LINKS, STORYTELLING AND COMMERCE
by Jerry Michalski

In the 19th Century, French writer Alcanter de Brahm proposed a new punctu-ation mark to complement the exclamation point and question mark, called the point d’ironie – the point of irony. One interpretation of the mark’s appearance is of a reversed question mark. The point d’ironie was intended to amplify writers’ expressive powers, but as you can tell, it didn’t even make it into the French language, let alone beyond.

The closest thing to it in modern Western culture may be the “wink” emoti-con, which is usually typed as a semicolon followed by a right parenthesis (can you feel Strunk & White shudder?). Unfortunately, the poor wink emo-ti-con is often misused and misinterpreted. Although ori-gin-ally intended to convey irony, it is often written or read as an ordinary smile or a mis-chiev-ous grin. Double irony, perhaps.

Or maybe the point d’ironie has just found a different form of expres-sion in modern times. In his insightful book, Interface Culture: How New Tech-no-logy Transforms the Way We Create and Communicate, Steven Johnson analy-zes an issue of Suck, one of the first popular Web zines (started by some HotWired programmers as a lark, Suck was bought by Wired in March, 1996; Johnson is editor-in-chief and co-publisher of Feed, a smart New York-based Web zine).

Johnson's analysis focuses on the ways that Suck explores the power of hypertext links to convey its message and establish its attitude. Like the pop-up balloons in VH-1’s Pop-Up Videos, the links in Suck add context, poke fun at the subject matter and sometimes at the authors themselves. At its best, Suck uses links in clever ways that twist and sometimes com-pletely subvert the text, revealing the true meaning of the document.

Johnson believes that Suck’s innova-tive use of links greatly increases its drawing power. He points out that Suck’s innovations operate more at the level of words and sentences, rather than at the narrative level, where early hypertext hype claimed links would cause the most transformation.

Of course, Suck isn’t the only Website that’s using links in nifty ways that enhance the content they accompany. Many authors are discovering
deep value in the thoughtful use of links, a train of thought we'll pick up again shortly.

A different setting

Clever use of links is also a hallmark of good Web commerce. Although the idea of a link's appraised value or book value may make you chuckle, some links have gotten expensive. The early gift economy of reciprocal linking between Webmasters has evolved into high-stakes link deals between major traffic-drawing sites and services. AOL, with the biggest captive audience in cyberspace, has set the pace over the past year.

A recent incident highlighted the tensions building as link uses multiply and link values rise. Last April, Ticketmaster sued Microsoft's Sidewalk for linking into the middle of its ticket-buying site, bypassing ads that Ticketmaster wanted visitors to see. Whether a site can protect itself against this kind of use remains to be seen.

Despite these unresolved boundary- and rights-defining issues, the market for Web banner ads is growing. Ads are, of course, enticements to go somewhere and buy something. In the ad business and many others, the literary and commercial uses of links intersect, which is the topic of this month's issue of Release 1.0.

Stepping back

Last month, our focus on links was quite personal. We explored ways to manage the torrent of links we see every day and better ways to express the linkages among things we know, which took us toward bookmark-management utilities and concept-mapping applications. This month, we take a step back from the personal productivity focus and discuss the narrative and economic value of links, connected by a short look at where links may be headed.

Our scope is intentionally broad, so that we may imagine the link's effect on the future of storytelling, commerce and entertainment. How will links change the way we express ourselves? As we get more accustomed to them, will we perceive our environment differently? Banner ads are the most primitive use of links in commerce. How will other kinds of links be used to create lasting and profitable business relationships?

Two recurring themes

In examining links' narrative and commercial lives, two interrelated concepts keep surfacing.

* Local order. Your main heading is probably someone else's footnote. In fact, that was one of the original principles of hypertext, and it's one of the Web's most magical attributes. When you follow a link from one author's Website to another's, you understand that you're moving from one concept of order to another that may be quite different. It works: Right away, you start to look for the new site's principles of order. Everything is relative; context is everything.
A new fabric. By putting links where they make sense, particularly commercial sense, Website creators are collectively weaving a new fabric for business and private life in cyberspace. For example, when you shop for a car on Classifieds2000, several buttons appear under the list of cars for sale. One links to a service that will check whether the vehicle you want to buy has ever been stolen, wrecked or recalled; another links to an escrow service; a third will remind you periodically to get oil changes and tune-ups. Leaving relevant, useful things at hand is the key. Smart businesses are creating such links everywhere.

The new fabric has local order. Anywhere a question arises or a transaction takes place, Website owners can offer links that answer the question or lead to services that complement the transaction. Each scene can be complete — and completely useful.

STRUCTURE

Before stepping into the heady space of experimental fiction and interactive entertainment, it's instructive to zoom in close and describe the ways that links are used on Web pages and the wide variety of functions they perform.

Under the microscope

Depending how they are implemented, links can be subtle or obvious, helpful or intrusive. The subtlest ones are barely distinguishable from their text. They are inline tags that use colors only a few shades different from the main text and perhaps turn the same color as the main text once they've been followed, so they disappear altogether.

Often it makes sense to be more explicit, either with a phrase ("Click here for story"), an icon next to the linked words or the URL spelled out. Sometimes, links are hidden altogether. Discovering the links — and the conceptual links between them — is a major element of the content. Many children's Websites and software titles use this scavenger-hunt approach, conditioning a generation of kids to click on anything.1 The best-selling grown-up games Myst and Riven are models of cannily hidden links. They are not narratives, but rather spaces that contain evidence.

A link can invoke changes in the current page, re-rendering it in a different form or with new links. If you click on a column heading in a Classifieds2000 table, the table will sort by that heading. An icon on ZDNet's AnchorDesk "turns on" the site's WordLink feature, which highlights technology terms that might stump industry novices in boldface and links them to its "Webopaedia," a glossary of technology terms. Another icon reformats the current page to be more printer-friendly. A third puts the current ar-
article into an e-mail message so you can send it to colleagues. A fourth sends you to the discussion area. The box below offers a few more ways to use links.

### A few examples

There are many ways to use links in a hypertext work. Here are three brief examples that are neither extreme nor exhaustive of the genre. Two involve personal narratives; one is educational.

**Less is more: Gentle links that create context.** Abbe Don is a multimedia developer and researcher at Interval Research. Her passion is using hypertext to record, preserve and share family histories. One of her works in progress, Bubbe’s Back Porch, is built around a series of stories her grandmother told her. Don also solicits visit-ors’ stories about their grandparents and posts them alongside photographs sent to her.

In this site, Don generally keeps narrative and links separate. The story is primary and takes center stage; links are collected under descriptive terms (e.g., journey stories, grandmother stories, romance stories) and set above or next to the main text, where they guide visitors to related parts of the site. The overall effect is peaceful and intimate.

**Voyeur: Links that expose a life.** Swarthmore undergraduate Justin Hall is putting his family history on the Web, too — the moment it happens. Hall, who began his Web presence several years ago as Justin’s Links from the Underground, treats his Website as his private journal. No, he doesn't wear cyborg gear that publishes whatever he's looking at to the Web in real time. Instead, he reports what is on his mind, and his daily writings can have an intimacy and an immediacy that's startling — especially if you're the person he’s talking about.

The people in Hall’s life invariably end up featured in his Web, often in a level of detail that most people would rather forgo seeing in front of millions of readers. Needless to say, Hall's Web experiment has changed many of his personal relationships. Hall mixes story-telling with artistic expression. Some of his pages have many links embedded in the text. Others are pure diary.

**Dense pack: Short texts heavily larded with links.** The Astronomy Picture of the Day provides what its title announces: One image each day, with a one-paragraph description written by an astronomer or historian. That paragraph is usually chock full of links that explain what the picture illustrates, where the observatory is, and what technology was used to capture the image. The daily paragraph is invariably informative and easy to read. You can dig as deep as you want by following the links. The photos of planets, galaxies and nebulae make excellent computer wallpaper, too.
All the news that's print to fit

Print and broadcast media constantly face space and time constraints. There are only so many pages to print or minutes to fill. Not so on the Web, where time and space are limited mostly by viewer's attention spans and publishers' disk space and bandwidth. This allows for many nifty features, such as news stories that point to their complete source materials.

Links can do far more than add nuances or point to background information. They can invoke applications, send messages and poll resources such as Webcams, vending machines and remote meteorology gear. The problem is that there is too much to choose from. Expertise with links should be valued as a rare skill.

Off the Net, links have to be spelled out, which used to be either cool or puzzling but is beginning to look merely awkward. Some technology trade publications list all the links that occur on a page at the bottom of the page, for quick reference. Our own Metaphors and the Net issue, available in full text on the Web, exhibits an interesting duality: Because it contains so much text, it is easier to read on paper; yet it is easier to follow and understand online, because all the links it contains are examples of the seven metaphors (see Release 1.0, 4-97 and www.edventure.com/pods).

We was framed!

Since links usually send visitors somewhere else, Web designers have developed ways of not losing their audience. Some links pop linked Websites into a new window, leaving their own window undisturbed. Others use frames to enfold the foreign Web matter.

This can make the foreign Websites angry, as Total News found out last February, when it was sued by six media giants for exploiting their works without permission. CNN, Dow Jones & Co., Time, Times Mirror, Reuters New Media and the Washington Post didn't like Total News republishing their content inside its own frames, effectively taking credit for the content without attribution to its real sources.

But careful use of frames can also greatly enhance content. Footnotes and references can be placed right next to source text, facilitating comparison and analysis. Frames will soon be common in television, too, as programmers begin to broadcast data alongside their traditional fare.

Where to?

Most links don't tell you much about what's beyond them. Following them requires a small act of faith. Holding your mouse over a link may help you infer something about the link's destination, as long as you can decipher URLs. If the link's author was considerate, the link may have a descriptive hint that pops up when you hover over it, but that is the exception, not the rule. When several links on a site disappoint you, you stop following them.

A few Websites use intermediate "buffer" pages between their links and the destination sites. The buffer pages create a more explicit transition and give the Website a chance to describe the destination in more detail, as well as to disclaim responsibility for what comes next.
Inbound visitors pose a special problem: Web authors seldom know where the visitors are coming from or what they know. This has motivated authors to pay special attention to navigation controls and to create text that can stand alone as much as possible so it is usable in a variety of contexts.

**Bringing things to life**

Links make the things they touch active. The linked items become footnotes on steroids, callouts with life, margin notes that bite. In many places, this news hasn't sunk in yet. For example, Net-connected reference works don't have to be static. Are you studying New York City? Why not link to a live Webcam in SoHo, the Rockefeller Center or 104 Fifth Avenue (from which you could have seen live footage of the two-story, gas-leak flame in the middle of Fifth)? Are you learning about stock markets? Why not see the New York Stock Exchange and Hang Seng trading floors, run a live stock-ticker applet with real data, play with portfolios on Motley Fool or dive into the most recent news about securities trading?

A link can also launch a communication event. Last January, in Conversation on the Net, we suggested a new HTML tag called CommunicateWith, which would invoke a variety of conversation tools — real-time and deferred — such as e-mail, IP telephony, voicemail, multi-party chat and videoconferencing. With such a tag, any Web document could become a platform for a conversation. Add markup tools, and distributed work groups could visit pages and discuss them as they point to and annotate them.

**Boundary issues**

The Ticketmaster and Total News lawsuits illustrate how links span and sometimes compromise boundaries, but there are other ways that links test boundaries. For example, think of a sentence written in an outline on your computer's hard disk, on your local-area network, on your company's intranet and on the global Internet. Many of the boundaries we perceive in this situation are dictated by the physical elements of our information infrastructure: documents, drives, computers and networks. But these boundaries have little to do with organizing information. The boundaries that matter more are access privileges and relevance.

In an environment such as the Web, links that point directly to sufficiently small elements cut through all the artificially imposed hierarchies and boundaries. One click can send you to a specific sentence in a document anywhere else in the world, and you may not notice what happened. (This point is well made by The Brain, Natrificial's software for organizing and linking thoughts, which we described last month.) This raises interesting questions. How small should a unit of information be, and what should its relationship to other units be? Is document size now a moot question because we have a way of bypassing the arbitrary boundaries of the information environment? How might this change the tools we use to capture, create, store and share information? What does "local" really mean?

**Web rings, zines and local order**

On a somewhat larger scale, Web rings are great examples of the Web's loose, local structure. In a Web ring, sites form an expanding virtual circle with
a common context. Each member site puts a Web-ring navigator at the bottom of its home page. The navigator lets visitors move forward or backward in the ring in a variety of ways.

There are Web rings for an amazing variety of topics, from poetry to bass fishing, Webcams and Buddhist thought (Ringworld offers a useful directory of Web rings; see Resources, page 16). All sites participating in a Web ring are equals, each has its own perspective and aesthetic. The ring construct brings a lot of structure to these relationships.

Many people participating in Web rings are among the millions of Web home-steaders inside Tripod, GeoCities, Angelfire and other mass-market Web-hosting services. Each person's site has its own aesthetic and structure. One notable exception is The Mining Company, which imposes strict visual and structural rules on its members so that visitors won't be thrown by confusing layouts and bad design.

Another source of grass-roots local order is the web of personal referrals between Websites. As more people build zines online to publish their point of view, host conversations or run their business, they will naturally weave pointers to trusted resources (see Release 1.0, 6-95, for more on zines). These loose alliances of people with judgment, access or special hosting skills will increasingly attract a following that is not well served by mass customization at mass-market Websites.

The macroscope: literature and literacy

A major feature of modern literature (some would call it a bug) is that readers must often work hard to infer the links that authors left in the work. There are many landmark link-laden works, including Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet, Julio Cortazar's Hopscotch and Alan Ayckbourn's dramatic trilogy, The Norman Conquests. The first page of Hopscotch has a list of numbers, which is the recommended order for reading the chapters. But you can read them in any order you like.

The Alexandria Quartet and The Norman Conquests are complex works that cover the same time frame. Each of the first three books in Durrell's work takes a different character's perspective of the same story; the last book is a more traditional third-person narrative of the story. Ayckbourn's three plays occur in different rooms of the same house (the dining room, living room and garden). They are traditionally played serially, and audiences quickly realize that an exit in one play is an entrance in the other, an elegant literary link.

What if the pieces ran in parallel? In some experimental plays such as Tamara and Tony & Tina's Wedding, (and in hosted murder mysteries), actors and audience walk around together inside a set that is a venue, not just a stage. The actors go about their business concurrently, much as they might in real life. When two actors part, audience members have to decide which actor to follow, which creates dramatic tension and stimulates cooperation ("You follow him, I'll follow her and we'll compare notes later"). You know you're going to miss something; your decisions affect how much.

This is less true on the Web, where you can bookmark Web addresses and return to places when you want to. Nevertheless, the Web's immensity
creates similar tension. Many Web voyagers despair that they will never
find their way back to things they liked or worse, that there is always
something better lurking just out of reach.

Paging Dr. Weaver

It’s cliche but true to say that it took many years for filmmakers to
evolve their own vocabulary and unique bag of tricks. Web developers are
just beginning to create the Net’s equivalents of cuts, fades, pans and dis-
solves, never mind modern-day special effects.

Janet Murray is an interactive media designer and theorist who teaches at
MIT and recently wrote Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in
Cyberspace, in which she surveys storytelling structures from classical lit-
erature to online role-playing games in order to identify the particular
pleasures of interactive narrative.

Among other projects, Murray is working with IBM to model new forms of drama
with parallel action for digital TV using IBM’s HotVideo application, which
lets video creators define click-sensitive areas in a digital video stream.

Imagine an episode of ER in which Dr. Weaver leaves the room and you’re
given the ability to follow her to another scene or stay put (and imagine
the production costs if every episode of ER had four parallel tracks!).
This is not an interactive plot, where the audience votes on the outcome,
but rather a parallel plot, where any audience member can jump between the
plot lines.

New forms of expression?

MTV elevated the jump cut from a mere tool to an industry. It also created
speculation that the next generation of kids would grow up MTV-literate:
They would feast on the flurry of bits heading toward them, weaving meta-
content of their own by surfing channels.

We disagree, at the risk of sounding crotchety. Coming generations are
likely to be comfortable with far more media saturation than the generations
currently at the helm, but MTV is what you get when you take video expres-
sion to an extreme and then institutionalize it. Even it has found moder-
ation. Note MTV Unplugged and the more sedate VH-1 for the older crowd.
The link is a more useful herald of future literacy than the broadband,
interactive multimedia on demand that an MTV-dominated world might promise.

Even the language used to describe cyberspace borrows from TV and holds us
back in subtle ways. For example, in Interface Culture, Johnson explains
why “surfing” is a terrible term for traversing the Web:

“A channel surfer hops back and forth between different channels
because she’s bored. A Web surfer clicks on a link because she’s
interested.... Channel surfing is all about the thrill of surfaces.
Web surfing is about depth, about wanting to know more. But if you
can’t see that distinction, if you imagine the mouse as the poor
cousin of the remote control, then of course you’re not going to
create documents that fully exploit the power of hypertext.”
Changing ideas of literacy

Modern literacy will require people to master some new concepts. For example, in a few years, everyone will probably need to know the difference between inclusion by reference and by value. Sun's interface wizard Jakob Nielsen believes it'll be hard to reach a new kind of literacy if people don't start creating specifically for the new medium. "Everyone's making the same mistakes," he says. "They're not writing for online. Kids should be collaborating on Websites, learning how to use the medium to express themselves."

To shape the new medium, everyone needs to be able to build things with and in it. It's no longer enough to delegate new-media content creation to a few people. Soon Web development will be more common than word processing and e-mail, except nobody will know what they're doing is Web development. They'll be worried about how to express themselves.
Clearly, Website developers have already found a lot of ways to use links to enrich their sites and the Web as a whole. This section explores some of the functionality that people would like to see added to Web links.

Although few people avail themselves of the feature, most Web search engines offer searching by link content. Head for the site's advanced-search section, enter a query that starts with "url:" or "link:", and the system will return Web pages whose links contain the keywords you entered after the first term. This is one way to see how many Websites point to yours.

Link types

The principal request made about links is for link types, so that the links themselves could carry information such as who created them and when, or how much traffic they see on average. The list of variables people would like to track is lengthy. Is this link paid for or free? What kind of relationship does it represent between the linked sites: Is one the other's supplier? Competitor? Owner? Brother?

Site ratings (see Release 1.0, 12-96) could be represented in links to those sites, so client-based content filters could simply skip them, rather than responding to a Web-page request with an error message. Inappropriate links could be turned to plain text or elided altogether.

Then users could do queries based on the link types. You might say, "Show me the Web with only links that Lawrence Lessig has traversed, or only those that Zoe and Phil rated as of high quality."

Who links there?

Another common request is bi-directionality or backlinks. This not only involves knowing who is at the other end of a link, but also being able to traverse the link backward. The idea was described early on as "transclusion" by Ted Nelson as part of his Xanadu Project.

It was designed around the way scientists and academics do scholarly research. The problem is that articles, once published on paper, never get updated with knowledge of future works that refer to them. Being pointed to means you're popular, and Nelson's networked Xanadu vision included a flat-rate payment system based on traffic volumes.

The Foresight Institute, which has roots in the Xanadu project, claims that the current Web is only a partial implementation of a real hypertext system. Foresight proposes a commercial system called HyperWave in its stead. HyperWave is based on an older project, Hyper-G, which includes features such as transclusion and itself has roots in Xanadu.

Getting it right

The question is where to put the added functionality. There seem to be many ways to get desired functionality through clever use of cookie files, search engines, in-line parameters, dynamically generated Web pages and other tools at hand. Also, XML is on its way, which should offer many ways to add meta-data to a Website.
We're leery of any proposal that continues to overload the Web or make it more complex than it needs to be. An important reason that the Web works so well is that it was under-engineered from the start. How much information should be put into the infrastructure, and how much should simply be in the content? How much freight should links carry?

The W3C's work

Despite all these wishes and speculations, today URLs are still fixed path names. If you move or rename the files they point to, links break. If you change the servers the files are on, the links can break, too. It's amazing how well the system works, given how fragile its underpinnings are.

There are multiple initiatives afoot to improve URLs. The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is the locus for most of them. Exploring them all is beyond the scope of this issue, but here is a taste.

One project will create Uniform Resource Names, which add a layer of redirection and insulate links from random file changes. URNs would be registered at naming authorities that are guaranteed to stay in operation for a long time. As links change, their owners would update the URN directory; any links that pointed to the URNs would continue to work. Of course, this would introduce a round-trip query to resolve each link address, an expensive tradeoff.

Another project will generalize URLs so they work not only with Internet protocols (e.g., http, ftp) and local file systems, but also with other services and networks.

Sheer speculation

How about inventing a few new links? AOL could create URLs that would point into its service from the Web. For example, aol://times/politics/5:35 could point to the 35th message in the 5th topic of the politics folder in the New York Times area of AOL. AOL subscribers would jump right to it transparently; non-subscribers could be offered a guest pass or a billing option.

Phone numbers are links, too. They're just not as easy to follow (and "press '1' to dial the number automatically" costs money!). People have experimented with embedding phone and fax numbers in URLs (see Carl Malamud's Internet fax service, Release 1.0, 2-94).

Today a phone number can link you to a live tech support person through a "call me now" button on a Web page, but you do have to type in your phone number (see Release 1.0, 10-96). As IP telephony grows (slowly), and applications such as e-mail and buddy lists become ubiquitous, the addresses behind our names should disappear into the infrastructure. Unfortunately, that disappearance will probably take at least a decade to occur.
LINK ECONOMICS

Links are one of the primary tools in the re-weaving of our commercial and communication fabric. In the physical world, things are often inconveniently separate, and they can be kept separate by people who don't want them seen together. The car dealer who doesn't want you to know he's selling you a car for twice what it's worth has little interest in leaving the Kelly Blue Book on the showroom coffee table.

Online, the most useful things can be left at hand as links, and if one vendor won't point you to a resource that will get you a better deal, the next vendor probably will. One reason we appreciate online market makers is that their links are likely to be more trustworthy than a single vendor's (see Release 1.0, 7-97 and 9-97).

Early in the Web's development, trading links was a normal courtesy, a standard part of Web etiquette. You would put a link to someone's site if it was relevant to your visitors, and vice versa. Scott Heiferman, CEO of i-traffic, recounts with some nostalgia how his company popularized the Netscape Now campaign on the Net by sending batches of T-shirts to Webmasters in exchange for buttons on their home pages and use of certain tags. Then Microsoft got wise to the process and raised the stakes.

It didn't take long for links to get valuable. If a Website got a lot of traffic, it could charge for pointing to those less fortunate. Web ads gave that phenomenon a price tag, though not a big one. Now the emergence of brand names that want to become mass-market portals is making link value even more visible.

Scarcity

In principle, Web ad space can't ever be sold out. It's infinite. Well, sort of. Two things limit that statement. The first is that the relevant measure is sellable ad space, which means that sites have to have a lot of traffic (alone or in aggregate), they have to be appropriate to advertisers (so their ads don't show up in undesirable contexts) and they have to be set up to collect, report and act on visitor statistics (so their ads show up in front of the best prospects).

The other limitation is the perception of scarcity. Companies that want Web ads to succeed are suggesting that the market is even smaller, creating two tiers of sites in advertisers' eyes. The first tier has only the top 20 or 30 trafficked Websites, plus AOL. Everyone else is in the second tier. If this movement succeeds, it will create the perception of a finite amount of sellable ad space on the Web, which will make the once-limitless Web seem far more similar to TV, where there are a fixed number of minutes in a week and channels in a network.

Portals and exclusive placement

Yahoo!, Excite, MSN and even Netscape have realized that their brands' popularity puts them in contention to challenge AOL as the most popular portal to cyberspace, potentially wielding enormous power.

What these players really want is to turn their visitors into members. If they can become the default link for huge audiences, they can then market
other services such as long-distance phone service to them. With this potential payoff in mind, the fight to be the exclusive supplier of anything for these portals has created an atmosphere of scarcity, too.

The problem is that today, none of those challengers have a feature set that can match AOL's. To catch up, they are all racing toward roughly the same set of features, which include free e-mail, shopping, directories, a search engine and broadcast channels.

Being on the home page or welcome screen of a popular Website or online service can be more lucrative than being on an end cap display in a supermarket or on the back page of the local newspaper. But that's not the only desirable real estate. Relevance to the buyer can raise the value of pages deep inside a Website or online service. For example, companies now pay to have their banners or icons put on search-results pages for topics related to items they sell. The way to increase relevance is to know your visitors and pay attention to the current content.

What to pay for

Although most Web ads are paid for today in the cost-per-thousand-exposures (CPM) measure that is common in the print and broadcast worlds, this may change over the next year or two.

Consider that print and broadcast ads are extremely indirect calls to action. The buyer still has to go to a store and remember to buy the item, or pick up a phone and go through the ordering process. Online, ad links not only take buyers directly to the goods, they can consummate the purchases. They can act as point-of-sale devices.

If you apply this logic to payments made, then CPM is the cost of a specific amount of behavioral conditioning administered to an audience. Cost per click-through measures hot sales prospects or maybe just well-lured passers-by with little serious intention to buy. The third, heretical position is to pay only when visitors actually make a purchase. That's called a commission, and it suits the Web well. However, pigs may well fly before media companies allow the Web market to turn to commissions.

Outsourcing

Instead of publishing text directions to your office and drawing a mediocre map, consider a link to a Web mapping service such as MapQuest or Vicinity. It can give visitors to your Website driving directions to your office, including zoomable maps and potentially even traffic and weather conditions (make sure it gives good directions to your place, first!).

Sun's Nielsen points out that this is a novel form of outsourcing. It creates a symbiotic relationship between the sites: You can give more sophisticated directions, which should benefit your physical visitors; the mapping site (or other outsourcer) gets more hits and share of mind.

Depending how the relationship is implemented, this can turn the service provider into an embedded function instead of a destination. The benefits that might accrue from such symbiotic relationships should also motivate Web developers to create useful landmarks on their sites that invite linking.
Affiliate programs are another great way to build symbiotic relationships as well as grass-roots links. They are the network-marketing arrangements of the 21st Century — literally.

Our favorite is the Amazon Associate Program, which encourages anyone with a Website to register, recommend books and collect a 15 percent commission on the sales. CDnow's Cosmic Credit program offers only five percent, and only for use on CDnow goods. Manhattan-based LinkShare has built a network of merchants offering commissions.

Constant comment

Context and annotations change links' value. A link in someone’s “cool sites” list is different from a link in her “worst sites ever seen” list — and different again if it's Phyllis Schlafly or Madonna. When Magellan’s editors add Website summaries and ratings or Yahoo!’s editors place a site in its taxonomy of terms, they add credibility and value to those links.

Or so we hope. Our experience is that editors are hard-pressed to evaluate, let alone write short summaries that can serve all the possible consti-tu-en-cies that need judgments about Websites. Yahoo! seems less useful the more sites it includes. When you reach a leaf node, there are often a hundred undifferentiated entries, and Yahoo! doesn't offer relevance rankings. Often, we would much rather find more focused domain experts who point us in directions we resonate with through their zines.

Superchat

It's puzzling that commerce and conversation are being kept so separate in cyberspace. Even on overtly commercial sites, the chat rooms are off in the back somewhere and the catalog is front and center. If it's presented as an option, there's nothing wrong with mixing the two.

For example, Nike decides that Nora is an influencer in her community because she's the captain of her school's basketball team, so it gives her 20 digital coupons good for 15 percent off Nike goods at any Foot Locker store. The first 20 people who drop the digital coupons on Nike's home page get the discount, which would motivate people to move quickly to redeem the coupons. Nora would distribute the coupons to friends by posting some to a discussion board or in a chat room. Today, neither the coupons nor the exchange mechanism in chat rooms exists.

Here's another idea; call it enhanced chat mode. It's an optional feature that, when turned on, lets the chat server parse everyone's input. If someone mentions a song or a group, the system pops a link to their discography or CDs on sale. The link is right next to the occurrence in the text and scrolls off the screen with the text. You can save it with your bookmarks if you want. If you mention a Ford Explorer, the system could pre-package a query to new- or used-car sales sites. The parser could search for whatever its users wanted.

Shepherd or Zen master?

The way a commercial site uses links is a measure of its trustworthiness and intelligence. Does it turn product names into links, so prospective
customers can inform themselves about the products? Does it offer links to
independent external sources such as industry quality surveys, Consumer
Reports or the Kelly Blue Book, or just to links that suck people into up-
selling opportunities?

Whether to link away from a site is a serious policy question for Website
designers. Some companies insist on being shepherds, constantly herding
their visitors back into the Website. Others play Zen master, confident in
the knowledge that if they let go of their pupils, they will return for
greater wisdom — or at least for sweepstakes giveaways.

Sending people away is mostly what Web ad banners do, and it’s a real
di-lemma for Website owners. They need the banners to fund the site, but if
the banners are successful, they suck traffic off the site.

One company that has worked hard to transact in situ is First Virtual
Holdings (see Release 1.0, 1-95). First Virtual’s Java banners can in many
cases collect data, interact with servers and complete transactions, all
without leaving the page that the banner is on. That’s a powerful induce-
ment for site owners.

Other control issues

The Ticketmaster and Total News cases are at the leading edge of many cases
that will set precedents for important issues such as whether links are
copyrighted materials, private property or in some other way protectable.

Our take is that publishing on the Web involves an implicit agreement to
allow others to point to your materials. If you take steps to block unwant-
ed access by adding passwords, that’s your prerogative, but openly published
materials are there for everyone.

Control of the right to link could turn out to be as important as control
over spectrum turned out to be in TV and radio, which were heralded as
democratizing media with all the fanfare we currently hear in descriptions
of the Net’s potential.

If link authoring could somehow be blocked or constrained, the nature of the
Web would be changed permanently. We can’t envision a scenario in which
this happens, but in the early days of radio nobody would have predicted the
way pirate (low-power) radio stations are persecuted today.

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COMING SOON

· Identity management.
· Online governance.
· Market-based security.
· And much more... (If you know of any
good examples of the categories listed
above, please let us know.)
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For further reading:


All Websites mentioned follow the form www.companyname.com, except for:

Bubbe's Back Porch www.bubbe.com
Feed www.feedmag.com
Foresight Institute www.foresight.org
Hamlet on the Holodeck web.mit.edu/jhmurray/www.HOH.html
Justin Hall's Links from the Underground www.justin.org
Ringworld (index of Web rings) www.webring.org/ringworld
Total News www.totalnews.net
ZDNet's AnchorDesk www.zdnet.com/anchordesk/

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