
Prof. Dr. Style

Top 10 Web Design Styles of 1993 (Vernacular Web 3)

For [Saskia](#) and [Dragan](#)

Codeword

Every term I give an introduction to Interface Design studies to new students. 99% of them are under the delusion that the design of everything in the world is made in Photoshop or other Adobe products. In case the design is to be perceived on a computer, these Adobe files will be thrown into a room full of programmers who are longing to make it all interactive according to noble ideas embedded in the graphics. So the task is to show non-fictional challenges of new media and to explain why to study Interface Design. (To make it short here: interface designers develop projects that will be handed over to photoshoppers to put gradients on buttons.)

Most of the students will not be convinced and will choose to study graphic design. Even those who want to be web designers. Though 17 years of the WWW show that you need quite a different skill set for that. That's why the last 3 hours given to me to influence people who will not study the web, but will design it anyway, I spent on highlighting the real history of web design styles. By real history I mean essential design trends rooted in technologies, beliefs and needs of their time, from 1993 to today. Imported visual trends⁽¹⁾ are left outside of this timeline.

Big emphasis in my talk is put on the mid 1990's, an era when the web was build and arranged and decorated by amateurs, when very web specific genres and looks were brought to existence, making it an incredible place to experience.⁽²⁾

But what was earlier? How did the World Wide Web look *before* this Internet boom, before it became a riot for star backgrounds, bouncing envelopes and under construction signs?

Well, in 1991, Tim Berners-Lee went live with the first web page `TheProject.html` located inside the `hypertext/www/` folder on a computer called "nxoc01" at CERN. Neither him, nor any of his colleagues made an effort to preserve this first version. The only thing we know is the URL <http://nxoc01.cern.ch/hypertext/WWW/TheProject.html> and the way the first page ever [looked in november 1992](#). That's early enough, still half a year before the Mosaic browser would be released and people outside of CERN would start to make their pages.

It is difficult to estimate how many pages created in 1993-1994 made it into the new millennium in their primordial way. If you manage to find something that was put online that time, it would in the best case display a 1995-1996 skin, like the [Russian Space Science Internet](#) -- redesigns clearly shaped by the then-new Netspace browser.

But there is a way to find pages that live for ever in 1993. To present them to the new students I look for "Prof. Dr." in Google. Some semesters ago it was possible to make a life performance with this search. Pages of academics in style were top results. As of June 2010, the magic seems to be gone. To collect enough examples for this article I had to go till result page 110.

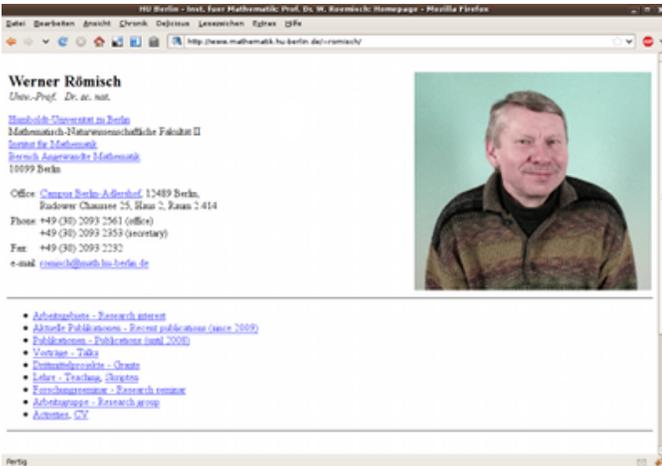
(1) Here are some Web Design Trends of [2007](#) [2008](#), [2009](#) and [2010 \(another\)](#), according to web design magazines.

(2) Try [Drachenglut](#), [Star Murals](#), [Mr. Bui Quoc Quan](#) or [Accept Jesus](#), read [A Vernacular Web 1](#) and [A Vernacular Web 2!](#)

name
Prof. Dr. Paul Embrechts
Univ.-Prof. Dr. sc. nat. Werner Römisch
Prof. Dr. Heinz Siedentop
Prof. Dr. Alexander Mirlin
Prof. Dr. Jan Paredaens

name
Prof. Dr. S.J. Bas Edixhoven
M.Sc. Dr. Sujatha Ramdorai
Prof. Dr. Wolfhard Janke
Prof. dr. P.M.E. De Bra

"Prof.Dr" is a codeword, a tricky search request. I am aware of the fact that there are users outside of academia as well who always designed their sites in pure markup or redesigned according to 1993 standards recently. Still I suggest to use this name based on a scientific title as a tribute to the history, and reminder that all around the internet the very first pages were built at universities. To cement this term, within this article I'll use only pages of senior academics holding a doctoral title.



URL

It makes sense to check pages with a tilde in their address. But there is no direct connection today in between URL and page appearances, a "~" is no guarantee that the page will be made in real Prof. Dr. style. Anything from a corporate university look to a generic corporate look can be encountered.

name	URL	URL style	design style
Prof. Dr. Edward L. (Ned) Wright	http://www.astro.ucla.edu/~wright/~wright/	tilde	Prof.Dr
Prof. Dr. Marcus Grote	http://www.math.unibas.ch/~grote/	tilde	corporate university
Prof. Dr. Christian Dustmann	http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctpb21/	tilde	generic corporate

There are enough examples where the tilde is absent but the style of early web is 100% there:

name	URL	URL style	design style
Prof. Dr. Reinhard F. Werner	http://www.imaph.tu-bs.de/home/werner/	subdirectory	Prof. Dr.
Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Horst Köppel	http://www.pci.uni-heidelberg.de/tc/usr/horst/	subdirectory	Prof. Dr.
Prof. Dr. Rainer E. Burkard	http://www.opt.math.tugraz.at/burkard/	subdirectory	Prof. Dr.

name	URL	URL style	design style
Prof. Dr. Robert Hyatt	http://www.cis.uab.edu/hyatt/	subdirectory	Prof. Dr.
Prof. Dr. Ronald L. Rivest	http://people.csail.mit.edu/rivest/	subdirectory	Prof. Dr.

It can even happen that Prof. Dr.s registered their own domain, but kept the style of web pioneers:

name	URL	URL style	design style
Prof. Bernard Moss	http://www.bernardmoss.org.uk/	own domain	Prof. Dr.
Rev. Prof. Dr. F.N. Lee	http://www.dr-fnlee.org/	own domain	Prof. Dr.

Though more often a domain name would mean that designers, photographers and project manager were consulted:

name	URL	URL style	design style
Prof. Dr. med. Markus Suckfüll	http://www.professor-suckfuell.de/	own domain	generic corporate
Dr. Prof. h.c. Hermann Scheer	http://www.hermannscheer.de/	own domain	generic corporate
Prof. Paul Goddard	http://www.professorpaulgoddard.com/	own domain	self-promotion
M.D. Oliver Sacks	http://www.oliversacks.com/	own domain	self-promotion

(3) For more on user culture see [Digital Folklore](#).

A "~" in the URL continues to be part of the look and reminds of early computer culture, when "user" was equal to "developer".(3) That's why, where it is possible, I prefer to use the examples with a tilde.

Primitive and All the Same

Prof. Dr. pages tell the story of the web.

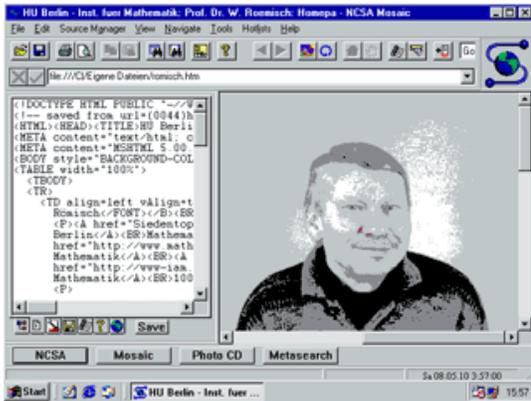
Not because they are retro. It is important to mention, that retro is the wrong term and notion in this case. Prof. Dr. doesn't mean at all that the site was made in 1993 and last time updated in 1995. The opposite. They are usually updated with a list of courses for the current semester or contain links to contemporary services like Google Calendar, twitter or embed Google Maps.

name	last updated	connected service
Prof. Alan FT Winfield	2010-06-08	
Prof. Dr. Michael Bieber	2009-02-02	Google Calendar
Prof. Steffen Staab	2010-06-01	Tag Cloud
Prof. Dr. Rudolf Schmitt	2010-01-26	
Prof. Dr. Jörg Fliege	2009-09-26	Google Maps

It makes them attractive for investigation -- they are actual and timeless. I mean you can open them in Mosaic 1.0 and it will not crash.

Still, if not retro, how to describe these pages? Prof. Dr. pages have their distinct appearance: **primitive and all the same**. And that makes them historically significant.

Primitivity tells us the story of the browser being not only a browser, but also an editor. Every user of the early web was a producer of web content. Web pages were to be opened in the browser to look at them, but also to edit them, using existing pages as templates for new pages. The simple design of HTML made it possible for the first users to create state of the art pages with only four to five principal tags. The result was an extremely fast growing web. **There were not many options, this is why we got many pages.**



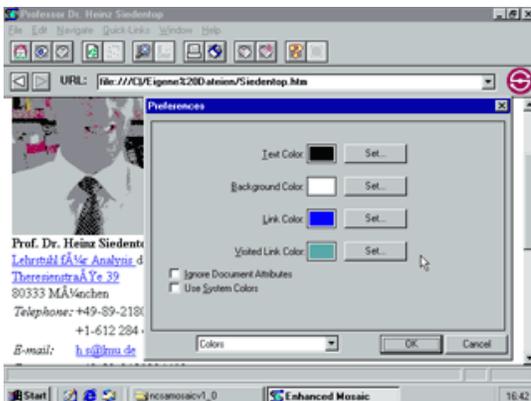
Next, Prof. Dr. pages look terribly **the same**. As if they were generated automatically by the browser, as one student said. Though, ironically, they are among the last pages generated completely by humans, not content management systems or services.

They look according to the viewer's browser settings. This reveals the belief of the early 1990s that any visual design should be left at the discretion of the user.

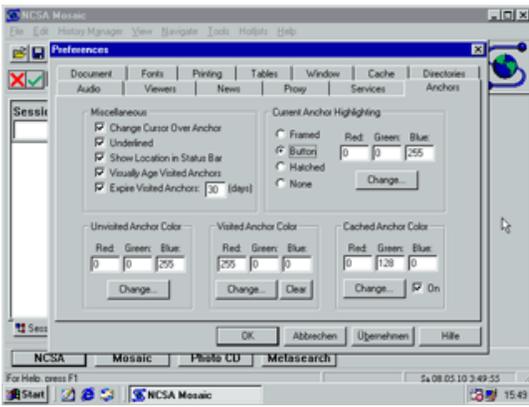
Page authors wouldn't define colors, fonts margins and line-lengths. In turn end users set their preferences for colors, fonts, links, graphics in their browsers, according to their needs or taste. Not a big deal, one can say, to decide if to see all the pages of the internet on a white or a gray background. But don't think about colors, think about the concept -- **each user was defining the look of the whole WWW for themselves.**

Wired journalist Gary Wolfer [wrote](#) in 1994:

"The beauty of this approach is that it allows maximum openness and flexibility. All World Wide Web documents are similar, but every World Wide Web reader, or browser, can be different."



With the first version of Mosaic one could choose link colors. Later, NCSA Mosaic allowed to decorate links in many different ways and choose colors from an RGB palette. It was the highest moment of "preferences freedom" a user could have.

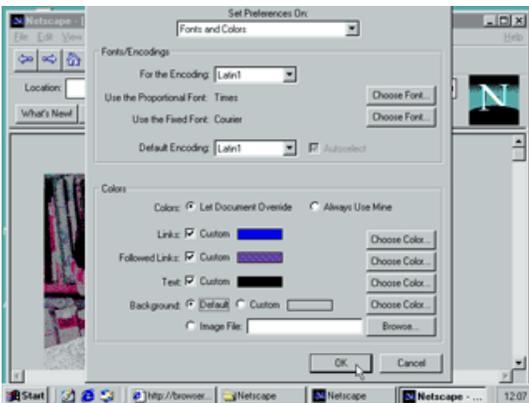


(4) It was [small](#) indeed, one could describe all its contents on just 20 pages of the fat compendium "[The Whole Internet](#)".

The concept "End User = Designer" is long gone. It could only work for the very small(4) web at connected universities.

What was enough to make academic profiles and papers look good online, became too less for the rest of us. Users didn't want to customize preferences for the whole internet in their browser, they wanted to make their pages individual and that this individuality is not lost in the browsers of others.

As soon as the WWW ventured outside of academia, the paradigm of the browser changed. In 1995 Netscape reduced the browsers' preferences palette to colors and fonts, while introducing new additions to HTML for defining the visual appearance of pages.(5)



(5) Today it appears as if the look and behavior of all web pages is under total control of their creators. Web authors describe how pages should look in CSS and browsers follow this standard to the letter. Preferences to change the look of web elements like in Mosaic have almost disappeared from current browsers. However, right now web users have much more power to alter not only the visual design but also the structure and functionality of anything they encounter in their browsers: [AddOns](#) (Firefox) or [Extensions](#) (Chrome) allow web users to write and share small pieces of arbitrary code running in the browser, potentially turning the web upside down. The most popular use is [filtering out advertisements](#), a more radical example is [connecting the amazon.com DVD store with corresponding free offers at Pirate Bay](#). As of yet, not many users really apply this technology because it is more complicated than changing preferences for font sizes. Also, the illusion of a stable web is comforting to most users.

The WWW, contrived in a Swiss Lab, became people's web.

From Prof. Dr. to Web Vernacular

It is very interesting to watch the transition from a primitive markup style of 1993 to pure madness of 1996 staying by Prof. Dr. search results. You can see all the small details that can make a particular Prof. Dr. web site leave the borders of Prof. Dr. style.

It would also important to stress that **Prof. Dr. style is only a style. It is not equal to pure markup**. None of the examples above would pass HTML1.0 validation. No wonder, Prof. Dr.s are not professional web developers. They are making their pages by editing code of their academic peers, who are non-professionals as well. Very often headings are replaced with a combination font style tags like *bold* and *font size*. Or the semantic `<address>` tag is substituted with `<pre>`.

name	tags	used for
Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Kurt Bauknecht	<code><pre></code>	address formatting
Prof. Dr. Harry Bührman	<code><pre></code>	address formatting
Prof. Dr. Alex Shafarenko	<code><pre></code>	address formatting

I still consider pages that misuse visual markup for structural purposes as Prof. Dr. Style, as opposed to the pages where their authors make a step to "bring life" to their online home.

You don't have to be web design expert to see the difference in between personal the home page of [Prof. Dr. Stephen Darwall](#) and [Prof. Dr. Harm Derksen](#). The first a typical representative of Prof. Dr. Style, the second a striking example of vernacular web.

There are also websites that look exactly like Prof. Dr. but aren't. Compare these two:

name	changed defaults	web editing software
Prof. Dr. Wolfhard Janke	none	text editor / unknown
Prof. Dr. Richard J. Boucherie	background color, link colors, fonts	Microsoft Word 2008

Both seem like Prof. Dr. though only the first page is. Prof. Dr. Janke's links are blue and underlined, and when you click one it becomes red for a short moment to give feedback to the user that the click was indeed registered by the browser and the requested page is about to appear any time. It is a reminder of the days when the internet connection was not so swift and you could stare at an *active* link for a while, waiting for a server to connect and packages to arrive, feeling the effort the *best effort network* makes. And then you are brought somewhere far or close. You can go further following other blue underlined links, or you can go back and see that the link you just clicked became purple, so that you can distinguish *visited* links from *unvisited* ones.

Prof. Dr. Boucherie changed the default colors of his links (they are blue even when active and visited) and by this crossed the thin border that divides Prof. Dr. pages from amateur web and later styles. This visually unremarkable modification can't be compared with decorating a page with all sorts of animations and sounds and still it is an act of users' voluntarism that paved the way to both amateur and "professional" web.

Modifying colors of links was the first, smallest thing one could do. Sometimes it is a sign of its authors' curiosity and the will to fiddle with code:

name	changed defaults	web editing software
Prof. Dr. Bernard Grofman	background color, link colors	WYSIWYG / unknown

Quite often though the source code would reveal that the page was created using a word processing software that is able to make links, but fails to produce lively hypertext:

name	changed defaults	web editing software
Prof. Dr. Gerhard Brewka	background color, link colors, fonts	Netscape 4.78, Microsoft Word 10
Prof. Dr. Sarah Cook	background color, link colors, fonts, font sizes	Microsoft Word 10

A curious example: [Prof. Dr. Kender](#) made a Prof. Dr. page. His Ph.D. student, [Hassan H. Malik](#), opened the page of his mentor in Microsoft Word and made one for himself. The links are there, blue and underlined, but they are numb.

The next step is to play around with text in general. Formatting it, changing font size, bringing color, ...

name	text styles
Prof. Dr. Cliff Burgess	colors, sizes

name	text styles
Prof. Dr. Walter Kohn	headline color
Prof. Dr. Carsten Timm	colors, sizes, removing underlines from links
Prof. Dr. Dines Bjørner	colors, sizes, small caps
Prof. Dr. Günther Rüdiger	blink

(6) At the time of this writing, the only browsers still supporting the native `<blink>` tag are [Firefox](#) and [Opera](#).

... arrogantly making it blink(6), like Prof. Dr. Günther Rüdiger made for the "Current Issues" heading of his website. Blinking is the pimp among HTML tags, you should be very self confident to have it on your page.

The next logical step after bringing colors to the text is to customize the background color:

name	background
Prof. Dr. Martin L. Kersten	#FFFDDC
Prof. Dr. Freddy Delbaen	#CCCCCC
Prof. Dr. Markus Schneider	rgb(255, 255, 238)
Prof. Dr. Jillian T. Weiss	#000000
Prof. Dr. Aravind Srinivasan	#FFFFFFE
Prof. Dr. Madelaine Böhme	#e0d2ff

There are 216 [web safe colors](#) and more than 16 millions colors in general, but for somebody really passionate about their webpage, it will never be enough -- and the background color will be replaced with a background image:

name	background
Prof. Dr. Eugene (Gene) F. Milone	greenwhite_paper.gif

name	background
Prof. Dr. Adrian Bowyer	g_texture.gif
Prof. Dr. Peter Hänggi	bkgrd023.gif
Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Ernst Kausen	Image3.jpg

A Background image can be just a nice looking pattern, as in the pages above, or can point out the research field the Prof. Dr. is active in:

name	background	observation
Prof. Dr. Huybrechts	wpaper.gif	"wpaper.gif" is a quite neutral pattern, but knowing that Prof. Dr. Huybrechts researchers large-scale three-dimensional time-dependent thermomechanical continental ice-sheet models, it is easy to assume that it was chosen because it looks a bit like a glacier.
Prof. Dr. Paul J. Crutzen	clouds.gif	Recipient of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, Prof. Dr. Paul J. Crutzen, has clouds on his page, because he is an atmospheric chemist.
Prof. Dr. Delp	ee2.jpg	Prof. Dr. Delp is professor for Electrical and Computer Engineering.
Prof. Dr. Eric Carlson	deep.gif	Prof. Dr. Eric Carlson -- astrophysic. Needless to say that an astrophysic's homepage with a star background is a great finding. Unity of form and content is a rare guest in the world of starbackgrounded sites.

Another crucial modification leading away from the academic look is replacing semantic mark up elements with graphics. Lists <i> becoming bullets, bubbles and icons:

name	bullet replacement
Prof. Dr. Ashraf Matrawy	 image003.gif
Prof. Dr. Ayodeji Demuren	 4abul.gif
Prof. Dr. Moritz Diehl	 icon.jpg
Prof. Dr. Henk Corporaal	 MOVElogo.gif

name	bullet replacement
Prof. Dr. Andrew S. Tanenbaum	 faq.gif
Prof. Dr. Farzam Farahmand	 acnvbul1.gif

Horizontal rules <hr> get transformed into more spectacular lines:

name	horizontal line replacement
Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Banzhaf	 bu.gif
Prof. Dr. Ernst Eberlein	 LINIE.GIF
Prof. Dr. Steffen Staab	 rainbow.gif

Then images get animated, making pages below looking less and less serious.

name	GIF animation
Prof. Dr. Gerard 't Hooft	 deeltje.gif
Prof. Dr. Halina Kwaśnicka	 em.gif
Prof. Dr. Jeff Geensite	 em.gif
Prof. Dr. Dhabaleswar K. Panda	 new.gif
Prof. Dr. Bernard Moss	 rotating.gif
Prof. Dr. Nguyen Ngoc	 mailbox.GIF

"Less serious", but only in the eyes of "experts". An article about Prof. Dr. Style is not a proper place for statements about animated GIFs, but I can't hold it: Animated GIFs on a web page are not a sign of low quality or light content. If an icon is animated it only means that the author of the page has better things to do than reading "10 worst web design mistakes", "Top Ten web designs of the year" and the likes. This also applies to musicians on Myspace and to an even greater degree to neurosurgeon [Prof. Dr. Ismail Hakki Aydin](#) or the holder of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry 2002, [Prof. Dr. Kurt Wüthrich](#).

[Prof. Dr. Alan G. MacDiarmid](#), discoverer of conducted polymers in the 1970's, put an under construction sign on his site in 1998 and got the Nobel Prize in 2000. His site is also an example of

a page with a grid layout.

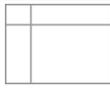
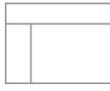
Making web layouts with tables, that is arranging content in columns and cells, was a usual way to design web pages in the 1990's. You could (and still can) achieve smooth looks with this technique if you keep borders in between columns and cells invisible. But amateur web designers preferred to show those borders, and experimented with their size, color and amount. Academics were no exception:

name	table layout style
Prof. Dr. Charles N. Haas	info grid
Prof. Dr. Eli Biham	blocks
Prof. Dr. Leszek F. Demkowicz	horizontal navigation links
Prof. Dr. Georgy Gimel'farb	year activity table
Prof. Dr. Michael Anshel	subpage navigation blocks
Prof. Dr. Gary L. Wells	columns
Prof. Dr. Karl Kleinermanns	business card layout
Prof. Dr. Ke Chen	decorative borders

And as other users, who are making their pages looking at the pages of others, they stepped in the traps of navigation menus ...

name	navigation style
Prof. Dr. Josef Kallrath	left side column with decorative image
Prof. Dr. B. B. Chaudhuri	left side column with university logo
Prof. Dr. Vincent Gaudet	left side column with decorative image
Prof. Dr. Aurelian Isar	left side column with university logo
Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Michael Bender	left side tabs
Prof. Dr. Bernhard Nebel	left side global site hierarchy

... and navigation menus in framesets:

name	frameset layout
Prof. Dr. Joseph P.H. Fan	
Prof. Dr. Zongjin Li	
Prof. Dr. Ewa B. Weinmüller	
Prof. Dr. Tayfun Akin	
Prof. Dr. Pavel Kroupa	

(7) can also appear under the name "Geocities 1996", "Dirtstyle" or "mid-90's"

To sum it up, through curiosity about the new medium, ignorance of w3c recommendations and passion to their profession, web users (irrespective of their scientific achievements) created an

environment where everything seemed possible:

- [Prof. Dr. Winfried Kerkhoff](#) presents his life and work via a site Deleuze and Guattari would give their limbs for;
- [Prof. Dr. Civelek](#) writes her name in glitter and put her CV on a free hosting server;
- Ph.D. student [Quan](#) makes a home page for his mentor -- [Prof. Dr. Schneider](#). It is not really readable and doesn't mention the professor's name, but still it's more meaningful than the [official interactive business card](#) Prof. Dr. Schneider got from his University.

Amateur style(7) was once the mainstream. Ridiculed and almost erased in the very late 1990's, it came back to the public's attention during the "web2.0" wave. Though the original amateur culture was very different from web2.0, many of its elements survived and in today's web carry the meaning of a close, true relationship in between users and their medium. The Vernacular Web is a recognized phenomenon.

And what message is delivered by classic Prof. Dr. pages, looking primitive and all the same?

Independence. Inside academic circles, a page made in Prof. Dr. Style shows off distance from the institution's corporate identity and its Content or Knowledge Management systems, which is not an easy status to achieve. Outside of academia, such pages are made by [people who know everything about the internet, but are too cool to mess with web design](#).

(8) Teachers of the ID pathway of Merz Akademie. [Term](#) coined by Dragan Espenschied.

Furthermore, Prof. Dr. pages offer an experience that soon will be unique.

Cyber National Parks

In its 17 years history the WWW was announced to die soon many many times. Not only it survived, it became all-embracing and is close to immortality. What is doing really bad is hypertext.

Web browsers developing in the direction of operating systems are leaving the idea of interlinked documents behind. Though hypertext is technically still there, it is not important any more, neither is surfing or linking. The web consists mainly of application interfaces where users activate functions.

Though the dismissal of the page metaphor is no explanation why those web pages that are still pages are made without any respect to hypertext. For example, there is hardly any page left that doesn't contain links that lead to the same page that is already displayed. Let's say you clicked the "about" link, and you came to the "about" page; the link "about" will still be there, you can click it forever and it will reload the same page forever. That's what we(8) call Zombie Links.

Some Internet Giants like Google or Flickr avoid Zombie Links on their facades, if you go deeper you'll step in the mud. Most others don't care at all, because their links are not important for navigation. Users don't surf, they search in Google.

Another reason is the extensive use of Content Management Systems (CMS). They make it easy to create navigation for complex projects and establish links within them, but they are not monitoring where the links are pointing to; if they do, most don't make anything useful from this information.

Users don't protest against Zombie Links and clumsy hypertext because in the times of fast Internet connections two or three needless clicks are not a big deal. Pages reload almost seamlessly, you can't even call it reloading, just flickering. Designers don't care because they are mostly graphic designers, who are interested in the look of the link and gladly delegate its behavior to a CMS.

Constant reload-flickering is the pitiful state of hypertext today. Even Wikipedia, a project that has hypertext at its core, is plastered with self-reloading pseudo-navigation links.

One might think that there is actually more than enough classic hypertext around. For example, Google's links are all blue, flash in red when clicked and change to purple after they are visited. But these colors are fake! They are fixed by the site's design, not by my browser preferences. Mosaic's classic default link color is the only element from the Prof. Dr. web era that survived to the present day -- however only in the form of superficial styling.

The last places to experience real online hypertext, hand made links, that look and behave like links, are the pages of the early web adopters and those who still follows their spirit. Visit them with your kids:

[Olia Lialina](#), July 2010