

July 22, 1996

Salon.com: Digital Culture

By Scott Rosenberg

The image is a screenshot of a web browser window from 1996. The browser's title bar reads "Salon: Interface In Your Face". The address bar shows the URL "http://www.salon.com/weekly/mok960722.html". The browser interface includes standard navigation buttons like "Back", "Forward", "Stop", "Refresh", "Home", "Favorites", "History", "Search", "AutoFill", "Larger", "Smaller", "Print", and "Mail". Below the address bar are several quick-launch icons for services like "Traffic", "Amazon", "Hot! Yahoo!", "Maps", "Nelle Fargo", "Outlook", and "SF Gate: eGuide".

The main content of the page is centered and features a navigation bar with "SALON" and "ARTICLES BY SUBJECT", "ARTICLES BY DATE", and "TABLE TALK". Below this is the section title "DIGITAL CULTURE" and the article title "interface in your face" in red. The author's name "CLEMENT MOK" is displayed in a large, stylized font, with a small portrait of Clement Mok integrated into the letter 'O'. Below the name, the text "TAKES ON THE WEB" is written in spaced-out capital letters. A decorative line of asterisks separates the author's name from the byline "By SCOTT ROSENBERG".

The article text begins with the word "if" in a larger font, followed by a paragraph: "if you work on a personal computer, odds are you use something designed by Clement Mok every day. Mok has left his mark all over today's digital landscape -- from his work with the original Macintosh team helping shape the archetypal graphic interface to his design of the look and feel of the Microsoft Network, from his identity-and-logo crafting for high-tech companies to the royalty-free clip-art images he distributes on his own CD label. Inspired less by traditional artists than by 'information designers' like Nigel Holmes, Edward Tufte and Richard Wurman, Mok brings clarity, order and a dollop of style to the typically confusing and often ugly world of new media."

The browser's status bar at the bottom left shows "Internet zone".

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Interface in your face

Clement Mok takes on the Web

If you work on a personal computer, odds are you use something designed by Clement Mok every day. Mok has left his mark all over today's digital landscape — from his work with the original Macintosh team helping shape the archetypal graphic interface to his design of the look and feel of the Microsoft Network, from his identity-and-logo crafting for high-tech companies to the royalty-free clip-art images he distributes on his own CD label. Inspired less by traditional artists than by "information designers" like Nigel Holmes, Edward Tufte and Richard Wurman, Mok brings clarity, order and a dollop of style to the typically confusing and often ugly world of new media.

In his new book, "Designing Business: Multiple Media, Multiple Disciplines" (Adobe Press, \$60), Mok outlines a view of design that transcends pure aesthetics; to design, according to Mok, is to organize consciously and communicate effectively amid the accelerating chaos of the technological era.

Now Mok is turning his vision toward the Web — a medium distinguished by radical growth and speed but hardly by thoughtful, friendly design. This week, a startup company Mok founded will release NetObjects — a software tool that aims to take Web site design away from the HTML-slingers and put it into the hands of code-shy artists.

Mok aims to make NetObjects a new "benchmark" — the kind of "killer app" that becomes the nucleus for an entire industry. Though he's entering an already crowded field of site-creation tools, the designer's track record lends some credibility to his ambitions. To keep up with a tumultuous industry, Mok has maintained his own company — formerly *Clement Mok Design* and now *Studio Archetype* — in a state of flux. We talked to him in his refreshingly modest office in a penthouse studio on San Francisco's Townsend Street, where he perches in a space-age Herman Miller office chair.

What is NetObjects?

We believe it's the Pagemaker or the Quark of Web site authoring. The NetObjects tool looks at the site very much as a document — as opposed to the notion that a site is a collection of pages inside of folders, the way a lot of the authoring tools out there do.

The big problem that a lot of non-technically oriented people have in designing websites is that, sooner or later, you get tangled up in the file system, whether you're in Unix or Mac or whatever.

We start instead by looking systematically at the information structure: Why is the structure this way? What is it trying to hide? Or can we hide this?

We only generate the HTML documents at the end. But everything prior to "publish" — before we say, we will publish this, or "save this as..." — is really operating at an information-structure level, like "put this picture over here." That's being described as

coordinates and points. This is all the result of the experience of the first round of the desktop publishing revolution. Right now the Web is desktop publishing, the next generation.

I'd think that someone like you would look at today's Web interface, the browser itself, and itch to improve it.

Yes. That's part of the tool, too. NetObjects allows the automated generation of navigation and creation of graphical user interfaces — not only the function but also the look and feel of the buttons and the graphics. We automate that entire process, so people can make those customizations easier and faster.

One of the points you make about the Web in "Designing Business" is that we still haven't agreed on what basic terms like "back" mean: is it back to the last page you were on, or back to the last page a designer designed a sequence for? There's still so much ambiguity.

I'm not sure if I'm adding to the problem or solving the problem, but I am looking at a way at least to create a framework that's consistent. I might not give the user the right options at this point in time — I'm quite cognizant of the fact that I'm not — but what we want to do is at least create a consistent framework to use as a starting point. The fact that there's no starting point is part of the problem.

How did you decide to enter the Web software field?

It started with some work we did for Wells Fargo bank — an online authoring system. We developed the product specification. We're not programmers. But we ended up connecting with a former client of ours to do the implementation. The amazing thing was, when we handed over the specification document, they said, gee, that's really interesting, that's identical to the way we would look at information structure and architecture. So we thought, okay, that's really cool — we're on the same wavelength. And when the metalanguage which described this information structure was then reused for deployment on the Web, that took two weeks. They were able to take fairly complex transactions and interactivity and transport that to Net delivery.

So we spent some time defining the problem: Here's a piece of wonderful technology. Who would use it? Why would anyone use it? How do we harness it? Okay, I've got an idea — why don't we use it so we can simplify the entire authoring process? Now, when half of this studio's volume of work is in Web development, and out of that development, 80 percent is just production, wouldn't it be nice if we could cut that production time way down? So sure enough, in a very short period of time we were able to publicize a demo of the technology to get VC money. This was back in October or November. So when I saw the ability to manage objects that way, I made the connection with "24 Hours in Cyberspace" and their need to publish. We basically used that project as a proof of concept to show that this

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piece of technology is capable of managing information structures and systems.

You titled your book "Designing Business," and NetObjects sounds like the sort of business that was actually "designed." But don't most businesses just grow haphazardly? Or are more business people beginning to think like designers?

The buzzword "reengineering" is inherently about reworking, rethinking and really redesigning. Companies are rethinking not only organizationally, but looking at the premise of why they're in business and what business they're in. So, in the broadest sense, yes, people are thinking that they have to go design it.

But specifically, the act of designing is very foreign to most business people. Most people feel self-deprecating about it. They don't know how it is done — they simply don't feel that they are the experts. In fact, some of them intuitively know what it takes to design a business. They might not know how to draw, though, and they have this fixed notion of what design is.

That it's graphic design.

When in fact you're orchestrating all the components of both the product and communication as well as the perceptions that you want to present.

You've just gone through a redesign here, from Clement Mok Designs to Studio Archetype. So this is something you're practicing yourself.

Practice what you preach — it's very important. Our society and culture are driven primarily on a project-to-project basis; that's how we tend to look at our systems. And business looks at a quarterly basis: let's launch a product, finish it and wrap this quarter up with great, terrific results. The criticism that corporations have taken the short view is probably quite apropos. What I have learned, even in running this business here, is that a business doesn't have a beginning or end. By God, a business better not have an end! Four or five years ago, I realized, OK, Clement, you'd better stop running your business like a project, and look at it as an ongoing thing. That might be a way to pull yourself into the long view.

You write about "The endless distractions that technology spews forth" and how that gets in the way of the long view. Clearly that's accelerating. What can we do to try to stay focused, without missing out on the good distractions?

Bottom line is, it's the discipline to question and constantly re-question your goals and what you want to do. And being somewhat selfish. This studio — not only me, but as a group — is exposed to lots of new options. New companies are always launching new widgets; you can do this even better! And it's scary when you start to believe the press releases. So to be a student of people is going

to help us overcome the technology hype that always tends to give you a nice buzz. Study how people behave around technology — that would be a counterbalance. You become incredibly skeptical. You see a demo, and you think, "Okay, that's good and fast. What would I use it for?" That tends to ground you.

There's an interesting phenomenon I've observed over the past year and a half: clients come to design and consulting firms just to sort of bounce ideas. Because the multimedia industry made so many mistakes in the last round of CD-ROMs and interactive television, in this round, I think, they've stopped believing their own hype, and so they think, maybe we should bounce this idea off someone who might actually use it.

Actual research!

Not a very accurate type of research, because we're all going to have our biases going into it.

In "Designing Business" you say that interface design is more social science than rocket science.

Because there's so many options and so much hype, the tendency is to solve problems in one dimension. We say, okay, this is an interface issue, let's solve it — when in fact it's essentially the same problem manifesting itself differently in different disciplines. A client comes to us and says, we have a user interface problem on a particular project; users don't know that we're the company behind it. Well, that's not a user interface problem, that's an identity problem!

You write a lot about identity design. Coming up here, I had trouble finding your office because you've got no number on the elevator button, just your logo. On the one hand, you succeeded in getting me to learn and remember that that's your logo; but you also bugged me and made me late. So is that a design success or failure?

Before that we had a different company logo, a bear. And we found that it was a great mnemonic device, and always a terrific piece of conversation. That user experience of getting up here was very frustrating for some, but not all; two out of ten would have problems getting here, usually as a result of our not prompting people on the phone in advance. So is that a failure? I don't know. If everything in the world is explicit, there's not a whole lot of room for creativity. But some people would think that making someone go through what you did was horrendous.

Your work is usually characterized by clarity and cleanness, but on the Web today, there's this widespread aesthetic of chaos and deliberate misdirection. Is that native to the medium, or just part of its immaturity?

I think that we're still in the experimental stage right now. Generally, I hate things that I have to spend a lot of time figuring out. At the same time, over these last four or five years working

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with the interactive media, both in CDs and online, I've found that one of the most under-utilized aesthetics is that of randomness. The beauty of interactivity is a certain amount of controlled randomness. Some of the most wonderful design out there is sort of planned randomness, where you can control a certain amount of serendipitous activity as well as serendipitous display of information. You're creating connections that even the creator could not anticipate.

That's a more radical notion of interactivity: rather than seeing chaos as a matter of a crazy look, you're talking about a deeper ceding of some control to the larger Web environment and the people on it.

I still think that we're very primitive at trying to exploit that aspect of the medium itself. We're still bringing our structured biases in the execution. And hopefully we're learning from mistakes over and over again.

You were a creative director at Apple for five years and helped launch the Mac. I see you still have a Mac on your desk.

And a Windows laptop, too.

Apple has taken a lot of blows lately. How much trouble is the Mac in? Do you think it's going to survive?

It will go away if Apple doesn't take care of us. Period.

Who's us?

The creative community. Apple is foolhardy to court the entertainment multimedia industry to do special effects, because there's no way that they can compete with the NTs and the SGIs and the Unix workstations. And here, foolishly, they are going to court the entertainment industry, when the people who are doing publishing and design and advertising and music have supported the product from the get-go. Frankly, I don't think they'll do very well.

The Mac is still the best development tool out there for creation. However, it falls very short as a tool for communication. And the design community has to wake up to the fact that if Apple doesn't support and evolve their technology to connect to the rest of the world, there's a very unpleasant surprise on the way, both for Apple and for people who've invested in the Mac environment. Given Apple's recent inability to deliver product, I'm finding myself for the first time saying, should I hedge my bets?

Hopping to the other side of the fence, your writing about your work on the Microsoft Network suggests a lot of frustration beneath the surface.

Now I'm going to get into trouble with both of them, right?

You write very diplomatically about creating an interface for this network and redesigning it on the fly as Microsoft kept repositioning the whole thing. The Microsoft Network interface still looks pretty nice, but as they move to the Web, it will —

— die as well.

So in this environment, a lot of design work is —

— short-lived. Success and effectiveness is hard to measure. What is design really contributing?

How do you feel about that?

It's always sad when something that you've created has a very short life. But then, you look at a brochure. My god! The life of those brochures is six months? A year? Boy!

So the environment of accelerating novelty —

— makes what we create basically a commodity, really. Yes. And I think that's why we have shifted some of our focus.

One thing that profoundly affected me in how I look at design was my tenure as part of the Mac team. Steve Jobs said, you have this incredible opportunity — you being the Mac team — to be the first to create this experience. By being the first you have the opportunity to set the standard and become the standard. So our orientation is not about what we create, but the process and thinking that what we're creating is a standard. If we accomplish that, and utilize that as our benchmark, and if we create a standard for people, that's a terrific sense of accomplishment.

That's what an archetype is — a kind of initial mold.

That's why I have to do something in software development right now. That's where my head is at right now — because I think I have the ability to shape and define some of what needs to happen there. My joy, and it's not everyone's joy, is to look at where those benchmarks are. That's getting me into very unfamiliar territory, with NetObjects, and Clement Mok CD, where we're about to rejuvenate the line for the Web. Getting into new territories with a design perspective, I learn a lot about the other arenas, and hopefully bring that value back into the design fold.