SECTION TWO: METHODS AND TECHNIQUES
USER EMPOWERMENT AND THE FUN FACTOR

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WITH JAKOB NIELSEN

Q: The usability movement has been criticised for being dull and promoting boring designs. Why do you think this is?
A: The chief reason is that some people equate design conventions with creative restrictions. However, this equation doesn't add up. While it is true that usability is typically enhanced by consistency and adherence to design guidelines, this does not necessitate identical design. Rather, such conventions aim to create a vocabulary of building blocks that designers can combine in many vastly different, and often enjoyable, ways. Consider natural language. Each word has an established meaning, and we typically combine words using a defined grammar. Literature that follows these conventions is easier to read and has a bigger audience than avant-garde, experimental literature. Still, such "conventional" novels are definitely not the same: Although they use fully standardized language, they can reach any desired extreme on a variety of emotional scales.

Q: Do you think that concerns with fun, enjoyment and aesthetics are incompatible with traditional models of usability?
A: No, because the greatest joy of using computers comes through user empowerment and engagement. It's very enjoyable to visit a website that works, where everything just clicks for you. In contrast, a user interface that doesn't do things the way you want feels sluggish, unpleasant, and possibly even hostile, despite the designer's no doubt sincere attempt to invoke positive emotions. A user's personal experience trumps anything the designer is trying to communicate. In talking about a design's "look and feel," feel wins every time.

Q: Can you give us an example of a fun website?
A: Amazon.com uses associative links to create a fun and rewarding experience for users. Each book page offers associative links to five books frequently bought by other people who purchased the book you're interested in. Following these links can lead to a powerful feeling of discovery. As a result, you can easily spend much more time shopping on Amazon than is dictated by the simple efficiency metric of buying the book you came for as quickly as possible. Such engagement requires usability. If users can't master the interface, they'll feel oppressed rather than empowered, and are unlikely to explore or use anything beyond the absolute minimum. On the Web,