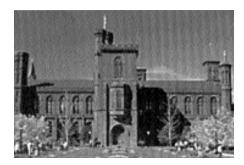
## Marc Pachter

# The World, the Web, and the Smithsonian

nce I would have said that a task as ambitious as creating a vast, useful and consistent Smithsonian presence on the Internet was inherently impossible. This has nothing to do with the complexity of, and consistent Smithsonian presence on the Internet was inherently impossible. This has nothing to do with the complexity of available technology. Indeed, online technology has progressed to the point that it can be said any organization can master it. The problem faced by the Smithsonian is organizational **complexity**, organizational **culture**, and organizational



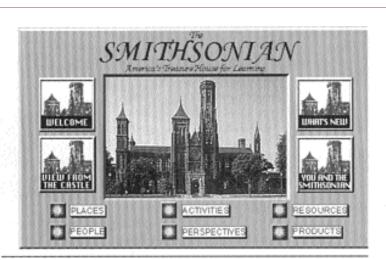
tise, or embedded assumptions to discussions about online presentations.

There may be doubts among some about the usefulness of such efforts-we are still in the age of faith, not certainty about the potential use of new enormous visual databases flashed around the world in an instant-but there is also remarkably little smugness about the right and the wrong way to proceed. This leads to a refreshing openness among participants, genuine discussions about needs and solutions to needs, and even a certain communal spirit which comes of all being in it together.

The central Smithsonian's World WideWeb home page represents the Institution's first guess as to the routes of information sought by potential users of the 20-hour-long site.

will. The Smithsonian, seen from the outside, appears to be a tightly coordinated institution. In fact, it is constructed from such an amazing variety of resource bases (having both public and private funding derived from many different sources), origins (each museum and research center emerged out of different historical circumstances and governance structures), and intellectual focuses (it harbors myriad disciplines and tasks within the larger groupings of science, history, and art) that any effort to create a unified strategy of presentation is, to say the least, bound to be an adventure.

Why did the effort work in this case? First of all, it must be said that electronic projects of any kind evoke a necessary and refreshing humility from most participants in the planning process. Very few people in our line of work bring long histories, recognized exper-



If this server is busy, you may want to visit the Smithsonian mirror site in California

## Welcome

A brief video clip of the Secretary welcomes you to the Web. Audio only is also available but requires software t simultaneously run audio and visual information or an audio player. Links to an <u>Overview of Smithsmian Musi</u> description of <u>Navigating the Electronic Smithsonian</u>, a search capability to explore all aspects of the Iostitution; a <u>Encyclogodia Smithsmian</u> (answers to frequently asked questions about the Smithsonian and other topics), and information on <u>Planting a Visit to the Smithsonian</u> or available here as well.

### View from the Castle

This section contains a monthly message from the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution on topical issues. It n viewed either as text or played with software that has audio capability. Links to <u>Smithsonian News Releases</u> and <u>Secretary's Speeches can also be viewed</u>.



This section includes information on <u>new and temporary exhibitions</u> for most of the Smithsonian's museums an galleries and the National Zoo. It also includes <u>new and recent additions</u> to the Smithsonian Web Server. And a s which describes Electronic Smithsonian. Finally, <u>press releases</u> from the Smithsonian are available electronically The Smithsonian's first comprehensive experiment in the development of an information-rich and user-friendly home page was conducted by its National Museum of American Art in a two-year relationship with a commercial online service. In the Smithsonian's case at least, humility came into play even in central administrative planning. There was, blessedly, no rigid master plan from on-high which began the process of our online conversion. From the first, it was recognized that we had to tap into the energy and intuition of those staff around the Institution who had long been testing the possibilities of the Net and other electronic options.

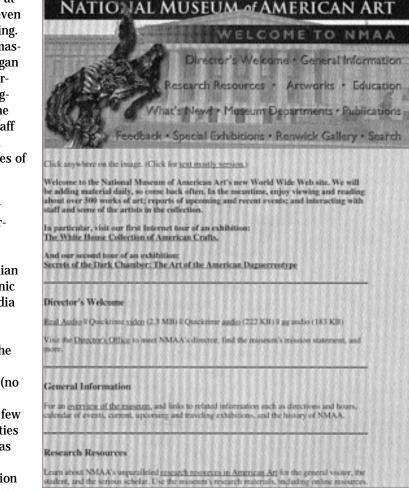
A full year before January 1995, when we began our determined effort to create an all-Smithsonian Website, we had invited anyone in the Smithsonian community who had an electronic project to a staff-only multi-media fair. This was facilitated by the resourceful director of our Information Age exhibition at the National Museum of American History. The effect was electric (no pun intended).

We also benefited from a few years of testing online possibilities with such commercial services as America Online (AOL) and CompuServe. The AOL connection was particularly useful as a galva-

nizing force because, although coordination was centered in a pan-Institutional office, experience was monitored by a users' group from throughout the Institution. The high morale within the group, which owed much to the sensitive coordination of our Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, led to a voluntary decision to return whatever profits came to individual units from AOL participation into a common pool to improve online strategies.

In all organizations there are pace-setters. In ours, there were a number who, to paraphrase a country song, "were online before online was cool." Chief honors go to the National Museum of American Art, whose director saw the possibilities of building new audiences and therefore directed museum energies and resources to understanding the programmatic uses of the medium.

It wasn't enough to get technical knowledge; the curators had to be involved from the first. On the science side, the curator of a major exhibition, Ocean Planet, decided to develop a parallel online exhibition, which would test the differences between the presentation of information in physical space and cyberspace. In this she was aided by a dedicated NASA volunteer. Fundamental to both



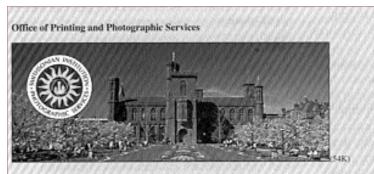
pioneering strategies was the recognition that this was the first medium whose presentations were continually affected by the interaction of the audience.

To bring these vital and disparate experiments together to create the dense Smithsonian Website launched in May 1995, took a number of happy circumstances. The first was the arrival of the 10th Smithsonian Secretary, I. Michael Heyman, who, when installed in September 1994, announced his commitment to the electronic transformation of the Institution. To underscore his commitment, he appointed a Counselor for Electronic Communications, whose 20-year background in the Institution was programmatic, not technical, and asked him to work directly with the newly arrived Senior Information Officer, the first in the Smithsonian's history.

Within months the decision to create a pan-Institutional Website was made. How fast this could be achieved depended in part on how quickly the Secretary's mandate permeated the institutional culture; but the toughest issue was finding a lead figure to guide the process of constructing both a central home page and home pages for the many museums, centers, and offices, which were all in dramatically different stages of preparation. The National Science Foundation's "gift" of a senior staffer to marshal the effort answered this need. As a bonus, Peter House brought to the task unflagging energy and an outsider's perspective on the vagaries of our organizational culture. His questions helped establish frameworks for the Institution's construction of home pages that answered not only our needs but also those of potential users.

The Smithsonian's first systematic attempt to make available a large database of graphic images was launched by its photography unit, the Office of Printing and Photographic Services. It is best to think of the first presentation of a Website as a comprehensive first impression of an institution. The more planning that is done in advance, the richer the experience of the user and the more likely a return visit and the possibility of "feedback." The second and opposite temptation, to stand pat with all the information initially presented and not to perpetually update and revise, must also be resisted. A Website is a form of publication not entirely fluid nor entirely fixed.

Any systematic attempt to go online forces an organization to reexamine its bank of published materials. Things that sit on the shelf can



Smithsonian Photographs Online

Making the photographic resources of the Smithsonian available on picture pages.

#### Current Feature

 Give Mg A Home Where the Butterflies Roam, Michelle Baker's photographs of butterflies attra the National Museum of Natural History's new Batterfly Habitat Garden, plus the story of how the musfirst outdoor exhibit was built.

#### Contents

- Science Defined by the Hands of a Book Artist, Reprinted from the Jane, 1995 Smithsonian Magazine. Photographs by Rick Vargas and Richard Strauss.
- A unique approach to <u>Studying the Jungle Canopy in Parama</u> the <u>Stutisticonian's Tropical Research laspioneers a valie Canopy Access System using a modified tower construction crane. Including a <u>personal</u> access<u>t</u>, by phonographer <u>Carl Hansen</u> on how he phonographed the crane and scientists working there, a as a <u>portificito of phonographs</u> takon from the erane's unique perspective.
  </u>
- A slide show of award-winning photographs by Smithsonian photographers (Optimized for Netscape Award-winning photographs by Smithsonian photographers, (Regular www page)
- · Photographs from the Dinosaur Hall of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History.
- A documentary photography project: <u>Reflections on the Wall: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial by the</u> photographers of the Smithsonian's Office of Printing & Photographic Services
- Faneral services for former Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Barger in Washington's National Presbygerian Church. Burger, also former Chancellor of the Smithsonian Board of Regents, was culogia Washington dignitaries including Chief Justice William Relinquist and Associate Justice Sandra Day

suddenly look embarrassing or at least out of date in the harsh light of the electronic environment. Our central visitor information unit reexamined all materials presented for usefulness in the new medium.

We also had to ask ourselves whether central information packages were as necessary in cyberspace, where a visit to an individual museum can happen through a simple click. Many of the museums, research centers, and offices continue to challenge the notion of a central home page which requires a number of transactions before coming to their particular home page. At the very least, however, everyone seems pleased that the central initiative got the entire institution thinking about the uses to which a home page might be put.

The future of our Website will depend on a number of things. We'll need to create a regular monitoring and updating system which not only reflects changes in the Institution but also reflects the knowledge we're gaining about what our electronic audiences want of us. We'll need to be innovative in the creation of new online experiences shaped by more clearly formulated educational goals. And we'll need to develop a more systematic pan-Institutional strategy of digitally capturing and making available increasing numbers of the images and objects we hold.

No one yet understands the full potential of this medium. Within our first 13 weeks we registered over 4 million "hits" on the home page, 20% from outside the United States. But who are these electronic visitors? How do they use the information provided? Will they want to visit the **actual** not **virtual** Smithsonian more or less? Will they overwhelm us with increasing requests for information, and should we mind?

What we do know is that our audiences are less and less passive in their interaction with the Smithsonian. They want to see more of what we have, to address more and more of what we say, and participate more in the communities of information that we represent. The electronic revolution is not alone the cause of this change but it will certainly prove to be one of its most powerful manifestations. We had all better be ready.

Marc Pachter is the Counselor for Electronic Communications, Smithsonian Institution.