

Monitoring the Web 2.0 Online Shopping Experience with AlertSite DéjàClick

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In the never-ending quest for “wallet share”, online retailers constantly conjure up ever more sophisticated functionality to attract shoppers. Using Java scripting and other highly interactive tools and services, retailers are delivering laser-focused experiences that propel customers to precisely what they seek. When these capabilities work well, they provide online retailers a competitive edge, increased sales, and brand loyalty—but if online shoppers are left to twiddle their thumbs due to poor performance, they quickly move on.

You can’t improve what you don’t measure, so you must monitor your users’ experience to make sure its performance is meeting users’ expectations as well as your business needs. That means you must **measure what matters**—and what matters in the case of Web 2.0 applications is **the real user experience**, which can only be captured from within the browser.

Why is it important to measure from within the browser? Because dynamic Web 2.0 applications often obscure visibility into performance, so they must be monitored higher up the protocol stack. This report describes these issues and profiles a tool from AlertSite called DéjàClick that addresses them.

Passive Is Passé

The Web is transitioning from a collection of autonomous websites to an integrated computing platform serving web-based applications to end users. This phenomenon, often referred to as “Web 2.0”, is not really a change in any web standards but rather a shift in how standards are applied. The real change is that web applications are being deconstructed into separate elements which can reside on the primary website or be distributed among many network locations. Each element can then be supplied by a business partner whose website is added to your mashup. Within an enterprise this change is driven by service-oriented architecture (SOA) and virtualization.

These application design changes are being spurred by new standards, and the desire to build applications more quickly as well as to couple the user interface more richly and intimately to the application. However, Web 2.0 application designs adversely affect performance management.

The browser is shifting from a passive to a dynamic client, as Figure 1 shows. In passive client mode, all presentation logic is loaded to the browser in the base-page portion of every web page. The browser then dutifully gets each page element and paints the pages as instructed. In dynamic client mode, the presentation logic moves to the browser where software operating above the browser makes choices based on user actions.

The dynamic client operates above the browser and within the browser window. Common examples of a dynamic client are Java scripts, Ajax, and Flash. In each case the user is primarily interacting with the dynamic client operating within a browser tab. In effect, the dynamic client is one rung up the protocol stack from the passive browser’s layer 7, which would make it a new layer 8.

A key difference in the dynamic client model is that the data required to fill out elements of the web page no longer come from a single source. Some content may come from an alternate delivery system like a content delivery network (CDN), but more recently,

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business logic, customer data, and even the business data needed to complete a transaction are supplied from third party sources.

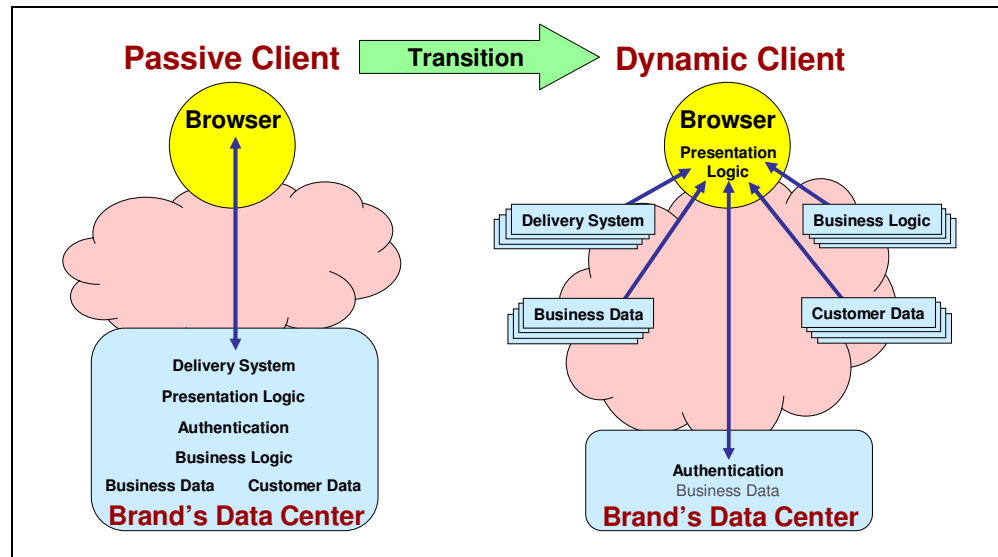


Figure 1 – Shift in How the Web Works

The browser assembles web pages based upon a combination of rules defined by the primary web server, dynamic client, and the user. (The user does not directly set rules, but rather simply moves a mouse or makes choices on the screen.) Furthermore, many aspects of the application operate on the desktop and do not interact with any server on the network. The dynamic client is autonomous software that is the new true user interface, relegating the browser to a supporting role.

With a richer set of controls over the browser and dynamic client, the user can now customize how the web page looks. The user can set policy over cookies, ad blocking, and the ability to run Java or ActiveX. Just within a browser, the user can have multiple tabs open, each of which may be updating data or images in the background. All of these settings are unique to a user's desktop and may affect how a web-based application works or even what it displays.

Losing Web Visibility

The reality of Figure 1 is that monitoring the user experience from the traditional locations no longer works.

Most enterprises monitor web performance from the data center because before Web 2.0, that was where all of the components of the web page originated. Furthermore, all the components that were generated in application servers and database servers were traditionally funneled through the web server to the browser. So instrumenting the web server from web log analysis to sophisticated business logic analysis provided a lot of information. But as more web page elements are delivered from outside the data center, this approach sees fewer elements of the full page.

Another place to monitor the user experience is in the data path between the web server and the browser, by adding a passive data-gathering appliance. Some vendors couple super-fast packet sniffers with sophisticated software that reconstructs all of the HTTP and HTML in each user interaction. These measurement tools provide a real-time user

experience view, but the single blue arrow in Figure 1 has morphed into many arrows, causing a data center appliance to see less and less of the content.

Finally, there are synthetic measurement approaches that run a user script of the application from agents on the Internet. This works well to check the completeness and timing of a single web page or sequence of pages, but a synthetic agent's accuracy is a function of how well it can replay all of the actions of a real user. Unfortunately, most measurement services do not have agents that are sophisticated enough to accurately monitor a dynamic client. AlertSite addresses this need, as we explain below.

Dynamic Client Examples

Dynamic clients are appearing in many subtle ways. Often, users are unaware of the new paradigm. Online retail sites are providing increasingly rich and diverse applications that are hosted or "fed" by third parties. Here are just a few among a myriad of examples.

Manufacturer-supplied Product Information

The typical online store has many more items available than the brick-and-mortar store. This is certainly true of electronics retailers. For example, a major electronics retailer can easily have 1,000 televisions in its catalog. A buyer can search and compare these televisions by a large number of technical details such as screen size, display type, overall product dimensions, weight, inputs, outputs, and remote features. This is just a sampling of the more than 50 technical details available. And they change as each of the suppliers adds or drops a model.

No retailer can keep some 50,000 details on all the televisions they sell current. So the manufacturers directly feed details about each product to the retailer. Critical business information pertinent to a sale appears on the shopper's browser with no retailer involvement.

A major online retailer can easily boast 100 such relationships in which user-presented content comes directly from the manufacturer.

Sophisticated Design Features

Increasingly sophisticated Java and Ajax applications and software-as-a-service (SaaS) offerings hosted by third parties are pushing the envelope of what is possible for online retailers. For example, it is now possible to try on clothes in a virtual changing room so prospective buyers can see how clothing will look before purchasing. With dynamic new interactive applications, businesses such as printers and sign makers now enable customers to design everything from business cards and wedding invitations to yard signs and company banners to their own specifications.

The highly interactive aspects of these features are implemented in software running on top of the browser. The web server provides the basic options available and receives the final selection made by the consumer. The performance of sophisticated design process that is critical to the user experience can only be monitored on the user's PC.

Your Brand is on Top!

In the above examples the primary brand is yours. When some portion of the web page was being supplied by a partner, the brand on the top of the web page was that of the website owner. If something goes wrong such as content is not delivered, or performance slows to a crawl inside the partner's window, the user still thinks he is talking to the primary brand. The real danger is that your brand's reputation and revenue is at a heightened risk because a portion of the session is no longer under your control. Higher risk with less visibility is a recipe for disaster.

How AlertSite DéjàClick Works

DéjàClick is a free user-experience monitoring tool from AlertSite of Coconut Creek, Florida, USA. DéjàClick is coupled with AlertSite's TrueUser™ Service which is a fee-based monitoring system. Let's look at the two offerings separately.

DéjàClick

DéjàClick is a free Firefox browser toolbar add-on (see download link at the end of this report). Its sophisticated agent technology operates on your desktop. Unlike other desktop agents that wedge between the operating system and the browser to simulate network events, DéjàClick operates as a simulated user on top of the browser or the dynamic client as Figure 1 shows. This vantage point is essential to seeing how the application operates within the context of a real browser.

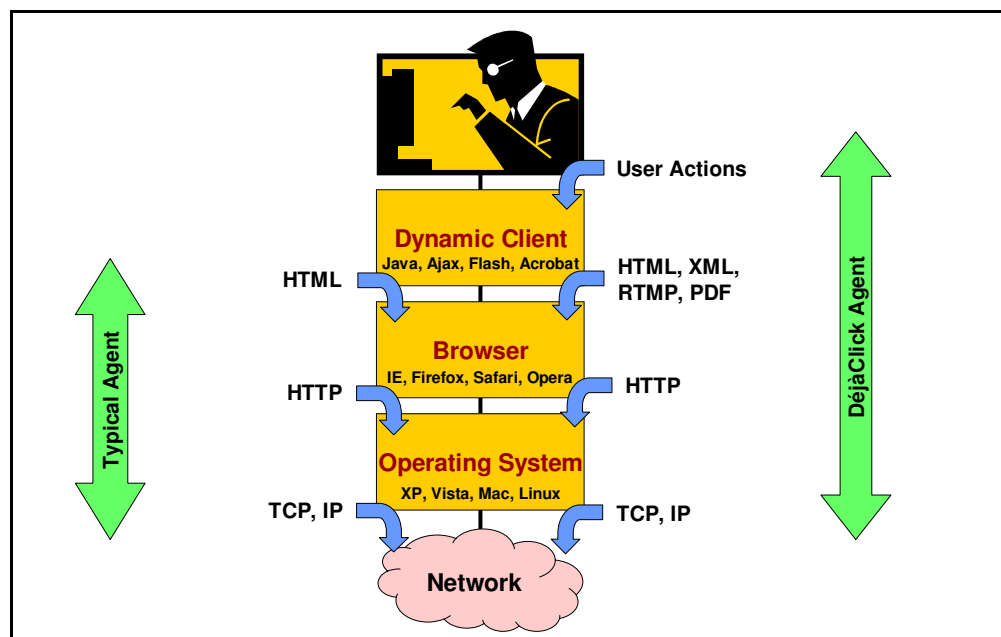


Figure 2 – Where Agent Software Operates

Programming the agent is easy because a transaction recorder automatically builds scripts by following the user's click stream. You can record a simple interaction or a complex session. The resulting script is a detailed outline of each user action, client event, or browser event. The user actions include such "internal to the desktop" events as "mouse hovering over button" that would never be seen when recording beneath the browser.

AlertSite recently enhanced DéjàClick with TrueScreen™ technology that monitors and records all user interactivity with Adobe Flash objects as well as all Ajax-based applications. TrueScreen monitors all Flash media user activity, including keystrokes, mouse clicks and drags, as well as “mouse overs”, to accurately record user-Flash object interactions.

During initial playback, algorithms within DéjàClick identify variations between how the script was recorded and how it is playing—and pattern-matching algorithms correlate the content delivered with the content originally recorded. The application tester can modify the script to account for a wide range of factors such as user think-time, network activity, cookie caching/hiding, form-filling requirements, etc. A built-in Replay Advisor guides the tester through these choices and recommends changes to the script replay parameters.

Once a script meets the needs of the tester, it can be saved locally, turned into an auto-play Super Bookmark, or uploaded to AlertSite for repetitive testing from their network.

TrueUser Business Transaction Monitoring Service

DéjàClick scripts can be loaded onto the TrueUser network of agent servers operated by AlertSite in more than 50 locations. The DéjàClick script operates just as it did on the script developer’s desktop, but it now simulates user actions that trigger dynamic clients on Firefox browsers operating worldwide.

The scripts operating on the remote agents have an adaptive playback capability that enables them to work properly in the event of small changes in the application, content, or software environment. For example, the adaptive playback capability automatically detects and adjusts to cookie- based form-filling, as well as to asynchronous activity and changes in the browser environment (e.g., an action causes a new tab to open).

The remote agents do not add latency to the software interactions, browser functions, or network transaction. This is a true measure of real user performance as seen from the AlertSite monitoring locations.

You can set several controls on the remote agents to affect the adaptive playback nature of the scripts. For example, you can set them to simulate differences between first-time and subsequent user interactions. The agent management interface uses a self-service model to set up and change a sophisticated remote monitoring system, and AlertSite also provides support staff to help set up a monitoring system within the TrueUser service.

The recent addition of Java-based custom scripting permits an even more powerful way to add logic to the script. For example, the script can select information from a web page that is then entered into a form on the page or on subsequent pages. This is a way to dynamically generate tests that are context sensitive. For example, the script can discover what item is on sale and then proceed to make inquiries specifically about that item.

The scripts can operate at any interval up to one minute. The data gathered is stored in a database which can be viewed in the form of a variety of reports. The data can also be exported for off-line analysis.

DéjàClick is a work in progress. AlertSite has plans to add capabilities as new dynamic clients and features emerge.

How to Use DéjàClick

Global monitoring with simulated users can detect network anomalies, server problems, and delays in receiving content from partners. Traditional synthetic agents, passive appliances, and server log technology can't discover these issues if the website uses complex rich-media design. Enterprises should use DéjàClick and the TrueUser service to perform the following management functions.

New Application Quality Assurance

No Internet application is static. It is important to test any changes before they are rolled out to the operational environment. You can use DéjàClick to test changes to the site, supporting software, or content partners. This is a valuable tool for ensuring that the user experience is not hampered by the change.

Failure Discovery

DéjàClick provides a foundation for setting thresholds on various technical aspects of the experience. The TrueUser system has many ways to set alarms that alert administrators if basic links stop working, content matching fails, etc. Alarms can be used to discover subtle changes in how a part of the user experience has changed.

Problem Discovery

NetForecast research shows that just over half of all application performance problems in enterprises with best-in-class performance management practices are discovered by end users rather than by monitoring systems—while in enterprises with worst-in-class practices, users discover fully 85 percent of performance problems. The True User system can be a valuable aid to identify performance problems before users are affected.

Problem Diagnoses

Diagnostics determine which part of the complex system of users, networks, and servers is creating a performance problem. With so many “moving parts” to the problem, diagnosis is really a matter of deductive reasoning. DéjàClick helps eliminate non-offending parts of the system in order to narrow the search for the troublemaker and improve mean time to repair (MTTR).

Correlation Analysis

TrueUser measurement data can be used over time to develop a performance baseline. Analysis of the data will discover if performance is consistent across geographic regions. The data can also be correlated across multiple service points such as various Internet service providers, hosting services, or content delivery networks. In fact, using DéjàClick is one of the few ways to independently verify the service being provided by a CDN to the parts of the world that matter to your business.

Load Testing

DéjàClick scripts can be written to randomize navigation events to reflect the actions of a real population such as to mimic the actions of first-time users or repeat users, and to reflect a range of user “think times”. By realistically load testing your site to reflect the actions of real users you can more accurately identify areas of stress vulnerability.

Recommendation

Poor retail website performance means lost customers and lost revenue. This makes it vitally important for online retailers to improve performance by measuring what matters—and what matters in the case of dynamic Web 2.0 applications is the real user experience which can only be captured from within the browser. It's easy to become complacent when page-load times look good, but if you only measure a piece of your user's experience, things may not be as rosy as they seem.

Complex, media-rich or dynamic client applications can only be monitored with comprehensive testing like that provided by DéjàClick. Since DéjàClick is free, NetForecast recommends that you download the tool and test drive it. Building sophisticated scripts is easy. You can fire them off as needed from the Super Bookmarks. Once you are familiar with DéjàClick, we recommend you subscribe to AlertSite's monitoring services to continuously track the user experience.

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AlertSite is a leading provider of Web performance management solutions that ensure a customer's Web-based services and applications are always available and running at peak performance. More than 2,300 customers worldwide rely on AlertSite to understand and enhance the end-user Web experience, including AT&T, Honda, Ryder, Symantec and Purina Mills.

Web: www.alertsite.com

DéjàClick free download: www.dejaclick.com

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NetForecast helps enterprises and vendors understand and improve the performance of networked applications.

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