

TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

By Paul McFedries

The Web, Take Two

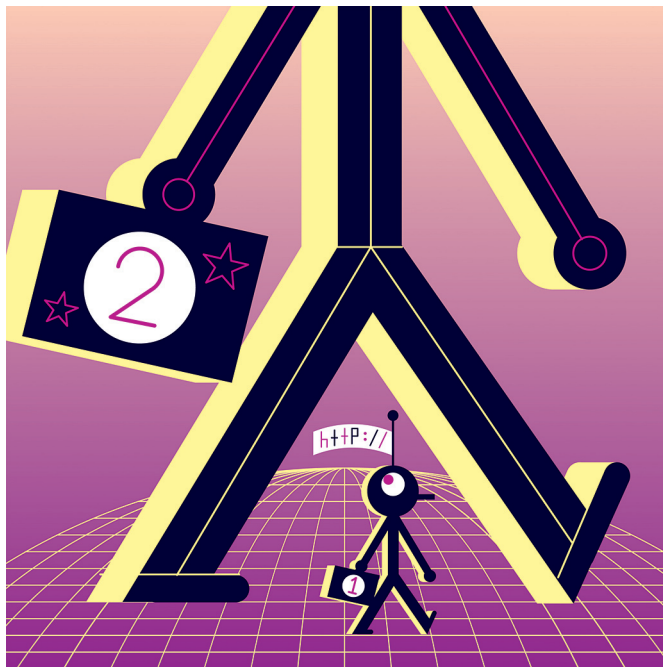
Please God, just one more bubble!
—Silicon Valley bumper sticker

Inventive wordsmiths in all fields are constantly forging new additions to the lexicon by blending words, attaching tidbits to existing words, and creating neologisms out of thin air. Some of these new words strike a chord in popular culture and go through what I call the *cachet-to-cliché syndrome*: the word is suddenly on the lips of cocktail partygoers and at the fingertips of countless columnists and editorialists. An instant later, however, the backlash begins. Rants of the if-I-hear-the-word-“x”-one-more-time-I’ll-scream variety appear, Lake Superior State University includes the word in its annual list of words that should be stricken from the language, and so on.

If there’s a technology buzz phrase that looks like it might go through this linguistic rags-to-riches story right now, it’s probably **Web 2.0**. Coined by Dale Dougherty of O’Reilly Media in 2004, this lexico-meme is *everywhere*: Google returns tens of millions of hits; Factiva (a database of thousands of news articles) lists over 1500 citations; the blog search engine Technorati returns nearly 100 000 posts; and O’Reilly hosts an annual Web 2.0 Conference.

So what the heck is it? That’s a good question, but unfortunately, it’s devilishly difficult to answer. Web 2.0 is one of those terms that resists definition, either because the concept is too amorphous to have any real meaning or because the underlying phenomenon is so huge and important that it defies any attempt to pin it down. Here’s my provisional (and somewhat stuffy, I admit) definition: a second phase in the evolution of the World Wide Web in which developers create Web sites that look and act like desktop programs and encourage collaboration and communication between users.

Whatever Web 2.0 is, one thing that’s certain is that it’s trailing a boatload of new words and phrases in its wake. We looked at some of these neologisms back in the February column: **tagging**, **folksonomy**, **long tail**, and **collective intelligence**. A hallmark of Web 2.0 is its user-created and -maintained content; some call this **peer production** (and others, apparently with straight faces, call it the **user-content ecosystem**). **Wikis**—collaborative Web sites that allow users to add, edit, and delete content—are pure Web 2.0, with the famous (on some days, infamous) Wikipedia encyclopedia being the canonical example. Allowing users that much control is



an experiment in **radical trust**.

The **2.0-ness** of a site also depends strongly on how closely the site mimics a desktop application; that is, to what degree the site offers a **rich user experience**. The rallying cry here is **the Web as platform**, or, as Microsoft’s Ray Ozzie has said, a **platform of platforms**, because every Web 2.0 site is a kind of miniplatform of its own. You can see this in action in **Web services** such as Gmail (<http://gmail.google.com>) for e-mail, Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>) for photo sharing, and Writely (<http://www.writely.com>)—recently bought by Google—for word processing. Most Web 2.0 sites use **AJAX** (asynchronous JavaScript and XML), which may now be the most

famous collection of programming technologies on the planet.

Web 2.0 sites are database-driven—some are now calling them **infoware**—and often supply application programming interfaces (APIs) that enable developers to create new services that combine data from two different sources. These are called **Web application hybrids** or, more popularly, **mashups**. (You may know this term from its older meaning: a musical piece created by combining two songs, particularly the music of one song and the vocals of the other.) The data from such sites are said to be **play-enabling** and to have **hackability** or **user remixability**. The first (and possibly still the best) example is HousingMaps.com, created by graphic artist and programmer Paul Rademacher, which uses the Google Maps API to map apartment and house rental data from Craigslist.

Of course, it’s also possible that all of these Web 2.0 buzzwords are just a bunch of hype, as people who missed out on the dot-com bubble try to breathe life into a new expansion that they can cash in on (**building to flip**, in the vernacular). This side of Web 2.0 is captured perfectly in the definition proposed by Greg Knaus in *The Devil’s Dictionary 2.0*:

Web 2.0, proper noun: *The name given to the social and technical sophistication and maturity that mark the—Oh, screw it. Money! Money money money! Money! The money’s back! Ha ha! Money!*

I’ll let you decide. ■

PAUL MCFEDRIES is a technical and language writer with more than 40 books to his credit. He also runs *Word Spy*, a Web site and mailing list that tracks new words and phrases (<http://www.wordspy.com>).