

# I INTERVIEW // JOHN BIELENBURG

**Friday, December 21, 2007 // By Phone**

**2) What prompted the Virtual Telematrix project. Was there something in the world of graphic design and corporate culture that you were looking to expose or call attention to? What was the motive behind it and how intentional were you in going about the project... did you have an end goal you were hoping to achieve or did it come about more organically... something fun that you just wanted to put out there?**

When I did Virtual Telematrix I was at a point in my career where I had Bielenburg Design up and running and felt like I wasn't quite at the top but could see the top from where I was. What I had been doing up until that point was mainly just greasing the wheels of commerce as a designer. But for me money was never a measure of success and with Virtual Telematrix I was interested in making fun of the design industry at that point in time. The project started out with a small billboard that said, "Warning, I have just meant the enemy and he is us." But as soon as I did the annual report for V.T. that's when it really morphed into something more substantial.

At the time I was caught up in the machine of the graphic design industry and that machine is so schizophrenic. How do you manage to both make money with your design and do something that has meaning and is fulfilling. At that point in my career doing the V.T. project was the only way I could survive and with it I was trying to get designers to think more about what they were doing. You get caught up in this who culture of graphic design where you're just trying to get good clients and design something that will win awards and make money, but in San Francisco towards the end of the dot com boom there was so much of that going on that it was really easy to satirize what was happening. I would say that today in some ways, corporate industry is almost beyond parody, some of the stuff they are doing is so ridiculous in and of itself you couldn't do more to satirize it.

But like I said the turning point for the V.T. project was the annual report. I thought it was just going to be a silly parody of graphic design but I had some friends come on and do spreads for me and they made it into a more pointed attack of corporate America. But the project was defiantly more organic for sure, and as it progressed I would do a V.T. related piece every time I saw something in that world that I wanted to respond to. It was great because I had built up enough equity with paper and printing companies I was working with, that they were willing to finance most of the projects.

**4) What would you say was the key element in making Virtual Telematrix believable?**

At first we kept the design just a little less than sophisticated. Not so polished that it looked like an obvious design piece. One of the first V.T. pieces was released at a branding seminar I was speaking at put on by the AIGA. As people came into the auditorium they were handed a Virtual Telematrix piece. AIGA played it straight the whole way, not letting on that it was fake, but when I got up to talk I let people in on the joke.

The first annual report I did actually ended up getting into the MEAD Annual Report show, but when they found out that it was fake they retracted and threw it out. I would say for the most part that people knew it was a design industry thing, so it was never that big of a secret that it wasn't real.

**6) What has the response to the project been like? Have you had any negative response? If so why do you think that is?**

For the most part the response has been positive. One unpleasant incident involved a client of mine at the time. I made a promo video for V.T. and in one part of the video I lifted this total nonsense corporate language from a report my client had done. Later they saw the video and weren't happy about it, but it wasn't anything I was too concerned about at that point.

I really didn't get that much negative response though. One law firm was kind of angry about it and told me that the FCC was not a laughing matter but the audience for which it was intended (designers) enjoyed it for the most part. No one was angry really but maybe a little suspicious.

With the whole project though, I didn't want to be an angry guy. I think some organizations like say Adbusters are a little pissed off and angry about the issues or causes they are trying to raise support for and I think that comes off. So I wanted to be happy about it and I think that came through in the end.

**8) If you were to do the project again for the first time is there anything you would change or do differently?**

If I were to do it all again I would have made it an actual company that sells stuff. Get it to a place where it has its own momentum. When I first started the project it was the end of the excess of the 80's and I think now we are in an interesting time where issues of sustainability and corporate behavior are at the forefront of people's minds. Now I see more interest and concern in doing good and I think graphic design can be a force of change through communication.

**9) Before you retired how often were you able to do side / personal projects like this and what effect did the personal work have on the client work? How important is it to do things for yourself every once in a while?**

I'm not really in the day to day trenches any more so it's easier to do the work that I want to do because I'm not under the gun to get client work done. The only hard part about doing the personal work when I was in that situation was finding the time to make it happen. But like I said you have to find time to work for yourself or you'll go crazy.

A good friend of mine, Stephan Sagmeister, got a call to do a CD for Jay Z and he said he'd only do it for \$97,000 which is pretty ridiculous - album design usually will go for \$5,000 if you're lucky. They went back and forth and finally they agreed to pay 97k for it. Stephan was able to do something in a few days and when it was finished the design credits went to 97k Studios. Stephan then spent the next 2 months doing pro-bono design work for non-profits. But he's always balancing the work he wants to do with the work he needs to do.

As soon as money gets involved it changes things and with personal work I like it to be pure. Even with V.T. having printers sponsor what we printed felt a little weird.

**10) I read a little about Project M which it sounded like was something that evolved from Virtual Telemetrix. Are there any other projects that V.T. has spawned?**

Project M came out of Virtual Telemetrix in an indirect way. Now that I have more time I've been getting involved in quite a few things. Nada is one project I'm working on now in which we create inexpensive, fixed gear bikes for kids in urban areas.

**11) Could you describe any renaissance periods you've had as a designer. When your thinking or your methods, or your way of approaching and solving problems changed? Has there been a single memorable point in your career where your thinking and approach completely changed?**

With V.T., no body gave me that. I did that on my own. It's so easy to get trapped in situations that seem impossible to get out of. My firm in the early 90's at times felt like a prison. When I realized I had control over my career and could get out of it and do what I wanted that was big. V.T. was instrumental in recognizing that.

When I moved to Maine it was an active attempt to get out of that rat-race. In San Francisco I really felt like I had to run fast to stay in one place and it felt like the clients owned my mind, like I couldn't get away from thinking about it at the end of the day. When I brought in partners I just thought... I'm done. Over time and with a little distance I've had a renewed passion for graphic design. When I had space to get out of it for a little it was fun again for me.

**15) Any last pieces of wisdom you'd like to impart to a younger design wanted to make a meaningful impact?**

Let me think about that one and get back to you.