

Tutorial Tuesday

Follow the Script!

by Scott Holstad

If you've been using Netscape Navigator(TM) 2.0-3.0 (or the new 3.0 version of Microsoft Internet Explorer(TM)), perhaps you've noticed some of the cool Web sites popping up everywhere. You know -- those which are no longer static HTML-based pages; the ones which have scrolling text, flashing colors, playful pictures, and funky toys. There are numerous tools which can aid Web developers in creating snazzy pages, and we will cover many of them in future "Daily bLinks." However, there's one addition to the Web development family which hasn't received much publicity, but which can help people make dynamic pages: JavaScript.

[Note: The next few paragraphs are going to get kinda technical as I explain the programming basics of JavaScript. If you couldn't care less about this computer-geek info, then skip ahead for links to cool JavaScript-enabled sites.]

Perhaps you've heard about the programming language, Java? That's great, but let's keep our terms straight.

JavaScript is not Java!!!

It's not a part of Java, it's not a scaled-down version of Java, it's not a wayward cousin of Java. What is it, you ask? JavaScript is an object-based scripting language developed by Netscape. (A scripting language is technically a programming language which differs from "regular" programming languages in several ways -- more on that later.) Netscape called JavaScript both "LiveScript" and "JavaScript Mocha" before settling on its current name. The original goal was to give Web developers the ability to do something beyond the limitation of HTML -- to enable true object-based interaction -- through the simple use of HTML tags (`<SCRIPT> . . . </SCRIPT>`) in standard Web pages.

While they share some similarities, there remain significant differences between JavaScript and Java. JavaScript is an interpreted language, handled by the browser itself; Java is a compiled language, like C or C++ -- it's compiled by the Web server before being executed. Code which is interpreted can be executed immediately, and is thus faster than its compiled cousin. Compiled code may take longer to execute; however, it is often more complex and can do much more. There are additional differences that the more technically oriented among you can access at the JavaScript 411 site.

Now that we have that out of the way (aren'tcha glad?), let's move on to what can be done with JavaScript. Web developers can use the language to offer a level of interactivity which HTML simply cannot provide. Web surfers can enjoy its benefits, through the use of JavaScript-enhanced Web pages. For instance, David's Game Cheat Page will enable PC gamers to uncover useful hints for cool games like Duke Nukem 3D and Warcraft 2. Mac lovers might like to check out Adam Williams' great Macintosh Terminal page (although he welcomes PC users as well). Adam's page is really original; it's obvious he's put a lot of work into it. "X-Files" fans might enjoy the X-Files Trading Cards page, while the amateur accountants out there might try doing their taxes at the JavaScript 1040EZ page.

Since we're talking about math (or does math enter into taxes -- I'm usually in denial when figuring that stuff

out), there are a couple additional sites which may be interesting. Students may want to consult a JavaScript-enhanced page which'll let them calculate their GPA. Or, people readying themselves for life-long financial slavery by going after that new car might want to review interest rates first.

But enough math! How about some games? Granted, they haven't started making JavaScript versions of Quake yet, but there are some interesting things out there. You Myst lovers will like the cleverly constructed parody called The Mysterious World of Missed. Gamblers might want to play blackjack at the JavaScript Casino, and visually oriented people should check out Eto's Home or Denise's background color page. People interested in learning JavaScript might want to visit the JavaScript Tip of the Week. . Sci-fi fans might appreciate the Interstellar Strategy Game, while you aspiring dictators can attempt to rule the Web Kingdom.

JavaScript isn't the next wonder of the world, I'll admit (especially since not all browsers support the language -- yet -- and you can sometimes get irritating JavaScript error messages). It is, however, a Web tool which shouldn't be ignored. JavaScript can make sites come alive with interactivity and meaning. Think of it as one more step forward in your Internet journey and enjoy your trip all the more.



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