

Usability of JavaScript and Flash Menus

by **Mary Masterilli**

JavaScript and Flash-based menus are the main navigational tools for many websites. While these menus are very popular among designers, they can present a barrier to users. For example, a user may have JavaScript disabled at work as part of their browser security settings. A home user with an archaic browser may encounter backwards-compatibility issues you never anticipated and didn't test for. In addition, some search engines still have difficulty crawling a site composed entirely of JavaScript or Flash menus.

Does this mean you should never use JavaScript or Flash navigation? No, of course you can.

Your choice of menu design will depend on your audience, their needs and goals, and your company's objectives. However, just because your target audience is composed almost entirely of high-bandwidth users with all the coolest plug-ins and latest browsers, that's no reason to leave out the rest of us. You **can** make everyone happy. All it takes is a little scripting.

When working with JavaScript or Flash menus, always provide an alternate text-based menu. If that's a design issue, don't fear: a little tag called `<NOSCRIPT>` can save the day.

The `<NOSCRIPT>` tag allows you to provide "hidden" alternate content when a script fails to execute, such as a JavaScript menu. If JavaScript is enabled, the user never sees the alternate content inside the `<NOSCRIPT>` tag. However, should JavaScript not be supported or executed by the browser, the text-based menu will display. JavaScript can also be used to detect the Flash plug-in, thereby enabling you to provide the same content to everyone.

Having a sitemap is another good way of providing access to the most important links of a website.

When building your site's navigation, don't depend on JavaScript or Flash alone. Add a list of links to the top-level pages of your site inside the `<NOSCRIPT>` tag. Build a sitemap to enable access to your most important content. Don't neglect search engines or users with archaic browsers. With a little thought and planning, you **can** please everyone.