Eye tracking: Eye candy vs. I can do

Eye tracking has been around for decades but has only become commercially available over the past few years. It’s been heralded as the next big thing in user research, ‘the closest thing to mind reading’! There’s also been a bit of a backlash against eye tracking recently. Jarred Spool, for example, has dismissed it as an expensive gadget that doesn’t tell a usability analyst more than they already know. In other words its just ‘eye candy’.

Eye tracking evangelists have countered by claiming that eye tracking shows what ‘I can do’ in new ways unimaginable before. So which camp are you in: the eye candy team or the I can do brigade?

What is eye tracking?

Eye tracking follows where the eye moves as it looks at a web page (or any other object). It’s claimed that because of this its possible to work out what someone is attending to and even what they’re thinking about. Eye tracking uses infra red technology that shows where a pupil is by reflecting light off the retina of the eye. It’s embedded in the monitor so totally non-obtrusive.

So, you can sit typical site visitors in front of your website and ask them to complete common tasks. The eye tracker will show you where they looked and whether they looked at something for long enough to have been able to see it. This is especially effective when combined with an interview or questionnaire asking people what they saw and what they thought.

When to use eye tracking

Eye tracking is usually used in conjunction with usability testing, where it’s great for showing the hotspots on a page (where users look at the most) and the deadzones (where users don’t look at all). Eye tracking is most useful when you want to test:

- **Brand awareness** - To assess how much people notice the branding in terms of logos, brand values and brand titles.
- **Navigation** - To identify any conflicting terms as well as how different navigation layouts interact with each other.
- **Page layout** - To show how a page layout and colour scheme affect the way users scan a page.

What eye tracking is good for

Eye tracking is good in many instances, three of them being:

- **Choosing a homepage design** - You create a set of criteria against which to test and then see which homepage design is most effective. This will put an end once and for all to internal design arguments.
- **Proving what people say** - Whilst people may say they didn’t notice something eye tracking will prove this. A great example of this is that users generally don’t notice the navigation until they’re lost.
- **Checking whether brand elements were noticed** - Eye tracking proves whether or not someone actually looked at the buy button, promotions and/or adverts.

What’s wrong with eye tracking?

It’s not all positives - here are some disadvantages of using eye tracking:
• **Less opportunity for user feedback** - In order to generate an accurate heat map (an amalgamation of what all users looked at) users can’t be asked too many questions. This is because participants will often look at the facilitator (and away from the screen) when answering questions.

• **Incompatible with some people** - Some people’s eyes don’t work particularly well with eye tracking, in particular people with poor vision, the elderly and people of Asian descent.

• **Doesn’t tell you why** - Eye tracking will tell you what people look at and what they don’t look at. It doesn’t of course tell you why so it’s important to follow up eye tracking studies with an interview.

• **Expense & technical difficulties** - Logistical problems, namely the cost and frequent technical issues can also be rather off-putting.

**Eye candy vs. I can do**

Without a doubt, an image of a heat map showing the sum of what all participants looked is very easy to digest. It’s also one of the simplest ways of time-strapped senior managers being able to digest the output of any testing. The same results can sometimes be found through regular usability testing (which is cheaper and easier) but a report and presentation just don’t provide the same visual effectiveness. The heat maps produced from eye tracking studies can actually be very effective in quickly **uniting everyone within the organisation** about what changes should be made to the website. In this case you could argue this is just eye candy, but there are certainly benefits to this eye candy. Where eye tracking really comes into its own is in terms of **page design and page flow**, the latter referring to the way in which someone scans a page. Eye tracking can give designers free reign to come up with some very different ideas and let eye tracking studies decide which is the most visually effective. Eye tracking can be used to really break the mould with regard to page design, giving designers more creative license and allowing them to rewrite the rule book.

**Conclusion**

Eye tracking is definitely not a magic bullet or ‘the closest thing to mind reading’. It does however serve as both a great piece of eye candy for senior executives with little time and is very powerful in helping come up with the most effective page design. This article was written by Mark McElha w. He’s crazy about usability and accessibility - so crazy that he’s head of client services at **usability and accessibility consultancy**, Webcredible. He’s extremely good at all aspects of **user research** and can often be found carrying out **card sorting** sessions.