

## ExperienceLab: Real World Experience

# The usability of long things

*By Andrew Swartz, July 2009*

You hear a lot about our ever-decreasing attention spans, as if all we consumers ever do is download bite-size chunks of information and entertainment: 3 minutes of YouTube, followed by 140 characters on Twitter, two paragraphs on a blog, and then for dessert, 45 seconds of a podcast.

True that may be for most of our days, but we are also consuming more and more very long things, even electronically. We're reading whole books on our iPods and Kindles; composing enormous reports in Microsoft Word; watching full length movies on our laptops; and listening to unabridged epics on our MP3 players.

And this unremarked obsession with length (ahem) poses an interesting usability issue that hasn't been much talked about. How do you help users keep their place when creating, viewing, or reading long items, possibly over many days?

At the moment, a lot of devices and software don't cope very well. They automatically take the user to the beginning of a file every time it is opened. And while this appears to be the correct thing to do for short items that are likely to be consumed in a single sitting, it creates headaches for people who consume a long item over many sessions.

Imagine for example you're listening to an audio book of *War and Peace* (61 hours). You aren't likely to be finishing that in one sitting. If you are listening to it on most mobile phones and on some MP3 players, it's a problem. If you stop to take a call or go to sleep and then come back to the book, the media player will take you back to chapter one, page one, and then you'll need a fast forward to find your place again. And then the fun really begins. Most mobiles have very slow fast forward, and what makes it worse is that fast forwarding requires not just pressing a button, but pressing and holding it. (If you accidentally press it without holding it long enough, it will take you to the end of the file and then you'll have to start fast forwarding again from the beginning.) Not many users have the patience to do that every time they put their book down.

The same issue exists for other long media files, whether they are movies, podcasts, or ebooks. (Interestingly, it appears a related problem occurs for authors of long documents. Many authors avoid closing long Word files overnight, because every time they open the file, Word goes back to the beginning again. And while it's not hard to go back to the end, the authors report that upon seeing the first page, they become obsessed with cleaning it up. As a result, the first page is revised dozens of times, while the end of the document suffers from neglect.)

Here are our recommendations for software that plays back long media, regardless of whether it's an ebook, and audio book, or a movie.

1. By default, remember the user's location when they close a long item. The next time the item is opened, return to the same place. (You can allow users to turn this feature off, but by default it should be on for long items. Consider treating short items differently, always returning to the beginning. What's a short item? It depends on context, but as a rule of thumb, call it the rule of five: audio or video less than 5 minutes or documents less than 5 pages.)

2. Include fast forward and rewind features that users can easily select without mistakenly pressing a button that takes them to the beginning or end of the item instead. This is a common problem on many MP3 players, which make it easy to skip to the beginning or end of the item, but hard to fast forward or rewind. For long items, it is much more likely that the user will want to fast forward or rewind than to skip. And make the fast forward or rewind as quick as possible without causing the user to feel like they are playing a very difficult video game.
3. Provide a bookmarking facility for content authors, and encourage them to provide bookmarks for significant breaks in the content, whether it's chapters in a book or sections in a podcast or video. For content in which authors have not provided bookmarks, insert default bookmarks at sensible intervals (e.g. every 25 pages of text or every 5 minutes of audio or video).
4. If your rewind and fast forward features aren't as good and fast as the iPod's click wheel (and maybe even if they are), provide a pair of quick buttons to skip forward or back a little. Offset their timing slightly. For audio or video for example, provide a skip forward button that goes forward 30 seconds and one that goes backward 20 seconds. Such tools allow users to fine-tune their place very quickly once they are in the right neighbourhood. The buttons should allow multiple clicking, so if you want to fast forward two minutes, press the forward button four times. (On some devices, the goal will be to reduce the number of buttons to create a simpler experience, and if so this recommendation does not apply.)

Here's one challenge we don't know the answer to, but it's a common use case. What about the user who falls asleep while listening to a 20-hour long audio book? Is there any good interface to help them figure out where they should rewind to? Perhaps a history function that would at least remember where they started, so they could start scanning from the last known good location? A memory of the last interaction (changing the volume, pressing a button?) as the user was probably awake then?

### ***About ExperienceLab***

ExperienceLab (formerly Serco Usability Services), are a global experience design research agency. They help organisations optimise their customer experiences, from web to TV and mobile, from advertising to physical environments. They've been doing this for a while, pretty much since the first computers and networks were created, so they know a thing or two about how to make people, processes and technologies work in harmony.

ExperienceLab use a wide range of techniques to tailor a research solution that fits your business objective, including ideation sessions, proposition analysis, customer needs mapping, usability testing, benchmarking and touch point integration studies. As a co-founder of the UXalliance we also provide research on a global scale.

Why not visit the ExperienceLab blog ([www.experiencelab.info](http://www.experiencelab.info)), which features the latest thinking on experience design issues.

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