Chapter 5: Conclusions

Analysis

The most beautiful things about the design process are its conceptual flexibility and its power as a formal system. The formal system of design in fact necessitates mental flexibility, as the designer keeps an open mind and an eye out for insights in the course of iterating certain aspects of the process and testing the various concepts thereby developed. The early stages of design work demonstrate the how good ideas are honed while weaker ones are eliminated. A good concept will stand strong and reveal new merits when different personas and situations are thrown up against it**.** My design work for Main Street Online demonstrates the power of process, as ideas are discarded and insights pursued. The artistic spark of creation is the mystery at the heart of design. However, the scientific side of design manifests itself in terms of attention to research and adherance to a formal, iterative design methodology. The practice of design truly exists at the intersection of art and science.

Assessment

I chose the visual design for Main Street Online illustrated above because it manifested clarity, simplicity and flexibility. The design applications adhered to the same hallmarks, with the additional concern of creating balance among multiple and dynamic elements visually and conceptually. The portal-style web site addresses the goals of the personas, with visual design considerations taken from the Main Street Online identity.

Quality of design tends to be proportional to the amount of time invested in it, and more time spent on this theoretical project likely would incrementally improve the actual designs. The success and appeal of this current design could be assessed through surveys with visitors and reactions in the media. Main Street Online could undertake a re-design at some future date after launching as a franchise endeavor, a process which many businesses undergo after a certain period. In the meantime, Main Street Online has an identity and the means to bring Internet access to towns across America.

How the Personas are Satisfied

The business card and log-in card are helpful for the personas in different ways. Reading the telephone number from her log-in card, Linda calls Main Street Online from work to ask: "Is there a wait for a computer?" while Teddy calls in the evening after doing homework to ask: "Is the game room full?" Gladys looks at the business card she attached to her refrigerator door to remember what time the center opens in the morning, as she's an early riser. Mary passed out some business cards to her friends and now she has a crew of people who will go with her to Main Street Online.

For the interaction design, serving primary personas Mary and Linda is most crucial. Mary is pleased by the many easy entrance points that the portal offers for what she wants to do. "Find information" and "Get her work done quickly" are Mary's most important goals. The web site offers helpful tools for her school research, including a persistent Internet search field and direct navigation from page to page. Linda is pleased by the focus on communication and fun which the Main Street Online portal offers. Her goal of "Be entertained" is answered with resources that the site offers. She especially enjoys poking around the People News section, and following Top Searches. Linda also appreciates being well-oriented as she navigates around the site, which prevents her from feeling stupid.

Customization is appreciated by all the personas, as Mary can put research tools into the left-hand content area of her home page, Linda can put "Travel Updates" into hers, and Jean-Luc can put Paris weather into his. All the personas are pleased on the communication front by the persistent availability of tools including Instant Messaging and new email notifications. With several access points for favorite areas, it's never hard for Mary or Teddy to get from one place to another.

For Gladys, the large font sizes on headers and article text are a major plus, never less than 12 pt. The designs for Main Street Online emphasize simplicity and clarity rather than flashiness, which appeals to her. The facility is a comfortable, friendly place to interact with others and with technology. Gladys even learns to customize her portal by engaging in conversations with the helpful staff.

Teddy Jones particularly appreciates the fun game room. Main Street Online has features aimed at people his age, and Teddy is excited to have quick access to online game sites all around the world. Jean-Luc finds himself impressed by the whole facility, which reminds him of better European Internet centers. He particularly likes the email which is so easy to use! He never feels out of place at Main Street Online, and the simple language of the portal doesn't challenge his English skills.

Impact

Around the globe, society needs to do a better job of linking the "haves" and the "have-nots." Everybody must be given the chance to learn about technology and use it to improve the quality of life. Additionally, as computing machinery becomes more and more an everyday part of our lives, we have to recognize that some people feel alienated from and wary of complicated technology. If we spread the knowledge of how computers and particularly the Internet will enrich and improve our lives, people will grow comfortable with the presence of these new digital tools, and excited about this technology benefitting them directly. This effort can begin by empowering people through friendly introductions to technology and ongoing education about how to use it best. Starting with the fundamental human activities which the Internet already encourages – communication, entertainment, learning – Main Street Online promotes this warm atmosphere of community and sharing.

Commercial viability

Main Street Online centers would likely be supported by a combination of public and private funds in order to offer its services free of charge to all town members. It would be staffed by one to two community volunteers at all times. To offset costs, a retail area could be included with value-added services such as printing, web site hosting or the sale of media storage devices. If the public model proves too expensive to support, after engendering a certain amount of loyalty, the center could charge visitors a token fee for Internet time. I do not recommend including a café at Main Street Online, because drinks and computers don't mix well, and in most cases, downtown areas have a coffee shop that serves drinks. Main Street

Online should stay focused on its central mission of delivering Internet technology in a friendly, supportive and fun environment to people of all kinds.

Creating ties with neighbors, and encouraging cooperation rather than competition, makes Main Street Online more successful in promoting togetherness. Some provisions, largely legal, need to be made for unpleasant situations arising by allowing unfettered access to delicate computer facilities, but in general, Main Street Online wants to rely on the honor system. Establishing trust in its staff, equipment, and visitors' good judgment is paramount to making this center viable in the long run as a friendly local storefront. I envision Main Street Online posting public event posters in its windows, and offering free maps to the local area as other value-added services.

Another commercial consideration might include partnering with an enterprise such as Kinko's, who could subsidize costs and reap mutual benefits with Main Street Online. However, this issue could become a morass of sponsoring and marketing, commercial conflicts of interest calling into question the idea of this venture as a truly public enterprise. I firmly hold that the Main Street Online portal should not display flashing advertisements, as there is plenty of such distraction online already. A more attractive avenue for partnership would be with a software or hardware manufacturer who contributes equipment and monetary support in exchange for a persistent acknowledgment on the Main Street Online web site, where a discreet "powered by PCSoft" text, for instance, would not irritate visitors.

Making this Design a Reality

Main Street Online could easily become a reality in America. Were it to be implemented as a franchise business, I believe it could be a huge success, although not without a lot of hard work. Internet centers are quite popular all around the world, and America should be no exception. Targeted at the American suburban and rural communities, this facility serves a major need. The successful implementation of a franchise is no small matter, though, as it involves large amounts of organized capital and personnel. Attention would have to be paid to maintain the community-oriented values upon which Main Street Online was created. After introducing people to the Internet with its marvelous opportunities for expanding

one's involvement with the world, Main Street Online should grow with the times to incorporate new technologies undreamed-of today, while preserving the community approach which makes it so special.

We must affirm the just power and positive benefits associated with good design. Humans are naturally inclined to make order out of chaos. The extraordinary R. Buckminster Fuller, inventor, architect, engineer, mathematician, poet and cosmologist – i.e., consummate designer – wrote in his book *Critical Path*:

> The artist-scientists...assume intuitively that a more man-favoring rearrangement of the environment would be conducive to humanity's spontaneous self-realization of its higher potentials. ...In the vast majority of humans there is an innate inclination, propensity—even drive—to make sense and to produce order in consonance with universal order. (Fuller 27)

Designers are today's artist-scientists, and the discipline of design contains the seeds of humanity's future happiness on earth. The practice of design is fundamentally problem-solving, and designers need to take some responsibility for solving problems besetting humanity, for the sake of a better future. Design shapes many aspects of our lives already, from buildings and environments to products and software, and it has the capacity to touch and improve many more. Visionary design which is human-centered makes the world more enjoyable, wonderful and beautiful.

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