Main Street Online

Main Street Online:

Building a New Community

by
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Problem

Once a place for people in a community to participate in social and cultural events, the downtown area of suburbs and small towns has been changing. In the "strip-mallification" of America, retail stores along with specialty shops and restaurants are relocating to outlying commercial hubs and busy, impersonal thoroughfares. The traditional American downtown Main Street is being transformed and sometimes destroyed in the process, and the sight of vacant storefronts in small town communities is a cause for deep concern.

While this geographic and economic reality preceded the rise of Internet usage in the United States, further advances in Internet use according to current patterns seem only likely to increase the abandonment of community-oriented areas. Used by individuals in the home, the Internet lets people locate information in isolation that they formerly might have traveled to a library or called on a friend to learn. Online, people experience entertainment alone that they might have once traveled to see with others. A public community Internet center would provide an interesting place for people to gather and communicate, for learning, playing games and sharing experiences with each other.

While the idealistic goal of bringing community spirit to Internet use is a worthy one, I also feel that the increasing disparity between the Internet-capable and the Internet-deprived is liable to induce social problems which need to be averted before they result in widespread digital backlash. The benefits of Internet ought to reach everybody—moreover, with the always-on connections and high bandwidth that many Internet-capable people can take for granted.

In short, there is great call for a friendly, local internet presence to help reconnect our changing community with our technology, as well as democratizing access to the Internet for everybody.

Design has the capacity to connect individuals with technology in a way that encourages its positive aspects. I propose to build a new community establishment through the design of a public Internet center. This public facility is to be located on the proverbial Main Street of a small town or suburb. While fostering a sense of community, the lasting phenomenon of the Internet will be brought to people who otherwise might not have access to it. The Internet center will promote social interaction, communication, and sharing of information in all its aspects. Main Street Online hopes to be a democratic and actively unifying force for small town society, bringing everybody up to speed in the digital age.

As noted technology pundit and interactive media critic Esther Dyson wrote:

> The vision [of technology] I like is the one where a person interacts with other people. A video game is interactive...but to me, what's more interesting is if there are other people there, so that the game becomes a communication medium. That's my concept of interactivity. (Dyson 113)

I firmly believe that we can enhance the Internet experience by enjoying it in a communal setting with our neighbors.

Sub-problems

Several sub-problems comprise the main problem of creating a new public Internet center as a community establishment in this creative work project:

1. Main Street Online needs a consistent visual identity which can be easily recognized by visitors in order to be developed nationally along the lines of a franchise.
2. Visitors need an easy way to keep track of Main Street Online's operational information, and to log-in to computers at the center.
3. Visitors need a helpful place to start their Internet experience at Main Street Online.

All of these sub-problems will have design solutions.

Limitations of Scope

The scope of the design does not include environmental or interior design. Also, this document will not discuss most of the practicalities of implementing the graphic and interaction designs developed in this creative work. However, some considerations have been noted which relate to all of these areas, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

The Document

This document details my ideas and exposes my procedures for arriving at the correct design, and presents the results of my design work followed by conclusions drawn from this project. In this chapter, I have introduced the general problem, and the sub-problems which will solved with design.

All good design work utilizes research, usually concerned with existing solutions and investigation about the practical value of and possible solutions for the design problem at hand. For this project, I looked into the nature of public Internet centers around the world, and include first- and second-hand accounts of Internet center experiences. This material helps to establishing a well-understood social context for public Internet centers. I also discuss the state of Internet access for the general American public, including their attitudes toward technology. These findings are contained in *Chapter 2: Research*.

Chapter 3: Procedures, is a discussion of the design process and my methodology, and how they manifested during the course of this creative work project. I believe strongly in the value of applying a formal methodology to problem-solving. In July 1999, I took a position as an Interaction Designer with Cooper Interaction Design, where we use a powerful design methodology called Goal-Directed® design ("Goal-Directed®" is a registered trademark of Cooper Interaction Design and protected accordingly). The primary manifestation of the Goal-Directed® design process is the use of *personas* as a design tool, representing user archetypes whose goals drive and inform the design.

Chapter 4: Design contains the creative results of this project, while Appendix B contains some interesting views of intermediate stages of my design work, scanned from my notebooks and print-outs. The finished products of this creative work are designs that different Main Street Online facilities around the country could apply consistently, along the lines of a franchise. The visual identity for the enterprise consists of a word mark, and I have applied it to a paper business card and a plastic log-in card. The web site is where each person's Internet session begins at Main Street Online, and I have produced screen mock-ups to illustrate the conceptual interaction design for the portal.

In *Chapter 5: Conclusions*, the design work produced for Main Street Online is assessed, and I describe how the goals of the personas were satisfied. Included here are some practical thoughts about making Main Street Online a viable operation. I also discuss the theoretical implications of this project, and the necessity for designers to apply their disciplined skills to solving problems that face humanity today.