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Metaphors and the Web

by

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A metaphor, as every schoolboy and girl should know, is a powerful figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily designates one thing is used to designate another, thus creating an implicit relationship. The web, itself a metaphor for the Internet protocol that so many of us find ourselves ever more deeply entangled and entwined within (I await in trepidation the cyber-spider that will one day scramble down from the ceiling above my computer to gobble us all up -- and serves you right, too, I can hear all the Doubting Thomases gloat), seems to be particularly prone to the application of what the great English grammarian HW Fowler refers to as "that indispensable but ticklish instrument".

Al Gore, of course, set the ball rolling (see, we can't get away from them) when he referred to the Internet as "the information superhighway", bringing up that now indelible image of information like so many speeding packets -- tiny, brightly coloured miniature cars (made in Japan of course), directed hither and thither on that wide yet invisible electronic ribbon of highway that stretches far into and beyond our imaginations and psyche.

Due to the web and its insinuating presence, its sheer persistent ability to weave itself ever more intricately into the fabric of our lives, we now suddenly find that we've all become citizens of some cosy but mythical "global community". We visit "virtual cities", walk down "virtual streets", or enter "virtual museums" without ever leaving the comfort of our armchairs, simply while staring at the computer monitors before us.

Such spatial metaphors imply a redefining of the physical and metaphysical space around us, and indeed the term "cyberspace" becomes charged with the suggestion of an inner universe of infinite potential at least as great and all-encompassing as the outer universe.

Perhaps precisely because the web exists mainly in our minds, it is necessary to invent metaphors to explain and amplify the phenomenon. Certainly, metaphors can be powerful literal and visual aids in effective and creative web site construction. As David Seigel, author of the now classic *Creating Killer Web Sites* (Hayden Books) says, "Third-generation sites use metaphor and visual theme to entice and guide. They strive to make a site feel familiar and easy to navigate, with clear typography and high production values." Let's look at a few examples.

Take the idea of a "virtual café", for example. Real cafés should be warm places that make you want to visit them. More than that, the best can become almost second homes, the sort where your *cappuccino* is made and on the counter virtually the minute you come through the door, your seat by the window and rack of newspapers always vacant and awaiting you. Cafés are places to hang out in, to think and write, to meet people, either friends or new acquaintances, to kill time and just relax. It's no wonder, is it, that they can make such compelling metaphors for web sites.

Shopping sites are obvious candidates for the metaphor "virtual mall" complete with such auxiliaries as "shopping baskets" to put your purchases in and the "cash register" where you give your credit card or other financial details to finalise the sale. Metaphors can be rich in suggestion and meaning that goes beyond the obvious. The concept of a "virtual mall", for example, is suggestive of the real archetypal shopping mall that exists in virtually every city, town and small village throughout the United States. Far more than simply some vast conglomeration of shops and boutiques grouped together under one roof, the mall is a destination in itself where everyone -- young and old -- quite happily goes to for entertainment, to meet friends or dates, get something to eat or drink, partake in physical recreation or sporting activity (bowling

alley, skating rink, gym or sports club -- I've even heard, for god's sake, of people who go to malls to "power walk" for hours), simply to pass time, *as well as* to make purchases from the vast array of shops. The best shopping web sites, we suggest, may similarly be those that endeavour to become true "virtual malls" by offering content that goes far beyond the mere the facility to make on-line purchases.

A "chat room" is another powerful and compelling web metaphor. A room implies an intimate and enclosed space where we are safe to confide and converse with whomsoever we should happen to meet or encounter there. Of course when we enter a chat room, we know that we are not all in the same room physically; rather by taking part in the sharing of minds and thoughts over shared networks there is a sense of the creation of some metaphysical cyberspace which we collectively share during our time spent there. In chat rooms we make "cyberfriends" and "cyberbuddies". We can make "buddy lists" and even indulge, so I hear, in "cybersex" (lots of people talk about this, but I've still not met anyone who's done it -- "how was it for you, dear, did the computer move?" -- but maybe I just hang out in the wrong chat rooms).

Perhaps in an attempt to define itself, the new media sometimes relies on metaphors that relate back to traditional "old media" such as television. "Channels", for example, is one current buzzword. Channels in the old broadcasting paradigm imply a choice between, say, watching "Bonanza" or "I Love Lucy" or "Teletubbies" or "Eastenders" or any number of endless choices as dictated by the twitchiness of your finger on the remote control. This nervous activity can indeed be somewhat analogous to surfing on the web, but there is also a temporal dimension to the metaphor that I think confuses. While real time events are being played out on the web, one of the most powerful aspects of digital new media is that information or entertainment can be supplied on demand, not when the broadcasters decide that you should be watching/accessing it. The concept of channels in the old sense seems to me to imply quite the opposite. So it's important to be aware that metaphors, though capable of

bringing up powerful relationships, may also lead in directions that result in confusions or muddled perceptions.

For ultimately, this "indispensable but ticklish instrument", the metaphor, is just that, no more, no less than a figure of speech, or in the case of web design, an artificial visual and navigational device to help you get your message across to your readers. From the readers' point of view, the danger, I sense, is when the metaphor, that which is being substituted for the real, becomes more vivid and important than reality itself. Make no mistake, a visit to a "virtual café" can be stimulating indeed, but for my money, I'm still awaiting the next generation of browsers that will deliver that perfect *espresso* direct to my desk or living room (and not just the scent of it, thank you very much). If Bill Gates can crack that one (and I'm sure he's working on it), then I'll tip my virtual hat to him.