Where Am I? Navigation & Interface

"I Left my baby daughter in the car while I went to buy dope. Then I drove away. I'd gone about five blocks when I realized my daughter wasn't in the car any more."

So begins a brief personal narrative that fills most of the screen of a web page. At the conclusion of this woeful tale, we see a link or button labeled More Stories. We are likely to click it.

Before doing so, we notice that a small Narcotics Anonymous logo appears in the upper left area of the screen and that four menu items appear in a column on the right. The Face of Addiction, reads one. There Is a Solution, reads another. Meetings, says a third, and Membership, reads the fourth.

Meetings takes us to a map of the United States. Clicking any city takes us to a schedule of Narcotics Anonymous meetings in that city. The Narcotics Anonymous logo, consistently placed at the upper left of every screen on the site, takes us back to the first page, with its riveting personal narrative and easily understood menu structure. Perhaps when we return to the home page we are served a different personal story. This story may be a bit longer than the first we encountered. After all, our attention is now engaged because we have committed at least a few minutes of our time to the site. At this point we are ready to involve ourselves with a slightly more elaborate narrative.

This is one possible interface for the home page of Narcotics Anonymous, a 12-Step program that helps addicts recover, one day at a time. Recovery begins by facing the problem and telling the truth about one's life—however painful that truth may be. The honesty of these stories enables the storyteller to get well and his listeners to identify with the problem his story demonstrates. The prototype web interface parallels this process because the designers have done their homework and found out how the "product" (Narcotics Anonymous) actually works.

WHAT COLOR IS YOUR CONCEPT?

Notice that we have not said a word about graphic design, typography, or technology. We are simply examining a prototype whose purpose is to immediately engage readers in the site's drama and promise. The site achieves this by plunging the reader into content (but not too much content) and by supporting that content with a quickly comprehensible menu structure, as well as a linear method of reading on (More Stories).

This simple site architecture, with its emphasis on human interest, provides an immediate way for addicts to identify with an anonymous speaker and thus begin to admit that they suffer from the same problem. It helps the loved ones of addicts to recognize their husbands and wives as addicts and start to understand why Harry or Sally is "that way." The site does not preach, nor does it overwhelm visitors with too much initial detail. Its careful structure engages the minds of a specific audience and allows them to get whatever level of support they need.

Every site should be this effective, whether it offers help for personal problems or half-price airfare. Every site should immediately engage its intended audience with compelling content that invites exploration. A web designer's first job is to find the heart of the matter: the concept. The second job is to ensure that readers understand it too. That is the purpose of architecture and navigation.

BUSINESS AS (CRUEL AND) USUAL

How would ineffective web designers and clients approach the Narcotics Anonymous project? It wouldn't be by providing immediately engaging content, nor by offering a streamlined menu with both global and linear functionality. They would likely present a standard menu bar with five to ten choices, a tedious welcome message, stock photos of smiling families implicitly representing addicts in recovery (at least, in the designer's mind), and overtly commercial tie-ins to an online retailer selling self-help books.

The interior of the site might offer similar content to that contained in our imaginary prototype, but the content would be buried several layers down in the site's hierarchy, where only the most dedicated would stand a chance of finding it. Instead of capturing and presenting the essence of the client's message, the site would merely mimic the boring "professional" surface appearance of thousands of other sites. Instead of potentially saving lives, the site would merely be one more roadblock in an addict's troubled life.

How would cutting-edge web shops approach the project? Possibly by creating a 250K introductory Flash movie featuring a spinning hypodermic needle. The needle might morph into a rotating navigational device. Or it might fill with blood that drips to form letters spelling out some horrific statistic on the mortality rate of drug addicts. Such a site might win awards in a graphic design showcase, but it would not help a soul.

In all probability, the Narcotics Anonymous organization would never commission a site like any of these, nor would we expect many drug addicts to go online in search of help. We've chosen this example because it quickly dramatizes the difference between effective and ineffective web design. In the case of Narcotics Anonymous, it could mean the difference between life and death. But this is equally true for any business or organization that requires an online identity—except that what's at stake is not the reader's life, but the survival of the business itself. Sites with strong concepts and solid, intuitive architecture will live. Sites lacking those things will die.

Web design is communication. It says specific things to specific people. It does this by offering meaningful content in the context of focused digital architecture. Navigation and interface are the doors to that architecture.

In a consumer society, communication is a function of time. Traditional designers and art directors are trained in the art of instant communication. They understand that consumers make split-second decisions based on emotional responses to visual information. Which toothpaste gets tossed into the shopping cart? A stripe of color may make one dentifrice appear more clinically effective than its competitor. Which paperback is bought in the airport bookstore? Color and typography make one book leap off the shelves while another is ignored. Which of a thousand billboard messages is remembered? The one with the smart line of copy and complementary image lingers in the mind.

When traditional designers and art directors take their talent to the Web, their consummate understanding of the power of the image would seem to position them as the ideal architects of the sites they design. After all, who knows better how to focus and deliver the appropriate message before the consumer has time to click the browser's Back button? In good shops, skilled web designers are empowered to do what they do best, but this is not the case in every web agency. Some shops constrict the designer's abilities by forcing her into a more limited role.

The Rise of the Interface Department

Traditional designers and art directors work in Design Departments and Creative Departments. The existence of these departments indicates the importance traditional media businesses place upon design—and rightly so. In such businesses, designers play an essential role in the formation of concepts and images that convey brand attributes and communicate meaningful intellectual and emotional propositions.

Sadly, many otherwise savvy web agencies do not have Creative or Design Departments at all. Nor do creative directors or lead designers show up often enough on some of these companies' organizational charts. What they frequently have instead are Interface Departments, implicitly or explicitly staffed by "interface designers." This departmental label trivializes and may even constrict the web designer's potential usefulness as brand steward, conceptualist, structural architect, and user advocate.

When a web designer is reduced to the handwork of graphic design, somebody else determines the overall focus and architecture of the site. Nevertheless, the rise of the Interface Department is telling because it underlines the supreme importance of interface design to web development.

Designing interfaces is only part of a web designer's job in the same way that working with actors is only part of a movie director's job. A director who can't work with actors will make a lousy movie, and a web designer who can't devise the most communicative interface for each particular site will serve up mediocrity. Websites provide content; interfaces provide context. Good interfaces support the visitor's (and client's) goals by visually and structurally answering two urgent questions:

1. **What is this?** What kind of site is this? What is its purpose? What messages are being conveyed or services offered? For whom is this site intended? If it's intended for me, does it offer the product or information I've been seeking, or is it all show and no substance?

2. **Where am I?** What kind of space is this? How does it work? Can I find what I need? If so, can I find it quickly? If I take a wrong turn, can I find my way back?

When a web designer fully understands the nature of the product or service, as in the example of the Narcotics Anonymous prototype above, then content and context, meaning and architecture, are one. Not only does the Narcotics Anonymous prototype quickly reveal the site's purpose by emphasizing appropriate text, it also understands and fulfills its potential viewer's gut-level needs by functioning simply and transparently. A wife who fears her husband is becoming an addict does not have time to waste. If the site confuses her, she's gone.

When a web designer does not fully understand the nature of the product or service—or understands but is not empowered to act upon that understanding—we get sites that excite and engage no one. Or we get potentially engaging sites that confuse and estrange the very people they worked so hard to attract.

There are too many such sites on the Web. What businesses must understand is that vague, non-engaging interfaces are a death sentence because they alienate potential readers, members, or customers rather than reassuring them that they've come to the right place. Good web design plunges the visitor into the exact content appropriate for the most efficient (and personal) use of the site and continues to guide him or her through each new interaction.

Movies immediately plunge a protagonist (and the audience) into conflict and action. Entertainment sites can work the same way.

Newspapers carry many stories but call the reader's attention to the most important ones. Content sites can work the same way.

Stores sell many products, but special displays on featured products arrest shoppers' attention as they enter. Commercial sites can work the same way.

FORM AND FUNCTION

Effective interfaces not only lead visitors to the content but also underscore its meaning, just as chapter divisions underscore the meaning of a book's content. Without usable, intuitive interfaces, websites might as well offer no content at all—because no visitor will be able to find it.

At their most basic level, web interfaces include navigational elements such as menu bars, feedback mechanisms such as interactive forms and buttons, and components that guide the visitor's interaction with the site such as magnifying glass icons and left or right arrows. Tired interfaces offer exhausted metaphors such as the ubiquitous folder tab and the heinous beveled push-button. Better interfaces are uniquely branded and help reinforce the site's thematic concerns (see Figure 3.1).

The Mary Quant site is a study in quick visitor orientation and structurally grounded design. the dominant but fast-loading photograph telegraphs "1960s" and "mini-skirt," which are the essence of fashion designer Mary Quant's legacy. The flower motif reinforces the 1960s theme as well as Quant's identity. A large flower fills in the space behind appropriately minimal text content; this is a fashion site, not a Ph.D. dissertation. Smaller flowers brand the five simple structural divisions: History, Makeup, Press Office, Shops, and Homepage.

The Mary Quant site—the perfect combination of solid design and ease of use (www.maryquant.co.uk).

The History label is faded to reinforce the visitor's position within the site's hierarchy. The Previous and Next buttons are placed left and right where a western audience would expect them and where even non-English speakers (at least those who read from left to right) will likely understand what these buttons do.

Although this is a fashion site, its structure is nearly identical to that sketched out in our imaginary Narcotics Anonymous prototype. The Previous and Next buttons provide linear navigation. Menu icons let the visitor jump from section to section. Engaging visual and text content match the desires of the intended audience.

Sophisticated interfaces work on multiple levels. On a well-made catalog site, not only will visitors find a main navigation bar, they also will be guided by contextual, user-driven navigational elements throughout the page. Both the photograph and the text description of a blue parka can serve as links to more detailed photographs and information or to an order form. The product photo caption may include a link to More Items Like This One, initiating a new and more focused search. Navigation does not live by menu bars alone.
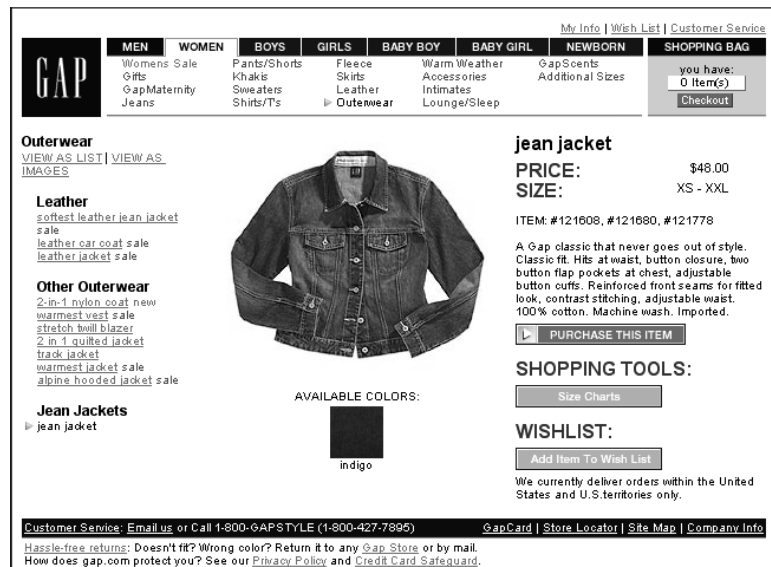
Figure 3.2

Multi-level navigation in action: the Gap site presents visitors with an overall menu bar but does not limit them to it. Clicking the model's photograph...

Figure 3.3

...links the visitor to a page displaying the jacket the model is wearing, along with relevant text information and the opportunity to buy the item (www.gap.com).

COPYCATS AND PSEUDO-SCIENTISTS

A site's navigational interface is the leading edge of the visitor's experience. It facilitates human needs or thwarts them. If it is not intuitive, it is useless. One reason we have so many unimaginative interfaces (visual Muzak) is because their familiarity makes them appear intuitive, and they therefore survive the pre-launch "user testing" phase.

For several years, nearly all sites offered left-hand navigation (menu items on the left side of the web page, content on the right). Was left-hand navigation easier to use or understand than any other configuration? No. In fact, some studies suggested that navigation worked better on the right. Navigation cropped up on the left because it was easier for web designers and developers to create HTML that way—and later, it was easier to control <FRAMES> that way.

Because it was easier to program, a few large sites such as CNET.com began offering left-hand navigation. Since CNET.com was a successful site, unimaginative web agencies copied its interface in hopes that CNET's success would somehow rub off on them. With so many sites engaging in this practice, consumers got used to it. Thus, in unsophisticated user acceptance testing, left-hand navigation was considered "intuitive" because consumers were accustomed to seeing it—not because it had any intuitive advantages on its own. The "folder tabs" metaphor used at Amazon.com has been copied for the same reasons. Every Nike spawns a thousand swooshes; every successful site with a particular stylistic flourish leaves a hundred thousand imitators in its wake. Bad processes encourage bad design.

There are good marketers and there are dolts in suits. Similarly, there is good user acceptance testing and there is worthless pseudo-science that promotes banality. Unfortunately, worthless pseudo-science is as easy to sell to web agency CEOs as it is to clients. It's hard to tell until you're actually working at a web agency whether its testing practices are informative or a shortcut to Hell. An engaged and thoughtful web designer will develop and fight for the best navigational structure for each site, knowing that each site is unique because its content and audience are unique.

Figure 3.4

Ye Olde Left-Hand Nav Bar in action, seen here on the Winter 2000 edition of Icon Factory, creators of free, funky Mac desktop icons since 1995 (www.iconfactory.com). The left side is no better or worse than any other menu placement. But for several years, nearly all sites stuck their menus on the left because, well, nearly all sites stuck their menus on the left. Most left-hand navigation bars are nowhere near as cute 'n cuddly as Icon Factory's.
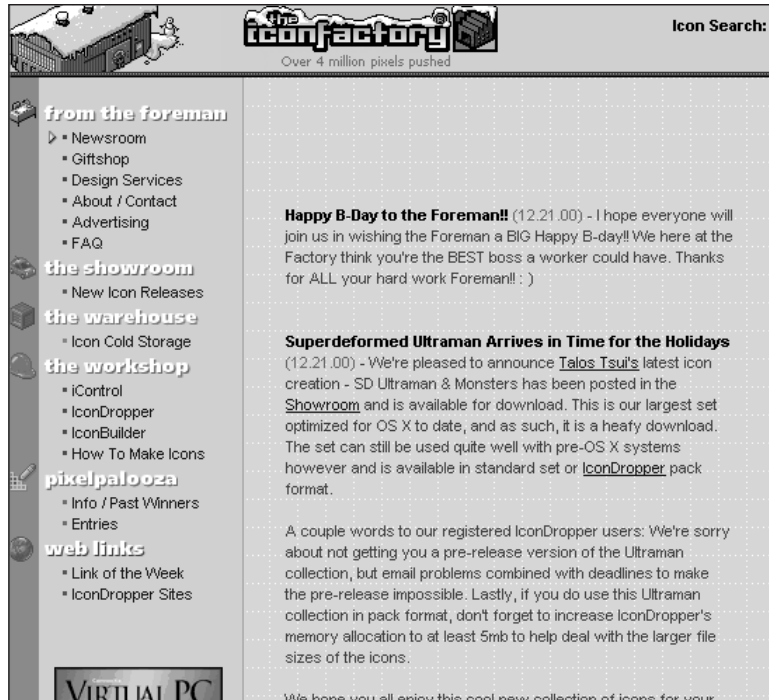
CHAOS AND CLARITY

Beyond providing access to and subtly reinforcing a site's content, the interface also enables people to engage in interactive behaviors, such as shopping and searching. Or it frustrates them and sends them scurrying to a competitor's site, as in Figure 3.5, where clutter and lack of differentiation create chaos rather than a satisfying user experience. Sites of this nature, if they do not die immediately, persist in spite and not because of their architecture. They survive by offering something of value to those who are willing to overlook the experience's deficiencies. With better architecture they would attract more customers.
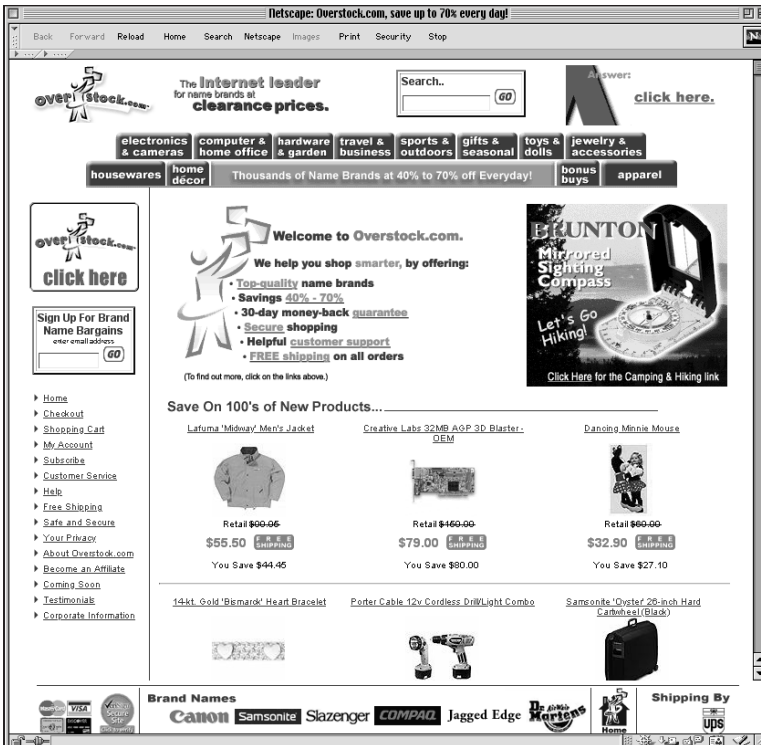
Where do I go from here?
Most likely, my browser's
Back button. Busy inter-
faces bore or confuse
all but the most die-
hard bargain seeker
(www.overstock.com).

We once inherited an entertainment site that worked only on one platform and one browser (no names, please). Our client pointed out that he was getting four million visits a month. We replied that he was cheating himself out of an additional million visitors. Similarly, the owners of cluttered and confusing sites frequently mistake a profit margin for success. Better user experiences mean bigger profits, which is the best way to sell them to clients whose sole concern is money.

Clients are not alone in sometimes forgetting that sites are created to serve human needs. Web designers also can lose sight of their work's primary objective.

A Design Koan: Interfaces Are a Means too Often Mistaken for an End

As web designers become expert at crafting more and more sophisticated navigational structures, we sometimes forget that our interfaces do not come into being for their own sake. Interfaces are built to serve the user, not to demonstrate our cleverness and technical mastery (unless cleverness and technical mastery are an essential part of the brand). The best design may go unnoticed by users, but Heaven is watching and you will get your reward.

Universal Body Copy and Other Fictions

Good copy comes from the product; good interfaces come from considering the particular audience, content, and brand attributes of each site. When navigation anticipates the visitor's needs and guides her through the site, it succeeds at the baseline level. When it does this in a fresh and brand-appropriate manner, it succeeds as effective web design.

In this sense, web design is no different from advertising, print, or product design. At the lowest level, an advertisement's text must be grammatical, and its presentation must be legible. At the highest levels, design and concept are indistinguishable from the product experience. (Many would say they *are* the product experience.)

Impeccable graphic design does not necessarily equate to good interface design. As suggested by the design koan above, a site that looks drop-dead gorgeous but confuses visitors is a site that fails.

At the turn of the Millennium, several high-stakes web businesses went under because they forgot that their interfaces were supposed to be used by human beings. Looking at comps and demos, the board members said, "Oooo-Ahhh!" But when attempting to navigate the completed sites, the public went, "Huh?" The public is the final court of appeals.

There were other reasons a number of web businesses failed in late 1999 and early 2000. Some businesses that served no earthly purpose and appealed to no imaginable audience managed to suck up venture capital anyway—until the investors woke up. But many sites with legitimate business models bit the dust when it was discovered that nobody could navigate them except, perhaps, the designers.

Each site speaks to a particular demographic. A site that is "everybody's friend" is nobody's *best* friend. Focused, usable, brand-supportive interfaces are as particular as the taste of a fresh-picked plum on a summer's day.

While great web design, like all great design, is specific in nature, web design (like all design) has developed a series of guidelines and best practices that can aid you as you begin to shape your own sites. Some of these practices are rooted in common sense, others in human interface guidelines developed during the personal computer revolution of the 1980s. We will examine these guidelines in the following sections, bearing in mind that they are suggestions, not rules.

Interface as Architecture

Navigation is the experiential architecture of a site. Web designers use consistent visual cues to guide visitors through the site, as an architect guides a building's visitors from the lobby to the elevator bank. Subtle visual hints cue a building's visitors as to which areas of an office are open to the public, and which are private. Folks can find their way to a bathroom or a public telephone without asking for help. The goal of a navigational interface, like the goal of real-world architecture, is to enable people to do what they need to do.

As you develop web interfaces, ask yourself if you're helping people find the site's offices, elevators, and bathrooms or leaving them to fend for themselves. Poorly structured buildings win few tenants; poorly structured sites win few repeat visitors.

TEN (OKAY, THREE) POINTS OF LIGHT

In her book, *Web Navigation: Designing the User Experience* (available at www.oreilly.com/catalog/navigation/), Jennifer Fleming describes ten qualities shared by successful navigational interfaces. Fleming's ten points defy quick summarization, so we'll settle for three of them. In Fleming's view, good interfaces should:

1. Be easily learned

2. Remain consistent

3. Continually provide feedback

Be Easily Learned

A designer who buys Adobe Illustrator will accept the product's learning curve; an online shopper will not invest the same kind of energy into figuring out how www.halfpricefurniture.com works. Overly complex interfaces may please the designer who came up with them, but they rarely win favor with those trying to find their way through the site.

Why do most of us hate the remotes that come with our TVs and VCRs? Because there are too many buttons to push, and there is rarely an intuitive logic to the placement and size relationships of these buttons. We are always hunting for the button that resets the clock or programs the channels (and discovering that this function actually lies buried deep in a series of onscreen menus). We approach even the most basic tasks with the sense that we are somehow being forced to prove our mastery over a troublesome object.

Unless we wish to watch one TV channel for the rest of our lives, we have no choice but to click our way through the madness. But web users always have a choice—they can visit a website that is easier to use.

Remain Consistent

Each site presents the visitor with a unique interface. Compelling content or useful services are the only reason users bother learning how your site works. After they've gone to that trouble, they will not appreciate your changing the interface, misguidedly groping after "freshness."

Web users are not mind readers. After they've learned that flowers serve as visual links (as in Figure 3.1), you'd be foolish to switch to a folder tab metaphor. If there are five main menu items per page, suddenly adding a sixth and seventh at the same hierarchical level could make naïve web users think they've somehow linked to an unrelated site. Sophisticated users will think the site is being redesigned, and they've somehow caught you in mid-process.

Many times beginning web designers feel that each section of a site requires its own distinctive signature. It usually makes more sense to provide a consistent interface, acknowledging the new section (if at all) with a subtle color change or a simple section title.
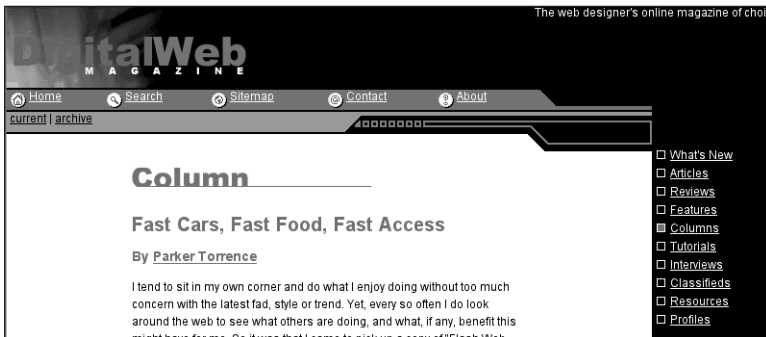

Figure 3.6

Digital Web Magazine, a popular online resource for web designers, offers a consistent interface between sections...
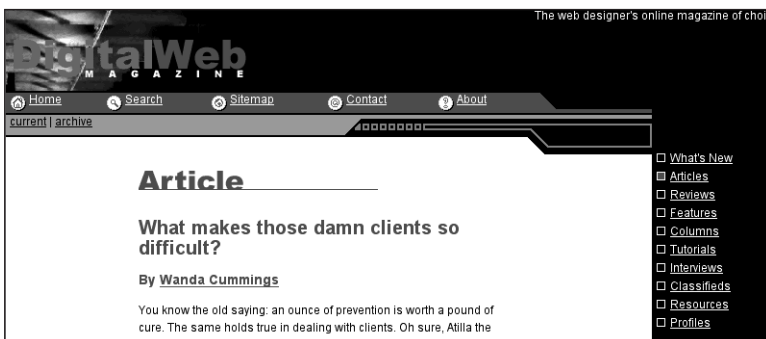

Figure 3.7

...but differentiates each section with a subtle color change. Because you can't tell that the color is changing with the color scheme of this book, you'll have to visit the site and see for yourself (www.digital-web.com).

Continually Provide Feedback

In Chapter 2, "Designing for the Medium," we remarked on the "look and feel" issue and discussed a major difference between print and the Web. On the computer screen, there are no matte or glossy papers, no subtly textured finishes, no chance for the designer to emboss or overprint to achieve a richer look.

But what we lack in ink and paper choices, we make up for with an almost limitless variety of interactive options. On the Web, the images we create can respond to the visitor's virtual touch. This not only adds richness to our design; it helps the visitor comprehend the interface.

In the real world, buzzers buzz and doorknobs turn. Good web design mimics this kind of feedback, using techniques such as the JavaScript rollover (*image swap*) to create a sense that the site is responding to the visitor's actions.

Such digital responsiveness is nothing new. It began with the desktop computer revolution and specifically with the Apple Macintosh Graphical User Interface (GUI).

GUI, GUI, Chewy, Chewy

A website's GUI includes all its non-text visual elements. The GUI allows users to perform actions by interacting visually with the various graphical elements. Familiar GUI elements from the Macintosh Operating System include file and folder icons, scroll bars, and the Apple Menu. Windows has its own unique GUI with elements such as the Task Bar and Start Menu.

If you were still awake a few paragraphs above when we made the big stink about consistency, hold your nose 'cause here we go again. Logic and consistency are two reasons that Windows, Mac OS, and other UI-based computing systems are more popular than command-line interfaces. GUIs succeed by being clear (users don't wonder what a certain button does) and remaining consistent (if the File menu is on the left, it stays on the left). Because your visitors are using a computer to view your site, they expect such consistency.

It is worth studying existing GUIs (such as Mac OS and Windows) to figure out what their conventions are and why they work. If your GUI works in similar ways, you are that much less likely to baffle your audience.
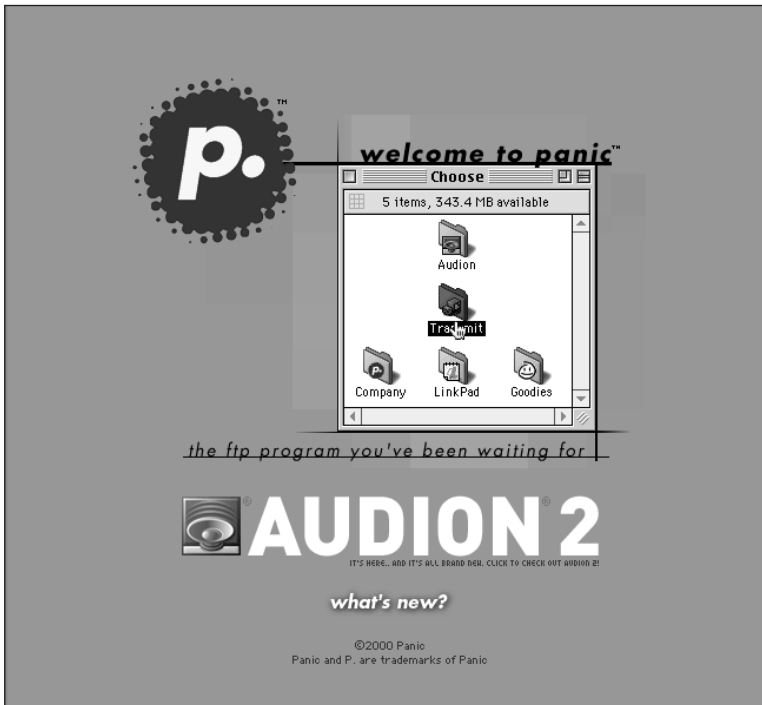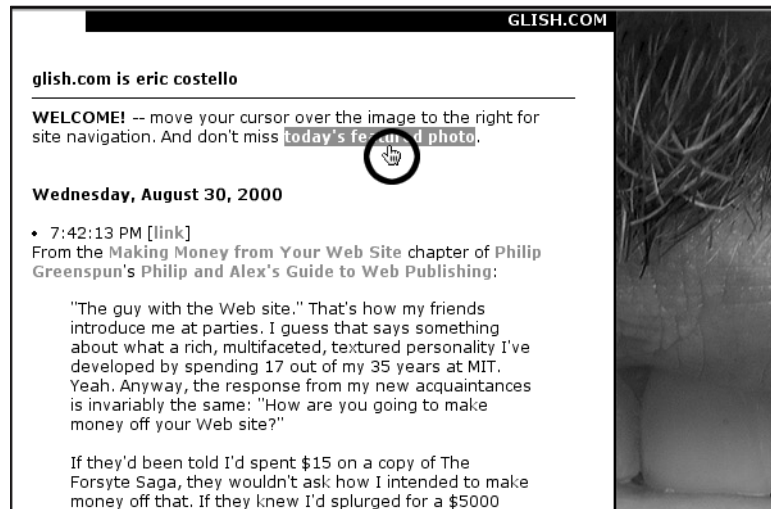
It's the Browser, Stupid

On the Web, the browser predetermines many elements of the GUI. For instance, in nearly all browsers, dragging a mouse cursor over a live link causes the cursor to change from an arrow to an upraised hand. These browser-based conventions help web users make sense of sites. Folks rely on these elements to understand what is happening without having to learn an entirely new set of conventions each time they load a new URL.

Web designers can change or override these conventions—for instance, by using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to place a hand cursor over plain text rather than live links—but it is rarely desirable to do so unless your goal is to confuse your visitors. There are sites, such as www.jodi.org and www.superbad.com, whose purpose is just that. These fall under the heading of fine art, and many web designers adore them. Even if they're not to your taste, you can learn a great deal about web users' expectations by studying the way these sites subvert them. On most sites, though, confusing visitors is usually not among the client's objectives.

Though the browser creates many GUI elements (underlined links, changes to the cursor state), the rest is up to the designer. Indeed, in a graphical browser, one could consider commercial sites custom GUIs whose purpose is to enable visitors to perform tasks while subliminally absorbing the client's brand.

Figure 3.9

Visitors know what this cursor change means (www.glish.com).

CLARITY BEGINS AT HOME (PAGE)

In developing GUI elements, web designers will frequently begin with the brand: funky elements for an entertainment site pitched at 20-somethings; somber, restrained elements for a news or medical site; and so on (more about branding in a moment). As each site presents a visitor with new GUI elements, those elements have the potential to brand the site while offering visitors a sense of identity and place. These elements also have the potential to confuse the heck out of people. As with the operating systems they mimic, GUI elements should be as clear and easy to use as possible. Clarity and ease of use are especially crucial factors in the development of iconic interface elements and site structure labels.

I Think Icon, I Think Icon

Graphical devices (icons) guide viewers through the site experience. Forward and reverse arrows are common ways of navigating from page to page. Graphical buttons are often used to trigger certain actions. For instance, a Play button may be used to trigger a recorded sound or an embedded, streaming QuickTime movie. A pen or pencil icon may link to a message board, or a book or newspaper icon can guide the visitor to a downloadable, printer-friendly version of the page's content.

Printing in the Browser Wars

Why aren't web pages themselves printer-friendly? It is because too often browsers are rushed into production as the latest assault in the "Browser Wars," instead of offering carefully considered and usable features. By the time this book is released, the worst of the Browser Wars will be behind us.

Icons, with or without text labels, frequently serve as quick, visual cues to the site's offerings. They also support international visitors for whom English is not a first language. Sites with massive amounts of content on their home pages, such as portals and magazine sites, can use icons to better organize and clarify sections (see Figures 3.11 and 3.12).

Figure 3.11

The icons seen here help draw the eye to the secondary menu, and some of them even communicate in ways a non-English speaking visitor might understand. Designing icons that communicate is difficult. Competing elements must fit within the narrow width of a lowest-common-denominator monitor, leaving little room in which to develop legible imagery (www.eloquent.com).

Figure 3.12

We are clearly in the land of the recreational web-site, as denoted by the tagline "professional martini consumer." Few sites would devote all that screen space to a menu structure. Indeed, this site recently went offline for a redesign (www.drymartini.com).

On the Web, as in talking to a policeman, clarity is a virtue. While it is tempting to get really creative with such elements, the most creative solutions are often the clearest.

Say you are designing a site for a chain of Wild West theme hotels. In visiting the hotels and studying the chain's promotional brochures and advertising, you can't miss the fact that Western paraphernalia is used to brand the franchise—from the bronze horse-head coat hooks in guest closets to the cowhide couches in the lobby. Thinking like a brand steward, you decide it might be fun to use lassos rather than arrows to indicate "previous page" and "next page" on the site. To you, as a visual person, it is readily apparent that the rope at the edge of the lasso "points" forward or backward.

Well, cowboy, test that design on some users before you fight for it. If users are confused by your branded iconic elements—if the lassos strike users as meaningless ornamentation rather than functional GUI elements—be prepared to rustle up some traditional left and right arrows, even if it chaps your spurs.

Adding "invisible" text labels to an icon via the <ALT> attribute of the HTML image tag or the <TITLE> attribute of a linked image can help explain the icon's purpose to inexperienced users. In modern graphical browsers, these <ALT> and <TITLE> attributes generate popup "tool tips" or help-balloon-style blurbs, enhancing the page's interactivity in a meaningful and user-friendly way.

Such tags also make the content more accessible to the visually disabled, to those using non-graphical browsers or Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) such as the Palm Pilot, and to folks using conventional browsers who surf with images turned off. (As mentioned in Chapter 2, accessibility makes good business and moral sense. Besides, it's U.S. law.)

When invisible text labels are not enough, consider adding visible text.

Structural Labels: Folding the Director's Chair

In the early days of the Web, designers and copywriters frequently had fun coming up with creative labels for menu bar sections and other navigational items. For instance, the home page of a video editing company's site might be labeled "The Director's Chair," while downloadable video clips would be found in "The Screening Room."

Today, most web agencies find it better to err on the side of clear copy than cute copy. After all, if the visitor does not immediately grasp what "The Screening Room" means, she could leave the site without having discovered one of its most important content areas. While alternatives to traditional labeling may be appropriate for some types of sites (gaming sites, fun sites for kids), many corporate sites depend on such traditional labels as Home, About, and Clients to facilitate easy user navigation. Dull as dishwater, we know. *Be creative clearly,* and it need not be dull at all.

The Soul of Brevity

Back in Chapter 2 we recalled David Siegel's three hallmarks of good website design:

- Clarity
- Brevity
- Bandwidth

Because most web users have little time and less bandwidth to waste, good interfaces are rarely overwrought. Given the choice between a simple, functional design and one that is ornate, most folks prefer the simple web layout that loads quickly and is easy to understand. Web users don't tell you this by peering over your shoulder; they tell you this by visiting the site or neglecting it.

Even when bandwidth is not an issue, quick, clear communication always will be. Users lucky enough to have T3, cable modem, or DSL access may not be slowed down by a cluttered interface, but they will be just as baffled by it as dialup modem users are. Regardless of the user's access speed, your communication must be fast and clear, or users will retreat faster than you can say "failed dot com." It's a peanut butter and jelly scenario: By focusing on functionality, you will develop low bandwidth interfaces; by focusing on bandwidth, you will develop interfaces that speak quickly and clearly.

Many web designers initially feel constrained by this. Some feel they cannot truly express their vision unless every page sports a 128K background JPEG, an animated menu bar, and a series of spinning logos and pulsing photographs. We've all had that feeling. It passes as you discover the joy of communicating richly while using a few elements well, or it never passes, and you locate clients with tastes as baroque as yours. When citizens avoid visiting the resulting sites, your client and you can toast your superiority to the rest of humanity and then hurry on to the next failure.

When bad web designers die and go to Hell, they will spend eternity searching for the Heaven option on an endless menu bar of purgatories. (That is, if they're not simply stuck waiting for an infernal intro to finish downloading.)

Hypertext or Hapless Text

Brevity is just as important when putting text content on the Web. A book is easy to read. Hundreds of years of book design make it so. But on a glaring computer screen, at 72ppi (pixels per inch) or 96ppi, reading long passages is a chore. A reader will simply skip lengthy texts, whether they're providing valuable product information or explaining how to use some advanced feature of the site.

By breaking text down into usable sub-units of information, a web designer can help readers find critical information and more easily absorb content. White space, while useful in print, becomes even more crucial on a web page. The logical separation of chunks of information helps engage readers and maintain their interest. Designers can use paragraphs, section breaks, and links to new pages to chunk information.

The more white space, the greater the chance that readers will remain engaged. Use CSS by itself or in combination with table-based layouts to create pages that demand to be read.

Figure 3.13

Readable typography, an elegantly spare layout, and plenty of white space add up to a site that welcomes readers—a quality that is depressingly rare on the Web (www.harrumph.com). Contrast this with Figure 3.15.

In print, a designer might include ten sentences in a paragraph. On the Web, with its scrolling interface, ten sentences can feel like a life sentence. To enhance readability, web designers (or web designers in combination with web-savvy copywriters and editors) will separate one long paragraph into several shorter ones.

Learn when to stop one page and start another. Despite what some pundits tell you, readers *will* scroll to read an engaging story, but they will not scroll forever. After two or three screens, it may be time to present the

reader with an arrow (or other page indicator) allowing them to move on to the next page of text. Doing so can relieve eye fatigue, enhance the drama of the presentation (www.fray.com), or simply give your client another page on which to sell ad banners.

Remember in Chapter 2 when we talked about the tradeoff between one large image that takes a long time to download and many small images that take a long time to display? (If this were a web page, we'd provide a link here.) Well, the same kind of tradeoff goes on with text. Jam too much of it on a single web page, and readers may be frightened away. Provide too little, forcing the reader to click to a new screen after every paragraph or two, and you practically guarantee that no one will read to the end of the article or story.

Working with client-supplied text is particularly tricky. If average citizens are bad writers, clients are bad writers with egos. Upper Middle Managers would rather *add value to cross-brand synergies while enhancing the functionality of strategically targeted product from the dairy side* than put milk in their coffee. Rare is the client who writes the way people talk; rarer still is the client who uses few words when many will suffice.

In brochures and catalogs, such copy is ineffective. On a web page, it's destructive on a nuclear scale. Consumers may ignore bad catalog copy if the layout and photography are compelling enough. But a site laden with vast blocks of ham-handed text is doomed. No visitor will stay long enough or scroll far enough to discover the million dollar photographs or compelling brand proposition buried on page three.

Laid out well (via text chunking and CSS), bad text can squeak by. Laid out badly, it kills websites dead. We cannot overemphasize the impact (and tragic rarity) of good writing on the Web nor the harm done by verbose and inexpressive texts, drizzled into layouts like so much phlegm. Learn web typography, practice text chunking, and work with good writers and editors. Do not let your clients or your project managers skimp on the writing budget unless you find failure exciting.

Figure 3.14

The front page of Sapient.com (www.sapient.com), a leading web agency, shows mastery and promise. Clean typography and high-quality photography, balanced as skillfully as in a classic Ogilvie print ad, direct the visitor's attention to the most important content. The carefully balanced page also makes use of Liquid Design (see Chapter 2) to accommodate variously sized monitors. So far, so good....

Figure 3.15

...Alas, once past the front page, visitors encounter too many pages like this one, where blocks of undifferentiated text, laid out with little care and no love, beg to be ignored rather than read. Since 99% of the Web consists of text that is intended to be read, the lack of attention to good textual presentation is tragic—hurting not only the site owner, but the would-be reader. Contrast this with Figure 3.13. (www.sapient.com).
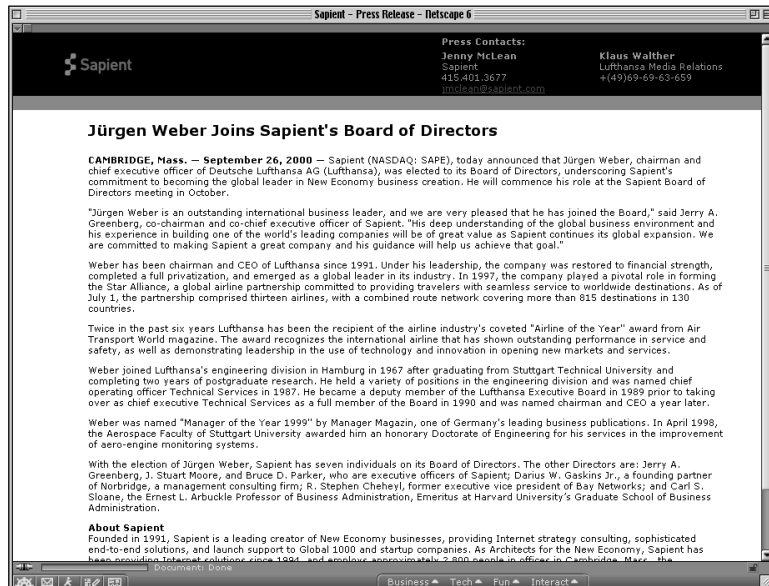
Scrolling and Clicking Along

Some "experts" will inform you that users don't click. They also will inform you that users don't scroll. If users never clicked or scrolled, nobody would actually be using the Web. Of course users click. (How else would they link from page to page?) Of course users scroll. (How else would they, uh, scroll?)

Nobody clicks more than they *have to*—hence the so-called "Three-Click Rule," described later. And nobody scrolls for fun and profit. Visit an amateur home page and see how excessive scrolling drags its nails across the blackboard of the user's experience.

The previous section, "Hypertext or Hapless Text," discussed text chunking and offered methods to keep scrolling to a minimum, but this does not mean that every web page should be limited to one or two paragraphs of text. Particularly when presenting in-depth articles online, text chunking has its limits. Users would probably rather scroll through five longish pages of text than click through 25 short screens that present the same information. Develop a case-by-case, site-by-site sense for these nuances, and you will find your skills in demand.

Every newspaper is designed so that the most important headlines, photographs, and stories appear "above the fold" (where the paper naturally folds in half). As shown in Chapter 2, vital information is best served in this small space above the fold. When links to the site's most important content appear within the first 380 pixels of vertical space, even visitors saddled with small monitors can find what they seek without scrolling. Once enmeshed in a story that engages their interest, visitors *will* scroll down a few screens to continue reading.

How many screens of text will readers scroll before wearying of scrolling and seeking the blessed release of clicking to the next page? Three. Just kidding. Only a pseudo-scientist would pretend to know. As web designers, we use our best judgment on each site. That, after all, is what we're getting paid for.

One reason frames are popular is that they allow web designers to keep the interface onscreen in a consistent location, even when the user is scrolling up or down like a madman. For instance, a horizontal menu bar at the top (www.microsoft.com) or bottom (www.the-adstore.com) of the screen will stay in place no matter how long the page may run and no matter how much scrolling the user performs. Frames are on their way out (in W3C parlance, they have been "deprecated"), but you can achieve the same effects with CSS, a web standard.

Inexperienced designers sometimes create pages that require the user to scroll horizontally. This is almost always unwise. Except at certain "art gallery" sites, users will almost never scroll horizontally. Such interfaces are inconvenient and often appear to be mistakes rather than deliberate design decisions.

To understand why horizontal scrolling is an evil spawned from the festering loins of the incubus, imagine that you have to ... turn the page to finish reading this ... sentence and then fold the page back ... to read the next line of ... text, which bleeds ... backwards across the gatefold again, forcing you to ... turn the page, and then turn ... it back again in order to begin reading the next line.

No print designer would lay out book pages that way, but inexperienced web designers do so frequently, whether from misguided creative impulses or because they've made assumptions about their visitors' monitor sizes. This is another reason that Liquid Design (detailed in Chapter 2) comes highly recommended; it always fits neatly into any user's monitor.

It's also the reason that clients, designers, and IT departments that set "monitor baselines" of 800 x 600 are blockheads. If even 5% of the audience is expected to scroll horizontally simply to read marketing copy, the client or web agency is effectively sending millions of potential customers to a competitor's site.

Stock Options (Providing Alternatives)

Users employ a variety of means to access the Web, including modern browsers, older browsers, non-graphical browsers, audio browsers, and non-traditional devices such as cell phones and PDAs. If the goal of a site is to accommodate as many visitors as possible, then it is critical to provide alternative forms of navigation.

Imagine that you have designed a lovely, frames-based site and that your navigational menu exists in its own frame. A visitor using a text browser enters the site. He cannot see frames because his browser does not support them. You, however, have thoughtfully included a <NOFRAMES> tag in your HTML frameset. Inside the <NOFRAMES> tag you cut and paste the main content from the home page, along with an HTML-based text menu. The visitor can now use your content, even though he cannot see your frames-based layout. (Again, we remind you that frames are on their way out anyway.)

Options and alternatives increase the odds that someone will actually use what you've designed. Larger web agencies employ quality assurance (QA) staffs who spend all day hunting for online porn. Better QA staffers search for flaws in your design by testing it in a wide variety of old and new browsers on various platforms. Do not hate these site testers—they are your friends. Build alternatives into your navigational scheme, and you will win their admiration and more, importantly, that of your site's audience.

The mechanics of including alternate forms of navigation will be covered in Chapter 9, "Visual Tools."

Hierarchy and the So-Called Three Click Rule

To accommodate the need for rapid access to information, a web designer creates layouts that immediately reassure the visitor that she has "come to the right place." Brand-appropriate design accomplishes some of this purpose. A clear hierarchical structure does the rest.

It's widely agreed, even by people who are not idiots, that web users are driven by a desire for fast gratification. If they can't find what they're looking for within three clicks, they might move on to somebody else's site. Hence the so-called "Three-Click Rule," which, as you might expect, states that users should ideally be able to reach their intended destination within three mouse clicks.

With the average site offering hundreds if not thousands of items and options, the Three-Click Rule sounds preposterous. But it is actually fairly easy to achieve if you start by constructing user scenarios before you begin to design the site.

What will people who use this site want to do? Where will they want to go? Based on those scenarios, the site is structured into main areas of content. These are then organized into no more than five main areas. (See the next section, "The So-Called Rule of Five.") Submenus in each of the five main areas get the user close enough that he or she is *at least reassured* by the third click, even if it takes a fourth click to get to the final, desired page.

Let's play it out. You are designing a site for people who live with house-cats. In the scenario portion of development, the team agrees that cat owners might want to read about Mister Tibbles' genetic heritage. In the top-level hierarchy, you create an item called Breeds. When Aunt Martha clicks Breeds, the site offers Long-Hair, Short-Hair, Tabby, and Exotic options. A second click takes her to Short-Hair, a third to Mister Tibbles' particular breed.

Like all so-called "laws" of web design, the Three-Click Rule is a suggestion, not an ironclad rule. It is, though, a suggestion based on the way people use the Web, and, particularly for informational and product sites, you will find that it works more often than not. If nothing else, the rule can help you create sites with intuitive, logical hierarchical structures—and that ain't bad.

THE SO-CALLED RULE OF FIVE

The so-called "Rule of Five" sounds like a period out of Chinese history, but it's actually just another guideline most working web designers keep in mind—especially if they want to keep working.

The Rule of Five postulates that complex, multi-layered menus offering more than five main choices tend to confuse web users. A glance back at Figure 3.5 should confirm the common sense behind this "rule." The main menu at Overstock.com offers not five, not six, not seven, but a whopping twelve main categories to choose from. (And that's not even counting the strange tagline area that is inexplicably designed to resemble a clickable menu button.) Overstock.com is so busy offering *everything* that many users will be hard pressed to find *anything.*

By contrast, Sapient's main menu (back in Figure 3.14) offers four choices: Clients, Expertise, Company Info, and Careers. Giving users three, four, or five main choices makes it easier for them to decide where they want to go. Hitting them with ten or more choices makes their next move harder to predict—for them and for you. Confuse them enough, and it becomes easier to predict where they will go, namely: anywhere else.

As with the Three-Click Rule, evolving a site whose architecture can be navigated in five main areas or less is easier if you engage in scenario playing before you begin to design. Chapter 7, "Riding the Project Life Cycle," provides a detailed analysis of how you, your team, and your client can collaborate to develop logical site structures that facilitate the Three-Click Rule and the Rule of Five.

On multi-purpose sites (and there are many of those), several layers of navigation may peacefully coexist. Looking yet again at Sapient (Figure 3.14), four choices are enough to guide visitors to main areas of the site but not enough to help those seeking one-click access to various client/vendor success stories. The icon-driven menu on the right ignores the Rule of Five without incident.

On a shopping site, the main menu may offer three choices: Women's, Men's, and Kids'. But submenus can be far more extensive: the Women's section might offer Outerwear, Sportswear, Business Attire, Casual Wear, Accessories, Cosmetics, Health Aids, and sundry other stuff without confusing any shopper. As the shopper burrows deeper into the hierarchy, these submenus can sprout submenus of their own, for example Cosmetics could include Hair Products, Makeup, Toners, Cleansers, and beyond. Such submenus may run deep, as long as they appear when users expect them to appear and behave consistently from section to section.

Some site designers and architects distinguish between goal- and task-oriented navigation. With goal-oriented navigation, the user wants to go somewhere (Clients, Expertise, or Company Info, for example). With task-oriented navigation, the user wants to do something (apply for a job, log in, or read case studies). Combining the two types of user needs in the same navigational context can be more confusing than helpful. In such cases, task and goal-oriented navigation coexist separately (see Figure 3.16), and the Rule of Five pertains to each navigational stream rather than to the page as a whole.

Figure 3.16

Goal-oriented navigation (Expertise, Process, Proof) and task-oriented navigation (Hire Us, Work Here, Login) carefully separated and balanced. The user can quickly follow a desired activity path without becoming confused or overwhelmed. Such complex structures are hard to pull off (www.hesketh.com).
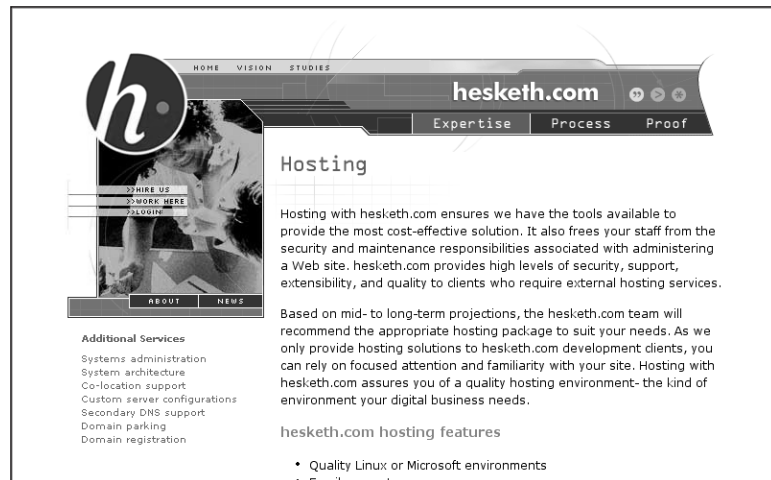
HIGHLIGHTS AND BREADCRUMBS

Drivers use road signs to track their location in space. Web users rely on navigation. Well-designed sites cue the visitor to her location within the site's hierarchy. For instance, if the visitor is within the Breeds section of the cat site, the Breeds item in the menu bar may be highlighted by a subtle change of color. This "you are here" indicator helps keep the visitor grounded, thus promoting lengthier visits (see Figure 3.17).

Figure 3.17

Subtle highlighting on the menu bar reminds you that you're on the Home Store page. Click to a different page, and a different menu item will be highlighted. Note, too, how much air the design team has managed to work into the page, in spite of the vast number of links and menu items the page must carry (www.bloomingdales.com). Compare with Figure 3.16 and contrast with Figure 3.5.

It's all about comfort. Better hotels offer fluffier pillows; better sites provide constant spatial and hierarchical reassurance. Breadcrumbs, called this because they resemble the trails left by Hansel and Gretel, not only serve as hierarchical location finders, but they also allow visitors to jump to any section further up in the hierarchy (see Figure 3.18).

Breadcrumbs remind you that you're on the Miles Davis page of the Artists section. Essential to complex directories, breadcrumbs can enhance branding, entertainment, and content sites by providing alternative navigation for those using less-capable browsers. They reassure beginners while enabling sophisticated users to skip tedious hierarchical layers and move quickly to the exact content they seek (www.jazzradio.net).

CONSISTENT PLACEMENT

The location of the navigation in the digital nation permits much permutation without causing perturbation. Navigation can exist in a horizontal strip at the top or bottom of the site. It can live in a navigation bar on the left or right side of the page. It also can float in a JavaScript remote popup window (as long as alternatives are provided).

What matters most, aside from technological and user appropriateness (remote popup window navigation is probably not the best choice for the Happy Valley Retirement Home), is that the navigation stay in one place so the user knows where to find it when he or she is ready to move on. A handrail guides someone down a flight of stairs, and the guidance works because the handrail remains in the location where the user expects to find it. Good site navigation works the same way. With few exceptions, it doesn't really matter where you stick your navigation as long as you keep sticking it there throughout the site.

Brand That Sucker!

We've discussed navigation and interface in terms of the user's needs, and they of course come first. But what of the client's needs? Meeting them is the role of branding.

A corporate website is the online expression of that company's brand identity. Making sure that the navigation fully supports the company's brand identity is crucial to the success of the site (and sometimes to the success of that company). Build the most navigable, information-filled site in the world, and if it lacks a coherent brand identity, nobody will remember it, nobody will tell their friends about it, and nobody will bother to bookmark it and return.

For over 100 years, advertisers have been working to build our joyful world of branding. When your stomach hurts, you reach for Alka-Seltzer (not an antacid). Sneeze, and you reach for Kleenex (not a disposable paper tissue).

Like millions, we may express our individuality through Levi's. You may choose Gap to show the world how different you are. Neither of us, as we don our separate uniforms, is likely thinking about the folks who picked the cotton, or groomed the silkworms, or trimmed the fleece from the sheep. Consciously or unconsciously, we're identifying ourselves with images created in small offices, thousands of miles from where the cotton grows and the silkworm arches toward the sun—images created by brand advertising.

Branding, branding, branding. McDonald's does not sell cereal mixed with the flesh of cows; it sells food, folks, and fun. Marlboro sells the myth of the freedom of the Wild West. Camels are not for everybody, but then, they don't try to be.

Branding is not limited to products. Although his verbal gymnastics, half-spoken vocal delivery, and angry social consciousness predate Rap, Bob Dylan can't perform Hip Hop; it would conflict with his brand image as the spokesman of the 1960s generation. But David Bowie can do hip-hop or drums-and-bass because his brand identity is that of an ever-changing, ever-current chameleon.

And how come Seinfeld can quip wisecracks about supermarket checkout lines but will never mine his personal sexual experiences for comic material? Hey, it's not part of the brand.

How does this relate to the task of web design? As a designer, you know the answer to this one already. Whether you're building a corporate site or a multimedia online funhouse, your first task is to understand and translate the existing brand to the web medium or to create a new brand from scratch.

Good interfaces reflect the brand. Sleek, high-tech graphics complement a sleek, high-tech company—or one that wants to be perceived that way. A "friendly" GUI is necessary for a "friendly" company such as AOL. (You in the back, keep your sarcastic observations to yourself.) It goes without saying that the company's color scheme, logo, and typographic style must be reflected in your web graphics and that existing print and other materials are often a guideline to what is appropriate for the site.

Smart web designers go far beyond the obvious. In addition to graphic design elements, savvy web folk craft interfaces whose very *functioning* reflects and extends the brand. A "fun" brand needs more than cute graphics. Its sectional titles should be fun to read and its menu fun to interact with. This may mean taking a cue from the world of gaming. It may mean building the interface in Macromedia Flash.

A movie studio's interface should not resemble that of a bank. A company that sells active wear should encourage active participation, through games, message boards, or contests. A literary site's interface should quietly promote reading, instead of busily distracting from it with funky dancing icons. (A literary site that avoids long copy belies its own brand identity.) The interface of a religious organization's site dare not resemble that of an e-commerce site, lest visitors along with moneylenders be driven from the temple.

IBM's brand image is that of a big-time solutions provider (www.ibm.com). If you're asked to design their site, it had better be technologically solid, visually impeccable, and easy to use. Anything less will send the wrong brand message.

- **Technologically solid,** in this brand context, doesn't mean a deluge of plug-ins or a reliance on safe, old 1990s web technologies; it means online forms that work, search functions that deliver usable results, and enhancements that shine in new browsers while degrading well in old ones.

- **Visually impeccable** means that imagery and typographic choices must play in the key of the brand. Type should be clean and readable—not fussy, not grungy, not softly feminine or boyishly abrasive. Photographic images need not be disgustingly corporate (two suits at a monitor will take you only so far), but images of crime, drugs, or bongo jams will obviously be inappropriate.

- **Easy to use** means easy to use. Why even mention it? Because if visitors find their way to content they seek on the IBM site, it reinforces *the overriding brand idea that IBM provides solutions.* If users get lost or don't know which button to push, it will send the opposite message. Sending the wrong brand message could harm a brand identity the company has carefully built up over generations.

Branding the WaSP

The Web Standards Project (WaSP), mentioned in Chapter 2, evolved from conversations between a number of frustrated web designers and developers. While some members brought high-level technological knowledge to the project and others brought "marquee value" (their names alone adding instant credibility to anything the WaSP might say or do), your humble author focused on creating a brand identity that would be both memorable and consistent with the task at hand.

Many names were bandied about; we pushed "The Web Standards Project" for a variety of reasons, not least of which was its ability to be referred to in shorthand by the acronym WaSP. Call us shallow, but we believed that this aggressive little insect was the perfect metaphor for our group. We also knew that a memorable identity was needed to keep the effort from becoming so technologically-focused as to confuse potential members.

After all, by agitating for compliance with web standards, we were taking on giant companies such as Netscape and Microsoft in spite of being a small grassroots effort. Which tiny creature has the power to disturb a giant? The wasp. It's a purposeful, productive beast with a powerful stinger, and while you may be able to swat away one wasp, you don't want to mess with an angry nest. The site's verbal tone and visual approach came straight out of this simple little brand image—from the color palette (wasp-yellow, gold, and black) to the tone of voice (www.webstandards.org).

When Kioken Inc. (www.kioken.com), a leading New York web shop, was charged with designing a site for the high-end retailer, Barney's, they carefully considered the client's brand identity as a provider of well-made, tasteful, and luxurious clothing. To put it bluntly, Barney's goods are well above the means of most of us working stiffs, and Barney's customers like it that way.

Kioken crafted a sophisticated, Flash-based interface like nothing else on the Web (www.barneys.com). If you were a savvy web user, owned a fairly powerful PC, had a fast connection, and were equipped with the latest Flash plug-in, you were treated to a unique showcase of Barney's clothing. Just navigating it made you feel smarter than the average web user.

If you were not an experienced web user, owned an old PC, had not downloaded the latest Flash plug-in, and were stuck with a slow dialup modem connection, Kioken (and their client) figured that you were not really a Bar-

ney's customer anyway. A certain elitism was as much as part of the interface as it is of the store. The Barney's site may not exemplify democratic humanism, but it is a perfect web translation of the client's brand.

Some critics faulted Barneys.com for failing to provide an e-commerce solution. You could look at Barney's clothing, but you could not buy it online. The criticism betrays a misunderstanding of the client's brand identity. You expect to be able to buy jeans from Sears' website, but to buy Barney's clothing online would be wrong for such a highfalutin' brand.

Interfaces that deeply and meaningfully reflect the brand will encourage repeat user visits and repeat assignments from your clients. As a web designer grounded in traditional art direction and design, you are better equipped than many working professionals to create brand-appropriate web interfaces: interfaces that don't just look like the brand, they behave like it.

Interfaces that look and act like the brand and that guide the right audience to the most important content or transactions form the foundation for the best sites on the Web—the ones you are about to design.