

# Web Usability in 2008: Mediocre

Jeff Johnson, UI Wizards, Inc.

The usability and usefulness of the Web is highly uneven, mediocre on the average, but improving.

## The Spread of Civilization as a Useful Analogy

Civilization -- numerous people living together in cooperative societies with infrastructures for food production and distribution, human transportation, housing, and waste disposal -- did not develop uniformly across the globe. It existed in a few places as early as 15,000 years ago, while most of the world's people still lived in caves as small bands of nomadic hunter-gatherers.

Evidence of non-nomadic settlements and agriculture has been carbon-dated in China to 7000 B.C. and in Mesopotamia to 5000 B.C. The Minoans of Crete had running water inside some of their buildings as early as 2500 years B.C. before a succession of earthquakes wiped their civilization out. The Greek amphitheaters and the plays performed in them were created while most Europeans wore animal skins and raided nearby villages for livestock and women. (The ancient Greeks knew the world was round.) In 1300 A.D., the Inca of Peru had aqueducts, indoor flushing toilets, and window shutters that automatically closed when the wind came up.

Today, most of the world's people live in civilized societies, but there are still isolated groups of people living in the stone age, the iron age, and all other ages up to now. Therefore, the correct question is not "How advanced is civilization at a particular point in time?" but rather "How is civilization distributed across the world's population?" (see Figs. 1, 2).

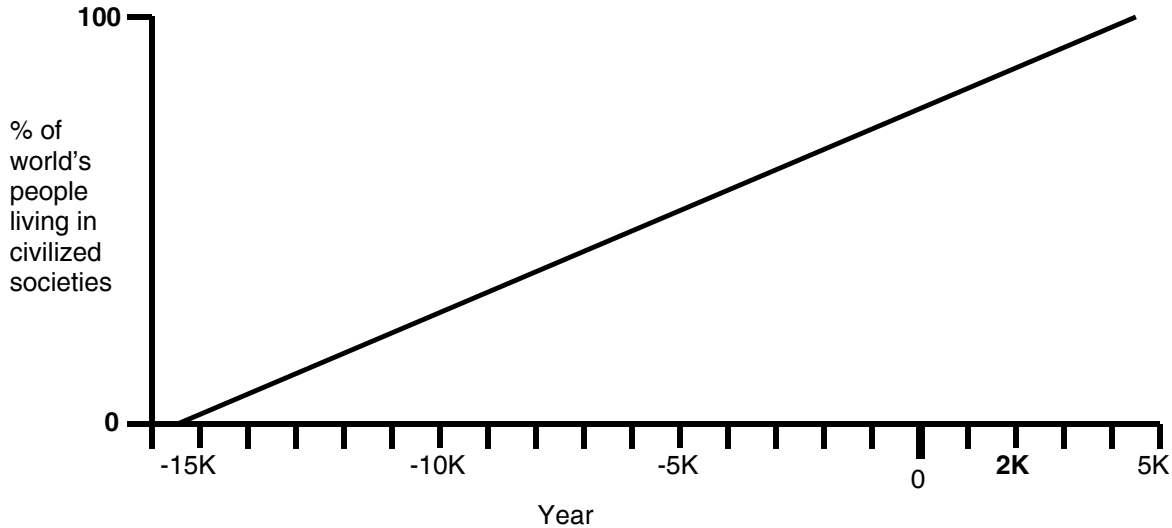
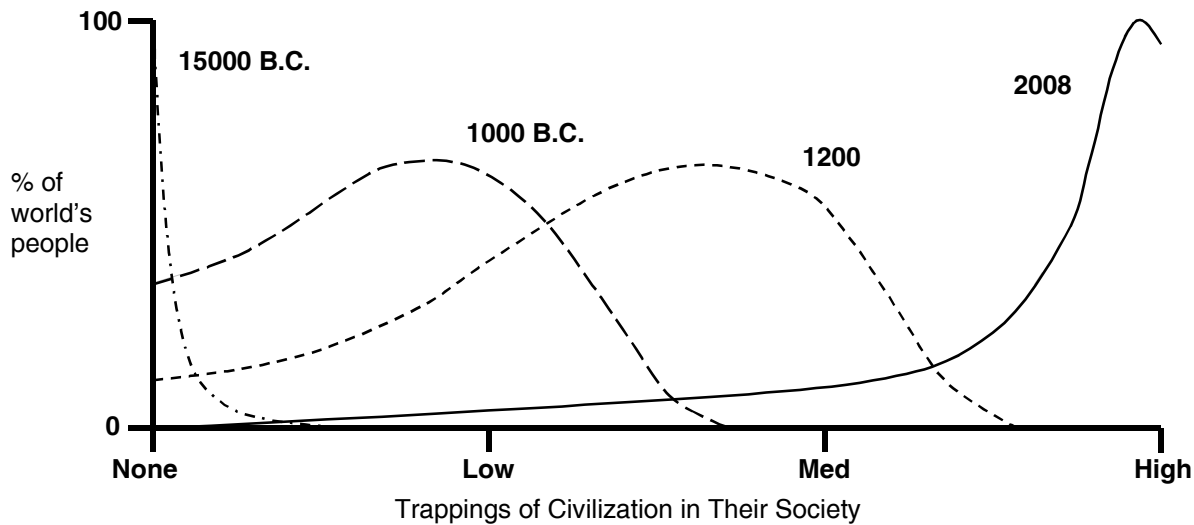


Fig. 1. -- Approximate growth of percentage of world's population living in civilization over centuries



**Fig. 2. – Change in distribution of world’s population living in civilization in different time-periods**

### **The Spread of Usable and Useful Design on the Web**

As with the spread of civilization, the usability and usefulness of the Web has been and will continue to be non-uniform. Long before Tim Berners-Lee created HTML, http protocols, and a text-only browser in 1989 as way for physicists to more easily share data and papers, isolated groups of people were browsing pockets of the Internet and other wide-area networks using graphical browsers, e.g., Plato [1, 2], French Minitel [3, 4], and other videotex systems.

The “civilization” of the Web began in 1994, with the introduction of the Mosaic browser. People, most with no training in interaction design or usability, began creating websites for a wide variety of purposes including personal expression, information sharing, online community, and e-commerce. Most early websites were horrible, several were good, and a few were excellent.

Over the next decade, Web design principles, best-practices, books, and training programs emerged. At the same time companies and organizations came to understand how valuable -- and costly -- a good website is. As a result, the average quality and usability of websites increased. There were still a lot of horrible websites, but the proportion, if not the total number, was diminishing.

Today, the Web is about where civilization was in 1400 A.D. There are still a few websites that are in the stone-age of design and usability (e.g., Pond Market: <http://www.pondmarket.com>) and a few that are extraordinarily well-designed (e.g., Google Maps: <http://maps.google.com>), but the vast majority of websites, especially e-commerce sites, exhibit only mediocre usability and usefulness.

There are also regional variations in the percentage of “civilized” websites. Even restricting our view to the developed world, a brief browse through websites in Russia, Japan, Korea, and New Zealand, finds a high proportion of highly problematic websites (e.g., Prince Hotels Japan: <http://www.princehotelsjapan.com>), especially in e-commerce. The fact that user-friendly e-commerce websites are still fairly rare in Japan is surprising given that its social civilization and technological advancement are ahead of the U.S. and western Europe. Not surprisingly, if we expand our survey to include the undeveloped world, the proportion of amazingly unusable websites increases still further.

### **Conclusions**

There will always be websites that are difficult and frustrating to use.

One reason is that there will always be new people creating websites despite having no training or experience. Those of us who write Web design books [5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10] have to face the fact that – sigh – not all new Web designers read our books before they start designing.

A second reason that there will always be hard-to-use websites is that knowledge and practices do not appear everywhere instantly. It takes time for them to spread out from the communities where they originated.

However, the above-mentioned books and others, along with online Web design resources (e.g., <http://www.UseIt.com>, <http://webstyleguide.com>) and training courses, do a great deal to spread Web design principles and best practices.

The state of usability and usefulness on the Web is highly uneven, but improving on the average. This should not be surprising. This is the way social and technological advances have always spread.

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