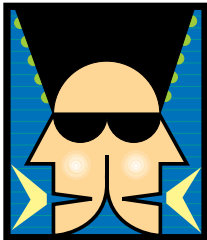


The Web-design elite speaks

The first generation in a new medium talks about its work



When movies first appeared a century ago, people ran screaming for the exits as grainy black-and-white locomotives thundered down on them from the screen. Motion pictures were more than just technological extensions of photographs; they provoked responses in viewers that led to the new communications medium being viewed as a global art form.

The World-Wide Web, with its ability to quickly transmit both text and images across the globe to virtual “pages,” is also more than just a technologi-

cal extension of the Internet. Remember the first time you watched Mosaic assemble a page? Most likely, that page was text-heavy and lightly sprinkled with inline color graphics. But if you were like many other people on the Web, you were amazed at the possibilities it offered. Perhaps it even provoked you to say, "This page would be better if I designed it *this way*." This response—shared by Web designers around the world—is one of the main reasons the field of Web design has quickly evolved from its text-based Internet roots to today's growing collection of professionally designed interactive sites.

The speedy evolution of Web design has produced a big-bang explosion of site designers: Yahoo!'s index of "Web page designers" lists more than 750 designers and content providers, approximately a tenfold increase from a year ago. With such a high level of growth, however, it's surprising to discover that the best sites are being developed by a relatively small cadre of professional designers.

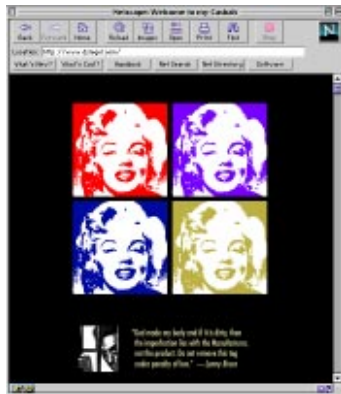
In addition to compelling visuals, their work highlights the importance of interactivity, quality of content, site organization, and the combination of

design and engineering necessary to communicate on the Web effectively. Perhaps most importantly, these designers appear to encourage openness to new ideas and seem well aware that they are working in an age of experimentation.

Franke James of the James Gang, producers of Nerdheaven—a site created specifically for the exploration of Web design—says, “The rules have not been written on what makes a great Web site. Many people want to cram Web design into a little box and say, ‘Yes, this is good—now let us go forth and make thousands of sites like this.’ In Nerdheaven, we are always questioning. Wreaks havoc with the budgets, but it’s satisfying.”

“It’s mostly amateur hour out there,” says site designer David Siegel, whose weekly “High Five Award” page spotlights some of the better sites on the Web. “[But] nobody should have points taken off for doing a badly designed site, because there are no rules of the road... Even if 98 percent of the Web isn’t very well designed, that’s still okay.”

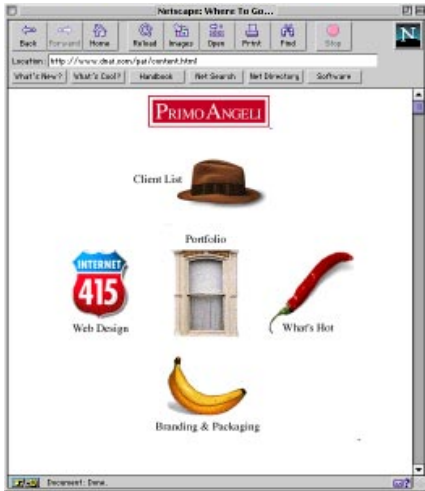
David Siegel's home page



Getting into that top 2 percent, or even the 5 to 10 percent that succeed without dynamic use of Web design, takes work. And, just as an early handful of expert filmmakers made the careers of today's influential movie directors possible, a few energetic designers are establishing Web-based design principles that others are beginning to look to.

Eye-popping visual effects, or just eyestrain?

Unlike print design, which often centers around strong images, Web design requires more than just beautiful GIF files. In fact, some designers believe that snappy images are low on the list. "Graphic specifics are about the least important part," says Nathan Shedroff, founder and creative director of vivid studios. "The first thing to do is sit down with the client and get them to agree to the goals, messages, and audiences of their site... Then we move on to issues of interaction design, the information design, and what it might look like." Many of the sites designed by vivid, such as the one for Computer Curriculum Corporation, employ simple graphics that direct visitors through the site, without



Primo Angeli home page

impeding their progress with long file-download and screen-redraw times.

Don't think that graphics should be forsaken, however. The ability to display images with text was one of the prime reasons the Web took off faster than other Internet technologies like gopher and Usenet newsgroups. Primo Angeli, whose Primo Angeli Inc. recently collected the 1996 Mobius Award for Outstanding Creativity in the Internet Home Page category, stresses the importance of dynamic visuals. "Where have all the concept people gone?" he laments. "What the Internet needs are designers who don't dwell on how computers and software work, but rather who are dedicated to more visually memorable communication that will challenge the market."

But even a site with clear goals and an impressive concept can be rendered useless if you go there and find nothing to do.



NWHQ home page

Mind if I play with that camera, Mr. Spielberg?

Utilizing the advantages of the medium is important in every design discipline, but prominent Web designers say that, in their arena, it's critical. Just as you wouldn't put 10-point type on a billboard (would you?), creating a Web site without interactivity is considered digital suicide. It's important, these designers say, to keep in mind that the Web was developed primarily as a communications tool, not just as a vehicle for one-way marketing pitches.

Elizabeth Fischer, creator of the arts and literature site NWHQ, says, "One of the elements of good Web design is using the technology to involve the viewer in hitherto unavailable interaction with the information . . . making choices, allowing for informed choices to be made, and at the same time guiding the user to make

informed choices." Unlike most sites, which offer some type of table of contents, NWHQ encourages its visitors' interaction by piquing their curiosity: they can click either on abstract

images or on several highlighted instances of the word "here." Both approaches offer a blind jump into the site, allowing visitors to discover their location once they arrive.



*Joe Boxer Web site
intro animation*

"This is what it's all about," agrees Shedroff. "The reason most multimedia products aren't successful, and Web sites are no exception, is because there is nothing to do with them. You can't make anything, you can't say anything, you can't share anything of yourself, and you probably can't even meet anyone

there. Until more people understand interaction design—the creation of experiences—most Web sites will continue to be places to read marketing drivel.”

One site that seems to exemplify Shedroff’s principles is the Joe Boxer Web site, designed by Art & Science W3 Development, Ltd. In addition to giving the visitor an abundance of choices and directions (not all of which even relate to Joe Boxer’s product, underwear), the site offers the ability to send a piece of E-mail that will appear on an electronic reader board in New York’s Times Square. With this type of interactive payoff, Joe Boxer manages to pitch its products to many users who probably aren’t thinking about underwear while searching the Internet. “People will work their way all through the site to find that damn billboard thing, and it’s great,” says Siegel.

Getting them past the lobby so they’ll watch the movie

You don’t need to watch a documentary to discover the vast size of the World-Wide Web and the rate at which it’s growing. Internet researcher Matthew Gray of net.Genesis estimates that the size of the Web is doubling every five months.

With that kind of competition, Web designers are discovering that the key to a successful site is a high number of repeat visitors. Providing quality content, especially content that is continually updated, is usually the best alternative to “brochureware” or “shovelware”—print materials ported directly to the Web without much thought of optimizing them for the medium.

“If your information isn’t interesting and high-quality, don’t expect people to drop by again, or recommend your site to their friends,” says Shedroff. “This should be a no-brainer, but the dearth of interesting information out there shows that most people don’t understand about communicating to an audience.”

James stresses, “In thinking about the site, ask yourself, ‘What is the main purpose or benefit of the site? What do I want the visitor to take away?’ Refine your ideas to the core issues. Get rid of extraneous info which clouds your message. Make everything count.”

Once you’ve got your content nailed, designers say, it needs to fit into a specific organizational scheme. Says Shedroff, “Any graphic designer can make nice visuals, but a site needs to be well organized, easy to navigate, and clear.



CMdesigns home page

That just doesn't describe most sites." A visitor's journey through a site can be just as important as what's contained there, he counsels, and it contributes to the site's interactivity.

According to Siegel, "You can't just assume that everybody who gets [to your site] is a directed user and wants to know everything you have to offer. You have to pull people through." One way Siegel and many other designers tackle this problem is to provide a front door to their sites. "You want to be welcomed in," he said, not hit by all of the site's information at once.

Designer Clement Mok, whose CMdesigns has created Web sites for Sony Pictures Television, Twentieth Century Fox, and HarperCollins Publishers, believes a front door should offer several flavors to accommodate visitors with varied hardware and Web-browsing software. Providing a text-only

version as well as a “full graphic assault” ensures that more people will be able to access and explore the site.

If you can't work the camera, you'll end up with a real short movie

Finally, because the Web is driven by constantly developing technology, considerable technical knowledge is required to design sites effectively, designers point out. It's not enough to know the basics of HTML. Professional designers need to be engineers in many ways to take advantage of the medium, whether that means optimizing GIF files for fast loading, or writing CGI (Common Gateway Interface) scripts.

“Slow sites don't get many visitors, and most consumers have 14.4 modems,” says Shedroff. “If your audience is a consumer one, your site better download all graphics and text in under 30 seconds, max.”

A well-designed site, James believes, employs “the creative use of technology. Have the Web designers used technology in an intelligent way? Are the bells and whistles delivering the message in a stronger way?”

At the same time, leading designers caution that getting caught up in the rush to include the latest tricks and Plug-ins means the site's overall design may be obscured. Says Angeli, "I'm not sure whether the people who design for this medium are wireheads to begin with, or if they turn into tech-nuts after they get into it and get lost in the blizzard of computer chips."

Fischer, at least in one respect, agrees. "Learn about the Internet, not only the Web. If you only know the Web without the rest of the environment in which it functions, well, then, you'll be putting up mere ads—making more stupid TV." 🍷

URLs in order of appearance:

The James Gang

<http://www.jamesgang.com>

Nerdheaven

<http://www.nerdheaven.com/>

(cont. on page 13)

David Siegel

<http://www.dsiegel.com>

David Siegel's High Five Award Page

<http://www.highfive.com>

vivid studios

<http://www.vivid.com>

Primo Angeli Inc.

<http://www.primo.com>

NWHQ

<http://www.knosso.com/NWHQ/>

Joe Boxer

<http://www.joeboxer.com>

Clement Mok designs

<http://www.cmdesigns.com>

Jeff Carlson, a Seattle-based writer and Web designer, is series editor of *eSCENE*, (<http://www.etext.org/Zines/eScene/>), a yearly anthology of the Internet's best short fiction.