

# Technology Journal --- Books: Jim Clark -- Visionary, CEO, Hothead

By Robert Templer

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Those around Mr. [Jim] Clark, the founder of Silicon Graphics Inc., Netscape Communications and Healtheon, are on a constant watch for his face to redden and his lips to tighten -- signs of an imminent eruption. Almost anything seems to set him off, but most of Mr. Clark's rage seems focused on his former business partners and his rivals, particularly his great nemesis in Seattle -- Bill Gates.

In the first chapter of Mr. Clark's book, "Netscape Time," a rival chief executive is described as "inexperienced" and "small time," the press, as reporting events "more or less accurately," and venture capitalists as "velociraptors" who cost him "financially and emotionally." They all come off lightly. In just these 15 pages, Mr. Gates is hammered a dozen times as a robber baron out to crush all competition and as a short-sighted visionary who, as recently as 1994, still hadn't fully understood the potential of the Internet.

The rivalry between Mr. Gates and Mr. Clark, both brilliant and driven men, could have easily become a focus for Michael Lewis' "The New New Thing." Or he could have dwelt on the transformation of a Texas poor boy into a Stanford University professor and a member of the new rich. But Mr. Lewis is too skilled a writer to settle for such obvious hooks. Instead his book follows two intertwining strands: Clark's career, from founding Silicon Graphics up to his 1998 venture called MyCFO, and Clark's dream of building one of the world's biggest yachts and controlling it remotely by computer.

## FULL TEXT

The New New Thing

By Michael Lewis

(Hodder and Stoughton, \$26)

Netscape Time

By Jim Clark with Owen Edwards

(St. Martin's Press, \$25)

What does it take to make a billion dollars?

If you're Jim Clark, founder of three multibillion dollar startups in the past 20 years, it might be a constant gnawing sense of dissatisfaction. This is a man who, on the maiden voyage of his \$37 million yacht, sat in a salon decorated with another \$30 million of paintings by Monet and Picasso and worked himself into a rage because the portholes were rimmed with metal and not wood.

Those around Mr. Clark, the founder of Silicon Graphics Inc., Netscape Communications and Healthcon, are on a constant watch for his face to redden and his lips to tighten -- signs of an imminent eruption. Almost anything seems to set him off, but most of Mr. Clark's rage seems focused on his former business partners and his rivals, particularly his great nemesis in Seattle -- Bill Gates.

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The rivalry between Mr. Gates and Mr. Clark, both brilliant and driven men, could have easily become a focus for Michael Lewis' "The New New Thing." Or he could have dwelt on the transformation of a Texas poor boy into a Stanford University professor and a member of the new rich. But Mr. Lewis is too skilled a writer to settle for such obvious hooks. Instead his book follows two intertwining strands: Clark's career, from founding Silicon Graphics up to his 1998 venture called MyCFO, and Clark's dream of building one of the world's biggest yachts and controlling it remotely by computer.

Clark's book follows a more traditional business narrative, taking readers through the years leading up to the initial public offering at Netscape. But it is hardly a blow-by-blow account, as Clark admits that after starting the company he was not very involved in daily developments.

Both these books capture a moment when our world changed. Netscape's Web browser allowed computer users to have access to the World Wide Web in a simple manner, transforming the Internet from a tool used by academics and engineers to the global phenomenon it is today.

Clark's exact role in this resists easy definition -- he didn't write the software or come up with the idea. The Internet and the Web were all in place before he came along. What he did was to imagine a little of the future and take a huge chance on it. His expansive imagination and stature focused talent and money to amazing ends.

In his book, Mr. Lewis suggests that Mr. Clark's ambition to build a yacht named Hyperion inadvertently may have led to one of the defining moments of the Internet age. Mr. Clark's aim was to sail this boat across the San Francisco Bay by controlling it from his office through the Internet.

Hyperion's ever-ballooning cost pushed Mr. Clark to take Netscape public long before it was profitable, at the time a radical move. The stock soared by more than 100% in a day, and Netscape became the model for everyone who wanted to turn a nebulous business plan into a lot of money.

In Clark's version of events, the yacht doesn't play such a major role. Instead, he describes himself as driven to move quickly by his frustration at emerging with relatively little money or stock in Silicon Graphics after its initial public offering even though he was the company founder and inventor of its groundbreaking 3-D chip technology. Pushed out of the company, he was determined never to let this happen again. In a chapter called "One Billion is the Best Revenge," he explains how he engineered things afterward to ensure that the managers and venture capitalists who had cut him out in the past didn't get their hands on any of the Netscape IPO money.

After Silicon Graphics, Mr. Clark turns into what Mr. Lewis calls a "performance artist" of the digital era. He doesn't

invent products, he doesn't write software, he doesn't even manage his companies. What he does do is come up with the ideas and attract the talent to implement them. And so, it isn't too surprising that the only people who come off well in Mr. Clark's own account are engineers such as Marc Andreessen, the lead developer of the Netscape browser. The industry once neglected to reward engineers amply, now it makes them very rich. Mr. Clark was one of those who set the example -- by generously giving out shares in his company to his key developers.

"The New New Thing" is a brilliant confection, immensely readable and sometimes very funny. Mr. Lewis is at his biting best in his descriptions, such as one passage describing Microsoft's lawyer John Warden in the midst of the federal government's antitrust trial as "a great Hogarthian ball of pink flesh with jowls that rippled over his starched white shirt." You can picture photocopies of these pages gleefully circulated by underlings at the poor man's law firm.

Mr. Lewis has a brilliant sense of story and pace, building up suspense about whether both the yacht and Mr. Clark's companies will work. But at the end of this book you feel as though you know very little about Mr. Clark or what he has done. Mr. Lewis pokes around in some old files kept in Mr. Clark's spare room, but apart from that there isn't much of an attempt to dig into the past. We hardly find out anything revealing or new about Mr. Clark other than this sense of a permanent dissatisfaction that seems to push him forward.

Mr. Lewis had amazing access to Mr. Clark but, as is often the case, this dulled his critical eye rather than opened up any great insights. Flecks of an unpleasant xenophobia sometimes crop up in his descriptions as well -- the Dutch are humorless and dull, Germans are worse, New Zealanders are bestial, the British ignorant, indeed any non-American who appears is faintly absurd. Sometimes the asides reveal a distasteful arrogance, not only on the part of the self-confessed egotist Mr. Clark, but on the part of the author. And this book lacks some of the insight found in Mr. Lewis' earlier book, "Liar's Poker," which explored the inside life of Wall Street, a world he understood intuitively as a former trader.

Still, in contrast, Mr. Clark's book, "Netscape Time," is distinctly less entertaining. He captures something of the atmosphere of Silicon Valley and its driven routines but does it with little wit. This is not helped by some clunky writing -- co-author Owen Edwards didn't do his job well enough -- and Clark's humorous asides would make only the most ardent sycophant crack a smile.

Although Mr. Clark milks everything he can from the now familiar images of unwashed young engineers fueled on pizza and Jolt Cola, there isn't much drama in the realities of long days at a screen.

The more interesting moments in the book occur when Mr. Clark directs his attentions to settling scores instead, but this is less interesting that you might suspect. After a while he comes across as vindictive and petty -- I even started to feel sympathetic to poor, misunderstood little Microsoft.

## DETAILS

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