

# Why Larry is correct, and Bill isn't

**A strategic look at eMedia design**



ILLUSTRATIONS FROM "NETWORKING" COLLECTION BY ARTVILLE

by Lorne Cherry

**L**arry Ellison's perpetual war of wealth and words with rival Bill Gates is an American free-for-all unrivaled. Despite a jittery market saddled with three years of negativity and uncertainty, these two elitists leapfrog over each other's billions of net worth in such an unimaginable theatre of power that the more I think about it, the more I question capitalism itself.

But there's more to this war than just mudslinging for money. Setting aside the political and economic arguments, we are still left with each magnate's vastly divergent view of tomorrow's eWorld landscape. And the winning philosophy (if there ever is one) will greatly impact how you approach future design problems in a multimedia eMedia environment.

#### HOW SO, YOU ASK?

We're all infinitely familiar with Microsoft's application and platform-based strategies:

"We'll give you the best tools for the job so you'll do a better job...and oh, yeah—let us gently remind you—that our tools work best on our proprietary platform."

Ellison's Oracle, on the other hand, has quietly (or not so quietly) become the number two softworld player through a more logical and elegantly simple philosophy:

"Good tools should be platform-independent—it's the central organization of the data that's important."

For someone whose desktop (both furniture and screen) usually looks like a recycling bin during a two-month garbage strike, centrally-organized data is a battle cry I can rally around.

In more abstract terms, Oracle's vision of our eFuture is seen not through a killer application or a single transparent platform (although Oracle is a world-leading database) but rather through a centralized strategy of how computers, people and data should interact. The eBiz buzzword for that vision is *drillable databases*, with *digital assets* as the core. (Stop scratching your head at these seemingly silly phrases; IT people often feel the need to justify their existence by making up one word with two words that mean three different things.)

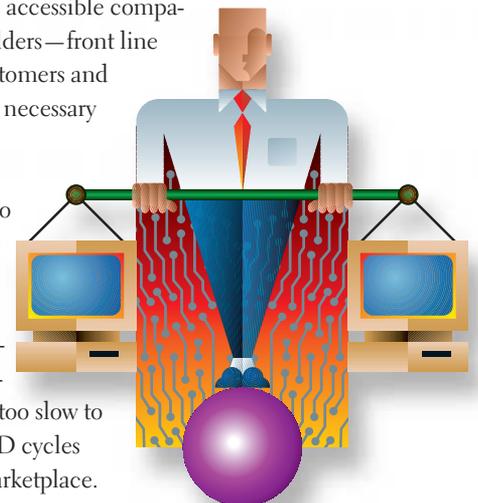
This emergence of a database-centric eWorld will have a critical impact on designers in two ways. First, application features will become secondary to the application's ability to share data or information with other applications (and most important, other people); and second, designers must learn to approach their clients' design and marketing problems from a centralized, collaborative viewpoint.

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#### CHANGING THE WAY WE WORK WITH DATA AND WITH OTHERS

Essential to the thesis of collaborative applications is the central storage of all data (the "digital assets"). In a perfectly evolved eBusiness, digital assets are seamlessly retrieved and manipulated by others, and they are accessible company-wide by all stakeholders—front line workers, suppliers, customers and shareholders (with the necessary security provisions).

Just as digital assets need to be accessible to all, so too does human capital. Outdated, layered and hierarchical business structures create barriers to information flow and are thus too slow to react to shortened R&D cycles and changes in the marketplace.





**Think of a guide dog leading a blind man through a 3D maze and you get the idea. You're the dog, the customer is the blind man, and the maze is your market. Now find the simplest way through the multimedia maze while the competition shouts different directions at the blind man.**

### **LEARNING TO THINK APPLICATION-INDEPENDENT—THE IMPORTANCE OF SHARING DESIGN IDEAS FROM DAY ONE**

For a designer born and bred on a diet of Photoshop and Illustrator, Oracle-like applications are a difficult meal to stomach. Oracle, NetMeeting and other collaborative eSuite software encourage us to share creativity at all stages of a project, an idea not only unorthodox to designers, but completely antithetical to the old-school, “Never show it ’til it’s finished” and, “Tell us what you want, and in which medium you want it and then we’ll create it... But you? You can’t share my creative application or my raw design ideas because you’re a marketing person or a writer or an IT person or a suit—you’re not a designer.”

In short, many designers are still resistant to exchanging ideas with those outside the immediate creative team because of a natural tendency to want others to judge only their best work. And that usually means a finished product. (Okay, maybe I’m leaning a little too hard on human nature; in fact, most design professionals are able to broaden their scope to accept and encourage sharing unfinished or raw ideas among peers and co-workers... but usually not with senior management or clients.)

This is why many large corporations (and especially heavily layered government structures) are so slow in getting things done. From a creative standpoint, such multi-tiered business “organizational charts” inhibit the necessary cross-pollination of ideas and expertise from all departments—expertise that is needed to design a successful eBusiness strategy. In total, it is vitally important that both digital assets and human resources are free-flowing and easily accessible to all departments involved in eBusiness strategy.

The sharing of resources and ideas, both human and capital, is the essential starting point for eBusiness strategy. But how does business process planning play out in terms of tuning your design strategies to an overall eBusiness strategy?

### **A THREE-DIMENSIONAL VIEW OF EMEDIA DESIGN PROBLEMS**

Up until the mid-90s, marketing strategists still embraced a two-dimensional view of the marketing process. Design work had to fit/complement/work into the marketing manager’s view of a current print, TV, radio, POP, direct mail or outdoor campaign. Customer interaction to a campaign was usually limited to responding by phone, mail or in person.

Today, our enriched world of eMedia offers a truly interactive experience with the goal of improving and simplifying the customer experience (something that few websites do well because both the media mix and the competitive landscape are so complex). Creative professionals must understand that the design process needs to address much more than just conveying the marketing message. Think of a guide dog leading a blind man through a 3D maze and you get the idea. You’re the dog, the customer is the blind man and the maze is your market. Now find the simplest way through the multimedia maze while the competition shouts different directions at the blind man.

Without going too deep into modern customer relations management theory, suffice to say that improving the customer experience is both a good starting and finishing point for the designer, because it forces you to simplify and streamline your message—not an easy task when dealing with programmers who want to mystify the world with their Java scripting prowess.

### **BUILDING TRUST FOR A SKEPTICAL AUDIENCE**

How will the website integrate with traditional media into an overall seamless customer experience? This is one of the most important questions when designing for the web or other “new” media. Anything less than a seamless integration dilutes the branding and confuses the would-be customer. And what about branding?

Branding your site on the web is extremely important because there are so many mixed mes-

sages flooding the Internet. Not only are consumers bombarded with more messages than before, but the bombardment is from a variety of often-unfamiliar media with a lower level of trust and acceptance. And that makes potential customers very wary of any unfamiliar turf.

Remember, the credibility factor of the unregulated web is still much lower than that of traditional media, so as a designer, you must work hard to instill *trust* in the message you are delivering.



## THE WEB SERVES WHAT PURPOSE FOR YOUR CLIENT?

The dot bomb has certainly shaken out many of the “clicks only” companies in favour of the “clicks and bricks” marketers who understand that the goal of a website is to improve the customer experience. Any deviation from that vision is a stateroom ticket on the Titanic.

Think of the website as a CRM (customer relation’s management) tool that must be in line with your clients’ overall marketing message. Then ask yourself a very important question. What is this website trying to accomplish?

The goal is not (as many pre-crash so-called e-commerce gurus proclaimed) to change customers’ buying habits. People—customers, kids, consumers, cohorts, even alien life forms—are always resistant to change of any kind. Only the brave early adopters will clamor through a Flashy (pun intended) new website in awe of the technology. The rest of us who are in a constant state of morning rush hour don’t have the time or the patience, and if we can’t get what we want right away from your website, we’ll abandon it for your competitors. And we’ll never come back.

## DESIGN STRATEGIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE

So how does all this theory translate into practical eMedia design tactics? Here are a few ideas:

**Design from the bottom up and put the market ahead of the technology whiz-bang.** Do not start by trying to implement what it is you want the website to do. Begin from the customer’s viewpoint and design/strategize from the bottom up. Use design as an aid to navigation, remembering that the computer screen is still a flat 2D representation of our 3D world. Your goal is to build the familiarity of our 3D world into a 2D site—a difficult task, at least until the next generation of web “walk through” software arrives on the scene.

Your website should emulate processes and structures that are very familiar to your audience: a grocery store aisle, a catalog, or a filing system are all good starting points for web or eMedia design.

Website design and interactive features are secondary, and as such must take a back seat to the higher goal of simply guiding the customer. No, I’m not advocating that capturing attention, creating atmosphere or piquing interest are not important. Quite the contrary—use the new interactive tools to improve your design and encourage customer interaction,

but do it without inhibiting quick access to what the customer really wants. Never more so has less been more.

**It’s always a team effort.** No longer is the designer/creative director/marketing department triangle valid for eDesign. Whether

your client is a one-man band or a multinational corporation, a strong eMedia team combines cross-pollination from the entire firm with outside experts. In addition to the usual e-commerce specialists, back office consultants and process designers, an eMedia project will often include departments such as human resources, accounting, marketing, public relations and IT.

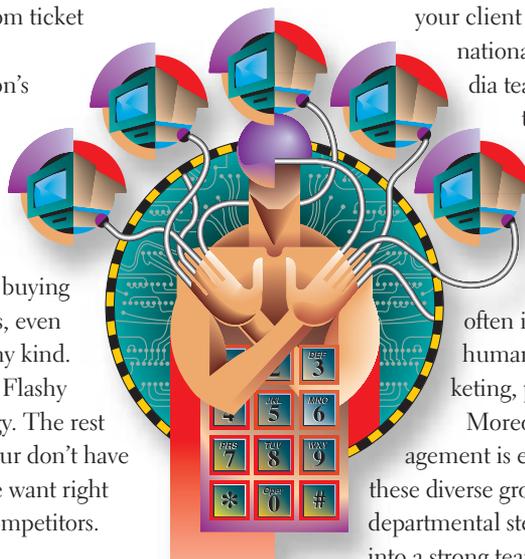
Moreover, buy-in from senior management is essential in order to draw these diverse groups away from their natural departmental stereotyping and bind them into a strong team.

**Got something to say? Use a professional writer.** I’m surprised at how many web design firms do not employ a professional writer, nor contract out for one when undertaking a large project. Most designers and web programmers make mediocre writers, and vice versa. You need both. Credibility on the Internet is hard enough to earn without the added distraction of poor grammar, misspelling or attempted humour.

**Assume web navigation is always for the directionally challenged.** I use a very simple test for evaluating organization and link logic on a website: do you have to use the back page command on the browser to get to where you want to go? A well-organized site always offers to take you to the most commonly visited pages or a logical next step from wherever you are in the site. And that doesn’t mean just adding a “home” button or link to a site map on every page—it means understanding a logical order of links and then explaining your logic to website users.

It never hurts to literally ask visitors to the website “Where can we take you from here?” and then provide links to take them there.

This gentle guidance is especially important to sites that use e-commerce to close the entire sale cycle. If customers can’t go back and quickly review their orders, and change or add to them, they’re likely to abandon their shopping carts.



**It's okay if your front end is fuzzy.** How many times have you entered a pre-design strategy meeting in which you or someone else has already mapped out a precise timeline with deadlines for each step of design and implementation? It may appear that a pre-built road map is essential to keeping a meeting on track, but if presented too early in the planning process, these preconceived time structures actually inhibit strategy and cost time, rather than save it.

Not only is it okay to be unclear about what the final design will look like even when you are halfway through the project, in many cases it's actually preferable. MBAs and R&D engineers call this the *fuzzy front end*—a business process theory and design philosophy that encourages you to start with phase two of the project before phase one is finished; phase three before phase two is finished, and so on. The logic behind this process theory is that feedback from the market (phase three, for example) will often very much benefit phase one. With a fuzzy front end there is still a set start and finish, but the steps in between always overlap. Most important, continual feedback leads to improvements at all stages, allowing you to finish a project in less time—and that's ever so important in eBusiness because...

The compressed timelines demanded by eBusiness give new meaning to the overworked cliché "You want it when?" Typically, R&D and production timelines with respect to new product development are 50% of what they were in the mid-90s, and the marketing or design process manager must now work within those shortened cycles. Overlapping project stages will actually help you bring ideas or products to the market faster and meet today's demanding eMedia deadlines.

The fuzzy front end is more than just a sign that you've hit forty-something and need to make an appointment with one of those laser eye surgery places. It's a new way of strategic planning that lets go of the old idea that we can't go forward if we don't know exactly where we're going. From a business perspective, no single philosophy has influenced my consulting more than this method of process planning.

Give it a try.

**If you want to get there, make sure you get there first.** The *first-in* philosophy is extremely important to success on the web (or in any new media), especially in the competitive retail categories where websites that are second-in might as well be last. The borderless global reach of a website completely negates the requirement for a "second location" with the net result that consumers don't need to look beyond the market leader.

Amazon and eBay are two examples of first-in success. Unlike their bricks-and-mortar competitors, these web leaders have only one location per country. Yes, there are other on-line book sellers and auction sites, but the early establishment of those two respective sites propelled them past their bricks-and-mortar competitors into market domination. So now you know why your client needs to push the timelines hard—market success is dependent on being first-in.

**Never force technology on customers or clients.**

E-commerce experts who previously touted the web as a replacement for the telephone are finally seeing the error of their ways. Technology can and *does* confuse, and thus it's good eMedia strategy to always give the market a few different ways to interact with your site.

Properly designed websites have a toll-free number on every page, or access to FAQ database, and a return e-mail address (that they actually answer). An extreme example, eBay has a site map, several community bulletin boards, FAQ page, interactive help page, live interactive help, e-mail, and finally, telephone support. Whether you're an established trader or a first-time user, eBay's goal is for you to be able to find out what you need to know without ever leaving the site. Notice, too, that eBay is free of unfriendly technology or overdone interactive Java and Shockwave.

**THINK STRATEGY FIRST**

The purpose of all these strategies is to introduce current eBusiness trends from a marketing professional's viewpoint so that designers will better understand the dynamics of eBusiness and tailor design work to fit those dynamics. In retrospect, I view the now three-year old "dot bomb" as simply a market rationalization of poor business strategies—strategies that were more interested in triple-digit growth and shareholder return than with understanding customer needs and wants.

Start your eMedia projects with your customer needs and wants as a top priority and you'll have a much better chance of integrating a successful design into today's complex, multi-dimensional marketing campaigns.

As for Larry and Bill, I just checked the unofficial *Bill Gates Net Worth* website ([www.quuxuum.org/~evan/bgnw.html](http://www.quuxuum.org/~evan/bgnw.html)), and Bill was worth \$29.6 billion with Larry still trailing by a paltry \$6 billion. Poor Larry. 🍌

*Lorne Cherry is a senior consultant and principal with TechnoXtreme, a Canadian technology integration company specializing in eBusiness strategy and startups. Lorne enjoys writing about how new technology interacts with business, political and social structures. Contact him at [lecherry@rogers.com](mailto:lecherry@rogers.com).*

