

Browsers as the Face of New Media

In early 1998, Dutch designer Mieke Gerritzen and I dreamed up 'Browserday' while working as part of the first generation of Waag, the "Amsterdam Centre for Old and New Media". Our motivation was clear: back then, browsers like Netscape and Microsoft Explorer were awkward and uninspired. They lacked even a hint of geeky charm or the moody allure of a great video game. Instead, they resembled bland office software, cobbled together by engineers with little sense for design. Was this really the portal to cyberspace we were promised? The so-called 'browser war' might have thrilled bureaucrats, but the browsers themselves were clunky, unattractive, and suffered from dreadful interface design. This wasn't due to technical limitations. Throughout the 1990s, from multimedia and VR to net.art, a lively and refined appreciation for interface aesthetics had blossomed. Yet, the internet itself remained oddly primitive, even as old-school bulletin board systems outshone it in sophistication.

Tim Berners-Lee gave us the World Wide Web, but visual flair was never part of his blueprint. The software engineers behind early browsers seemed oblivious to graphic design, leaving the artistic revolution of their new medium untouched. Their message rang out: the avant-garde's torch had passed to the technical and financial, not the artistic. Soon, the dotcom era's cultureless youth would leap aboard, and nerds-turned-pop-icons would eclipse the precarious art and design hipsters. The drab browsers of the time didn't just highlight the old rift between art and 'science'; they made the absence of design painfully obvious. There wasn't part of the creative rivalry between Steve Jobs' Apple visionaries and the IBM/UNIX/Windows bureaucrats. Even with the constraints of low-res JPEGs, we believed there had to be smarter, more imaginative ways to explore the newborn World Wide Web. This conviction became the driving force behind the Browserday events that followed.

After three spirited competitions in Amsterdam (April 1998, April 1999, April 2000), Browserday set out on a journey—landing in New York (March 2001), then Berlin (December 2001), before returning home to Amsterdam in May 2002 for its final act.

The pre-PechaKucha three-minute format, presented in Flash, was built on an earlier collaboration of the same crowd in July 1997: the

We Want Bandwidth! campaign that took place during one week at Documenta X in the Orangerie in Kassel (Germany) as part of the 100 days of the Hybrid Work Space project.[\[3\]](#) While at the beginning the emphasis was more on open-sourcing web browsers, later editions focused on the democratization of interface design. Not only hackers and geeks, but also the venture capitalist entrepreneurs they work for, should decide the very parameters of our communication. As media theorist Lev Manovich put it in 2001: “Browsers are extremely powerful tools because they make us understand the world, information, and ourselves in a specific way. Alternative browsers offer different worldviews and ways to think about data and the Internet. Designing your own browser is the most radical form of artistic activity. It means you’re questioning the very foundation of technology.”[\[4\]](#)

While hackers and geeks at the time were obsessed with the open-source vs. free-software debates over the Microsoft PC operating system versus Linux, the Amsterdam coalition of art and design ‘new media’ tribes and ‘public domain’ tactical media activists turned their attention to open-sourcing the browser design. Two weeks earlier, on April 2 1998, the same Waag crowd, coordinated by Michael van Eeden, had organised the Netscape Source Code Release Breakfast Party – Open Source Now! on the day Netscape (over on the US West Coast) released the source code of its browser, opening the possibility for anyone to design their own browser.[\[5\]](#)

The idea behind Browserday was to present a demo design for alternative browsers to a wider public. A working prototype of this idea was the Web Stalker of the London I/O/D collective.[\[6\]](#) One of its members, Matthew Fuller, came over to give a presentation. Students of the Rietveld Art Academy, the Utrecht School of the Arts, and the Sandberg Institute competed with crude sketches they made for the event, dubbed the *First International Browser Competition*, which took place at Amsterdam’s pop temple Paradiso on April 17, 1998. The idea was to increase the influence of the graphic-interaction designer in software development and to make designers aware of their responsibilities. For the event a reader was produced, designed by Mieke Gerritzen, including Eric Raymond’s essay *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*, the article *Storming the Interface* by Belinda Barnet and an interview I did with I/O/D (Simon Pope, Colin Green and Matthew

Fuller) about their Web Stalker, the “artist-made browser that challenged the emerging conventions of the new medium of the web.” Its radical interface “reimagined web browsing as an engagement with the structure of the web itself. It ignored images and formatting, instead allowing users to move freely among online texts while highlighting the connections among them.”[\[7\]](#)

As part of the first Browserday in Paradiso, a public debate took place about “the future of the public domain in the media.” The privatisation wave in telecommunications infrastructure put public information provision under pressure. “Information monopolies and information filters, commercial networks, virtual supermarkets, and home shopping channels are undermining the public character of the media and communication infrastructure.” Slogans on the press release indicate the direction of the future debate: “Who Owns the Digital Freeways of the Mind? – Liberate the Wires – Free the Ether – Push Back – Demand Bandwidth, Pull the Plug on Push! Build Your Own Browser – Mind Your Frame, Reframe Your Mind!” For this occasion, a Frequently Asked Questions about the Public Domain and the recently released People’s Communication Charter were taken into account.

Initiated by Mieke Gerritzen and me, a team of people organised the Amsterdam Browserdays, among them Jeanine Huizinga (Waag), David Garcia (N5M), Eric Kluitenberg (De Balie/N5M) and Marleen Stikker (Waag). The Amsterdam browserdays were a collaboration between Dutch organisations such as the Society for Old and New Media (the old name for Waag FutureLab) and cultural venues De Balie and Paradiso, with involvement from the Rietveld/Sandberg art academy in Amsterdam and the Utrecht art school HKU. In 2000, Mieke Gerritzen, who taught at Sandberg and was the main force behind Browserday, took the competition on board and incorporated it into her newly founded NL-Design non-profit, pushing it in an international direction. Even though the event had the label ‘international’ from the start, it took some time to get design schools outside the Netherlands to join. All four Browserday events in Amsterdam were moderated by John Thackara, former director of the Dutch Design Institute and curator of the Doors of Perception conferences. He was also the jury chair.

The second Browserday, again at Paradiso a year later, in 1999, took on an international character, with students also from Finland, Germany and the UK. The theme this time was *Operating Systems*. The atmosphere was dominated by corporate mergers and the dotcom hysteria that had also reached Europe. In an interview with the winner, I wrote: “The assumption may be as naive as radical: design does matter. Get over the general discontent over the primitive screens, let your imagination speak and show the world your wildest electronic fantasies. The closing of the American Internet and its local branches should not distract anyone from drawing up odd-looking, utopian concepts.”[\[8\]](#) One of the participants was Koert van Mensvoort (the later founder of Next Nature) with his demo design, *Blow your Browser in a Thousand Pieces*.[\[9\]](#)

The third edition in May 2000 was themed *The End of the Browser* – an end-of-the-world millennial desire that coincided with the dotcom crash. The title was also a prediction failure about the browser’s dominance in the decades to come.[\[10\]](#) A quarter century later, the browser remains a dominant tool for gathering information and communicating, despite the rise of smartphones and apps. From now on, web technologies will consolidate and regress into monopoly platforms, a direction that was predictable but hard to accept for the pioneer generation. The current dominance of YouTube, Insta, TikTok and Netflix is anticipated here: “With the mega-deal of AOL and Time Warner, the stage is set for the final fusion of television and internet. Maybe this will mean the end of the Internet as the open medium it once promised to become. Around the world, media moguls are investing billions of dollars into the ‘high-bandwidth channels’, ‘content formats’ and ‘user interfaces’ of the future media landscape. To what purpose? From a sceptic’s view, we are seeing the next couch-potato medium being created. The net of the future is simply television enhanced with a ‘BUY NOW!’ button. All you will have to do is sit back and click.”

In April 2001, the fourth edition took place at Cooper Union in New York, this time organised by United Digital Artists and its chair, Stewart McBride,[\[11\]](#) who put a gang of digirati in the jury. As Mieke Gerritzen told Matthew Mirapaul (New York Times), who wrote a report about the event: “It’s important that people get more freedom to design,” otherwise, she added, “the world is going to be more ugly,

and more the same, every day.”[\[12\]](#) According to Mirapaul, internationalbrowserday.com was “a sort of poetry slam for artistically inclined techies.” The NYC winner was Jonah Brucker-Cohen with his Crank the Web, “a browser that allows people to physically crank their bandwidth in order to see a website. Simply enter a URL, start cranking, and text and images appear in the browser window. The idea behind Crank the Web is to combine ancient forms of automation with today’s digital telecommunications technology. All bandwidth should be free, and everyone should have access to the fastest speed connection. It is up to you to physically crank your bandwidth so that your internet connection will rely on your personal strength, not personal wealth.”[\[13\]](#) His presentation can still be accessed via YouTube.[\[14\]](#)

The fifth Browserday took place at the Volksbühne in Berlin in December 2001, moderated by Mediamatic co-founder Willem Velthoven.[\[15\]](#) The theme this time was *Mobile Minded* and was devoted to the rise of small tablets and mobile phones that could access the internet (this is still the era before the arrival of the smartphone). The event was sponsored by the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, where Thorsten Schilling, at the time, played a pivotal role in promoting a democratic digital culture that could shape the public domain in the network age. In its report, Neural noted: “In open contrast with control systems, a video was shown called Big Browser Brotherhood by Jaanis Garancs, which displayed material from camcorders and analysed the data representation of the network. Another one was C-Watch, where C stands for Connecting, a clock that allows listening to music and notifies you if someone else nearby is listening to the same kinds of sounds.” Aram Bartoli won with *Daten am Ort* (Bits on Location), his graduation project at the Berlin University of the Arts. Just before Flash was decommissioned on the Web in 2020, Aram Batholi made a video of the website and uploaded it online.[\[16\]](#)

The topic of the sixth and last Browserday in May 2002, when the event returned to Amsterdam, was *Wireless-Cell Space-Rich Air* – an anticipation of the smartphone and the browser-app question of how to navigate the internet on your mobile phone: “The techno-economic battleground has shifted from the Internet to mobile networks but the issues are still the same: who sets the standards and owns them?”

What degree of freedom does the user have, and what is the role of designers in this fast-changing world of new media?" [17] The announcement stated that "networks have liberated themselves from their cables. Electro-clouds blow through the streets. The heavy desktop computers of yesteryear have shrunk and accompanied us everywhere and nowhere.

The unbearable lightness of the media makes us uneasy about the world's almost perfect accessibility. The invisible abundance of signs takes users into a technological unconscious. For the moment, all problems seem to be solved. But who are the ones who invite us to this technological wonderland? Are wireless networks part of society, or are we mere paying guests of this cellular space, clients granted access only after paying? Does wireless mean powerless? Can we act against tapping wireless devices? Are there public spaces on the network that aren't being run by the big telecoms? What do the tiny screens look like that offer more facilities than sending text messages or photos?" For instance, Roel Wouters and Luna Maurer participated in the Klima Master. [18] The readable report for Rhizome, covering the event's different facets and written by Jonah Brucker-Cohen, ends with the winner of what turned out to be the last Browserday. "*My Browser* by Bob Stel and Laurant Ory (Sandberg Institute) won the event, which featured a video presentation of a dying old man describing his personal attachment to his browser. Speaking of the browser as if it were his only companion, the project emphasised the idea that in the future our personal attachments to technology will ultimately become more important than simply using technology." [19]

Mieke Gerritzen set out to spark a new media design movement, placing designers at the heart of multidisciplinary collaboration. The goal was to prove that designers could do more than just use the latest multimedia tools—they could shape the very applications they relied on. If tools influenced creative work, then designers deserved a hand in their evolution. The browser, the quintessential Internet application, was anything but neutral. Its design was steeped in cultural and economic meaning. Back then, browsers were seen as portals to a world of information and communication—true doors of perception. The first 'browser war' (1995-2001) revealed just how political these applications could be. Yet Browserday showed that the

browser itself could ignite techno-imagination. The politics and aesthetics of navigating data would remain central to our digital lives well into the 21st century.

“Many hurry to serve stockholders and clients. At the moment, technical development is strongly money-driven,” Mieke Gerritzen told me in an interview, back in 2002. “The International Browserday is an educational (and entertaining) event focusing on technical developments. It is not related to money, and therefore it is also not related to technical realism. It is related to technical development in terms of ‘fantasy’. It’s all about the public expression of creativity.”^[20] Progress you can see when people are working on a topic for a long time, but we are not living in the age of sustainability, Mieke noticed. “The progress I saw at the browserday in Berlin is that students feel more responsible for social and political aspects of the world they live in. This is different compared to the first browser day, where more people tried to come up with a navigation system in the hope of becoming a millionaire, which was a somewhat normal expectation at the time.” Designers joined the digital technology development only 10 or 15 years ago. The browser was an interesting object to reflect this change.

A browser day showed around 30 presentations in a row. Having only three minutes forces people to prepare their presentation very tightly. You can only show the very essential parts of your idea. It is about making choices in line with the PechaKucha format, which was invented a few years later.^[21] In my 2002 interview with Mieke Gerritzen, she explains: “You have to look at your own work and pick out the most personal and characteristic part of the idea and use all the creativity you have to present this in a clear and special way to the public. The event is a show. It is what I would call event education. These days, stage presentation is part of the design. Designers these days are more on stage than ever before. Being a designer is getting close to becoming a pop star.”

The browserday competitions had a structuralist design approach. Because of the emphasis on the power of applications, the storytelling aspect of design disappeared in the background. There is no idea in design as such: the application is the message. Looking back, Mieke also noticed an increase in applications critical of information

overload. “I was happy that during the BrowserDay in Berlin, there were more attendees than ever before. The dot-com bubble did not directly affect digital media education. Students there are not used to making lots of money. The hype is over, and what is left are diehards. However, one a priori remained intact throughout this fast-changing period: the belief in the importance of the interface and the role of artists in its design process. The aim is to oppose one-size-fits-all, global, and monopolistic solutions that exclude alternatives. Mieke, again in 2002: “Students like to build their own browser. This idea is really funky, but they are not very aware of the politics of technology. Students need to know about software and its limitations. They should control the software, not have it control them. At the moment, we live in the age of style poverty. Software generates too many images and styles created by tasteless people. This is what makes the world so poor and boring. Culture is losing out due to the homogenising forces of globalisation. What we need instead is subjective madness, a radical individualism which aims at esthetic singularity.”[22]

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[1] <https://waag.org/en/project/international-browser-day/>. Parts of the original website <https://project.waag.org/browssite/> can be accessed via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine.

[2] An introduction to the history of the first generation of web browsers, including the late 1990s browser war, can be found here: <https://project.waag.org/browssite/>.

[3] <https://waag.org/en/project/we-want-bandwidth/>. More info on the project as a whole here: https://monoskop.org/Hybrid_Workspace.

[4] <https://straddle3.net/context//01/010327.en.html>.

[5] More on the event in the nettime archive: <https://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9803/msg00122.htm>

[] Both events in San Francisco and Amsterdam were connected through a video conferencing system using streaming media and webcams.

[6] <https://anthology.rhizome.org/the-web-stalker>.

[7] Quote from <https://anthology.rhizome.org/the-web-stalker>.

[8] See my interview with the winner Andrej Mrackovski:
<https://networkcultures.org/geertlovink-archive/interviews/interview-with-andrej-mrackovski/>.

[9] <https://www.koert.com/work/browser/>.

[10] More on this edition in Wired's report of the event:
<https://www.wired.com/2000/05/browsing-the-future/>.

[11] <https://www.edge.org/digerati/mcbride/index.html>.

[12]
<https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/02/arts/arts-online-innovative-web-masters-chase-fame-at-browserday.html>.

[13] <https://www.coin-operated.com/2010/05/04/crank-the-web-2001/>.

[14] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEzMaZDPWkk>.

[15]
<https://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-bold-0107/msg00054.html>. There is a report in *Die Tageszeitung* from 6.12.2001, written by Verena Dauerer (in German).

[16] <https://arambartholl.com/blog/tag/datenamort/>.

[17]
<https://m.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-bold-0205/msg00136.html>.

[18] <https://old.roelwouters.com/klimakontrolle>.

[19] <https://www.coin-operated.com/2002/05/20/8521/>.

[20]

<https://networkcultures.org/geertlovink-archive/interviews/interview-w-ith-mieke-gerritzen/>.

[21] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PechaKucha>.

[22]

<https://networkcultures.org/geertlovink-archive/interviews/interview-w-ith-mieke-gerritzen/>.