USABILITY
MADE IN BRAZIL:
HOW TO DESIGN EXPERIENCES

When speaking of Usability, it is likely that the first references that come to mind are the articles and books written by international experts, such as Jakob Nielsen and Steve Krug.

However, that reality is beginning to change. One good example is the recently launched book "Design para a Internet, Projetando a Experiência Perfeita (Design for the Internet: Designing the Perfect Experience)" that is adapted to the Brazilian reality and written by Felipe Memoria, Globo.com interface designer and professor at PUC-Rio (Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro). In this exclusive interview, the expert reveals how the idea for the book developed, how Usability is doing in Brazil, and also analyzes other aspects related to the topic.

Wd: How did the opportunity to write a book on Usability arise?
Memoria: When I finished my Masters Degree in Design with emphasis on Ergonomics and Usability paper I was encouraged to publish it as a book. The contents of the paper were very up to date, with novel results obtained through research and Usability tests on a navigation element called Breadcrumb Trail. The initial idea was to approach the same subjects, basically reproduce the same contents of the academic paper, but in a more agreeable format, in a less formal and more straightforward language. So that was the proposal I sent to Campus/Elsevier.

After talks with the editors, we thought it better to make slight changes to the focus by bringing the publication to a more practical side, with the contents being more detailed and comprehensive to those who work in the area. It took me only 20 days to write the book: I went on vacation and stayed at home fully concentrated on the publication, studying and writing. In the end, I believe the book is much more than a publication about Usability only. It is a book about experience.

Wd: Is Usability (or should it be) exclusive knowledge of web interface designers? What should the profile of the professional who will be working in this area be?
Memoria: This knowledge should run in the veins of every professional who works with the internet. However, I believe the designers, those who create the final traces for the product, are who most need to study the subject. Form and function cannot be separated, that is a basic premise of Design. Architects of Information also should not refrain from it either. Usability is an important subject to those who wish to work with this new media, but it is also fundamental for other areas of Design, especially where products are concerned.
The profile can vary widely. At Globo.com, there are journalists, publicists, graphic designers, and product designers. But the marketplace also has people from computing, psychologists, librarians, engineers, economists, and even biologists working on user experience. The important thing is to study a lot, be a bit of a geek, have good sense, and a touch of good taste.

Wd: In his book “Don’t Make Me Think!”, Steve Krug points out that the competition is a click away, therefore, if you frustrate the user they go some place else. Can we consider web Usability as the art of providing navigation pleasure for the user?
Memoria: I think the issue of pleasure is very important. I talk a lot about it in the book, of the matter of happiness, the joy in using a product for the experience to be positive and rewarding. But that is a feature that lies a bit beyond Usability. It is an extra, like a luxury optional item. Google works, has good usability, but does not provide pleasure. On the other hand, Orkut does not work and provides pleasure to people, who return to it in spite of the “bad, bad server” message.

The fact is that on the web, the importance of easiness to use is strengthened by the user need for activity. It is not like on the TV, where the contents come to us as we sit in front of the set, belly up, drinking a beer. Moreover, people do not always have to use a certain site, but very often they are forced to work with programs such as Word, Excel, or PowerPoint. On the web, they can choose. Learning must be easy and simplicity must prevail, otherwise the competition is right beside, a click away, in fact.

Wd: Brazilian internet professionals are considered to be extremely creative due to the power of adapting concepts and techniques to the web reality in the country (the case of Web Standards, for example). Do you believe we have our own way of handling Usability?
Memoria: I believe we are far from it. What I am about to say might not be the most popular thing, but I think that in terms of design and development we are second league on the internet. I strongly agree with a statement by my friend Newton Fleury Filho: “There is one place in the world where real internet is made. That place is called United States of America”.

We have a very strong web in the country, a lot of people access it, enjoy it, invade the Orkut, the photo logs, and jam up the MSN. It is so intense, that we are considered a kind of a nuisance, a virus. At present, Orkut is practically ours only - we have repelled other people. But this strength is not reflected on our products, in the development of sites “made in Brazil”.

We are creative, experts in being smart and finding easy ways, but we are not there yet. Over here we play internet. It is not important that we receive awards for banners made to win in Cannes, but not to be used. Nobody sees banners. As to the Web Standards, I really cannot see a single innovation made by us. We simply copy the Americans in the very few sites we have implemented that way in Brazil.

Regarding our own way of producing Usability, not meaning to be boring or grumpy, I also think it is not true. We do not even know how to make proper usable sites, let alone invent our own standards and create our own style. Bottom line: we are behind, we are not that serious, and we have to shed off the habit of thinking we always have to be the best in the world in something.
Wd: In chapter 1 of your book, “Processos de projeto e inovação (Design and innovation processes)”, you claim the Webmaster figure has lost meaning. Why is that?
Memoria: I have always thought the term Webmaster extremely preposterous, since the times it represented the internet almighty figure, the guy who knew a bit about everything and managed to have sites created, developed and maintained. I myself was proud of being a Webmaster, although I was ashamed in some way of the term, since, in fact, I was master of absolutely nothing, quite the opposite.

When speaking of large projects, fruits of a more mature internet, such as those I approach in the book, we start working with the concept of multidisciplinary teams, more specialized and less generalist persons. Of course, this cannot mean being alienated in respect to the process as a whole, but at present, specialization is fundamental. The figure of the Webmaster no longer makes sense, it is a reminder of amateur, experimental projects. It has been a long time since I last saw the Webmaster contact on Amazon.com, Yahoo!, Google, or eBay.

Wd: Jakob Nielsen, a pioneer in web Usability, is a name that causes controversy among internet professionals: he is loved by some and hated by others. Which concepts that involve Usability are no longer used and what has become fundamental in the present days? Does the technique evolve together with the advance in internet use?
Memoria: Nielsen was and will always be very important for the web. He played a fundamental role to make usability more popular, published a lot of works, taught many people. I think his inflexibility was good to make people pay more attention when designing for the internet. He might have pushed too hard on some aspects, exaggerating in his recommendations (such as using links in blue, for example), but always spoke with a lot of authority. Links do not have to be in blue and underlined, but they must “look” like links, be obvious. Still today I see designers making sites in which there is no difference in color between the text and links.

With time, it is normal for some specific beliefs to fall into neglect, but the concept, what brought about some given recommendation, that does not change, it does not lose its sense. The use of scroll bar is an interesting case. In the beginning, people would find it extremely hard to use the scroll bar, manage browser windows, those kind of things. So, back then, the trend was to make sites centered in 800x600, that were rectangular in the middle of the page. I believe those who navigate since that time remember. That format was successful because it freed users of the need to use the scroll bar. It made sense. With time, people gained experience and using the scroll bar is no longer a problem. Thus, building sites in that proportion is no longer the ideal at present, it wastes valuable pixels. The next obvious step, for example, is to start designing for a resolution of 1024x768.

The basic concepts do not change, do not fall in neglect, and will always be fundamental. The target public is what matters. It is important to think that people have to be able to view the page contents in the easiest possible way. That will not change. At present, whether people can use the scroll bar, whether 800x600 is used, it is information that may vary with time or with the profile of site users.
Wd: Usability has been much discussed in recent years, professionals and companies now understand how important it is, but the experts point out that it is still a common mistake to bring it only at the last stage when developing a site. How do you analyze this issue?

Memoria: When designing, people must always think on use and learner friendliness, the absence of errors, whether it will be pleasant to use, and so on. Designers must study Usability, pay attention to function and form, as I said before. If there are professionals who specialize in Usability in the team, better still. It is the ideal situation, but many times it is not enough.

What can happen too late is the assessment of what has been designed. Then we are talking about usability research and testing. Of course, in an ideal world, it is best to always perform tests before launching, during the design phase. The earlier errors and possibilities for improvement are identified, the less money will be spent on redesigning. It is much easier to change a layout than to reprogram the entire site. For that to happen, there must be some spare time in the project deadline, which not always happens. Moreover, there is the budget problem, since usability tests cost money.

Wd: Speaking of costs, is it possible to perform Usability tests with a low budget? (in chapter 3, “Testes de Usabilidade: o produto sempre pode melhorar (Usability tests: the product can always be improved)” you mention the case of Globo Media Center, for example).

Memoria: Yes, it is possible to test products spending a lot and spending a little. The case of the Globo Media Center usability test was a very successful experiment, but it had pros and cons. It was a great learning experience. If on one hand we reached the conclusion that it is best to have a professional from the team itself to perform the tests (which did not happen before), we also noticed that it was rather complicated recruiting participants through our call center (as it happened in that specific case). Testing was more efficient, because the assessor knew the product. On the other hand, the selection was somewhat restricted, since we could only contact subscribers.

Now we are testing GloboEsporte.com, our main sports product that contains a lot of news, exclusive reports direct from the clubs, real time videos of the goals scored, in sum, a product intended to be the definite solution for sports fans.

For this test, we hired a company to recruit participants within the profiles we requested. It was good because they were responsible to fit into the schedule we programmed to carry out the experiments. Also, Marcia Maia, who performed the Media Center test, stayed on as assessor interacting with the users. In this case of the sports portal we made use of an intermediate method with the assessor from the team itself and the recruiting company.

No matter how much we held back, costs always existed. Globo.com has its own laboratory, which cost money to be built and takes up valuable space in the office. The hours the professionals spent involved in researching have to be computed. The recruiting company also cost a certain amount. All that must be included in the final price for the test, in the cost it will represent for the company. What matters is that the results generate a return on the investment made.

Wd: What type of return can investment in Usability bring to a site?
Memoria: The main one is to reach the product objectives. Measuring the return on investment in usability is not a simple task. I believe the day someone manages to measure this gain in a precise manner for sites other than e-commerce or intranets, it will be a great finding.

For e-commerce, it is very easy: sales before against sales after testing. For intranets, calculation is slightly more complicated: time spent by employees on certain tasks against time spent afterwards on the same tasks. Those seconds gained, multiplied by the number of working days and the number of employees can generate thousands of working hours saved every day, week, month, year. It is a rough explanation, but, nevertheless, it is not that complicated to measure how much the company will be saving on hours worked. For products that require consumer service, we could also take into consideration the number of calls made to the call center. If the site has improved enough to reduce the number of calls, we could calculate how much the company saved. In any way, in this case the return would have been higher than that. The difficulty is to see this difference.

Now, for sites that are not for e-commerce or that are for internal use by employees, I think the return can be measured in the sense of whether the methodology helped or not the product reach its objectives. If a site is launched with the objective to obtain audience leadership within an “x” period of time, and it attained the aim through usability testing to improve the product, it could be said that the return has been obtained, since the budget earmarked for the project included the use of the method.

For example, you have “R$ 10,000.00” to attain leadership within a certain segment in, say, six months. After that period, through designing and testing, you manage to attain the goal. The method did generate return on the investment made. The return is having reached the leadership in that product segment. It is not very precise, it is difficult to quantify the percentage for each stage, but the major contribution testing makes is to validate what had been determined. The return, in the end, is the irreplaceable help to attain the aims.

Wd : Perhaps yours was one of the first publications in the world, if not the first, to approach the changes brought by the Web 2.0 (quote in chapter 4: “Pensando além da boa usabilidade: conteúdo e experiência fluida (Thinking beyond usability: contents and fluid experience)”). Facing this scenario, do you believe the designers of the future will stop designing screens to design experiences instead?
Memoria: The Web 2.0 concerns people: this participation by individuals that so strongly characterizes this new phase is coupled to some technological advancements that make it possible. The sites will no longer be simple applications, but will turn into real platforms. That is, we are not speaking of newsletter applications, but of RSS readers, for example. The content can be presented in the most varied forms. Beside RSS, AJAX is also part of this transformation the web is undergoing. It allows some interactions to take place with no need to refresh pages. Those who access the Orkut may have noticed that after logging in, a “loading...” message appears that replaces the text fields. This is a simple example of AJAX.

Those novelties are interesting for who works with Usability. They are products built with several interactions, slightly more complex and less trivial, that open up a new world of possibilities. This new reality is in fact stimulating people’s creativity.
Designing the full experience is not something for the future. I think the major professionals should always be concerned with all the stages in the design process and with those concepts that will add value to the user experience as a whole. The products have to be well made, easy to use, fast, free of errors, and mainly generate satisfaction and joy when used.

Wd: Still in chapter 4, you point out that in the web “what really matters is social networking”. How can the social networks transform interface designing and Usability testing in a site?
Memoria: In fact, the great difference between the internet and any other media is the amount of people connected, a bunch of people gathering in the same place. It is a process of network maturation, where people are finally managing to understand what is happening. Just notice that, among youngsters, the triplet “E-mail, MSN and Orkut” is prevailing as never before. The three of them allow people to interact, intensify social networking. That is inherent in human beings. People are always interested in others, in socializing and communicating. We are biologically programmed to consider the next human being as the most interesting thing in the world. It is them who have the power of making us sad, excited, happy, confident, and so on.

For example, Hattrick is an online soccer manager game which I love playing, it stimulates in all ways that players interact with one another, be it by ht-mail (Hattrick e-mail), be it through group conferences (discussion forums), or through messages in the teams’ visitors books. The game was thought out so that its routine always promotes socialization. Therefore, sites must be designed in a way so as to help and stimulate interaction between people.