

The Mother of All Happy Macs Gives the Gift of Web 2.0

By Steve Silberman  11.07.07 | 12:00 AM



Illustration: Evah Fan

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typography.

After two decades of front-end work for clients like Microsoft, Sony, and IBM, the Mother of the GUI now spends hours a day in her cozy San Francisco office sculpting virtual birthday cakes, bouquets, engagement rings, and other icons sold as gifts in Facebook's rapidly growing social network.

Launched last February, the site's gift shop offers icons for every occasion, from balloons, puppies, and champagne to mojitos, handcuffs, boom boxes, and a can labeled whoop ass. To date, users have exchanged more than 20 million virtual gifts, paying up to \$1 for each, making them one of the site's most successful revenue streams.

"I can do things in gifts that I never could in UI design," Kare says. "Screen icons have a job to do — they're more like traffic signs than illustrations. But the gifts don't have to be anything other than what they are."

The shop is the brainchild of Facebook "product ninja" Jared Morgenstern, whose retail career began in fifth grade, when he was hustled to the principal's office for selling candy out of his sister's makeup case. Now the Harvard grad works closely with the pioneering pixel artist to develop a new design each day, often incorporating suggestions from users. Kare's art has even inspired a knockoff industry among indie developers who believe that gift-giving should be free. Like imitation Prada pumps, however, their stick-figure unicorns and pixelated cheeseburgers often lack finesse.

The season of Christmas-tree ornaments and Hanukkah dreidels is upon us, though marketing icons as apparently innocuous as a marshmallow chick requires sidestepping proprietary terms like Peeps. To commemorate 4/20, the unofficial stoner holiday, Kare whipped up a green-flecked brownie. The brownie was approved, she says, but the flecks were "just too much."

Recently, Facebook decided to offer advertiser-sponsored gifts, so the 53-year-old artist dutifully roughed out a set of tiny Red Bull cans, Hershey's kisses, and Trojan condoms as bait for potential clients.

When Kare faces an impasse, she channels her late mentor Paul Rand, who designed memorable logos for IBM and UPS. "Paul never believed that you have to suppress your natural playfulness for the sake of being businesslike," she says. The trend in branding, though, is toward monolithic swooshes and chilly glyphs like the one that evicted Kare's Happy Mac from the OS X startup screen. But anti-aliased descendants of her classic icons survive throughout the digital domain. Most graphic-design software still relies on uncredited variations of the pencil, lasso, pan hand, and paint can that she bitmapped for the Mac. Now Kare uses one of those programs, Adobe Illustrator, to create virtual tchotchkes for Facebook.

With a million potential gift-givers joining the social network each week, she's bombarded with friend requests from people who were not even born when the Mac first smiled on the world. "I'm flattered, but no offense," Kare says, "I really want to care about my Facebook friends. Life is too short to track the status updates of virtual strangers."