



Designing an Interface for the World Wide Web

Morph Talks to Young Designer
Jaime Levy

The World Wide Web—"ho hum," or so say some. Yet many people plugged into the global information network are very excited about this new form of electronic publishing. Just as magazine publishers want people to buy their magazines, so Web site designers want people to visit (or hit) their home page. However, as the volume of Web sites continues to grow, getting people to hit your home page will become more and more difficult. Sure, people may check out a home page once, but will they spend any time there? Will they return? This depends on whether people are presented with an interface experience that meets their desire for fast, easy-to-get, quality information plus visual and/or auditory stimulation.

Recently, I spoke with Jaime Levy, a New York-based interface designer and electronic publisher who produced the ground-breaking *CyberRag* and *Electronic Hollywood* disk magazines, a disk-based novel, and *Billy Idol Cyberpunk*, the first floppy ever distributed with an album. Currently, Levy teaches multimedia authoring at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program, hosts CyberSlackers events at her loft and

acts as a consultant to corporate giants like **Sony, Viacom** and **IBM**. Levy's advice is to get grounded in the basics of interface design.

According to Levy, it's hard to create a good interface. "You have got to think creatively and think pretty pictures, and you also have to think from the other side of the brain in terms of problem solving." Planning for functionality is essential. "Before you start, make sure you know who your users are and what they need. How long have they used a computer and what do they know about it?"

Levy suggests writing down your goals. "It's just like making a movie. You have to get an outline on paper. For example, here is what we are trying to do and how we are going to accomplish it. What are the tasks? There are thoughtful ways of figuring out your interface so when you go to design the look and feel of it, it has got some backbone to it—some functionality." Then design, layout and graphics should be planned to make the product intuitive enough so users know where to go and what to do.

Says Levy, "What is interesting is how people are implementing graphical user interfaces to navigate through all this content. For example, the magazine *HotWired* hired an artist who developed cool icons for them. Yet you look at their main interface and you don't know where the hell to go or what those pictures stand for. It looks like a Mexican rug—they have actually admitted that their interface sucks. They know they have a problem, but the cool thing is that online media is not static, so their interface and content has the opportunity to change. They can see where people clicked, how long they stayed in areas, what is happening and what is not. With any interface, it is really important to get user feedback as soon as possible—not just from your friends, but people who don't know anything about your service. The most important thing about interface design is whether someone can actually use it—is it user friendly? Although *HotWired* has problems, they are cool because they are one of the first online electronic magazines. They didn't want to look like *Wired*; they wanted to look unique. I think they accomplished that. I hope it gets better and I think it will."

"The Web is still simply point and click," explains Levy. "Until you can have animation, there is no movement, there is no flashing. It is just a place where you can click on different things. It is almost more of a 'connect-the-dots' than an interface. You click on a picture with seven places you can go. The issue is not who can make a pretty picture with really obvious icons so you know what the topics are without needing text, but who can come up with a really cool metaphor. For example, you could establish the metaphor of an airplane. To select where the airplane is going, you might see a stewardess holding a map that you can click on. People need to come up with more navigation schemes that make you feel like you are traveling through space. The lack of metaphors is why the Web sucks. But that is going to change."

"Once you come up with a good metaphor, it can be used like a formula. When I did my electronic magazine, *Billy Idol* said, 'Wow, that is cool, can you do that for me?' So I dropped out all my *Electronic Hollywood* content and put in *Billy's* content. It's the same thing with a Web site. Come up with a cool navigational scheme that works, then make the artwork and drop it in. It's like making a movie."

Says Levy, "One thing that the World Wide Web and disk-based products have in common is they are low-bandwidth. When designing interfaces, we need to think about loading time. With the World Wide Web, an interface feeds through this little pipe called your phone line, so pictures can't be very big or have a million colors. Can we make a really cool picture that is 4 bit, 16 colors or 1 bit, black-and-white? To accomplish our goals, should we use many small pictures that load fast instead

of one big one? Should we have the text look really cool and make it a graphic element? Should we combine text and graphics so it feels fun and is easy to figure out, while at the same time not requiring that users read too much text? Size and speed issues can have a

big effect on design. For example, an 80 x 250-pixel 8-bit picture takes eight seconds to load. So maybe we want to make it 40 x 125 pixels and 4 bit to reduce loading time. You don't want people to have to click and wait 20 seconds for results like they had to do with the first CD-ROMs."

What you can and can't do with HTML (HyperText Markup Language) also has a definite effect on your interface. Six months ago, you couldn't have a picture with text on the right. "Some people are trying to compare HTML to HyperCard but that is not a good comparison," comments Levy. "You can't even center justify with HTML. There is not much code in HTML so it is not what you can do, but how to do it with only a few possible choices. You only have six header sizes and limited control of the fonts because people can set their own preferences for viewing text. Still, every week someone creates a line of code or a program that does something that gives you more power. On the Web, everything is public property. If you see something that looks cool, go to the File menu, View Source, and the code appears. Copy, Paste, and change the images and it is yours to put in your home page in about six seconds. It is a free world out there."

Levy advises multimedia developers to look at everything you can get your hands on. "Spend hours, put a computer by your bed and work on it 10 hours a day. It's not just this lucky thing where if you work on something for 10 minutes, you can make it incredible. If you actually work on it for 10 hours, it might be more incredible. You get out what you put in," Levy states. "I like the computer because it's fair. It doesn't know if you are a woman or



retarded or what color your skin is. Success is very much based on your own motivation."

For more information, contact Levy at jlevy@echo.nyc.com or write to Electronic Hollywood, P.O. Box 448, Prince St. Station, New York, NY 10012.

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company include Illinois, Michigan, Arkansas, Montana, Louisiana, South Carolina, Indiana and Kansas. If your state has a lottery or horse racing, chances are it has a grant program. Rust belt states tend to offer more cash to their entrepreneurs than do sun belt states that rely on tourism. Call the Economic Development Department in your state and ask for a list of their programs.

If you are awarded grant money, you will have to repay the grant with future conditional sales royalties. If your innovation flops, you have no future obligation. The royalties may seem small when you are a start-up, but the royalty payments could be punitive if the product becomes a hit. At that point, consider renegotiating the royalties.

A. David Silver, President of ADS Financial Services, Inc., an investment banking firm in Santa Fe, NM, is the author of *Quantum Companies: 100 Companies That Are Changing the Face of Tomorrow's Business*.

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