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ARTICLE

Media design: new and improved without the new

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First, a caveat. The term 'new media design' has the stink of the dot com bubble about it. New media designers were the web wizards and interface gurus zipping down no-collar, hierarchy-free corridors on Razor scooters, grabbing double tall mocha lattes on the way to inventing the new, new thing. New media designers wore black, had goofy Pez dispensers on their desks, and laughed at the clueless squares in suits who were their clients. They chattered away about XML databases, NASDAQ, peer-to-peer (P2P), and Pets.com while watching their option packages and planning their 'post-economic' futures. Or so went the fairy tale part of this story, where anyone with the ability to write HTML code and build a webpage labeled him or herself a 'designer'. Then, poof . . . it was all over.

Second, a reminder. Market euphorias and economic dystopias come and go, but where we are in the cycle does not in any way diminish the incredible impact that digital technologies and electronic networks have had on design. It is only after the new economy utopianism has crashed that we can begin to see the transformations for what they are. Any discussion about the impact of computer-inflected media on the design disciplines over the past five years should be situated within the move from information technologies (IT) to information technologies and creative practices (ITCP) (Mitchell, et al., 2003) This shift of emphasis indicates a healthy maturation from the 1990s focus on communication infrastructure to the 21st century's more encompassing interests in the form and content of what is actually being communicated. In this context, concentrating on 'new' media design has also evolved to the point that the concentration on novelty inherent in the term 'new' is less productive than talking about media design in a broader socio-economic context. What more than two decades of digital inflection have brought to the design fields is a comprehensive infusion of information density and transmedia connectivity.

Third, the next order of business is to define design. The great American modernist Charles Eames offered the following: 'A plan for arranging elements in such a way as to best accomplish a particular purpose' (Eames, 1972). This definition situates design as a problem-solving discipline, with problems here defined and solvable mostly within market contexts. The 1980s and the 1990s saw an explosion of 'personal' design to challenge this problem-solving methodology, which brought about debates on everything from legibility to the dissolving of the boundaries between art and design. More recently, Serges Gagnon has referred to design as 'the cultural appropriation of technology' (cited in De Winter, 2002); a phrase that, while appealingly brief and particularly appropriate to a discussion of the impact of the digital, is also so broad as to remind us that in many ways design has become a category beyond categories. Marshall McLuhan used the term 'Gutenberg Galaxy' to describe the effects of the printed book on human culture (McLuhan, 1962). Astronomers group galaxies by clusters, and I have claimed that now, we all live in the Design Cluster (Lunenfeld, 2003).

Even as the definitions expand, the general public is aware of the Design Cluster in a way that they have not been since the 1960s, to the point that on 20 March 2000 *Time* magazine ran a cover story titled 'The Rebirth of Design'. One factor contributing to this renewal was the general diffusion of desktop computers through a wide swathe of the population. To all intents and purposes, the computer is an alphanumeric typewriter that we forced into becoming an all-encompassing media simulation machine. The legacy of graphic design is still central to digital media interfaces. Although only a small percentage of users took full advantage of the full multimedia production capabilities of their machines, people became aware generally of the mutability of digitally generated forms and systems. It may be hard to remember that before the desktop publishing boom of the late 1980s, people did not have 'favorite' fonts for the most part. While on the one hand, the spread of digital technologies raised awareness of design, their growing exposure simultaneously devalued people's assessment of the prowess of designers. The underlying problem was identified by the great designer and illustrator Milton Glaser, who notes that the computer

> has basically made the process of work transparent to clients because they think they can control it from beginning to end . . . All they want is someone to give it a little style twist. (cited in Davis, 2002: 36)

The computer also allowed architecture and industrial design to work with new forms, and made complex extant forms easier to manufacture profitably. The development of architectural engineering softwares such as CATIA made it possible for Frank Gehry to create the fluid forms and complex cladding of landmarks such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao and the

Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. A younger generation of digitally-savvy architects such as Greg Lynn, Lise Anne Couture, and Hani Rashid are moving architectural ideas into virtual realms, and importing interactive capacities into the formerly stable forms of built space. Industrial designers are bringing this experimental excitement into the home and office, breaking with complacent modernism to create sinuous 'blobjects' and reactive products. As computers allow us all to work beyond the page, we will no doubt see a similar expansion and devaluation of industrial design clusters as Glaser noted of graphic design. In other words, just as PostScript printing software brought us WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get), a three-dimensional era of WYMIWYM (what you model is what you manufacture) will soon be upon us.

Karl Krause, an early Viennese modernist, once complained that art nouveau living spaces were so fully integrated that they allowed their inhabitants no 'running room' for the imagination (cited in Foster, 2002: 15–7). In the emerging clusters of entertainment design and experience design we see the resurgence of the totalizing impulse: the Disney World model of complete design integration from food to signage, people mover to thrill ride to collectible souvenir, moves centrifugally outward from its Orlando home, becoming the de facto model for new experiences within entertainment capitalism. One factor contributing to the rise of entertainment and experience design is the computer itself, which allows for an unprecedented merging of design 'disciplinarities' and a sharing of communication and information across design groups, participating companies, and geographical space. The impact of these intersecting design and technology schema are to be found everywhere from the World Wrestling Federation's showcase in New York's Times Square to the Smithsonian Museum's most recent exhibitions in Washington DC, as interface and object, building and web presence, commodity and brand identity all swirl together in digitally-enabled environments.

From WYMIWYM to the globalization of Disney World, one could construct a depressingly banal catalogue of the market-driven manifestations of digitally-enabled design. What of more sanguine effects? Within this digitization, is there potential to revive some of the utopian aspirations of early 20th-century design? Is it worth reviving the idea that design should codify and clarify the stuff of the world, making it easier for citizens of democracies (or Soviets, depending on which side of Poland you happened to be located before 1989) to determine decisions about their lives? Modern design was supposed to guide the citizen or comrade through the complexities of science, public policy, ideology, and even consumer choice in order to render decisions in coherent and rational ways. There is much there worth rehabilitating, even if it means taking on the anti-rational, anti-humanism of the past three decades of academic discourse. What the

computer, linked to a network, does to these issues is to expand both the range of makers and the nature of design's audience, potentially creating a real public that understands, and in fact demands, a measure of social and environmental responsibility from the Design Cluster.

One question for those who want to do new work in the Design Cluster is how to create Kraus's 'running room'. I would say that that information space is a key arena for contemporary media designers. What we need to confront is the explosion of information that computer networks engender. Designers who understand the changes wrought by computer-inflected technologies realize that there is a huge difference between processing data and designing its output. The designer moves through an ever-narrowing series of constraints. The representation of all the connections or data points, even after the processing of raw input, is simply overwhelming. The power comes from the modes and strategies by which the designer organizes it and offers visual, conceptual, and technological affordances to the material. It is those times when the data set is so vast as to make it simply unwieldy to use within science itself, and the visualization provides a high bandwidth access to the material, often in a real-time, interactive environment. That is something quite new that computer-enabled visualization and simulation technologies have brought us. It has been proposed that the defining qualities of contemporary information culture are power and play, because never before have we been able to change the conditions of experimentation so easily and so dynamically (Hobart and Schiffman, 1998). To take this into the Design Cluster, consider the designer who changes the background color in Photoshop over and over again, in the hope of pleasing a client. Each time she changes the color, she is engaged in 'tweaking' the system, using its power to play with the variables in real-time.

Tweaking is both a result of, and contributing factor to, the information expansion (or explosion), that has been discussed widely enough to constitute the common sense of the 'age of information'. But what does this really mean – how can we move past marveling at, or deploring, the rush of data? The addition of greater levels of information to an object or system is not simply an additive process, it is a transformative one. It transforms objects by augmenting them and situating them in vastly larger hypercontexts. It transforms their users by altering their expectations of objects' 'perceived' intelligence. This secondary transformation – between user and object – is related to the development of what I refer to as the 'dynamic non-consciousness' of the computer. The expectation of information richness from objects and spaces creates a situation in which anticipation of logical sophistication increases, an expectation that follows directly, but in subtle ways there is an advancement of the expectation of emotional and transrational and irrational effect from our objects, machines, and systems.

This alchemical transformation of instrumental tools into emotional actors is one of the reasons why design's importance to the culture at large has increased so much over the last two decades. Design and advertising culture yoke scientific methods – audience surveys, design research, empirical studies – to intuitive and emotionally-driven methodologies. Art does this as well, but tends to disengage itself, at least in its public pronouncements from direct relationships with market culture (Lunenfeld, 2000). If alchemy is the proto-science that precedes the cognitive turn taken by the rational Enlightenment, then whatever these information-rich transformations we are living through today may in fact offer us a vision of the emotionally-driven post-Enlightenment practices that are in the process of being born. The constant emergence of these hybrids sometimes makes my head spin – how can one comment on something in such flux? I suppose the art world, which is always presenting new artists and attempting to launch new movements, and which offers a brand new crop of shows every month from September through to May, offers one model. You keep up with what you can, and assume that someone else will with whatever you cannot.

In an essay on the early modernist de Stijl movement and its potential impact on media design, Jessica Helfand notes that 'the opportunity to define – even celebrate – precision lies at the heart of what [designers] can and should do' (Helfand, 2002). This attention to rigor, the desire to make as well as consume, the modesty of service, the belief in beauty and pleasure as beautiful and pleasurable in and of themselves, even the acceptance of its position within market economies – all of these and more really situate design as an exemplar for getting past the unresolved disputes of the 20th century, and exploring what could really be 'new' about media design.

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