

Bad Web Design: Sound Mistakes

By Richard Lowe

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Sound is one of those things that is very difficult to do correctly on a web site. Indeed, sound is possibly the one thing (next to disabling the right-click key) which annoys visitors the most. You know what I mean - you've surfed to a great site which is simply excellent. Suddenly your speakers blare some horrible music, and within seconds you've hit the back key, never to return.

To illustrate the explosiveness of this subject, most web site awards programs include a criteria which states either (a) no background sound, or (b) an easy way to turn it off.

So what are some of the mistakes that people often make when using sound files.

Background sound - It's usually a mistake to include background sound at all, but it's a forgivable mistake if there is an obvious way to turn it off fast. On the other hand, if you create a site which does not allow me to turn off the sound in a second or two, I will most likely surf somewhere else - quickly.

What the problem with background sound? Well, I surf the web with my own music playing on the CD or radio next to me. Your sound is interfering with my enjoyment of my own music. In addition, it's very unlikely that your pick of sound has anything to do with my own tastes. This just gives me one more reason to want to leave your site.

Strange plug-ins - I am beginning to wonder if plug-ins are ever a good idea. Well, sometimes they are, especially in the case of the big, common formats (sound and non-sound) like Adobe Acrobat Reader, Macromedia Flash and Macromedia Shockwave. I've found that most other plug-ins are

simply not worth the possible system problems (not to mention that some plug-ins act as spyware).

I've had bad luck with many other plug-ins. Real Player seems to be pretty stable, but it has been rumored to be spyware. Crescendo is a nice player for sound, but it's bulky and adds to system overhead. Other plug-ins seem to require the filling out of long registration forms asking way to much personal data.

A major problem with plug-ins is that many people will simply not download them at all. This will cause, in many cases, your web page to fail to load or to appear broken or mangled. Why won't they download them? Plug-ins are big (slow to download), are often spyware (I know I've repeated that many times, but it's important), use system resources, can make a system unreliable (even unbootable) and have dubious value in many cases.

So what do you do? Sound, unfortunately, often requires a plug-in of some kind since the browsers do not support many different formats natively. If you stick to WAV's (most people can listen to this format), Real Audio (many people have installed this plug-in) and MIDI you will be pretty safe. Crescendo is also a relatively good and safe plug in for sound. Personally, I wouldn't use any other formats except in very specific instances.

Using copyrighted materials illegally - Believe it or not, the sounds of the Simpsons or the words muttered by the Star Trek characters are copyrighted in their sound formats as well as their video and text formats. Thus, you cannot legally post sound files on your site to which you do not have clear permission from the copyright owner.

Stealing Bandwidth - Quite often a site will link to a sound file on another site. Unless you have the permission of the site owner, this is bandwidth stealing. All sound files should be stored locally on your own server.

Linking to sound files without size - One effective use of sound files is to link to them. If you had a Simpsons site, you might include a list of sounds that the Simpsons have made on their show with a link to those sounds for each item. In general, it's a good idea to include the size of the sound file in the description. Otherwise, someone on a dialup modem may find himself unknowingly waiting a long time without understanding the reason.

An example might be: "Homer says Doh! 27k".

Using sound on hover buttons - I've only seen this a couple of times, and each time it was quite a disturbing experience. It seems that Frontpage 2000 allows sounds to be associated with a hover button. Sometimes sounds used in this manner can be cool (a key click when the button is clicked for example), but in these two cases it was just ... obnoxious.

These web sites had different sounds associated with each button. The sounds were rude and took a long time to download, even on DSL.

Okay, what's the bottom line? Sound is a tricky thing to master on a web site. Use it sparingly and use it correctly, and you may succeed. Use it incorrectly, and you may doom your site to failure.

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