Chapter I

Introduction

Designing for the little screen on the desktop has the most in common with designing for the Big Screen. Interactive software needs the talents of a Disney, a Griffith, a Welles, a Hitchcock, a Capra…. (Nelson, 1995, p. 243)

When sound finally came to film in 1927 with *The Jazz Singer*, producers went first to the Broadway stage looking for actors, writers, and directors. The first projects they developed were often little more than filmed stageplays. In some ways the technology of the time dictated this strategy—the camera had to be enclosed in a large box in order to deaden the sound of the celluloid strips moving through the machine, and the microphones had limited range, forcing the actors to stay close when speaking. More importantly, there was a conceptual limitation. Filmmakers had not yet developed a unique language for sound cinema, and they therefore began by mimicking theater. We are now in a very similar stage in the development of technology-enabled education. Distance-learning courses offered by videotape, online, and computer still use the language of the conventional classroom. For the most part, these courses with their talking heads and online campus metaphors do little more than automate the traditional classroom. Computer-based learning has yet to find its own language and is still metaphorically locking the camera to the floor and recording the traditional classroom, rather than offering a new approach to learning.

Figure 1: Sound-Proof Booth (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [LC-US262-95604])

Alan Kay (1995) quotes Marshal McLuhan in suggesting that if the personal computer is a truly new medium then the very use of it will change cultural and individual thought patterns. Could the development of this new medium change education? Kay argues that in order for users to receive messages embedded in a medium, they need to have internalized the medium. While the American film has developed an elaborate symbolic sound and image code over the years—the conventions clearly understood by the general viewing audience—computers have yet to develop such complex viewing conventions. We need to develop these computer-viewing conventions particularly for learners.

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