Designing for the Sandbox

Peter Merholz
peterme@adaptivepath.com
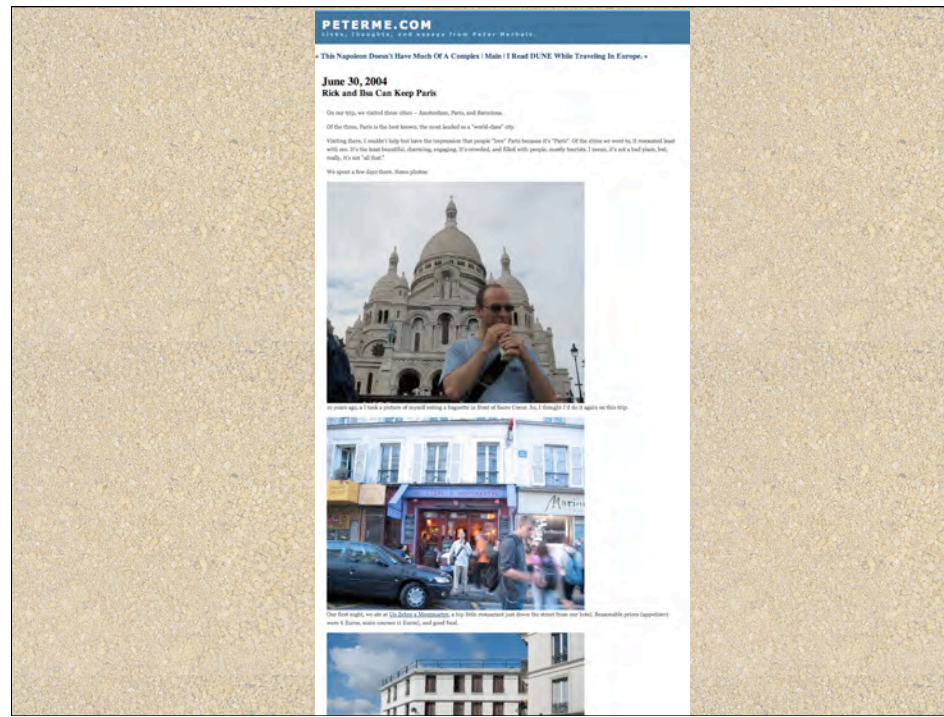
adaptive path

This is the Canon PowerShot S60, the camera I own. Like many of you, I take a digital camera with me everywhere, and shoot all manner of things.
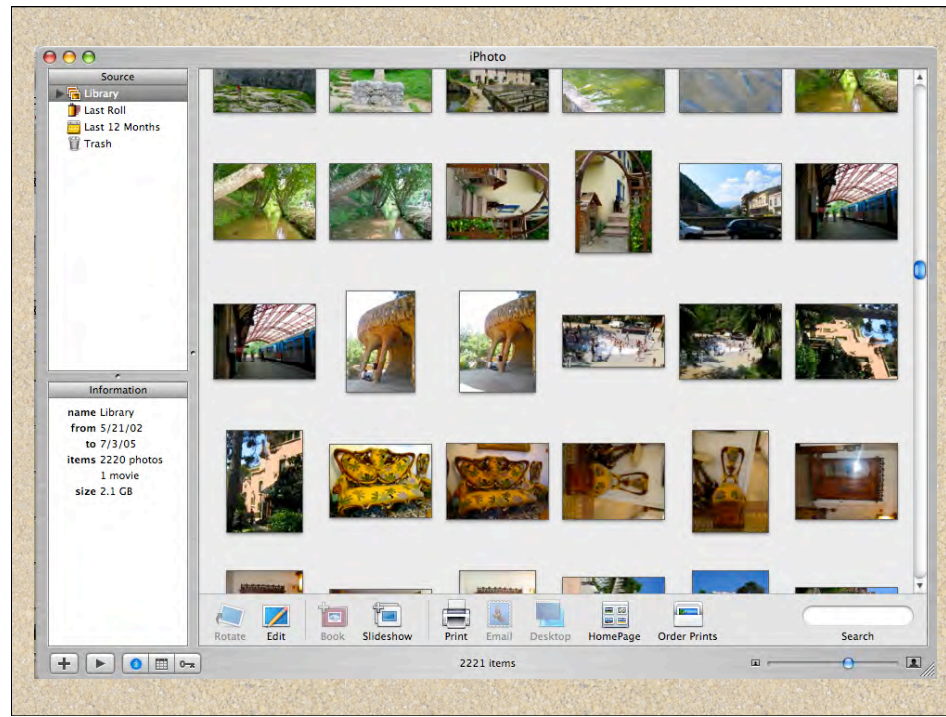
And, for the longest time, those things would first make their way to iPhoto…

And then to my blog. It was not the easiest sequence of events, getting my photos out in the world. I had to use either FTP, or kludgy blog software.

Then, like many of you, I discovered Flickr. For the three of you who don't know, Flickr is a photo sharing site with Friendster-like connections between people. Unlike Ofoto or Shutterfly, it doesn't assume you want prints. It figures you just want to show people your pictures.
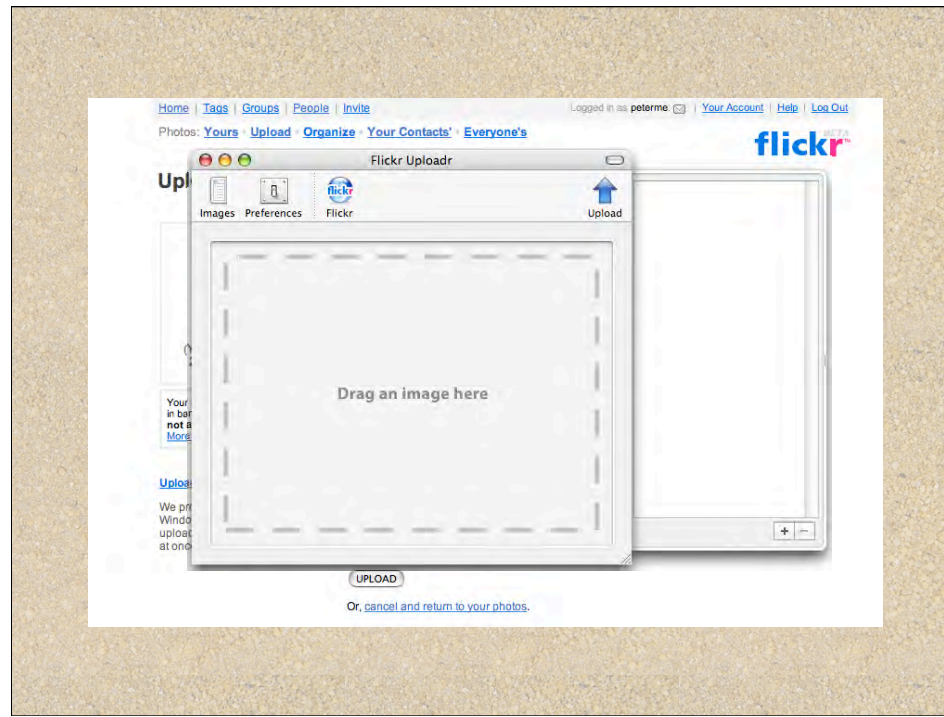
"Out of the box," there are two ways to get your pictures up on Flickr. The first is the all-too-familiar browse-your-harddrive-and-upload process. The second is the "Flickr Uploader" a rather impoverished little app that makes the process only marginally smoother.
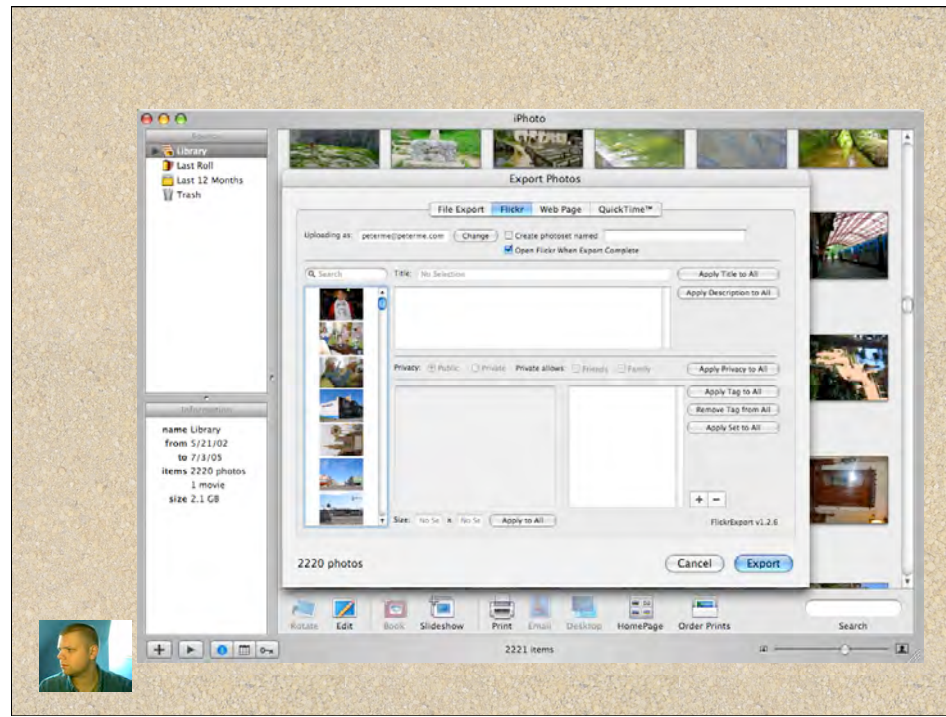
But then there is this man, Fraser Speirs. He clearly loves Flickr and loves the Mac. He's also a programmer. He read the API to upload to Flickr, and wrote a plug-in for iPhoto that makes uploading a breeze. You can tag, and sort, and create photosets, all from this one interface!

Well, in pretty short order, I found myself trying to upload more than the 20MB allotted under the free account. Since I clearly was using and committed to the service, I decided to go "pro" and pony up the dough.
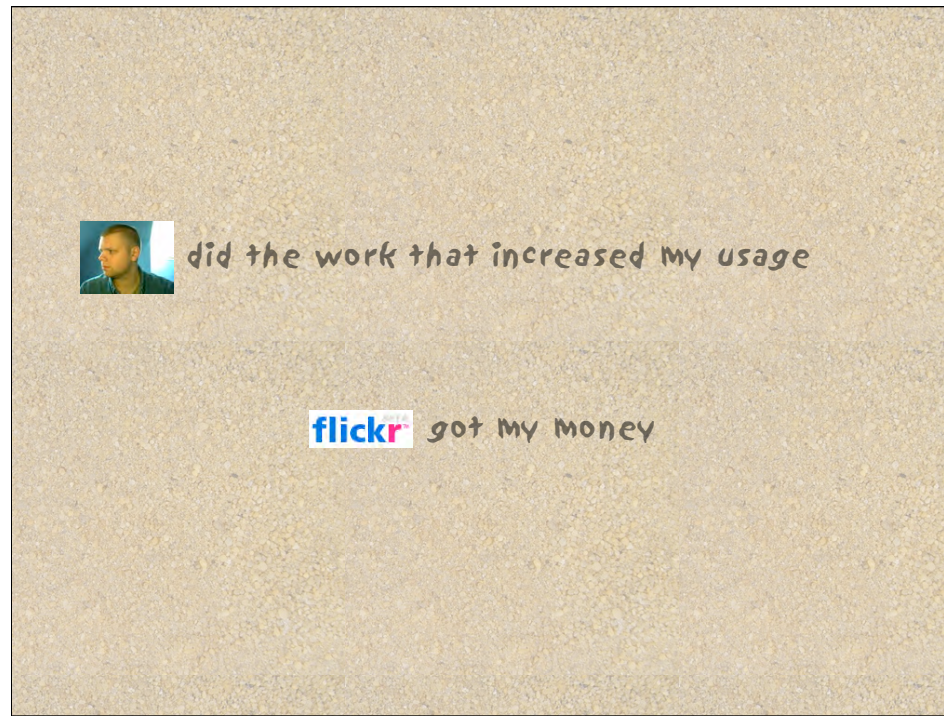
So, Fraser Speirs, out of the goodness of his heart, did the work that increased my usage.
Flickr got my money.
And Fraser is probably perfectly happy with that.
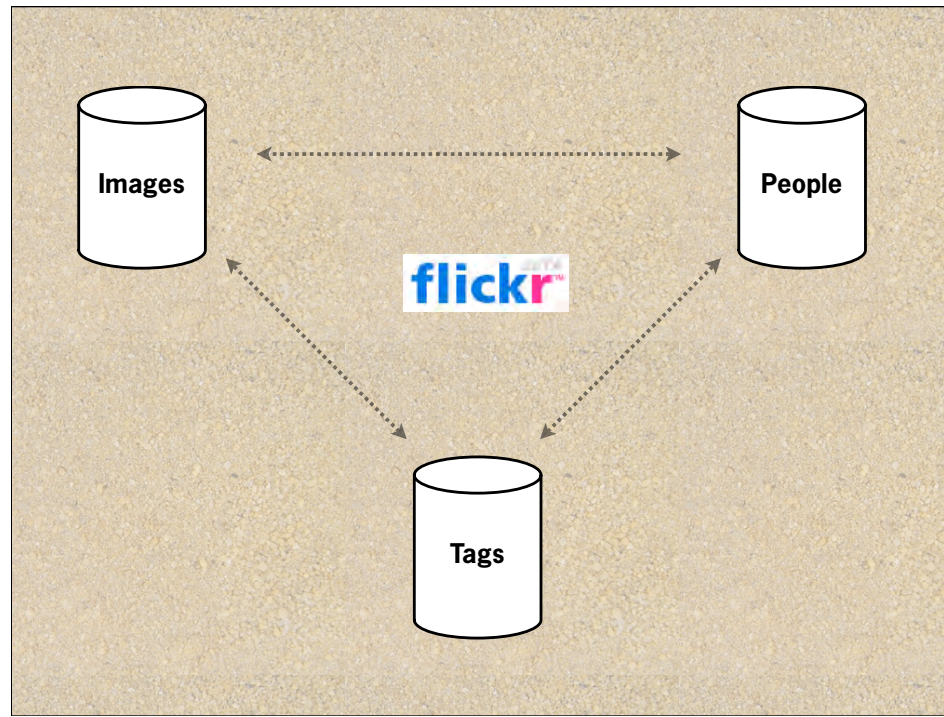
Flickr recognized that the value was in exerting as little control as possible over the experience, and to let others make of it what they will. Flickr owns up to what it really is: simply a database of images, people, and tags and the connections in between.

What is the sandbox?
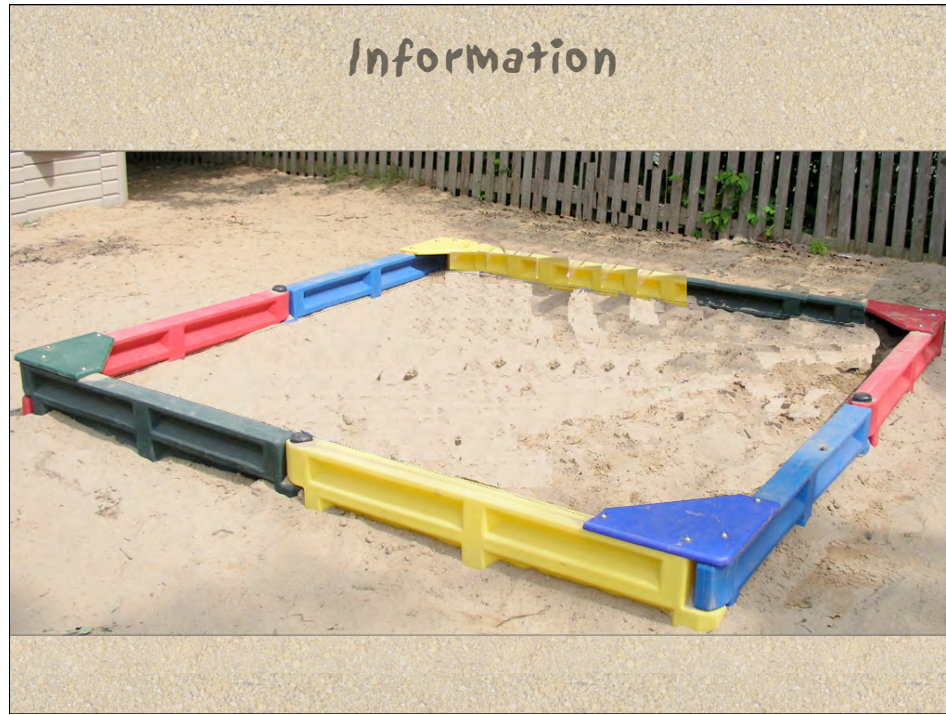
Information is the raw material of digital media. On the Web, it's typically content -- words, images, sounds. But it can also be things -- the products that an online retailer offers. Or it could be data -- clickstreams, behaviors, etc.

People, are, well, people. You and me. The things that actually bring value to the network. It's startling how few sites take advantage of the fact that there are PEOPLE on their sites, doing things that could be leveraged in interesting ways.

Tools allow the people to act on the information. They serve to mediate the experience. Tools on the web are often very simple -- links and forms. But with the development of Ajax and Flash applications and whatnot, the tools we're being given are getting quite interesting.

These three ingredients aren't particularly interesting. Websites everywhere have information, people using them, and tools that they use. What sets designing for the sandbox apart? It's the philosophy. And it's philosophy is pretty simple, familiar to Jedis everywhere...

Let go? But I'm a designer!

"As a designer, I would love to be able to control more of the environment and experiences of my customers. Identically, as a business person, I would love to be able to control more of the environment and experiences of my customers. After all, the user experience is influenced by far more than the applications we are creating."
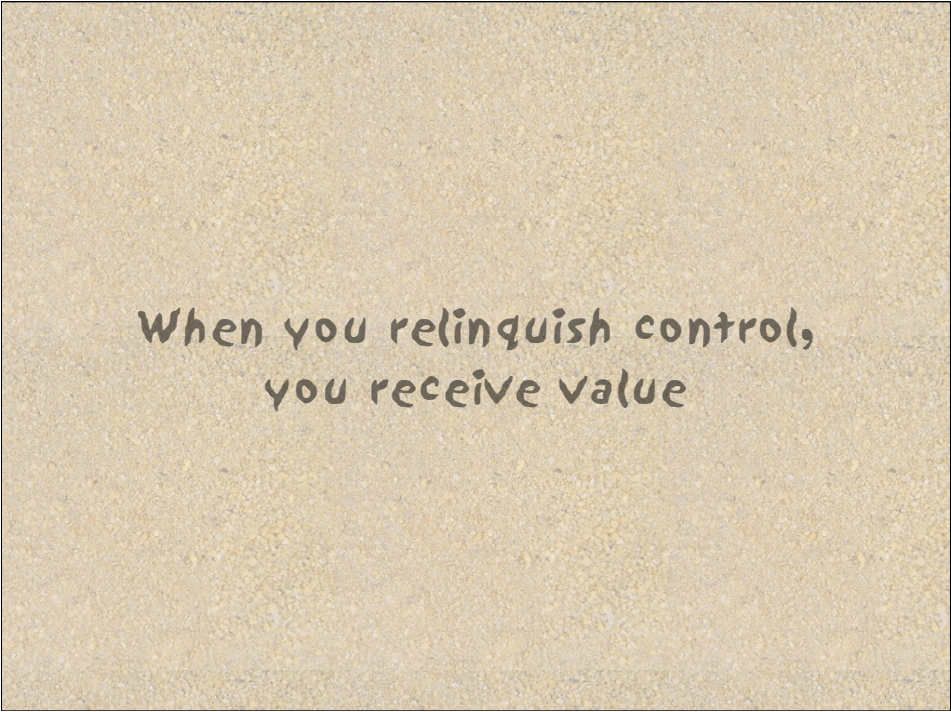Dirk Knemeyer
http://www.knemeyer.com/dk.cfm?a=cms,c,292,1

Here are some sites that attempted to exert control. Back when "page views" were considered valuable in and of themselves, sites sought to be "sticky." So instead of serving a true purpose, they threw all manner of content at you, in desperate hopes that something would be worth clicking and keeping you on the site. They weren't so concerned with the quality of experience -- just tried to control your behavior to keep you locked in.
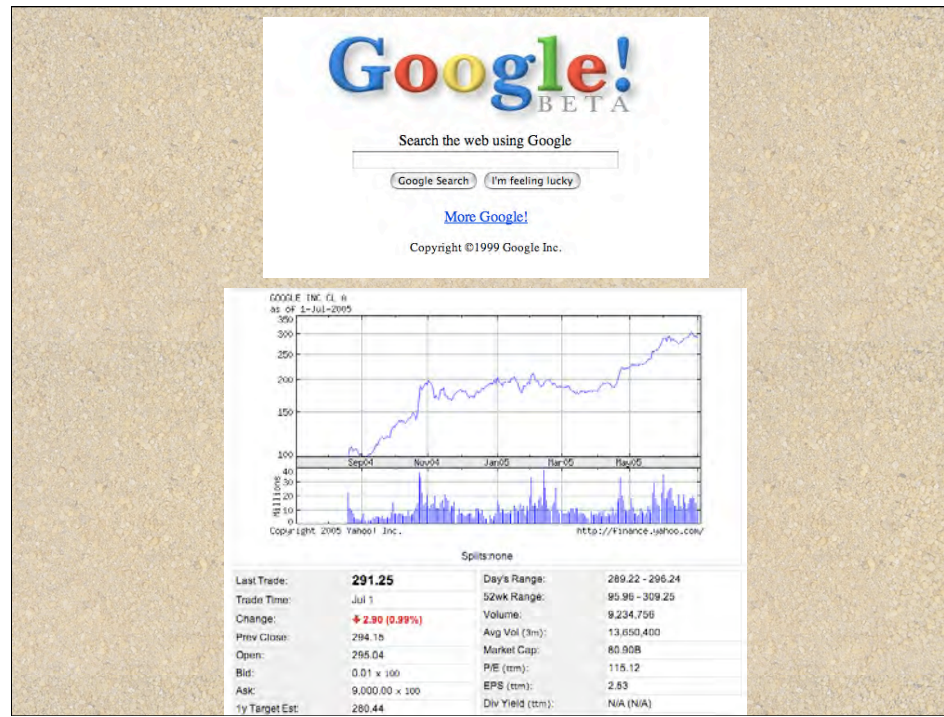
Then Google came along. With "I'm feeling lucky", you could successfully use the site in one page view. Where's the value to the business in that? Well, as Google's valuation suggests, the value wasn't in page views -- it was in becoming an indispensable tool. Google recognized that it cannot control the experience, because the variety of contexts is nearly infinite. We serve better by providing useful tools that can be integrated into those unforeseen situations.

When you relinquish control,
you receive value

Again and again, the history of the web has taught us that if we relinquish control, we receive value. If we don't try to control the aesthetic with big blocks of GIF text, we're searchable. If we don't try to unnaturally force people to stick to our site, we become an indispensable resource. If we offer people tons of choice, they'll take advantage of it.

The Five Planes

Concrete

surface

skeleton

structure

scope

strategy

Abstract
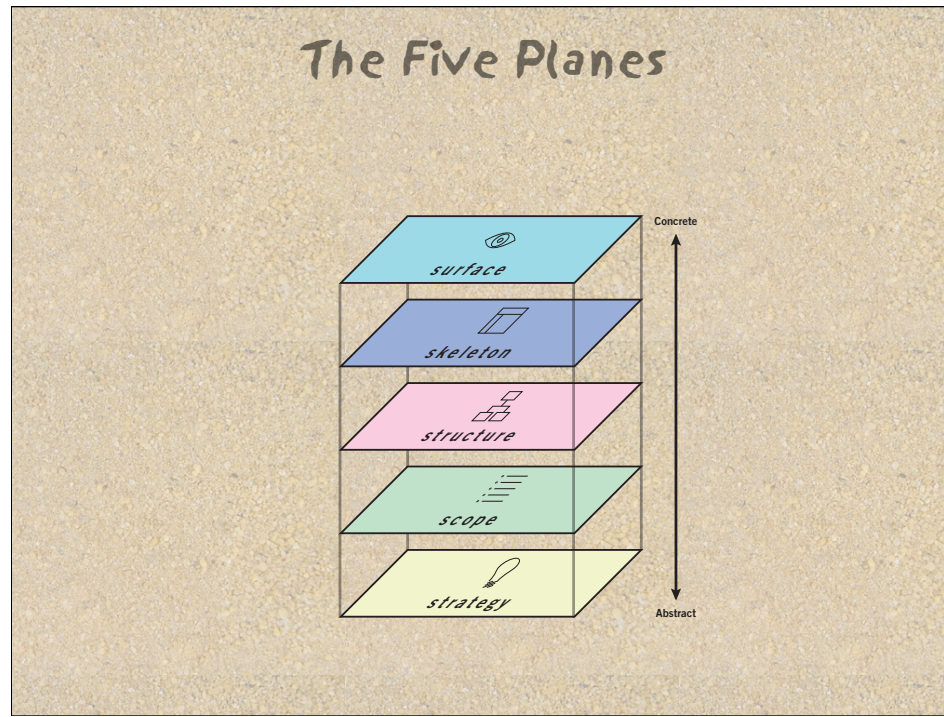
So the sandbox is about the appropriate relinquishing of control. But what kinds of control? How can we thinking about it systematically? I think that my colleague Jesse James Garrett's Elements of User Experience provide a potentially helpful framework.
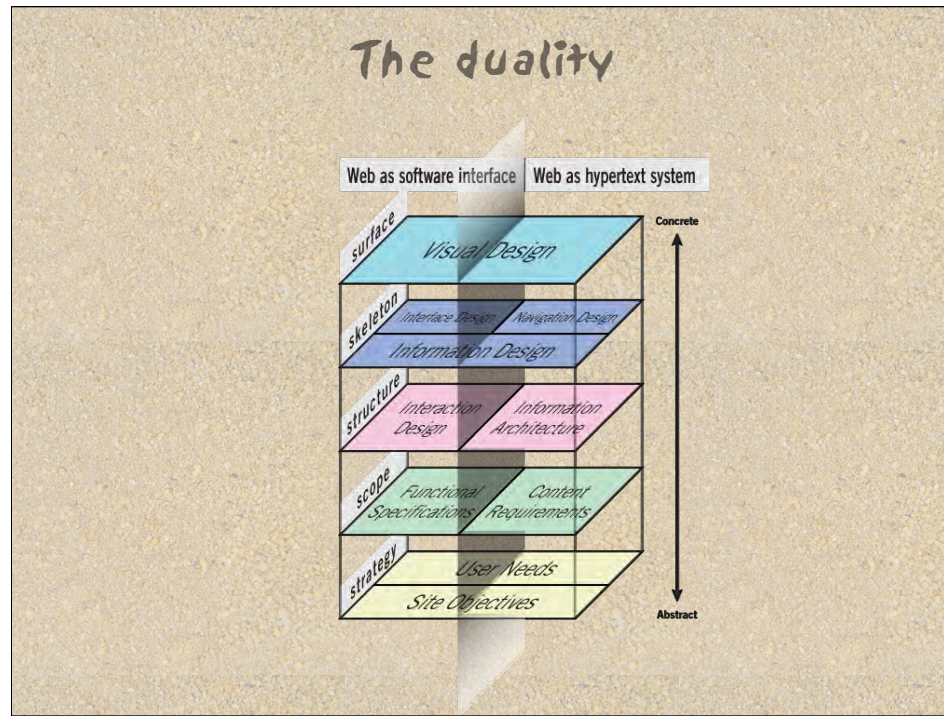
Jesse makes clear to distinguish between the web as software and the web as hypertext system. As we'll see this distinction, and the elements it reveals, can help us think through the notion of control.

Surface

Web as software interface | Web as hypertext system

surface

Visual Design

↓

skeleton

Surface

- Don't take over the screen
- Don't pop up windows
- Stop with the graphic text
- Encourage skinning, if appropriate
- At best, keep your presentation simple and straightforward

Skeleton

Web as software interface	Web as hypertext system

skeleton

Interface Design | Navigation Design

Information Design

surface

↕

structure

Skeleton
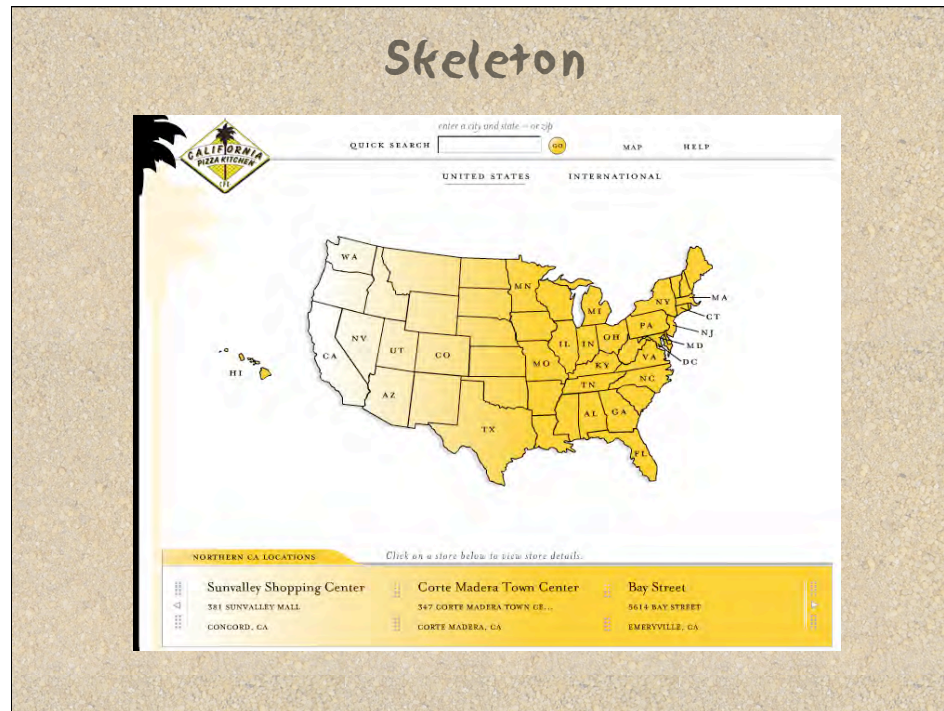
This is the store locator for California Pizza Kitchen. They were so proud of it that it was submitted to an interactive design award. Yet it's a miserable piece of interaction design, particularly in how they attempt to control the users experience. Instead of making it easy to find a store, they make it remarkably hard, forcing you to jump through their hoops.

Structure

| Web as software interface | Web as hypertext system |

structure

Interaction Design   *Information Architecture*

skeleton

scope

Single, hierarchical structures restrict the options people have when trying to find information that is interesting to them. You get one way in, and so you have to figure out what the creator was thinking. For Allrecipes, if you want a beef main dish, do you look in "beef" or "main dishes"? An alternate type of browse, utilizing faceted classification, puts the power in your users hands. You provide them with many entry points, and they build the path that's relevant to them. Epicurious allows visitors to come with a variety of task approaches. You want to work with a particular ingredient? Maybe you're interested in exploring a type of cuisine? Or maybe that it is breakfast that is the most important thing?

Or what about when you're looking for something. Standard methods have you go through site-created categories. But now with tagging, we can build up folksonomies that speak in the language of the users.

dmoz, the open directory project, has only two categories for Adaptive Path. Del.icio.us, the social bookmark engine, offers a list of 20 or so tags that have been applied. From a browse perspective, which is more likely to find us?

Scope

Web as software interface | **Web as hypertext system**

Functional Specifications | *Content Requirements*

scope

structure

strategy

Scope

ANATOMY OF THE LONG TAIL
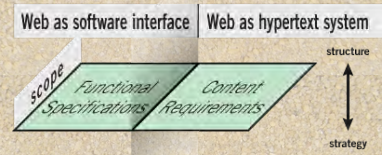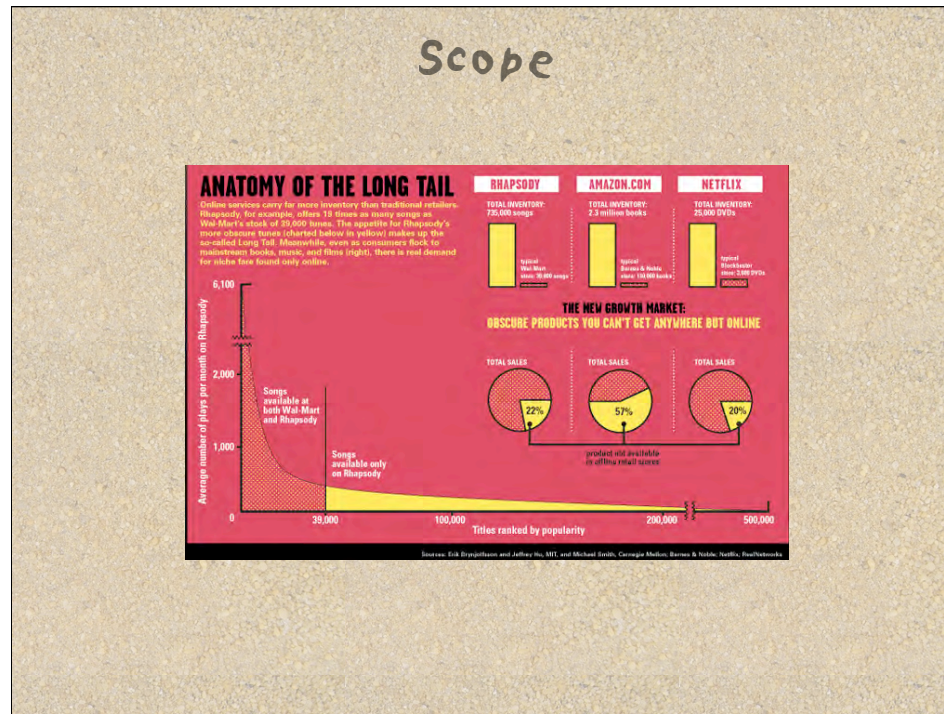
One of the more obvious shifts of control that has happened on the Web is the move toward offering people a lot more choice when they're shopping. Physical stores are constrained by shelf space, and so necessarily limit what they sell. On the Web, shelf space is infinite, and some smart companies have taken advantage of that.

The Long Tail depicts just how much opportunity there is in the things that stores don't carry. Over half of Amazon's total sales occurs in products not available in offline retail stores.

On the functional side of things, opening up APIs allows folks to alter a company's functional requirements. Google and Craigslist are two archetypal sandbox companies, and look at what happens when you mash those two together. Gold!

Strategy

Netflix made a core strategic decision to relax control on the one thing that drives significant revenue in the video rental business -- late fees. No more late fees. They opted out of that potential font of revenue in favor of attracting more people who wanted control over their viewing schedule.

Craigslist is probably the company that has given the most strategic control to its users. Craigslist is phenomenally successful -- 10 million unique visitor, 120 cities in 25 countries. It's traffic is one-fifth of eBay's, while having .2% the number of employees. And why is he so successful? In part because Craig asks his users for their input.

A challenge for companies is to figure out what their appropriate sandbox is. This seems to be easier for web-only companies, perhaps because sandbox ideals are more obvious online. But their offline counterparts shouldn't just be copying what the web-only companies do… For example, you have Amazon. It's only 10 years old, and only on-line. Their sandbox has things like customer comments, people who bought this also bought… and sales rank. Barnes and Noble, which began in 1917, and is best known for their superstores, has a sandbox with things like…. customer comments, people who bought this also bought… and sales rank. Why?

I mean, Barnes and Noble is known for their presence in the real world. How could they sandbox-ify that? Well, let's think -- information, people, tools. An obvious example -- have some type of social networking like service, but that's rooted in stores. Find out who else shops where you do! Offer a Meetup like service around these stores -- get people coming in once a week! Hell, as the folks who prowl the aisles at Powell's here now, this is ripe for a dating service!
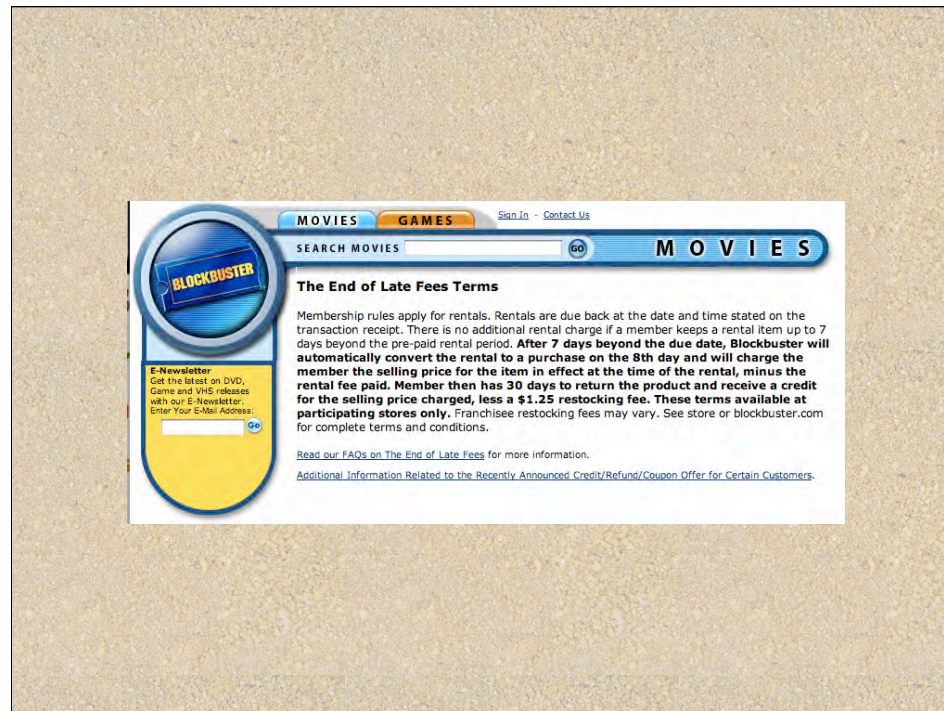
Blockbuster, similarly, was foolish. They're the classic example of a company trying to play in the sandbox, but where it's just clearly not true to their nature. Their stores touted "The End of Late Fees," which made it sound just like Netflix. One problem, as the terms shown here suggest... If you're TOO late with your DVD, well, you've just bought it! Isn't that nice?

Walmart, on the other hand, wasn't so foolish. They tried the DVD rental game, and realized that they couldn't compete. It wasn't in their DNA. So, when you can't beat 'em, join 'em. They've now got an agreement with Netflix.
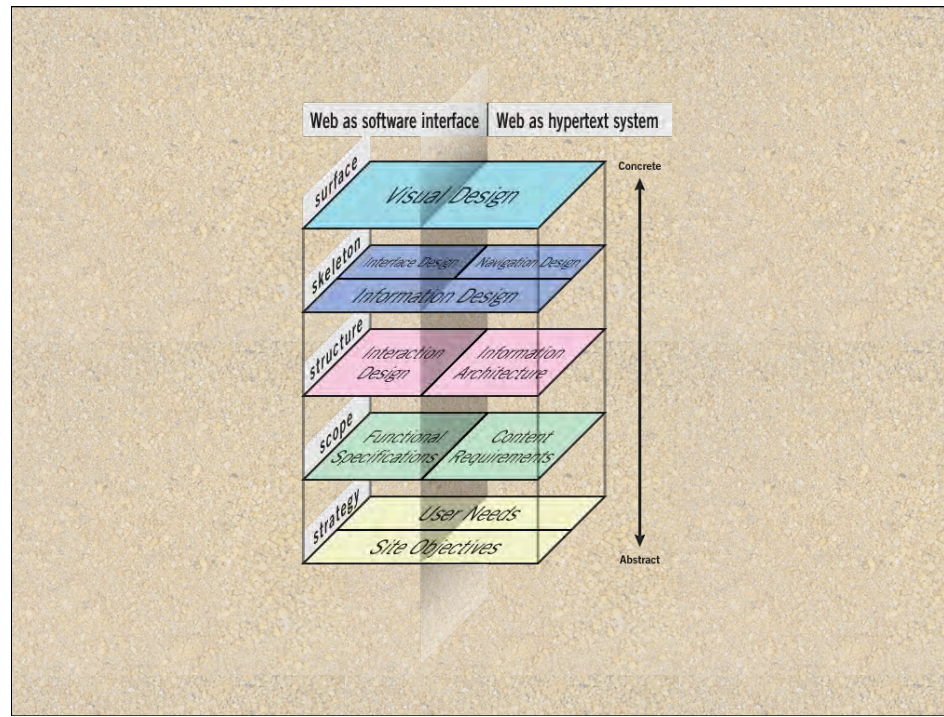
So think about how deeply you can relinquish control, to what ends, and how it remains germane to your business.

So what about convergence?

Well, we have to think about all the things that people are doing. Our designs have to fit into the context of our users lives. How does convergence square with that?

The sandbox means letting people make it their own

- Convergence is not about greater control for the business
- It's about greater choice for the user
- Get out of their way
- Keep it simple!
- "Design" as little as possible
- People will derive their own meaning and value from the experience – you don't have to give it to them
- Make information, people, and tools "small pieces loosely joined"
- Meaningful convergence will then just happen

Thank You

User Experience Week 2005
Washington, D.C.
August 22–25

Including our just announced
Flickr Case Study, with Eric Costello

http://www.adaptivepath.com/events/2005/august/

adaptive **path**