The Virtual Newsstand ⬍

By Colin Berry

Online magazines, having proven their worth as viable content providers, are fine-tuning their design and editorial mix and attracting a rapidly multiplying readership.

1

CHARGED ISSUE 3 spring/summer 2000

SECTIONS

2

Slate HOME briefing ▼ politics ▼ culture ▼ utilities ▼

BACK TO FRONT PAGE

DAILY ESSAYS

FILLER

SUCK INDEX
ALL THE STUFF WE'VE DONE

SPECIAL FEATURES

NET MOGULS .COM

3

1995 1996 1997 1998 1999 All   1996 1997 1998 1999 All   1997 1998 1999 All

HOTWIRED Search: Wired News ⬍ for [   ] go

4

FEED

5   MH

nerve.com   NerveCenter: boards | chat | email | homepages | personals | e-cards | help   [   ] 6   sear

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7

Volume 36 Issue 16 | America's Finest News Source | 3 May 2000

8

salon.com

WORD

MAY 8

Issues, Culture, Regularity

Up until five years ago, magazines entered our lives in two ways: by waiting patiently at the corner kiosk until we bought them (after a leisurely perusal, of course), or by arriving in the mailbox as a subscription, a scenario that followed our 1) impulsively mailing in one of their omnipresent blow-in cards, 2) being hoodwinked, or 3) helping out the neighborhood middle-school student raising money for the winter prom by selling subs. Once home, magazines served as coasters, shelf filler, fly-swatters, and, occasionally, a decent read.

But with the Internet came a new form of magazine: one published exclusively on the Web. These bookmarks cost us nothing, don't force themselves into our homes, and demand no space on our bedside table. In discovering online magazines, many netizens find they satisfy their need for fresh news, sharp commentary, and a pleasing design.

With pithy names like *Feed, Nerve, Slate,* and *Suck,* today's Web zines fall roughly into two categories. One sculpts daily content to bring the world to our desktop, with myriad articles that address a wide range of topics. The other caters to those pursuing leisure-time activities—sex, music, exercise, computing—with occasional pieces that provide readers some virtual escape. Surprisingly, online publications have changed little in the Web's quick rise to

ubiquity: Shifts have been subtle, and even as their print counterparts have scrambled to exploit the Web's dynamism, e-mags have held their own by retooling form, streamlining function, and wrapping the result in hi-vis packages. The best reflect the Web's spontaneity and vigor, resistant, by and large, to radical change; most have adopted a less-is-more esthetic and a polite conciliation with technology. Many are worth reading; few are perfect.

The first e-zines arrived in 1995, in the days preceding the rise of the World Wide Web. Until then, much of their content had been found on text-only mailing lists and in newsgroups. But the Web's graphical capabilities provided publishers a chance to integrate pictures and text—to create real Internet magazines. Among the first were *HotWired,* the neon-hued spawn of *Wired* magazine; the crudely ardent rock rag *Addicted to Noise; Suck,* the sharp-tongued brainchild of moonlighting *HotWired* staffers; and *Salon,* whose founders defected from *The San Francisco Examiner* to launch a site dedicated to books, arts, and ideas.

"Back then, the biggest hurdle was convincing people to take the Web seriously," says Scott Rosenberg, *Salon*'s VP of site development and the zine's managing editor. "We found that, for the most part, the Web had limited outlets for serious writers."

From the beginning, how-

ever, *Salon* attracted them, culling current topics to deliver prose in a daily format. As *HotWired* drew the ravers and *Suck* the industry insiders, *Salon*—its first issues included interviews with Jamaica Kincaid, Amy Tan, and Salman Rushdie, and editorials denouncing Net censorship and Newt Gingrich—sought *readers,* a slightly more mature Web audience looking for more than the latest Kurt Cobain shrine. Many people loved the magazine, though at the time, little else was online to love.

Part of what was cool about Web zines was what was cool about the Web: hotlinks. Within a review of a U2 disk, for example, *HotWired* readers could click a link to hear a short, scratchy song snippet; a *Salon* profile of Kevin Mitnick could link to a story about the cyberhacker in *The New York Times* archives. Some sites used hotlinks more effectively than others: *Suck,* whose contributors regularly skewered the Web's copious vaporware, stuffed shirts, and fast cash, used the technology to great effect—mining a Unabomber feature, say, with links to pipe-bomb recipes or illustrating a point in a "Doom" feature by linking to a list of Quentin Tarantino movies. Tracing this unique, 3D narrative style was like learning to read all over again, and readers were fascinated. Additionally, stories could be long—*Addicted to Noise* devoted 6000 words to Jerry Garcia's obituary—a luxury unprecedented in tradi-

tional print formats.

As e-zines toyed with length and linking issues, so did they with layout. Lacking design precedents and burdened with technological concerns, online art directors were constantly experimenting. "Most of our conversations in prelaunch days had more to do with deciding what type of content was appropriate for the Web, given its limited bandwidth and browser instabilities," recalls Barbara Kuhr, *HotWired*'s original creative director. "We worked at trying to add images and sound, but had to continually ask, 'Must information be so heavily text-driven?' The answer, after much experimentation, was '*Yes.*'"

From a design standpoint, what seemed to work in those nascent days was something eerily akin to a print magazine: a plain background with clean spaces and a minimum of visual noise. Both *Salon* and *Suck* settled early on a white-page scheme, a columned layout, and a left-hand navigational gutter. Eschewing most visual elements, *Salon*'s pages then, as now, favored letter over look. "We used print as a starting point," says Rosenberg, "but quickly realized the Web demanded more updates and nonsequential navigation." "Print-based models were always a reference point," admits Kuhr, "but the feeling was that this was a brave new world."

A few clicks over, *Suck* opted for a single, wide-spaced column centered on

the page. Carl Steadman, who launched the daily zine with Joey Anuff, notes that HTML-based tables and other such layout tools arrived long after 1995. "*Suck* was a reaction *against* print," he says emphatically. "At the time, sites were made to look and feel like magazines, with tables of contents and multi-page layouts. We put content up front, to draw people immediately into the experience. *Suck*'s design was a reaction to the eye-glazing screens of text on other sites."

Counter to this accumulated knowledge, however, came *Slate*, the Microsoft-owned zine launched under the leadership of media heavyweight Michael Kinsley. Since its high-profile debut in 1996, *Slate* has marched to its own drummer, sustaining several major revisions in as many years. The current version features a clickable header and text links to nearly 100 articles—many well-written—yet whose design still appears to be the work of a large and contentious committee. That *Slate* tosses the Web's prevailing perceptions of design and navigability out the window is fitting: Its parent company's reputation for esthetic or intuitive products is less than stellar.

Yet for its breadth and scale, *Slate* embodies the e-zine rack's big-media player. "In the beginning, we did embrace the magazine metaphor," recalls Jack Shafer, Kinsley's deputy editor since day 1.0. "We patterned *Slate* heavily on *The New Republic*. But since those early days, we've been migrating toward a broadcast metaphor." He clarifies: "Early on, Michael saw the magazine as a sort of rolling weekly, with daily postings culminating on Friday.

We now think of ourselves as a daily—with regular news briefings, some sense of weekly spin, a digest of the TV pundits' commentary. It's broadcast, really: Things are much more raw, much more immediate. We've sacrificed the long consideration that goes into a typical magazine article."

Most e-zines would disagree that such changes are positive. Most of the current players reflect a deep commitment to content, as well as a keen design and a growing understanding of what sets each publication apart—from print and each other. Consider *Word*, born of Echo, one of New York's earliest and most esteemed online companies. Purchased in 1998 by Zapata, a food-service processing giant, *Word* isn't particularly pretty to look at: Its home-page design smacks of a video game, the current backdrop featuring a stylized skyscraper encircled by a small, hyperactive helicopter. Yet inside, *Word*'s mix of edgy art criticism and social commentary is thoroughly engaging. With amateurish panache, the zine conveys a sense of play missing from most competitors.

Charged, another Zapata site, is even better. Its lean design and diverse content sell "action and leisure" (one issue featured pieces on sandboarding and extreme mountain biking) and attracts readers with blurbs about tarot cards, banana slugs, and scamming free trips on Greyhound. Besides being a compelling read, the zine looks great: Its green-and-purple layout feels welcoming, its navigational iconography hospitable and consistently catchy. *Charged* feels less like a magazine than a trendy club where twenty-somethings come to chill, and

1. Logo and navigation bar for *Charged* (www.charged.com). Art director: John Swartz.
2. Navigation bar for *Slate* (www.slate.msn.com). Design director: Kathleen Kincaid.
3. Navigation template for *Suck* archives (www.suck.com/barrel). Art director: Terry Colon.
4. Navigation bar for *HotWired* (www.hotwired.lycos.com). Design director: Eric Eaton.
5. Home-page illustration for *Feed* (www.feedmag.com). Art director: Siri Wilson; illustrator: Marcellus Hall.

NET MOGULS
HEY, KIDS!
COLLECT 'EM ALL!

John Warnock

Bill Gross

Steve Jobs

Scott Kauffman

11

10

6. Navigation bar for *Nerve* (www.nerve.com). Creative director: Joey Cavella.

7. Logo and navigation bar for *The Onion* (www.onion.com). Design director: Andrew B. Welyczko.

8. Logo for *Salon* (www.salon.com). Design director: Mignon Khargie.

9. Home-page logo for *Word* (www.word.com). Art director: Yoshi Sodeoka.

10. Vertical navigation bar and icons for *Nerve*. Creative director: Joey Cavella.

11. Illustrations for *Suck*, "Net Moguls." (www.suck.com/netmoguls). Illustrators: Terry Colon, Matt Robinson, Charlie Powell.

12-15. Home page, feature articles, and section menu for *Charged*. Art director: John Swartz; designer: Maryam Zafar.

IS ALL AROUND, DUDES

SAND BOARD

by Nick Stoller

Dudes who want to snowboard but don't have the snow, or who want to surf but the water's as flat as glass, fret not. Dudes! Sandboarding!

text-only version

INTRO LA HISTOIRE WHERE BOARD? WHAT BOARD? HOW BOARD? INTERVIEW

INTRO TRIALS CYCLOCROSS BICYCLE POLO SNOW MOUNTAIN BIKING LOWRIDER BICYCLES BICYCLE RODEO TEXT-ONLY

INTRO

A CHARGED GUIDE TO BIKE SPORTS

By Elon Schoenholz
Produced by Daniel Falcone

...al uses such as getting from point A to ...aside, bicycles can be a helluva lot of fun: a ...Americans are just beginning to remember. ...n biking reintroduced a generation to the joys ...a bike, and Lance Armstrong's victory in last ...ur de France rekindled an interest in shaved ...I skinny tires, putting a shot in the arm of a ...bike industry. But there remain other realms of ...eled activity slightly less embraced but no less ...le. Welcome to a biased and incomplete guide ...ports. *Go Charged!*

CONTENTS

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The FEED Art Issue

My Favorite Visual Thing
An Interactive Survey of Optic Desire

STEVE MCQUEEN'S ASS IN SAM PECKINPAH'S "JUNIOR BONNER"

Lia Gangitano is curator of Thread Waxing Space, New York.

LERNER HALL, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK CITY

New York has been a city of interior design for so many years we hardly notice anymore. Lerner Hall, the new student activities center at Columbia University designed by Bernard Tschumi, is the most provocative new building in Manhattan in 30 years. It is impossible to overstate the difficulty of convincing a conservative university with a staid 19th century campus to try something different, yet Tschumi managed to get this homage to urban circulation built.

The frameless glass facade appears collapsed because it follows the slope of the stacked ramps that weave up to the top. Like the Guggenheim compressed and reinterpreted in glass and steel, the ramps create an exciting vortex of people moving in different directions, at different levels, with a clear view out to the campus as the backdrop.

Eric Liftin is principal of MESH Architectures, an architectural firm committed to integrating physical and

16

FeƎD 17

Current Hoo-Ha:

The Wireless World
Gadgets and Gizmos
MP3 Rocks the Web
Women in Tech
IPO Outlook
Executive Summary
Wired News Radio
The Wired Index

Animations and More:

Browse All Animations
Plug-in Tester
Submission Guidelines
Quickies
Staff Picks
Sleep Busive
Shinji-san
Baby-Cue

Crash Courses in:

Animation
Info. Architecture
Web Design
Beginning JavaScript
Advanced JavaScript
Site Optimization
Dynamic HTML
Dreamweaver

19

18

YOU are the Songwriter
Are you a musical poet? A budding songwriter in the making? Wait. Don't answer. Because whether or not you realize it, the answer is an emphatic "YES."

Action Painting
Some very funny pictures by Mark Tansey.

Chicago Diary
Is FUN all there is? Mike Albo wishes there was more to life than construction-worker theme bars and Special K parties.

Untitled
Photos by Gregory Crewdson. Welcome to a creepy...

Action Painting BY Mark Tansey   Word

20

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17. New logo for *Feed*, launched this summer. Design firm: Chermayeff & Geismar, New York; designers: Jamie Peloquin, Corine Putz; creative director: Jonathan Alger.

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CONTENTS

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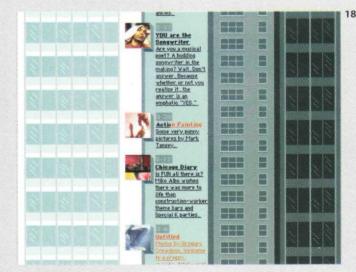Info. Architecture
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proves one of the few exceptions to why—even as the Net expands exponentially—new e-mags are unable to challenge the old guard's popularity: They don't do it very well. *Charged* offers Gen-Xers community and shelter from the deafening noise of cyberspace.

Other zines have begun to understand this clubbiness. Launched in 1995, the publication *Feed* bills itself as a "hybrid of old-fashioned magazine and BBS [bulletin-board system] community." It devotes each monthly issue to a central theme—food, books, art, inventions, DNA—and supplements it with daily columns and essays. With many words and few pictures, *Feed* looks like an earlier version of *Salon*, yet features harder-hitting, lefter-leaning content.

"In the early days, we felt our readers didn't have the patience or bandwidth for heavy graphics," confides *Feed*'s executive editor Stefanie Syman, who with partner Steven Johnson designed the site until 1997. With two iterations of the zine in its past, *Feed* hired Chermayeff & Geismar to design the latest, a sleek scheme unveiled this summer. "We could have done it in an old version of HTML," laughs Syman of the new design. "We're actually simplifying year by year. We've dabbled in multimedia, and will integrate broadband elements at some point. But at its core, *Feed* will always be textual."

In a variation on the theme, in May *Salon* debuted a new design that scrapped its minimal look for a more crowded, gridded page—a layout much like the online news hubs from which it once differentiated itself. After raising the ire of loyal readers, the design was softened a bit, but

MON 5-8
Work: Assistant Professor

SAT 5-6
Talk Inn: Let's All Devolve!

FRI 5-5
Staff Home Page: Sabin

THU 5-4
Horoscopes From The Lavender Planet

WED 5-3
USA Waste: The Ipotex Workstation

TUE 5-2
Toozeday Komix

21

still retains a more button-up look. Editor-in-chief David Talbot says the new scheme reflects the zine's larger interests: to move *Salon* from a leisurely reading experience to a dynamic news operation. "We need to compete with the CNN.coms and NYTimes.coms of the world," he admits. "We're still tweaking the design, but for our business to succeed we've had to sacrifice some old magazine elegance in favor of more practical concerns.

If the major online journals differ in content, focus, and layout, they all have one thing in common: advertising. Whether in headers, gutters, footers, or text, each publication consigns valuable on-screen real estate to ad space and tests the necessary evils of the blinking banner. Most zines are constantly experimenting, and currently favor top- or bottom-of-the-page frames for their ads. "Things

have become more standardized at *Feed*," says Syman, echoing an industry-wide opinion. "We now offer advertisers a set number of possible banner sizes and placements."

With a growing Net audience, the sites' traffic can be a big draw for advertisers. In September 1999, *Salon* attracted 1.9 million unique users; *The Onion*, a humor zine, receives some 500,000 weekly readers. "Last month," says Jack Shafer at *Slate*, "we had 1.8 million unique users—that's knocking on the door of *The Washington Post*." *Slate* suspended a subscription-only campaign after one year, but not all zines operate in the black: *Salon* loses money; *Suck* doesn't. "We keep costs low, have a strong, regular readership, and hire capable salespeople," boasts Joey Anuff. "We don't blow our budget on a zillion editors who generate tons of pages: *Suck* has a slim staff and pays contributors very well. It works out for everyone."

Given the potential pratfalls, that few online zines pull the elements together into a fulfilling experience is not surprising. One site, *Nerve*, attracts its audience with its subject (sex, a tried and tested Internet winner), and keeps them by providing faultless layout, strong prose, and an alluring array of digital trinkets. Passionately designed in crimson and black, the site features weekly columns, personal essays, fiction, and photography—all of it carnal in nature. The zine's mission is to explore the wide territory between erotica and pornography, to excite the brain as well as the genitals. "*Nerve* has become much more than a Web zine," says Genevieve Field, *Nerve*'s editorial director and co-publisher. "It's also

an online community and a publishing company, and we're branching into television and film."

What elevates *Nerve* above the pack is its integration of word, image, and technology. Visitors can read a story by Richard Brautigan, chat, check e-mail, click banners, or browse personal ads; a partnership with Art.com allows them to buy digital photo prints; RealAudio software plays groovy music in the background. Understated and sophisticated, *Nerve* is immersive in the best possible way.

Ironically, *Nerve*'s publisher recently released the first issue of the zine in a print format. You can pick up *Nerve* at the corner newsstand, buy a subscription for your home. "Our allegiance is not to print, nor the Internet, nor any other medium, but to our writers and photographers and their creations," says CEO Rufus Griscom, defending his plan. "We did it backwards. There is no screen glare."

The Irish novelist, George Moore, once claimed that "a man travels the world in search of what he needs and returns home to find it." Has the medium come home? Probably not. Rather, it's come full circle, and just as the Web once beckoned to print purveyors, so will print to the online world. "In the last five years all media has become digital," says *Slate*'s Shafer. "We have one lingua franca. We're finally recognizing the fact that everything is an iteration of a digital culture." Soon, schoolkids seeking prom duds may sell a new kind of subscription: access to your local ISP.

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Colin Berry lives in San Francisco and writes about the arts, music, and culture.