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DENIM: An Informal Tool for Early Stage Web Site and UI Design

Group for User Interface Research, University of California at Berkeley

available for Windows, MacOS X, and Unix; free; <http://guir.berkeley.edu/projects/denim/>

Some say that web designers are rediscovering the scribble. Photoshop with its automatic slicing and tools for making HTML table layouts does map well onto the workflow of the average Web design studio. Yes, Photoshop prototypes are comfortable for graphic designers and impress client management, but their polish often conceals fundamental blunders in concept and architecture. They direct the focus of both designers and clients to looks and surfaces too early. Polished layouts also tend to look finished, prompting clients — who are often unfamiliar with design workflows — to start absurdly premature discussions about what they perceive as errors.

If you can smudge the pencil lines with your thumb, though, everybody knows this is a concept — malleable, informal, open to change. Pencil and paper are ubiquitous and familiar. Jacob Nielsen has been preaching early usability testing for over a decade now, and though his preferred tool is paper prototyping, few web design studios have followed his lead.

["Why don't design teams use paper prototyping?"](#) Is it because it's so expensive and time-consuming that project managers regrettably decide to allocate resources elsewhere so they can ship on time?" asks Nielsen. His answer is conceptually clever: "Paper prototyping isn't used because people don't think they will get enough information from a method that is so simple and so cheap. It feels like you're cheating if you attempt to improve your project without investing more of the sweat of your brow."

Nielsen has a point, but he's wrong: the reason paper prototyping isn't used is simply that it's clumsy. Papers gets crumpled, torn and lost. You only leave your Post It-Notes outline on the wall

overnight once; when you arrive in the morning to find your work product neatly tucked into the trash by the cleaning crew or scattered across the floor by the air conditioner, your enthusiasm for low-tech solutions is bound to flag. Paper prototyping isn't integrated. It's hard to archive. The look and feel are different — pointing your finger at the word "submit" written on a piece of paper and waiting for someone to retrieve B16.3 from a pile of papers is not a good simulation of Web navigation. And, even if paper prototyping yields a firm consensus, this design has to be recreated from scratch — with plenty of opportunities for blunders and deviations — before you can even begin to test it on screen.

Now, **Denim** has taken the first few steps towards easy and practical Web prototyping by offering a practical sketch tool. A graphic scribble tool from the Group for User Interface Research at UC Berkeley, *DENIM* runs on Windows, MacOS X and Unix. *DENIM* works best with a two-button mouse or — better still — with a graphics tablet.

Denim's underlying concept is way cool. It allows you to outline and detail without much switching, and without constant fussing with tools and codes. Page elements are represented sketchily -- you can see what's where, but it's always clear that this is a concept, a suggestion. But *DENIM* takes advantage of the computer, both to make scribbling easier and more productive, to facilitate collaboration between designer and client, and to generate live simulations from sketches. For, hidden in the "File" slice of Denim's pie-menu, the Run option opens a new window with that displays your project as clickable Web prototype generated directly from your sketches. Changes in the Edit window are reflected immediately in Run view. This makes preliminary usability testing of click paths, button position and link labels infinitely more comfortable than HTML prototyping or juggling piles of paper, turning *DENIM* from a scribbling tool to a prototyping tool and filling an annoying gap in Web development workflow. Now you can define entire use-cases as early as the rough draft-phase. This way, everybody involved will find it a lot easier to appreciate the concept than if they'd been presented with a verbal treatment and a couple of sketches.

DENIM is a research prototype, an adventure rather than a product, and so its interface is pretty basic and in its beigeness pretty ugly. There is a pannable main panel to draw in, a zoom slider to the left to adjust the magnification, and a tool bar at the bottom. Instead of a menu bar, a "pie menu" is tucked into the top left corner plus a "radar" bottom right.

The zoom slider is smart, offering eleven distinct levels of detail from full overview to page design. Select a page symbol while zooming, and the view stays focused on that page. Zooming makes Denim infinitely more useful for cconceptual web design than, say, *PowerPoint* or *Visio*, the tools that do the job in most Web design studios these days.

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