

# The Six Dirty Secrets of Tagging

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# 1. It's the content, stupid

The point is not the tags, it's the objects they are applied to.

Yeah, Paul Saffo said it's the *context that matters*. He was right in the sense that content loses value if it is not findable and framed in a way that highlights its value. But context is pointless without content.

Image by George Kelly, Creative Commons license, see <http://flickr.com/photos/allaboutgeorge/110903135/>

# Which is more interesting?



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creativecommons  
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## 2. Ordinary people don't get tags

Typical user's response to a tag prompt:

tags | The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog

And to a tag cloud:

"That looks kinda cool but it's got too many words."

Bring people in off the street (or the virtual street, which is Craigslist) and filter out the IT professionals, and you'll find that tagging is not a mainstream concept at all.

### 3. It's the UX, stupid

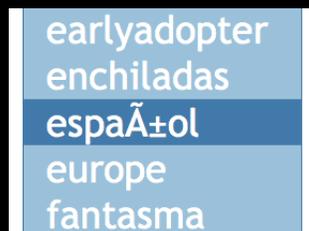
When tagging systems work, it's because a lot of attention went into the whole experience.

For example, Flickr provides a lot of subtle cues about the utility of tags, so a casual user sharing photos or looking at pretty pictures will be led to try them out. And Flickr provides careful prompts about how to tag.

Put a bad front end on a good tagging system and you get a bad result.

## 4. Tags don't play well with others

Tagging systems are plagued with interoperability problems.



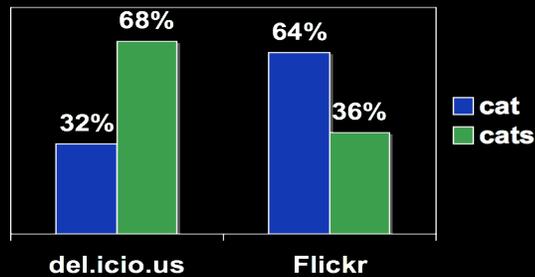
earlyadopter  
enchiladas  
espa±ol  
europe  
fantasma

For starters, there's the obvious interoperability issue of character sets.

## Delimiter wars

- Del.icio.us delimits with spaces so tags can contain punctuation
- Yahoo My Web and others delimit with commas so tags can contain spaces
- Flickr delimits on spaces *or* commas, supports quotes, and preserves spaces and case for display while flattening them for search. Whew!

## Interoperation amplifies imprecision



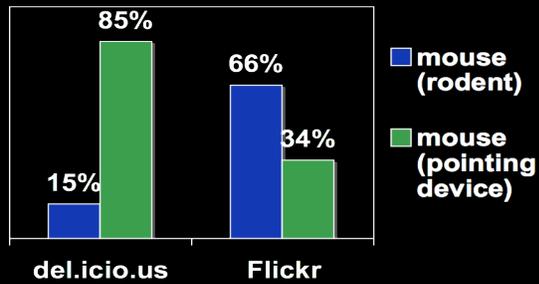
Synonyms: cat vs. cats

A more subtle interoperability problem is that different tagging communities develop different norms. To the extent that the social effects of tagging are important, they get lost when you pool tags from different communities.

To use a simple example, the classic synonym and homonym problems play out differently in del.icio.us and Flickr. Users who consciously or unconsciously try to comply with the norms of those systems have different targets.

Regarding the synonyms “cat” and “cats”, del.icio.us users follow the common English norm of using the plural of a count noun to denote the generic, while in Flickr there are a lot of photos of just one cat.

## Interoperation amplifies imprecision



Homonyms: mouse vs. mouse

Similarly, it's no surprise that the homonyms "mouse" and "mouse" are used differently in del.icio.us and Flickr, with pointing devices predominating in del.icio.us while Flickr has a lot more pictures of furry animals.

## Tagging systems commonly interoperate in just a couple of ways

- Aggregation, e.g. Technorati
- Portability

In part because of these problems, there really aren't very many sophisticated ways in which tagging systems currently interoperate.

We all know about Technorati so I won't put up a slide.

## Interoperation for portability

- The del.icio.us API will let you export your bookmarks and tags
- Shadows and some other systems systems will let you import your del.icio.us bookmarks
- Flock will even move your bookmarks for you



Flock.com

Bookmarks and their associated tags are more portable than you'd think.

The social browser Flock, which stores your favorites on a remote service, will let you choose among del.icio.us, Shadows and others and move your bookmarks back and forth for you.

5. Rich functionality requires  
rich metadata

# Where's my flying car?



## Tags are great but I wouldn't want to \_\_\_\_\_ with them

### Great for:

- Recall
- Discovery
- Fun and games

### Not so great for:

- Medical applications
- Managing money
- Hunting terrorists

## 6. Nobody wants *real* tags

- Simple keyword metadata
- No control
- No hierarchy
- No syntax or semantics
- Minimal cognitive effort by the user

Since this is my presentation I get to define what “real” means.

The original premise of tagging is that it should be the simplest possible form of metadata so that users will be bothered to apply it.

“Control” is in the library science sense.

The only syntax or semantics would be that applied by the user, not the system.

What they really want is

**Tagginess**



Pop culture references get them every time. :-)

## Syntax and semantics

- del.icio.us for:username tags
- Geotagging  
e.g., geo:lat=30.2646 geo:lon=-97.7385
- Shadows @group tags

But syntax and semantics creep into tagging systems anyway. These may be useful features but they're not free-form intuitive tagging. And geotagging is about as far from "real" tagging as you can get.

## Consensus tagging

- sxsw, sxswi, sxsw06, or sxsw2006?
- iloveyoubutivechosendarkness or chosendarkness?

Groups of people now commonly agree on a tag.

At Shadows we're running an experiment in consensus tagging around SXSW: we researched the most common tags in use for all the bands, films, directors and Interactive panelists. See them at:

<http://www.shadows.com/features/site/help/sxsw/music.htm>

## Hierarchical tagging

- web.design.css
- web/design/css
  
- history.us.wwii
- history.france.wwii
- history.wwii.us
- history.wwii.france

Some people have proposed turning tags into hierarchies reminiscent of filesystems.

But evidence shows that most users don't manage filesystem trees well.

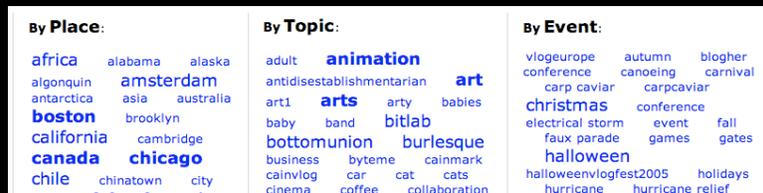
And this leads directly to the classic problem of devising and using taxonomies. Librarians spend years learning how to do this stuff.

Of all the attempts to overload tags, this one disturbs me the most.

# Faceted tagging

## Facets are just buckets of tags

For example, the video site Mefedia.com has facets for place, language, event, topic and people.



On the other hand I like the idea of faceted tagging.

There's a lot of confusion about faceted classification systems. People seem to think there's something mystical about them -- they even originated in India! :-)

But in the context of tagging they just mean separated tag spaces or buckets of tags. Given a good UI, I think it's reasonable to think that users who get the idea of tags could be expected to sort them out into a small, clearly defined set of buckets.

See mefeedia.com, a video site with separate tag spaces for place, language, event, topic and people.

Contact me at [prentissriddle.com](http://www.prentissriddle.com)

**Tagginess.com is  
available**

Thank you very much. If you want to talk further, you can find me at  
<http://www.prentissriddle.com>

And I'm taking bids on the domain [tagginess.com](http://www.tagginess.com).