

By Andrew Marlatt



### Designing for the Information Age

Every new form of media borrows from its predecessors. The Internet has been no exception, employing and experimenting with various elements from print, radio, and television. How closely this emerging medium should resemble traditional media, however, is a question site designers and programmers wrestle with every day.

As chief creative officer of Cambridge, Mass.—based Sapient Corp. and founder of Internet services firm Studio Archetype, Clement Mok has long played a role in influencing the direction of Internet design. A former creative director at Apple Computer, Mok also co founded site authoring tool firm NetObjects and is the author of *Designing Business: Multiple Media, Multiple Disciplines* (MacMillan Computer Publishing, 1996). He also contributes to *Deconstructing Internet World's* weekly column on site design. Studio Archetype whose clients include IBM, Netscape, and the Total Entertainment Network—was bought by Sapient in August

INTERNET WORLD: How have traditional forms of media—books, magazines, newspapers, advertising, television—influenced the presentation of Web content?

CLEMENT MOK: Well, from the very fact that we call them Web "pages," I think we can quickly tell where the influence is coming from.

IW: Did the Web get off to a bad start there? Is "page" psychologically restrictive?

CM: Is there a better word? Screen? I think we are incredibly constrained with language to define what these containers are, and any textual references to them are inherently biased. If you look at any new forms of media in the past, there's always the mimic part, so I think we're still going through a transition phase right now that's neither right nor wrong. "Page" is appropriate in that people are comfortable using it.

IW: Not everyone is comfortable. People often complain that though newspaper sites try to act like traditional newspapers, functionally, they're not. You can't easily turn pages or instantly scan a wide range of stories. What will media sites do to change that?

CM: If you look at the CD-ROM development world, there's a project where IBM and World Book are putting together a reference title where the content viewing environment is not only visually very rich, but provides cues on a single screen. It's basically a single screen interface, so that you touch things and they come up as [daughter] screens or pages with more cues to go to other areas, other windows. So you're not really going from screen to screen—it's a fluid transition, from event to event. With the improvements in streaming data that will come over time, you will get that fluid state, where you're not going from page to page but from event to event within that container.

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IW: Where do you see that evolving?

CM: Everyone says that with set-top boxes, richer media will come, and those of us who've been around long enough and gone through the phase of interactive television say, "Oh yeah, right!" But I think, honestly, in the next four or five years, the set top box will be a reality. Then we will see the more risk-taking companies enhance and add that to part of their content delivery. Microsoft and MSNBC will be a much stronger player in that space. The New York Times and The Wall Street journal are going to be followers.

IW: So broadband is going to move Web media content further away from the print model.

CM: I think things will be presented more like television, more animated, than they currently are. I'm not saying that's good. I'm saying that people are lazy, and those are much easier habits to form. Will it go too far that way and then come back? The tendency will be to just swing everything over and push massive amounts of motion graphics onto the screen whether it's warranted or not. And then the novelty will wear off. We're just going through these cycles.

IW: Do you see the varying styles of TV print, and the Web eventually merging?

CM: They already have. There's a finite set of symbols, colors, and actions [available] to communicate ideas. When we work with our clients to create a set of communications and design a set of product specifications, we are

basically merging these styles, appropriating things from one and incorporating them into another.

IW: When you say finite, "it sounds as though there is a presentation box that's difficult to think outside of.

CM: There is a finite set. Look at story-telling there are seven archetypal forms of storytelling. It's how you go about doing it and combining the forms. Look at story structure-there are thousands of novels out there, and they all combine elements of the same seven forms of information structure.

IW: But have we discovered all the various forms of content delivery on the Web?

CM: No, we haven't, but the structure will remain. Unless we rewire our brains genetically, many of these structures of how we humans receive, understand, and act with information won't change.

IW: In the early 80s, traditionalists didn't like USA Today's TV-inspired layout and style. But readers apparently did, and other papers soon adopted the colorful, compact-story approach. Where have you seen Web design influence traditional forms of media?

CM: The components and elements of a page are being used as a mainstay of many symbols of functionality and sounds. We see that even in the news, where they say, "In the next 15 minutes, we're going to cover these headlines," and you basically see a mouse-over cursor highlighting headlines on the TV screen. [Such

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things] are not borrowed completely, but components of Web attributes are everywhere, if you look really hard.

In print its more subversive, and not as pervasive, because print already has a very structured, formal lexicon to accommodate all the things it needs to do. So when it gets applied in print, it's very cosmetic and superficial, more as a stylistic influence than a structural influence.

IW: Looking at emerging technologies, which will most greatly affect the design of media content sites?

CM: I'm excited about XML, like everyone else, but the question is, who's going to make that investment to do all that tagging? It's unlikely publishing companies will look at that and take advantage of XML at this point. I think it's going to be the companies that don't have any investment to protect, the new startups. They will provide information and services that will challenge the established players. That will happen first in the vertical markets and vertical industries, in businesses like real estate, insurance, and health care.

IW: What do you think Web users want from media content sites that they're not getting?

CM: How to use the information. Look at Weather.com. The premise is pretty interesting, but the granularity of information is not very useful. It's like, "OK, the weather in the Bay Area is sunny and cloudy." It's not unlike how television delivers information. And there are things on the site that give me the illusion that I have more information, like the Doppler report, which is about precipitation. So I say, "OK, let's see if I need to bring an umbrella." I go into the Doppler report, bring up a map, and I don't know what to do with it. Where they can help is help me understand what that Doppler report is and help me interpret the data. That's missing in many sites out there. The better media and news content sites don't need to facilitate that, but many sites that supposedly provide me with information-they're not providing me with information, they're providing me with data.

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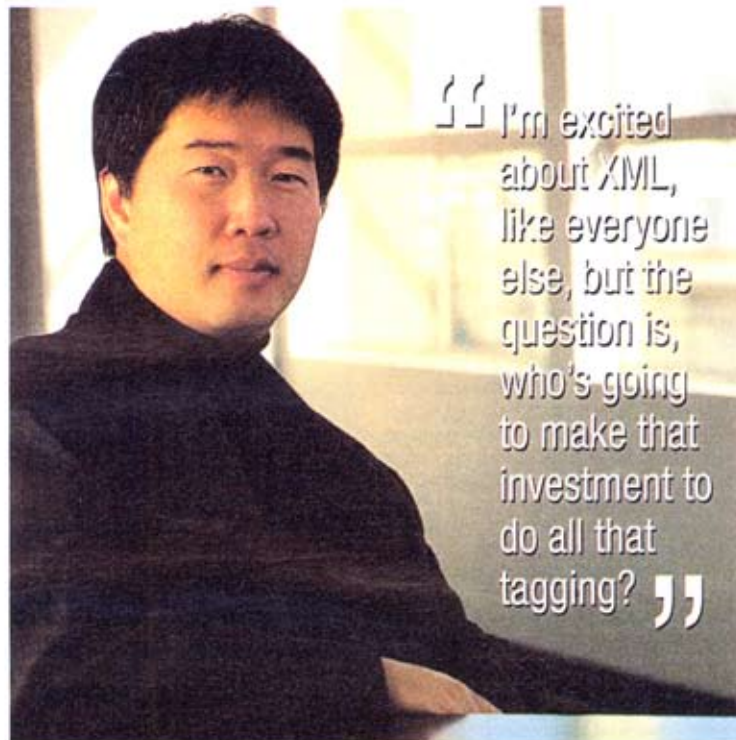
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