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Implementing Responsive Design: Building Sites for an Anywhere, Everywhere Web (Book Review)

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Book reviews

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***Implementing Responsive Design: Building Sites for an Anywhere, Everywhere Web* by Tim Kadlec. New Riders, 2013. ISBN#: 978-0-321-82168-3**

Web designers are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to creating media-rich web content that attracts and retains visitors. The primary problem is that designers must account for countless devices and users along with multiple network connections in their designs. The need for media-rich sites has shifted from a nicety to a demand, while the range of devices and network technologies users can access to experience those sites has exploded. Every user has the potential to use multiple devices to access web content, from desktop to e-reader, and those devices can access that content using high-speed fiber optics, wi-fi, multiple bandwidths of cellular data, and even modems.

Further complicating the problem is that designers have long relied on desktop publishing as a model for designing websites, optimized for a relatively homogenized user profile using broadband on a high-resolution, high-bandwidth desktop to access content. The variety of devices able to access web content has made print models obsolete. Designers must develop content that responds to users' technology and bandwidth access and preferences as well as browsing habits. This focus on responding to users' technology habits is at the heart of Tim Kadlec's (2013) *Implementing Responsive Design: Building Sites for an Anywhere, Everywhere Web*. The text engages experienced "designers and developers who want to start creating sites that display and function well on a myriad of devices" (p. 18) who also have a clear understanding of the way CSS, HTML, and JavaScript work together with content to provide users the best experience for the device they're using.

Kadlec begins the text by asking where web designers went wrong, reinforcing the underlying assumption that designers have erred in relying on desktop publishing models for web design. Kadlec's answer to this question sets up the text's primary theme: "We've done everything we can to put ourselves in control, but the fact remains that we were *never* in control: on the Web, *users are in the driver's seat*" (p. 3, emphasis original). Rather than designing web content for a single platform — a mobile site for mobile users, a desktop site for desktop users — Kadlec encourages device-agnostic design in response to users' choices and preferences. Not only does such a design strategy address existing platforms, it also represents a future-friendly approach that can "survive the upcoming swarm of devices" (p. 11). Kadlec takes the term "responsive web design" from the title of Ethan Marcotte's 2010 *A List Apart* blog entry.

In this entry, Marcotte describes designs that are flexible and adaptive to the media. Kadlec's approach appears to be a nuanced variant of Marcotte's: where Marcotte sees design as "adaptive to the media that renders them," Kadlec sees design as responsive to the choices and preferences users make in the multiple devices they use to access those sites. Kadlec considers responsive design to be about privileging user agency, at this time and in the future, in design decisions.

To accomplish such responsiveness is not only about coding and media techniques, but rather about understanding users and planning carefully for the wide range of choices available to them. This focus on users is reflected in the text's organization and content: the text contains nine chapters including the introduction, but only three of them are focused directly on coding a responsive website. The rest are about "how responsive design impacts the rest of the web design process" (p. 18), including researching, understanding, and planning the user experience.

The book is an instruction manual for designing a responsive website wrapped in a practical handbook of web design and interspersed with actual use cases by design experts representing a wide range of design strategies and firms. The text offers a useful (and responsive) companion website at implementingresponsivedesign.com that links to resources

mentioned in each chapter and provides the code sampled and described in the text. The foreword is written warmly by Aaron Gustafson, a web designer who introduced “progressive enhancement,” a design strategy that paved the way for the concept and principles of responsive design. Chapters two, three, and four comprise the instruction manual for responsive design. Chapter two covers fluid layouts and presents strategies for shifting from fixed width, fixed typography designs to fluid, grid-based layouts and fluid typography. Chapter three covers media queries, providing tips for defining media queries and breakpoints for various platforms including CSS and JavaScript code samples to illustrate these methods. Chapter four delves into responsive media, tackling the problem of incorporating fixed-width media (like images, video, and advertisements) into fluid layouts using a variety of scripting and styling techniques.

Each of these chapters identifies a problem, then provides strategies, illustrations, and sample code to solve it. Chapters five through nine comprise the handbook of web design that recommends practical ways to incorporate responsive design into the more general web design process. Chapter five covers planning for a responsive site; chapter six recommends workflow for including responsive design in web design workflows; and chapter seven covers the necessity of planning, creating, and displaying responsive content in a design strategy. Chapter eight addresses the limitations of client-side responsive design, limitations that often result in loading media and data that is ultimately not used in optimizing content for the user’s specific device and network. Kadlec proposes Luke Wroblewski’s Responsive Design and Server-Side (RESS) components as a solution that marries features of client-side and server-side detection to deliver an optimized experience to the user’s device of choice. Chapter nine returns the text’s focus squarely on users in what resembles an analysis of the rhetorical situation of a user’s web browsing experience, including audience analysis, mediation, context, and personalization.

Kadlec’s afterword looks forward to the “upcoming swarm of devices” referenced in the introduction. In these three short pages, the book emphasizes the importance of responsive design strategies by illustrating the expanding ways users may choose to access and

interact with web content through what we now call the Internet of Things (IOT). Confirming the speed of technological change, Kadlec didn't have the luxury of describing "connected devices such as vacuum cleaners, windowpanes, and yes, refrigerators" (p. 256) as IOT — the term had not achieved sufficient currency to be understood by his audience by its 2013 release date. This surprisingly anachronistic limitation in Kadlec's diction reinforces the book's primary purpose: to prepare web designers to address the inevitable proliferation of web-connected devices and the rapidly expanding choices users will have to access web content. *Implementing Responsive Design* is likely an opening salvo in designers' ongoing attempts to match user preferences with designs optimized for the devices users prefer to access online content. It's a text whose value is seen in the range of interspersed designer voices successfully implementing responsive design strategies in their users' — and their own — contexts.

Works Cited

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