



Interview with Klaus Kaasgaard

This interview is held by Lea Aharonovitch, product manager at Answers.com, and the representative of UPA Israel for this session, with Klaus Kaasgaard Director of User Experience Research at Yahoo!.

LLL: Hi Klaus, and thank you for joining us.

KKK: Hi Lea, and thank you for having me.

LLL: Since we're talking to the Israeli crowd, I just want to open this interview, before we start with usability issues, saying that I've seen on your Yahoo! Profile that you've actually spent some time at Tel-Aviv, during the 80's. What were you involved in during that time?

KKK: That's true. I've spent 6 months in Israel, back at 87'. I was in a Kibbutz for a couple of months, and spent 2 or 3 months at Tel-Aviv actually working. I loved the place. I haven't been back though and I'd really like to.

LLL: I'm sure the UPA Israel branch will love to have you.

KKK: Then maybe we can work something out.

LLL: That's great then. This interview has proven to be worth while.

Let us dive in to some usability issues. Can you give an overview of the different methods of usability testing that you use at Yahoo!.

KKK: As a matter of fact we use different types of usability testing. Paper prototype testing, RITE method (Rapid Iterative Testing and Evaluation), and standard testing both formative and summative usability testing techniques. But apart from that, we do a lot of more upfront formative research as for ethnographic type research, interviewing different types of users, and we also do some summative, more quantitative benchmarking of our products. It pretty much runs the whole gamut user research techniques from the very early parts of requirements gathering, understanding users needs through actual prototyping, concept testing and usability testing and through benchmarking.

LLL: Do you keep on checking usability issues once a product is out and running, after a while, do you ever stop?

KKK: That's a good question. No, it really never stops. Once you've launched a product you now have an opportunity to study it in real life and so we do that once we've launched one product it becomes input not only to evaluate that product but to try to understand how we can improve that product and make the next version better.

LLL: Is there a certain method that you feel has more insight to users' behavior? Do you prioritize methods, or is it a sample of everything possible?

KKK: Well, I think it depends on which questions you're trying to answer and where you are in the product developing process.



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So for example, I think that for internet products specifically we do A-B testing to test certain designs for example. We put different designs (that vary along specific variables) out there to groups of people and see which versions work best according to certain well-defined metrics. Other than that, recently we've seen real improvements in the area of eye tracking. We use an eye tracker for certain questions that we're interested in, on search especially, and I think that we've seen some real improvements in that particular methodology. I'm very thrilled about that and I'm excited about the prospect of eye tracking. Because I do think that it's a methodology that so far has slacked both in terms of the hardware and software support but also in terms of the actual definition of the methodology and which questions it can help you answer. At Yahoo! We've come a long way, I'm really excited about how we use eye tracking and the metrics we developed based on that.

LLL: When you talk about questions, what questions do you feel that eye tracking is addressing the most?

KKK: It certainly can tell you something about where on the page people are looking so if you have information that's critical to the page success and user goals on that page you want to make sure that people are actually looking at that particular piece of information. So that's one thing that we use it for. It's also interesting to use on pages where the user behavior is something that you cannot talk to people about and ask them about it because people are unconscious about their own behavior so if you take something like search then the way people digest the SERP and the look through search results is something that happens incredibly fast and eye tracking can give you some insight into how people gaze over a page and which aspects of the page they seem to pay attention to. So it's another data point that along with other data we collect it helps us understand how people really use a SERP and understand it.

LLL: How does the UI team at Yahoo? Do they work independently? Do product managers deal with usability issues? Who's in charge of usability regarding a certain product?

KKK: We have a group at Yahoo! that's called UED which is short for User experience and design and our user experience research group is part of that. So I head the User experience research group, which is part of the overall User experience and design team headed by Larry Tesler. So that's a central function within Yahoo! however each designer and each researcher works on specific products and sits with the product's team and the marketing teams that work on those products. So we try to get the best of both worlds in a metrics organization. As for who owns usability I would say that nobody owns usability or rather to be more precise everybody owns it and everybody is responsible for creating great user experiences and good design. A designer at Yahoo! or a user experience researcher will



works specifically with that day in day out. But that doesn't mean that they own it. It's a responsibility of everybody. Especially on the internet great user experiences is what drives users to use our products so it's very important for us to give users products that are not only easy to use but that are desirable for people to use and maybe even fun to use, who knows.

LLL: Let me move on from having different usability owners to how does usability live with a kind of natural tension between the revenue goals of a company and user experience. While revenue officers would like to cover a page with ads, UI teams fight back to keep a balanced, hopefully optimized user experience. How do you deal with that at Yahoo?

KKK: I think that this goes back a little to the part of everybody owning user experience. That also means that everybody is responsible for finding the right balance between monetization, conversion and the user experience on the other side. I don't think that that's only the job of a user researcher or a designer to represent the users. It's their job to help find the right balance between monetization, short term or long term, on one hand and on the other hand the user experience and as I said the user experience is the fundamental for these types of products. If you create bad user experiences you will very quickly start bleeding users. I think that everybody agrees that you need to have great user experiences, great usability and great design but on the other hand we're also a business and it's the job of designers and researchers to help make it profitable business. We have very specific skills to help the company achieve that goal by balancing user needs, user experience on one hand and monetization on the other.

LLL: I want to address a specific project that Yahoo! has implemented recently, the new homepage project. I'm guessing that it took a while to research and then implement. What was that process like? What generated the feeling that an updated homepage is in need, what you need to change and other aspects of the project?

KKK: The homepage is a very interesting page to discuss. It's probably the most visited page on the internet and with such a huge established user base you want to make changes but you also want to make sure that you don't scare away that large user base that you've established, millions and millions of users. You want to be very careful and that's why it's an interesting page to discuss. We hadn't updated that page for a couple of years and it was about time just from a visual, esthetic point of view to give a new look and feel and also we felt that technologies that are being used more such as AJAX and different types of DHTML could improve the user experience of that page. That kind of work is really done through numerous iterations a lot of testing, both AB testing, live testing as well as usability testing. We're in the lab 24/7 with a page like that. Some of the new stuff that this page has which is pretty cool I think the personal assistant on the right hand side of the page when you're in a signed in mode you can hover over the mail icon for example and it'll pop up the latest mail message and then you can click into it. So you have a lot of information available at your



fingertips that doesn't clutter up the page because it only shows up when you hover over that particular icon. So that's a huge change, using some of the new technologies of the internet and it's gotten good feedback from our users.

LLL: It's interesting that you mentioned hovering with the mouse, within your lab do you see that users know how to use the mouse, do you think that today's users work better than they have with a mouse, with menus, with hovering, AJAX, scrolling long pages... or are we talking only about above the fold as we were years ago or are users trying to interact within a page? How do you see it within your user base behavior?

KKK: First of all I do think that overall people have become more sophisticated users of the internet, so I think that it's one of the changes we've seen in the past 5 years and it's part of the internet becoming more integrated with in more peoples lives. Things like hover over icons to see content that way make features available is something that people are more familiar with now than they were 5 years ago. Having said that, we still have a lot of new users coming to the internet so we still have to make usability a high priority for both new users and for trained users of the internet. For the personal assistant we did a bunch of usability testing, with different types of users trying to understand the time lack necessary people to understand that this would actually expand more information and at the same time you don't want that information expanding whenever you move your mouse over it so finding that right time lag was essential. Users have become more sophisticated and I do think that if we look over the past 5-10 years then certainly web designers have become much better than they were in the early days of the internet, much more focused on integrating great usability with esthetics a coolness factor, so I think those two things speak in favor of good design on the internet. But at the same time we still have certain products really need to be updated and need to focus more on usability. The interesting thing is that we need to ask ourselves how important is usability really? And I think that it sometimes depend on the product and user base.

LLL: Do you see a difference? To what products usability is more important than other issues?

KKK: I think that every products deserves a good usability, but I also think that if you look at a product such as MySpace which is the fastest growing property on the internet right now and has been for the past couple of months, I'm sure that if you did a heuristic evaluation of that based on the old kind of Neilsen heuristics you'd come up with a 350 page report. I actually find it hard to use myself; of course I set up an account to try to understand this product several months ago and in terms of usability it's horrible. However, most teens on the internet fight over this usability because it's so desirable for them to have a MySpace page so the usability doesn't seem to be a barrier for them. Not yet at least. It might become that but in these early stages of this product, the really bad hasn't kept it from becoming the fastest growing property on the internet. So I think we need to understand how usability fits into an



overall products strategy and when we can really make an impact and when we should be focusing on other things.

LLL: Before I get back to what you just said about MySpace I want to handle just one more thing regarding the homepage. You mentioned using Ajax as part of new technologies implemented on the page. As new technologies come about not always with proper standards, what kind of risks are there for user experiences when something is behaving differently but yet it's so cool and we're rushing to implement it. How do we deal with new design patterns?

KKK: Lets face it, most of us in this field love working in this field exactly because of that. Things changes all the time and we're making this stuff up as we go along and that's why we're so fascinated working in this field probably. I know that's why I am. You're absolutely right, things change. Technology changes and old standards and old patterns become obsolete and we create new ones as we go along. I think the best thing we can do is to share our experiences, share our data to the extent that we can between us and update our patterns, update our standards as we go along, as we learn more and as new technologies become available, and then of course on the science side of things lets make sure to adopt standards that are known and only break them when there are really good reasons to do so. Just as with Yahoo! new front page it's a matter of balancing innovation and coolness factor and new technologies on one hand with user's needs and experience and existing standards on the other hand.

LLL: So your advice is not to be afraid of new technologies, to embrace it and to balance it with other usability standards that have proven themselves so as not to scare the user but to educate them how to use different features.

KKK: Definitely. If you look at fairly generic standards from 10 years ago they still hold up so things like "make sure the user is in control" which is an old heuristic and old standard I think that still holds true, a generic heuristic that a designer should always think about, however there are a number of more specific standards from 1995, 2000 and even 2003 that are obsolete and they need to be updated, and we need to do that and that's a lot of fun. But certainly sometimes usability experts tend to be to conservative when it comes to innovation and options that new technologies offer, so no I would embrace change and new technologies, embrace innovation.

LLL: Let's go back to fun technologies that you've mentioned. Let's go back to MySpace and Flickr, del.icio.us, and Yahoo!Answers and other web 2.0 websites. How do we deal with something so powerful like websites like MySpace that may have what we called bad usability and still with so many users using applications and having fun them, yet from a more professional point of view we wouldn't have that the same way 2-3 years ago.



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KKK: First of all I think MySpace is probably the one application that made it out of maybe 100 who didn't or more, that's all good for them, I still think that you can create web 2.0 products, community products or participatory products that have the social nature but are still easy to use. I think that Yahoo!Answers is a good example for that. The usability of Yahoo!Answers is quite good and I think that the design of Yahoo!Answers is quite strong, so I don't think that you have to have bad usability on those types of social products. Does that answer your question?

LLL: Yes. We're talking about having usability as a safety net while accepting the fact that sometimes it's either luck or something else that helps something to catch on and create a new buzz that we really can't explain.

KKK: Certainly MySpace is on a roll now and good for them, 3 years from now they'll have competitors, they already do of course and they're going to have to compete on not just the coolness and newness factor of their product but also on how easy it is to use and the overall user experience.

LLL: So when you have a product like Yahoo!Answers and still maintain good usability, what guidelines do you feel that we should remember and follow when we try to think of a more social application?

KKK: First of all web 2.0 products are a wide range of different types of products so I think it depends a little on what specific product we're talking about. I think on some of the things that MySpace and other products have shown is the importance of self expression. I think that user generated content has become already and is becoming more important not only to the internet but to society as a whole. It's changing our economies. That type of participation and enabling that is core to what I consider social products. So self expression, the user as producer of content rather than just a consumer of content is core to this and enabling that in an easy way is incredibly important. I think YouTube did a good job of that, 1.6 billion dollars worth of that so when we talk about social media, even web 2.0 which means a lot of stuff. When I talk about web 2.0 the most important aspect of that is customer participation, enabling users to create and distribute content, and that is changing the whole way the internet is working, it's changing the way we're communicating with each other and at the end it's changing our society I think.

LLL: What is your personal thought of these big deal that we hear of, Google-YouTube and others, do you think that we're heading toward a new bubble, and I don't mean only in economically? Do we just offer fun, usability? Will editorial websites still have importance or are we shifting only to user generated content?

KKK: No. I think that we'll always see a mixture of editorial content with user generated content. So it's not an either/or. It's certainly moving from what was years ago mostly or



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probably only editorial content to enabling users to generate content and distribute content and share content and it'll be a mix of those.

LLL: Generally speaking of usability, there is also accessibility. We've talked about users learning to use a mouse and embrace new technologies. Are you also testing groups of children, elderly, handicapped? Is accessibility also measured or just generally usability issues?

KKK: Yes we are although I'd like to see us to do more. I think that often by focusing on accessibility issues you automatically improve the experience not just for disabled users but for users in general. So things like tab order, making sure that your tab order is efficient benefits not only disabled users it benefits everyone who uses the keyboard to navigate through a page or through a form, and there are a number of examples of what we consider accessibility that improves general usability. It is something that we are focusing on and I'd like to see us do more and as a matter of fact I just put in a proposal for us to focus on more on that.

LLL: That's great to hear. I wanted to ask some questions for those who are new to usability, if its website programmers, designer or a new company that is starting their own website and feel that they should focus on usability. What would you recommend to those who want to start usability testing? What are the first steps?

KKK: I think that there is a misunderstanding in small companies or startups that usability engineering and design will generally slow you down and it costs a lot of money , and I actually think that it's not true. I think that you can start small and you can come a long way by doing expert evaluations of your product as you move through development phases and that doesn't cost a lot of money and it's quite fast, there are really good techniques that you can apply. Having said that I think that in the long run it's more efficient for companies to do proper user research and understand what the users' needs are and what the requirements of different products are before you actually start building them. Designing things before you start building that's a mantra I think and it'll prevent you from having to do those expensive reengineering projects where you're 80% there and you realize that you've gone in the wrong direction with your users and you need to start changing some of that code that you've built. That's when it gets really expensive. The whole idea that user research, user experience design slows you down I think it's a big misunderstanding and we as a community need to make sure that we communicate better to stake holders that proper user experience research with the right methods in the right time and the right design technique will help you keep your product on track and avoid any expensive reengineering projects.

LLL: And for a beginner in usability what books would you recommend to start with? What are the usability bibles?



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KKK: There are a number of books out there. You could probably do a search on Amazon you'll find numerous books. What books do I like? That's a very good question... The books that I'm reading lately are more related to the whole change in participatory media and social media. For a startup I would recommend going back to some of the classics in the field. Jacob Nielsen original book on usability is still a good book and he just published a new book as well that updates some of his guidelines and standards for internet design. Jesse James Garrett's book is a good book, and I recommend my own book, of course.

LLL: What's it called?

KKK: "Software design and usability". That's actually a bunch of talks with experts in the field, and I think that some of them still hold true today.

LLL: We've written that down and we'll boost its sales...

I'd like to end this interview with a more futuristic question. What do you expect that the year 2007 will look like, internet wise?

KKK: I've given a number of talks this year where I've said that we're in the middle of a huge change in the internet. When historians will look at 2006 they will say that these are the years where the internet has started to change from being a media that distributed content in a more traditional fashion to a media that calls for participation and collaboration much more than before in history. I think that in 2007 we will expand to that area of social networking improving what's already out there but also innovating and coming up with new features, new ideas as to how people can publish content and share content and really share knowledge between them. That's a big challenge and it's a big hope, for me at least that we're on the verge of creating something very big in terms of how human knowledge is created and shared.

LLL: I really thank you for this wonderful interview, and welcome you to Israel whenever possible.

KKK: I'm happy to be engaged in a dialog with the Israeli UPA community and I look forward to the day we can meet in person some time.