_the_next_5_000_days_of_the_web.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/kevin_kelly_on_the_next_5_000_days_of_the_web.html)
³ [http://looksgoodworkswell.blogspot.com/](http://looksgoodworkswell.blogspot.com/)
⁵ [http://designingwebinterfaces.com/](http://designingwebinterfaces.com/)
The free Lightbox\(^6\) library of JavaScripts for displaying photo or video media in a darkened pane above your current Web page has been around for a number of years and has become the standard for presenting images (and, more currently, videos or interactive modules), but e-commerce powerhouses know that flow heightens the browsing experience, which in turn leads to sales. Netflix.com keeps you looking at as many film titles as possible while calling up a personalized overlay with each mouse hover over a film graphic. The quick overlay has all the information one would need to make an informed decision about whether or not to select a film for viewing (Figure 2) and the browsing application progresses to a much more functional overlay once a title is actually selected for the queue. This secondary overlay (again delivered right on top of the current page) lets you promote your recent selection to the top of your viewing list and presents you with ten other titles you might want to act upon based on your last selection. From a purely economic point of view, Netflix wants its users to fill their queues with as many enjoyable films as possible and their well-designed overlay system combined with their suggestion algorithm makes a strong case for renewing that monthly subscription again and again.

\[^6\text{http://www.lokeshdhakar.com/projects/lightbox2/}\]
Amazon, no slouch in the online retailing universe, also uses customized and full-featured overlays in their bookstore. They know all too well that people like browsing the shelves of brick and mortar stores. One find leads to another, one concept or author opens up a world of possibilities. Amazon’s look inside feature gives you more information about a book by letting you flip through it, browse and even search its contents (is my Kindle full yet?). Like Netflix, the user is presented with personalized options for more books related to the current one and one’s own buying history.

The beauty of the overlay is that it is easily dismissed (click anywhere outside the overlay’s content) and it furthers the experience. It is one step closer to flow in the browsing experience. On Amazon, it’s as close as one gets to flipping through the book in your right hand while keeping your place inside the book in your left hand with your finger.

Overlays are the harbingers of what is to come. Better browsers, quicker code execution, and the semantic Web will embed a steady flow of relevant information into our browsing experiences, while background intelligence connects us to concepts and information products that will keep our minds occupied and our imaginations afire with an endless conversation with an expert.
Notes

* “Design pattern” is a term coined by Christopher Alexander in *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction* (1977) that refers to “…a problem which occurs over and over again in our environment, and then describes the core solution to that problem.” This concept was adapted to engineering, programming and information architecture. Put simply, design patterns are a model for capturing, organizing, and building a shared vocabulary of best practices.

** The semantic Web is considered to be the next stage in the evolution of the Web. It involves an underlying intelligence on the Web that automatically understands the context of information and builds logical connections between current and related content. Imagine automatically generated hyperlinks!

Editor’s Note

Interface published an article dealing with the concept of flow and game addiction by Alexander E. Voiskounsky of the Psychology Department, Moscow Lomonosov State. Please see it at:  
http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2007/06/voiskounsky.php