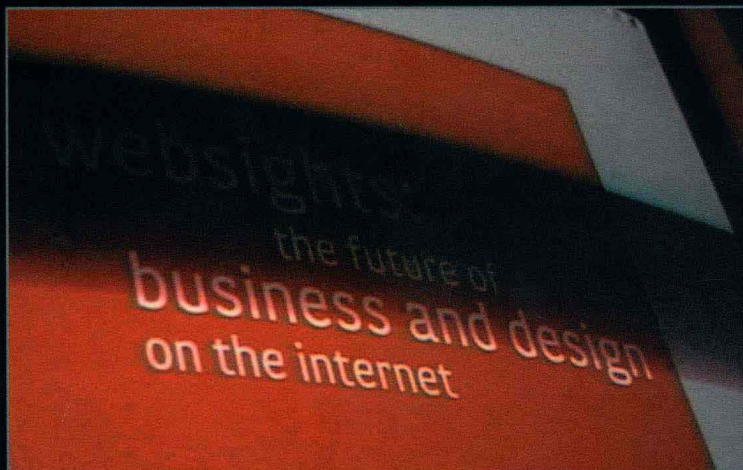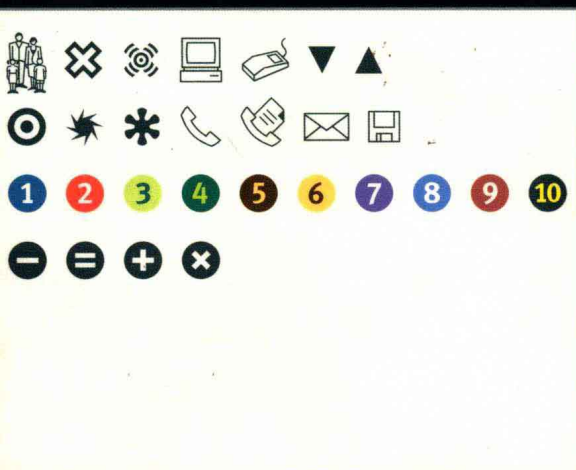# WEBSIGHTS: THE FUTURE OF BUSINESS AND DESIGN

ON THE INTERNET

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TABLE
OF
CONTENTS

>

INTRODUCTION:

WEB DESIGN
AND THE
TOTAL USER EXPERIENCE

TEXT: KATHERINE NELSON

What is Web design? The field is vast, encompassing such areas as graphic design, information architecture, advertising and sponsorship, entertainment, and e-commerce. When faced with the task of assembling a collection of writings on Web design, the editors of PRINT magazine were also faced with the following question: What overarching theme can possibly begin to link such disparate design backgrounds, approaches, and attitudes? In my ongoing discussions with the contributors to this book as well as a variety of design professionals, one theme has continued to resurface when they define the role of the digital designer: creating "experiences." Industry observers, designers, and executives alike often describe designing for technology as the act of crafting a compelling user experience.

The idea of experience creation is not merely a new design approach, but rather the result of a fundamental economic shift, according to Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, authors of *The Experience Economy* (Harvard Business School Press, 1999). Pine and Gilmore claim that Western culture, in its current state of affluence, has moved beyond the consumption of mere products and services. More and more, people are paying for such intangible offerings as the creation of memories or fulfillment of fantasies. To support continued economic growth, many American companies, especially those in the service sector who already deliver a more "intangible" product (e.g., dry-cleaning, baby-sitting, food service) have begun to shift their focus away from the product itself to how the product is used. (For example, a clothing manufacturer might develop a marketing strategy around how a specific piece of clothing would be worn, cleaned, transported during a vacation, or stored in the off-season.) "Experiences represent an existing but previously [under-recognized] genre of economic output," write the authors. "Information is not the foundation of the 'New Economy' because information is not an economic offering. Only when companies constitute it in the form of information services—or information goods and informing experience—do they create economic value." Offering myriad examples from theme restaurants to luxury travel, Pine and Gilmore argue that "companies stage an experience whenever they engage customers, connecting with them in a personal, memorable way."

Granted, when designers employ the term "experience" to describe Web design, they could be describing almost any number of consumer interactions, from TV to broadcast to print. However, of all these media experiences, it is the Web that is the most inherently active in its engagement with consumers. Craig Kanarik, self-titled "chief scientist" and head of the prominent digital design firm Razorfish, says, "I don't think that people make the same commitment to the other forms of media that they do to interactive or digital media. With TV, for example, it's a much more passive experience. People will leave it on as background noise while they walk around the room. On the Internet, you certainly don't have that type of behavior and you constantly run the risk of losing people's attention." Joel Hladecek, chief creative officer of Red Sky
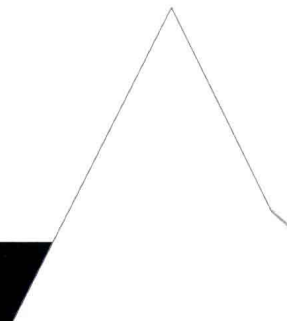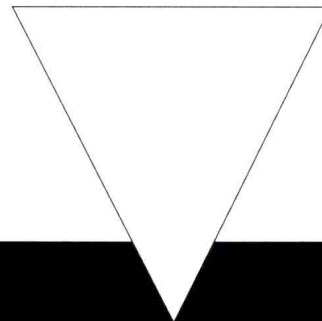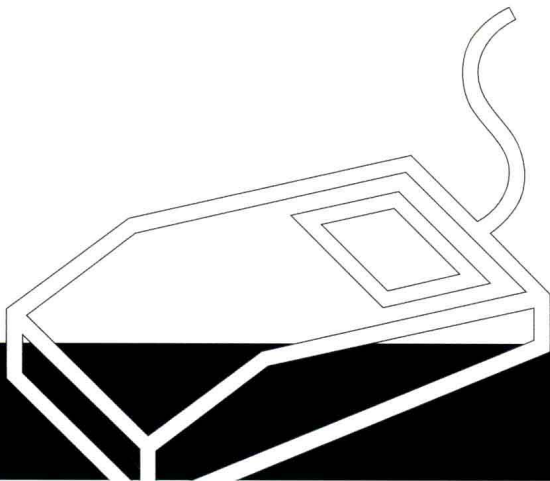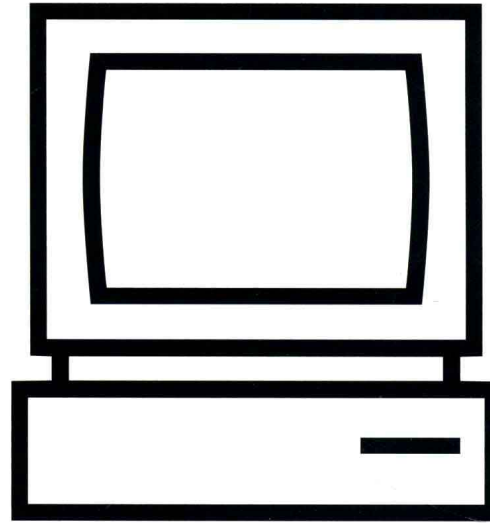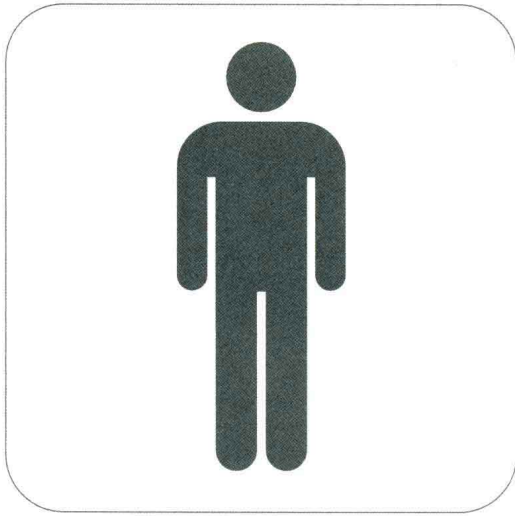
Interactive, agrees that a successful Web experience must not only inform users but also thoroughly engage them. "Traditional advertising is about communicating the notion of value to a target group," says Hladecek. "Whereas in the online space, you have to provide value immediately. It's not enough to communicate it."

The idea of the immersive user experience begins with the creation of an environment that can be uniquely tailored to each individual. Mark McCabe, a designer at ePlanet, likens a compelling digital experience to an evening at the movies: "You leave the theater with a story, a fable about your experience. It's a jigsaw of individually created moments. The theater, the film, the chewing gum on the floor, parking the car, the traffic jam, and the grumpy attendant are all fundamental components of your experience." McCabe makes the point that it is the variables as well as the fixed elements in an interaction that comprise a participant's experience. The movie itself is a structured, contrived component of the occasion; the chewing gum is not. Both elements are ingredients of the overall environment within which the user's personal choices will drive his or her specific narrative.

How do designers allow for the kind of variables that McCabe describes while still presenting a meaningful and consistent client message? What exactly is the cyber-equivalent of chewing gum on the floor, that quirk which makes an experience more compelling and unique? Gilmore and Pine tie the idea to consumer psychology: "[An experience-provider] no longer offers goods or services alone but [a] resulting experience, rich with sensations, created within the customer. All [more traditional] economic offerings (e.g., goods, commodities, and services) remain at arm's length, outside the buyer, while experiences are inherently personal. They actually
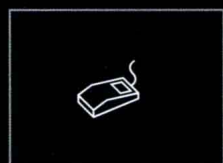
occur within any individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level."

Creating a seamless user interaction, one driven from both within and without the consumer, is currently of major concern to the designers of hardware interfaces. In product design, physiological information is often used as a model to develop what are termed "smart" user interfaces. "The challenge for the designer is to create an experience that may be unique to the user, but that is also dependent on his or her life experience," says Geoff Smith, a scientist at Interval Research, the vanguard technology think tank in northern California. Smith gives the example of a car radio melding to a specific user's needs at a specific moment in time: "The turning of the station-knob sends information to the micro-controller, where it decides the volume. It may also receive data from the speedometer, thereby allowing the wind rush to be taken into consideration when deciding an appropriate volume. So, as devices gather information from a broader range of sources, product designers can create more integrated experiences." The idea is not to create things that blink, honk, or beep, but experiences that meld seamlessly with the momentary and unique needs of the individual user.

So what about the Web, the least visceral and most virtual of media? Hladecek, whose design team touts the title "experience engineers," presents a scenario of the virtual world based on personality and psychology. "You populate an online environment with objects, be they buttons or characters, that have a certain kind of behavior. You are essentially assembling the makings of a great story, not the story itself. Because, ultimately, it's the user who lives on the playhead of the experience. It's the path the user chooses to take that becomes the story." While designers give up control over structure and sequence, they gain control by providing a set of behavioral guidelines. "The only control mechanism that you have as the creator of this space is the self-motivation of the audience," says Hladecek. "You can't tell them what to do. They have to decide themselves. You focus instead on how rich the environment is. You focus on the depth of your characters. What are their triggers? How do they respond? How do they play off one another? Then you let the user play along with them."

When exploring the total user experience, why should we limit our discussion to the Web? In terms of constructing engaging situations, isn't the idea to leverage a brand across all media, thus creating the ultimate brand immersion? Says Kanarik: "Say you are Nike and you want to show somebody a TV commercial. If the TV could morph physically, like the Sony logo changes into a Nike logo during the commercial, for example, then you've got the idea. Better yet, if the whole room turned into a Nike store during the commercial, we would love that. The intention is to build up the interaction between the consumer and this metaphysical brand essence." Kanarik says that his team at Razorfish had actually been "fighting" the perception of their firm as a Web-design company. "I don't care whether the experience is on the Web, on TV, or in plastic. It's not about making logos and pictures and text. It's about crafting the user's reaction," he says.

So where does the broader perspective leave us? Is it myopic, as Kanarik suggests, to explore the particular potential of the Web during a time of increasing sophistication in the technology of many other disciplines? He has a point. Creating Web sites is indeed only one component of the overall interface between brand and consumer that can be manifested cross-platform on TV, in print and product design, on the Web, or in almost any media combination conceivable. The issue comes down to another key idea: the craft of design. The content of *Websights* harks back to the fundamental notion that expertise is built from the ground up. In order to create an optimal user experience, we must first analyze its most fundamental components. In breaking down the interactive paradigm, from the nuances of digital typography presented by Clive Bruton in Chapter 3 to the subversive navigation explored by Steven Henry Madoff in Chapter 6, designers can begin to understand the potential of the total user experience. After that, where to draw the line is defined only by the self-prescribed limits of each individual designer.
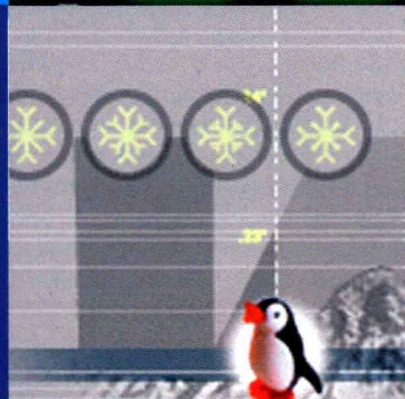
—*Katherine Nelson, Editor*

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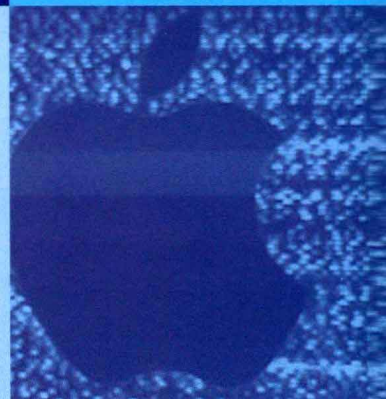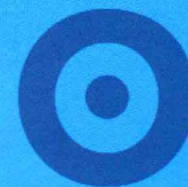
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ROLE REVERSAL:

THE WEB AS METAPHOR

FOR **TRADITIONAL MEDIA**

TEXT: RHONDA RUBENSTEIN

It was 1984, the year imagined by Orwell and engineered by Apple. William Gibson published a novel titled *Neuromancer* and coined the term "cyber-space," while Paul Brainerd founded a company called Aldus and invented "desktop publishing."

One could claim that 1984 saw the beginning of many things, but of particular significance for the development of Web communications a decade later, it saw the introduction of the first computer metaphor. The new Macintosh screen became a desktop, littered with visual representations of physical objects. Gone were the pointless and clickless screens of command-line program code. Instead, one found bitmapped icons of folders that opened, a smiling face when the computer booted up, a frowning one when it didn't, and a cute bomb when it crashed. This iconic vocabulary made unfamiliar technology a little more familiar and a lot more user-friendly (an idea that had previously enjoyed little market value in computing circles).