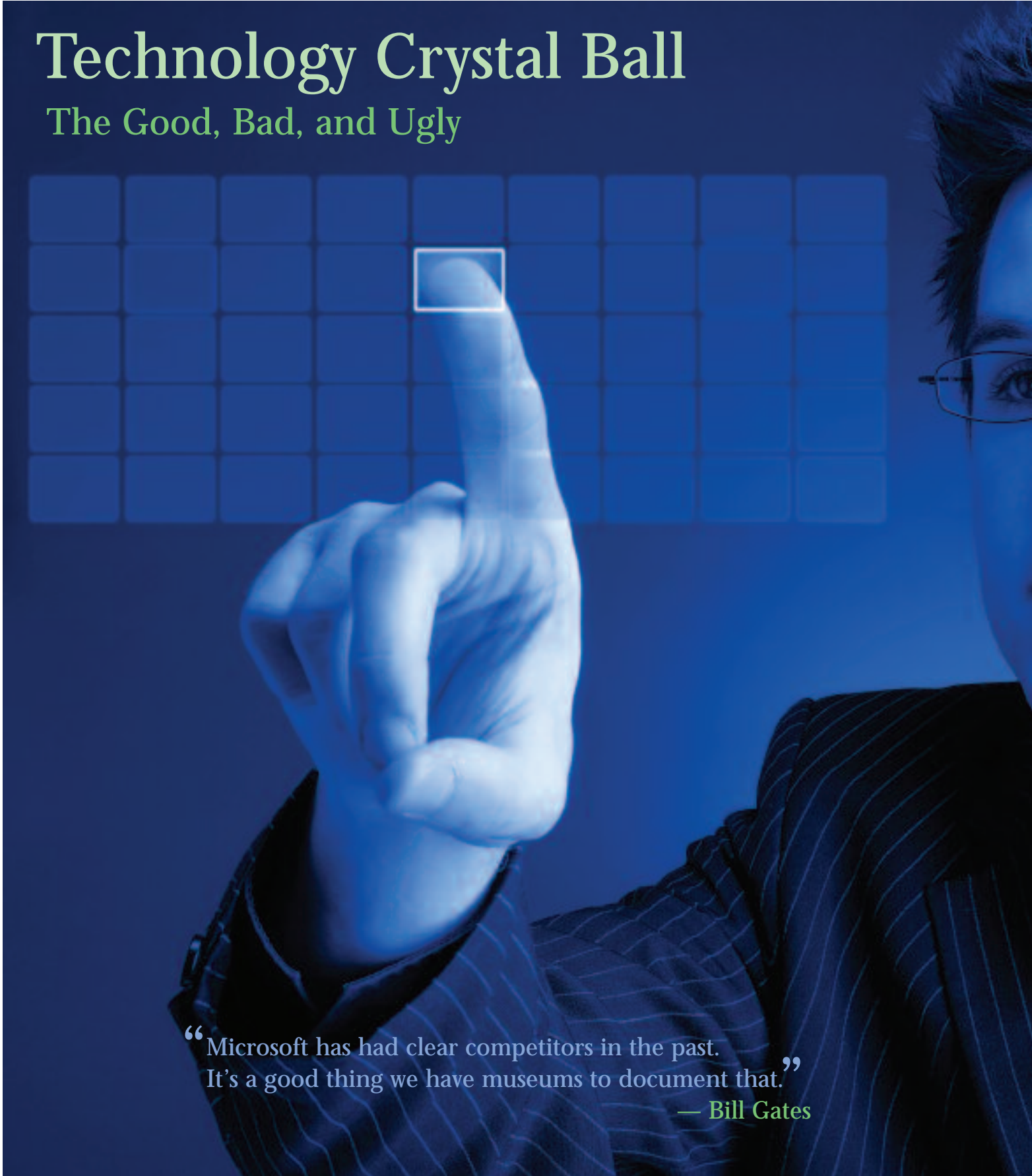


Technology Crystal Ball

The Good, Bad, and Ugly



“Microsoft has had clear competitors in the past.
It’s a good thing we have museums to document that.”
— Bill Gates



Steven Donahue ponders the future of the convergence of technology upon the educational system and personal privacy

Battle of the Giants

The news is full of conflict from Korea to Lebanon, and the gloves are also off in the worldwide web and software domains. The free-love-open-source days are over, and the battle of the giants is taking on the dimensions of a world war, impaling educational systems and learners, universally. As in a real war, there is a great deal of hand-to-hand combat and hubris — from poaching and head-hunting to espionage — which will affect students in the coming generations: for the good, for the bad, for the ugly. And “free” does not exactly mean “free” anymore, but implies a network of attached strings, which are, for the most part, undisclosed.

Google, a Madison Avenue enterprise on steroids built on ads and data mining, is constructing the world’s most colossal server bunker along the Columbia River, 80 miles east of Portland, near hydroelectric power centers and with twin cooling towers spiking four stories into the Oregon sky. And this is becoming ground zero for students’ eyeballs and attention spans. Perhaps at the expense of the classroom experience and direct human contact itself.

The endless Google treasure trove of cash is buying up the road for wireless and over-common-power line delivery of Web services that may one day make your refrigerator, if not your language students, pretty darn smart. Recent acquisitions, such as spreadsheets and Writerly, will allow free online use of Microsoft Word clones, allowing users to store documents online for “free.”

Clearly, Microsoft is in turmoil about the giant search engine. But that other Gulliver is not easy to tie down and is fighting back with the release of a clutch of consumer products. Products including: Microsoft’s new Windows Live Messenger (WLM) linking users to Yahoo! Messenger, with promises to add VoIP (Voice over the Internet Protocol) and, possibly, video-conferencing technologies. This would allow up to 350 million users to make PC-to-PC calls for “nada,” perhaps numbering the days of the traditional phone system.

And Internet Messenger is not your father’s chat machine. The Windows Live Messenger supports a beehive of features, such as sharing folders, integration with Windows Live Contacts, and keeping personal and contact list information instantly up to date. The use of blogs and RSS search engines, such as MSN Spaces has gone exponential with over 34% of Internet users now hitting them. A cynic would conclude that in these visions of the Internet, one can neither run nor hide.

The Good: Convergence, Power, Information

It used to be a slow, simple world. Only crazy people heard the refrigerator talking or spoke of hidden chips in their teeth acting as