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Musings, tips and tricks about the accessible software world

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Review of the WebVisum Firefox extension

Today, a [post announcing the WebVisum Firefox extension](#) was posted to the mozilla.dev.accessibility newsgroup. The things talked about in this post and on the [WebVisum homepage](#) almost sound too good to be true. Among the features are:

- Ability to tag graphics, form fields, links, and other page elements. While some or all of these features have been available in some screen readers already, this feature is unique in that it works across platforms. It also sends the data back to the WebVisum web service so other members of the community can benefit from the labels someone provided.
- Optical Character Recognition (OCR) to try and identify those images that absolutely won't tell us through their SRC what they're all about.
- Visual page enhancements such as a high-contrast profile.
- Suppression of automatic page refreshes or Flash content
- And most astonishingly: CAPTCHA solving!

A few days ago, I was approached by the WebVisum development team if I would consider beta testing their extension. So, I had a bit of a head start with this tool, and I was **very** surprised when I started testing some of the features.

The tests

From my main screen reader, I already knew the capability to label graphics or HTML form elements that have missing alt text or labels. Instead of using those techniques, I applied a few labels to the main navigation images on the [CakeWalk homepage](#) using WebVisum. After labelling the graphics from my Windows computer, I fired up my Linux box, installed the extension there and surfed to cakewalk.com. Orca immediately picked up the labels I had given the graphics and used them as the link text.

I then went ahead and labelled the Search combobox on the German [Heise Newsticker](#) site. Again, after visiting the page from the other computer, the label for the combobox was read aloud.

And then I actually tried a CAPTCHA. I chose [digg.com](#) as my first target since I know they also offer an audio CAPTCHA. Of course this is not a 100% satisfactory solution because deaf-blind people are still left dead in the water with this, but it gave me a good reference to compare the results. I went into the new account creation process on digg, and when it came to the CAPTCHA, I let WebVisum do its magic. Within less than 30 seconds, I got a result back, placed on my clipboard by the extension, ready to paste in. I compared it to what the audio CAPTCHA told me, and the results matched!

I repeated this step two more times because I had first chosen a user name that was already taken, and then goofed up something else in the form, and each time, the result was correct. Totally stunning!

I tried the same on [Technorati](#) who also offer an audio CAPTCHA, and got the same results: The CAPTCHA was correctly resolved.

As my third target, I chose [MozillaZine](#), who, despite a couple of attempts on my part, still do not offer an audio CAPTCHA for registration or sending a reply to a forum without being logged in. Without this fall-back mechanism, this is a real-world scenario that visually impaired people are being faced with on an almost daily basis. And I'll be darned, it worked out! I could register with the MozillaZine forums without any sighted assistance.

The conclusion

There are actually a couple of conclusions, concerns and questions that this extension raises.

The educational aspect

So here we are, having been trying to educate web developers all over the world to use W3C accessibility authoring guidelines, comply with section 508 and what not, and now an accessibility comes along that allows for labelling controls, providing alternative text for graphics, and even share this with the community. So did we do all this educational endeavor invain?

The answer can only be a firm and resolute: "No, we didn't!" While this extension allows to correct for obvious mistakes like a missing *alt* attribute on an image, it cannot correct all the requirements there are to meet for section 508 compliance. And it should not! On the contrary: All mistakes one has to correct should be counted against a ranking on a "Wall of shame" kind of statistic that depicts the sites requiring the most corrections. Similarly to the Firefox "Report a broken website feature", that in Firefox 3.0 also

has a “Disability Access” component that allows to report an inaccessible web site, this data should be used to advertise for better accessibility in a future relaunch of that particular site.

Furthermore, there are so many websites that are part of the so-called web 2.0 that are not publically-owned or from a big company, but which are just as compelling to participate. These can usually either not be bothered or cannot financially make it to be 100% sec 508 compliant. Having the possibility to enhance these pages will make the web 2.0 a much more compelling place than it already is in the future.

The CAPTCHA solver

This is probably the most controversial feature. The fact alone that WebVisum is able to solve the CAPTCHAs will probably send shivers up and down the spine of many web developers, website administrators, blog owners etc. that have to fight spam every day. The fact that WebVisum can do it probably means that spambots will sooner or later also be able to do it. Even worse, some could argue that the WebVisum service may be abused by spammers to get CAPTCHA resolution for free.

The WebVisum developers assured me that they’ll make sure that only real people will be able to use their service. Furthermore, the number of CAPTCHAs that can be solved per day per site is limited.

While it is correct to advertise for alternatives to visual CAPTCHAs, the reality is that audio CAPTCHAs, which are the most common alternative, do not allow every person to use them. I already mentioned deaf-blind surfers. But also people who have a hearing impairment and have difficulty deciphering the distorted audio have trouble with this alternative. The CAPTCHA resolution feature allows to solve the problems of these people and also anyone who has trouble reading or hearing the text who is not visually impaired.

Also, this allows access to those private sites and blogs that are under no pressure government- or image-wise to implement an audio CAPTCHA. It definitely lowers the barrier for participation in the web 2.0 world!

Aside from all that, CAPTCHAs only offer a false sense of security. There are much more effective ways of fighting spam than imposing these things upon everybody. My blog, for example, has no CAPTCHA entry for commenting, and still my spam fighting measures have kept this blog clean for as long as it has been in existence. But the sad reality is that CAPTCHAs are an “evil” we currently have to cope with, and WebVisum certainly helps a lot in circumventing these artificial barriers.

My hope is that the WebVisum folks manage to keep their user base spambot-free and that there won’t be any other way to abuse the feature for unsolicited activities.

A few wishes for the future

I see for this extension the potential to become much more than “just” a web helper for the visually impaired. For example, I can imagine this being enhanced to allow hearing-enabled people to provide a textual transcription of an audio clip for deaf surfers, sighted people giving a textual description of not just an image, but a video clip or the like, and other similar cross-impairment possibilities. After all, any hearing-enabled blind could provide such textual transcription of an audio clip for a sighted deaf person.

Aside from this larger-scale vision of mine, a few more basic features such as an undo feature that allows to revoke a server-submitted enhancement will hopefully make its way into near-future versions of the extension.

So: To be able to make up your mind for yourself, go check out the website and extension at www.webvisum.com.

Tags: [Accessibility](#), [captcha](#), [Extension](#), [Firefox](#)

This entry was posted on Thursday, July 3rd, 2008 at 9:36 am and is filed under [Accessibility](#), [Extensions](#), [Firefox](#), [Mozilla](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site.

30 Responses to “Review of the WebVisum Firefox extension”

1. *Hermann Says:*
[July 4th, 2008 at 10:18 am](#)

This sounds very interesting, but I want to draw your attention to one scenario, I meet on my homebanking page: “Volksbank/Raiffeisenbank”: Since they’ve shifted to the I-tan procedure, they provide the I-tan number you’ve to put in in a CAPCHA like graphic; however you have to read it instead of copying it. Then you have to search for that certain I-tan in the paper form, sent by the bank.

Do you think it’s possible to identify this by Webvisum? You cannot play around with this, since the certain I-tan is gone when it’s placed once on the homebanking form, even if you don’t do any action.

Moreover: This mentioned CAPCHA like graphic contains more information. The

date of your birthday is given as “Wasserzeichen”, (sorry I don’t know the word in English and have no dictionary at hand). The effect can be confusion of the Webvisum feature.

All this should be tested in a simulation scenario, but from my experience the bank people are not that cooperative.

Sorry for this longer text, but if we want to extend this amazing feature we have to deal with real life scenarios.

2. [Web Visum](#) Says:
[July 4th, 2008 at 10:28 am](#)

Hermann,

We would love to help you. Contact us through the WebVisum site and we will work with you directly.

Thanks

3. [Marco](#) Says:
[July 4th, 2008 at 10:29 am](#)

Hermann, thanks for your feedback! The way WebVisum works is this: You focus the field the captcha solution needs to go in, press a hot key, normally Ctrl+6, and the captcha is found and submitted to the WebVisum server for analysis. The result is later transferred back and placed on your clipboard. It is also shown in the alert at the top of the page so you immediately know what the text is. Instead of pasting it in, you could look up the iTan from your paperwork and type the relevant number in instead.

I guess the only way to find out whether this works is by trying it out. You can then coordinate with the WebVisum folks to see if you get a result back and if these image types give their service a problem.

4. [pv's blog » Blog Archive » WebVisum](#) Says:
[July 4th, 2008 at 12:05 pm](#)

[...] Lepší popis v angličtině už publikoval Marco Zehe [...]

5. *Hermann* Says:
[July 5th, 2008 at 1:51 pm](#)

In answer to comment 1:

Fortunately the banking site offers a demonstration of their accounts. So I checked it out and I've to report, that no CAPTCHA was recognized. I started the demo version and sent money to an imaginary person.

Everything

looks like in the real transaction form, including the demand for a special I-Tan. The control graphic is shown including the message to check its content and put in the desired I-Tan.

When pressing Control+6, I hear "No CAPTCHAs found on this page". You can try it by visiting:

<https://finanzportal.fiducia.de/ebpp07/entry?rzd=XC&rzbk=0115>

I think you should land on the demo page.

6. *buzz* Says:
[July 5th, 2008 at 4:33 pm](#)

Review of the Web Visum Firefox extension...

Αν αποκτήσει κρίσιμη μάζα ... εχμ ... θα προκαλέσει αλυσιδωτή αντίδραση....

7. *brandon* Says:
[July 5th, 2008 at 5:59 pm](#)

This extension is amazing. I started using it after seeing a post someone made to a certain list. , Love it! If only there was a way to undo a label completely. I've axidently labeled stuff wrong on a site. I've fixed it to the best of my ability , but you know... It certainly will help a lot of people, and I hope this spreads far and wide throughout the connected blind community. My username is serrebi on the extention.

8. [Mishu70 Says:](#)
[July 7th, 2008 at 2:17 am](#)

I saw this add on last week and am also very impressed with the possibilities. There is also plenty opportunity to be malicious such as changing a web pages title to some nasty message about being infected with a virus etc. Think there needs to be a new option to use your own modifications first and then if you have none use the database or ignore completely. Other than that I am very impressed

9. [WebVisum Says:](#)
[July 7th, 2008 at 8:01 am](#)

@Mishu70: these are important points which we have considered as well. Very soon we will launch several features that can help the community "police" itself. We would also possibly have stuff like warning uses who misbehave and even temporarily (or permanently) banning them. I don't think anybody would like to get banned from the service and therefore most should behave.

This stuff is not ready yet as we have more important things that we need to finish, first.

10. [DJC Says:](#)
[July 8th, 2008 at 7:15 pm](#)

i'VE RUN IN TO A PROBLEM WITH WEBVISUN. i DISABLED IT AND NOW CAN'T SEEM TO ENABLE IT AGAIN. tHE PULL DOWN MENU IS GRAYED OUT. i UNINSTALLED AND REINSTALLED BUT THAT DIDN'T FIX THE PROBLEM. i'M RUNNING AN OLDER VERSION OF WINDOW-EYES SO CAN'T YET TAKE ADVANTAGE OF FIRE FOX3. tHE PLUGIN WAS WORKING PERFECTLY UNTIL i DISABLED IT. i THINK IT'S A TERRIFIC HELPER AND i APPRECIATE IT. aNY HELP WOULD BE WELCOME AND tHANKS.

11. [pvagner Says:](#)
[July 9th, 2008 at 8:59 am](#)

Hello,

I have sent a few things to the WebVisum guys using their contact us form. I am seeying they are also discussing here and I

prefer to have things shared so they can be discussed better. Here are some ideas and issues I have thought about:

- 1) It is not possible to use accented letters to name form controls and graphic properly. When naming a control using some non-english letters it's correctly reported but when coming back to the site I have previously labeled a control at some of the accented characters are not printed correctly. This might have something to do with character encoding of a particular website or I don't know because results are varying between sites.
- 2) There are keyboard layouts which can't be used to produce some of the WebVisum shortcut keys E.G. ctrl + ctrl 2 etc. I have tested with czech and slovak keyboard layouts under windows. The upper row on a us keyboard is used to type numbers. With these 2 layouts upper row prints some national characters and numbers are typed by holding down shift key and pressing corresponding key in the upper row of keys.
- 3) On my system I have got several other firefox extensions installed besides WebVisum. I think while Video download helper and WebVisum are installed together it takes very long time to start the firefox. Shal I rather try reporting this issue to the Video download helper author?
- 4) I have seen a post from Aaron Leventhal in the blind programming mailing list that WebVisum is looking for the contributors. If you would like to localize the extension to various languages then please cont me in for slovak language if you like. I believe the extension language might be since with the localization of firefox where available.

Other than these issues I am amazed. The most helpfull is captcha solver so I wish it keeps functioning properly for a maximum possible period.

Please note all my tests were done with firefox 3.0 and NVDA as my screen reader of choice.

12. *Hermann* Says:
[July 9th, 2008 at 3:42 pm](#)

In answer to comment 10:

Have you tried to activate Webvisum from within the tools menu? There's a submenu which contains an "activate" button.

I wonder if Webvisum works with FF before 3.0. And I think FF3 should work with older Windows versions, but I might be wrong. Which Windows do you use?

13. *pvagner* Says:
[July 9th, 2008 at 4:43 pm](#)

By default FF3 won't work with non-NT based systems at all. There are some unofficial projects adding some functionality to the win 9x kernel just to make FF3 running though.

14. [WebVisum](#) Says:
[July 9th, 2008 at 5:34 pm](#)

@DJC: Please follow Hermann's advice. Also, you can try the open source screen reader, NVDA, which is totally free and works quite well with Firefox: <http://www.nvda-project.org/wiki/Download> take version 0.6p1 as 0.5 will not work well.

@pvagner: We're already addressing all of your excellent and well detailed feedback. Hopefully by the next version it will all be corrected. We'll send you the files to translate over email. Thanks for the offer.

15. [optical character recognition](#) Says:
[July 10th, 2008 at 3:49 am](#)

[...] [...]

16. [DJC](#) Says:
[July 10th, 2008 at 4:31 pm](#)

The pull-down menu in the tools area of fire fox is grayed out and that's why I can't get to it. I'll try nvda and see if I can turn it back on that way. Running WinXP Corporate.

17. [djC](#) Says:
[July 14th, 2008 at 5:24 am](#)

Well I'm sorry to report that I still can't get this working. For some reason when I pressed control-shift-f2 it disabled the add on even though firefox says it's enabled. Does WebVisum write the login info to an ini file or something that I can delete to get the add on to behave so I can log in with it and if so where should I look?

18. [pvgagner](#) Says:
[July 14th, 2008 at 3:23 pm](#)

@djic the only way I know how to see the individual settings is to go to the about:config page and entering webvisum into the filter. They can be removed though.

19. [djic](#) Says:
[July 14th, 2008 at 6:51 pm](#)

Ok I finally have Webvisum working. I had to install firefox3 which resolved the issue. The menu that was grayed out in firefox2 is now working so I was able to enable Webvisum and it's working correctly Thanks to everyone who tried to help.

20. [WebVisum](#) Says:
[July 15th, 2008 at 8:51 am](#)

@djic: Congratulations! Our next version will require Firefox 3.0 or later - this should make it easier on some people who happen to be using Firefox 2.

21. [Bart Bunting](#) Says:
[July 15th, 2008 at 2:06 pm](#)

Hi, I think this is a fantastic addon. I've had no luck however with my bank's website. <http://www.pcu.com.au> I tried to use the capture feature and nothing happened. I'm using orca and ff3. Worse than that I labeled the actual capture image and apparently it no longer shows the actual capture text so even with sighted assistance I can't log in with visum enabled. Another odd thing is that on that particular site when I disable visum i am unable to renable it. I'm sure these are all just kinks though and will get sorted out. Well done guys!!

22. [WebVisum](#) Says:
[July 15th, 2008 at 4:25 pm](#)

Marco's blog is not a support forum Its best that you contact us through the contact form on the site.

I believe this issue will be fixed by our next release and you should be able to solve this CAPTCHA.

Let us know how it goes if you're still unable to work it out with the new release.

Best,
Richard

23. [links for 2008-07-15 at 1p 5.](#) Says:
[July 15th, 2008 at 11:14 pm](#)

[...] Marco's accessibility blog » Review of the WebVisum Firefox extension "Today, a post announcing the WebVisum Firefox extension was posted to the mozilla.dev.accessibility newsgroup. The things talked about in this post and on the WebVisum homepage almost sound too good to be true." Have to check this out.. (tags: Accessibility firefox review plugin) [...]

24. [Social Accessibility - Threes a Crowd? - The Paciello Group Blog](#) Says:
[July 18th, 2008 at 2:26 pm](#)

[...] Webvisum [...]

25. [User-Centered Design and Web Accessibility Blog - AniktoBlog » Blog Archive » WebVisum Extension for Firefox](#) Says:
[July 20th, 2008 at 3:04 pm](#)

[...] Visit Marco's Accessibility Blog for an excellent review of WebVisum's features. One item of particular interest is to what extent software displaces educational efforts; what does this mean for those of us who have long endorsed best practices in authoring web content? Does this mean that we can now permit more a relaxed set of development guidelines? Marco has the right idea, I think: While this extension allows to correct for obvious mistakes like a missing alt attribute on an image, it cannot correct all the requirements there are to meet for section 508 compliance. And it should not! On the contrary: All mistakes one has to correct should be counted against a ranking on a "Wall of shame" kind of statistic that depicts the sites requiring the most corrections. ... [...]

26. [*AccessTech*](#) Says:
[July 26th, 2008 at 2:04 am](#)

[...] Posted on July 25, 2008. Filed under: Reviews | Review of the WebVisum Firefox extension [...]

27. [*Talking Books Librarian*](#) Says:
[July 28th, 2008 at 8:49 pm](#)

Hi, I just found this blog via the WebVisum website. I'm glad to find another accessibility blog! I am a Talking Books Librarian and blog about various resources for people with disabilities and also about library-related issues. Feel free to check it out at <http://talkingbookslibrarian.blogspot.com>

(Sorry if this is a double post, I realized I had the address wrong in the previous submission!)

28. [*Shawn K*](#) Says:
[August 6th, 2008 at 8:29 pm](#)

I would have loved to try this out. Unfortunately Firefox 3 won't run on my system, I have xp Home with SP2. When I looked at the ff forums there were so many reasons why ff3 would crash at startup and so many complicated things to try to fix it, and so many people for whom no suggestion worked that I just gave up in disgust. I'd love to have that earlier version that DJC was using that worked with FF2. As it is I've signed up with Social Accessibility and will stick with that until a more stable and less finicky version of Firefox comes along. FF3 apparently crashes on Macs and systems running Linux as well. Before I gave up I ruled out any plugins or add ons causing the problem, and I don't have Google Desktop or the roboform plugin or the Yahoo Ap that was said to cause the problem on some systems. I also tried ff3.1 beta with no luck.

29. [*Antonio Cezar Locutor*](#) Says:
[August 17th, 2008 at 10:28 am](#)

Hi.

I noticed that WebVisum does not manage to work well in Captcha when it is required the letters capital letters fingering and minuscule. But it managed to behave itself well in lots of sites that before were inaccessible. However I had difficulties for captchas in <http://www.linhadecodigo.com.br/Artigo.aspx?id=1284> or in the site <http://www40.dataprev.gov.br/cgi->

[bin/fcgg.exe?w3exec=Identificacao](#)

Also do not manage to change the shortcut keys starting from a keyboard in Portuguese, because he does not assimilate anything different from standard or shift tab. Then I use the context menu and solve the thing.

Hugs.

Oh! I can help with the translation for Portuguese of Brazil.

30. [Marco's accessibility blog » Blog Archive » WebVisum had to switch to an invitational registration system, I can give out invites!](#) Says:
[August 27th, 2008 at 8:11 pm](#)

[...] Review of the WebVisum Firefox extension. [...]

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