

The Future of Graphic Design

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The Elevator Pitch for the Future of Graphic Design



1. Graphic design has been essential to every era of publishing history and now is a profession in the midst of enormous change. A superficial argument would state that graphic design has been diminished by the Web. But in fact it has been enhanced. Why? In previous publishing eras content was often of equal or greater importance than the appearance of the content. On the Web, appearance and usability are often of equal (or perhaps even greater) importance than content.
2. There is a direct correlation: a well-designed website, regardless of its other qualities or shortcomings, draws more visitors than one that is poorly-designed. Consider two websites of equal virtue in their content: the best-designed with the greatest ease-of-use will win the day. This is not esoteric; it's dollars in the bank.
3. Designers who are drawn to the Web are a hybrid. Some emerged from print publishing, some from multimedia, some from television and other broadcast media. The Web demands the best from each and all of these design disciplines.
4. Designing and architecting effectively for the Web is a relatively new skill and its requirements change almost daily. The best designers are being drawn to the Web in unprecedented numbers because their skills, when used effectively on the Web, generally pull in far better remuneration than they ever did in print (or other) media, while affording tougher challenges and greater career opportunities.
5. The individuals and organizations responsible for website management are increasingly recognizing the virtue of the skills of designers (and their agencies) and are more than willing to pay the going price for the best of breed.
6. One dark cloud currently on the horizon is the drop in employment for graphic designers, roughly 25% since 2006. This is covered in more detail below.

My prognosis for the future of design remains extremely positive: great design is going to ever-increasingly make an enormous difference to the future of communication in *all* media.

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Introduction

Graphic design, long a core element in all media, has gained in significance with the advent of the Web. It brings with it hundreds of years of tradition and innovation from some of the most creative minds ever to have been involved in publishing in its so many varied forms. More so, while writing and publishing tend to be very culturally-specific, graphic design has long been informed with a remarkable international cross-fertilization of ideas and techniques that in turn have brought added richness to the publishing endeavor.

A small note of caution: I've no ability whatsoever in creating design or illustration. I am instead a long-time observer and buyer of design and illustration, both as a publisher and as a collector. So my perspective is that of a "consumer" not a practitioner. How this colors my perspective and commentary you will have to judge for yourself.

Underlying everything we read and see is graphic design: some terrible, much quite good, some great. Everything published *must be* designed, regardless of the medium: Even in the absence of a conscious design effort, graphic design is inherently a part of each published piece. There exists a fundamental graphic "language" of which the amateur is often consciously unaware but which informs all publications.

The graphic design industry, like all other sectors of the broad publishing industry, is facing huge challenges and undergoing great changes because of electronic media. Some abhor and fear those changes; others embrace them and thrive on the new world that awaits them.

We are really just beginning to explore what will constitute effective graphic design in this emerging digital media era. The rules continue to be written.

The Essential Challenge of Graphic Design to the Future of Publishing

There are so many wonderful things about graphic design.

At its best, graphic design can motivate people to do things, try things or make things that they never thought they would or could.

As its role is in the realm of the creative, design remains controversial. Like other art forms, the quality of graphic design is in the eye of the beholder. Graphic design can be

extraordinarily beautiful. Sometimes we don't even care what is being communicated, choosing instead to luxuriate in the sumptuousness of the brilliance and execution of the piece.

But of course, as in other creative forms, there is a great deal of graphic design that is consciously or unconsciously referential to forms that have preceded it. There's certainly nothing inherently wrong in this.

Originality in graphic design should perhaps be defined. I like this definition: "The quality of having been created without recognizable reference to other works" (taken from a site no longer available online!). When graphic design is original, it gains additional power to move the mind and the soul, regardless of the message.

In the pre-Internet era, graphic design, if not intended to motivate aesthetically, was often consciously asked to undertake the challenging task of motivate action from the viewer – obviously this was at the core of advertising, including direct mail.

So what's the problem?

I believe that too many graphic designers confuse [themselves with artists](#): "a person whose creative work shows sensitivity and imagination". Showing sensitivity and imagination is all to the good. The problem for publishers is that graphic artists are employed for a specific task. That task is generally quite functional: to produce a piece of graphic communication, for print or digital media. Showing sensitivity and imagination is not in the core task description (it is, at best, a bonus). Most important is using graphic design to make the published piece easy-to-navigate, easy-to-understand, clear and legible. The role of "artist" is distinct from that of "graphic designer."

But these roles can be very easily confused. And hence the problem. The same graphic designer who creates a clean and simple interior book design may be called upon to also create the cover. This often demands the skills of an artist, illustrator or photographer (sometimes working with the graphic designer). The same graphic designer who creates a clean and simple Web site may be also be called upon to create the home page. This often demands the skills of an artist, and perhaps an information designer.

And so roles become easily confused.

I think that one of the major problems confronting publishing today is helping graphic designers uncover their evolving roles, accept those roles, and successfully perform their new duties. The confusion is sometimes their fault. Just as often it is the fault of those who commission their work. They too often place excessive value on the "original" or the "distinct."

Graphic design is *essential* to the future of publishing but its role and methods *must* change. Many graphic designers will require additional training, much of it in the broad area of information design/information architecture.

Graphic Design Reduced

I think that there is no graphic design as simple as the layout of the pages of a book that contains no illustrations. I'm referring to the average novel or book of narrative non-fiction.

The design rules for these pages are simple, straightforward, well-documented and well-accepted. I won't repeat all of them here, but the most important rules in North America book publishing are:

1. The trim size of the hardcover book will often be 6" by 9" or, if a trade paperback, perhaps a little smaller, i.e. 5½" by 8½" (with minor trim-size variants sometimes demanded according to the presses and production method of the printer).
2. Pages will follow classic proportions in the arrangement of the blocks of text in relation to the overall page trim size. The amount of white space surrounding the text will be sufficient that the page does not appear crowded.
3. The typeface chosen for the text will be a serif face, one of perhaps a dozen or more that have been well-established for their readability over many pages of text. The size and leading of the text will be specified so as to ensure the least strain on the readers' eyes, while respecting the publishers' requirement to often minimize total page count for financial or production reasons.
4. There will be a folio (page number) on each page of the main body of the work, and, if appropriate, a running header to identify the chapter or section. This will generally appear on top of the text rather than at the bottom of the page (then called a "footer").

I challenge the readers of this section to pull a dozen qualifying books off their shelves, and see how many of them conform to these simple rules. The result will, I think, be surprising – you'll find a significant number of variances.

I'm always left asking myself the question: Why? Why did the designer decide to break these guidelines – perhaps to omit the running head, to choose a small typeface, or, worst of all, to set the book in a sans-serif typeface? Occasionally I'll deduce a justification. Usually I'll just shake my head in wonder.

Print design complexity increases across the publishing spectrum, into illustrated books, magazines, newspapers and advertising collateral. Regardless of the print form, the discriminating eye often stumbles on the pages in view. Too often I find myself asking the same question: Why? Why were these design choices made?

Having said this, I recognize also that graphic design is probably as close to an art form as any of the aspects of technology and craft that comprise the publishing industry. As I continue in my career to explore the possibilities of automated publishing, I've finally realized and learned to appreciate that design *is art*, and only repetitive graphic planning can work in the realm of automated publishing. That which is original in graphic design, and design generally, will always be what makes it most valuable. To grasp the future of

publishing it's essential to recognize that there will always be a range of expression that exists primarily in the creative sphere: not everything can be automated.

Web Design

Throw the search term “Web design” onto Google and you’ll be rewarded with some 300 million entries). I guess we could say that the subject is well-covered, on the Web at least.

There’s no question in my mind that the master of Web design theory is Jakob Nielsen. He just gets it. I don’t know Mr. Nielsen personally. Maybe he was an auto mechanic before he discovered the Web. But he understands what is essential to Web design like no other analyst before or since. He understands deeply how graphic design has changed with the advent of the Web. Exploring [this rich site](#) is always stimulating and fun.

How has the Web changed design and what does this mean to the future of publishing? Start with [the fine article](#) Nielsen wrote (in 1997!): “People rarely read Web pages word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences. In research on how people read websites we found that 79 percent of our test users always scanned any new page they came across; only 16 percent read word-by-word.”

I’ve searched multiple sources to find someone who says it better, without success. Nielsen makes the key point: the nature of reading on the Web is *significantly different* than reading in print.

If the nature of reading on the Web is significantly different than reading in print, it follows logically that *writing* for the Web is a very different challenge than writing for print publication.

I think that writing and designing for the Web must focus on “information architecture” and “information design,” rather than graphic design in its traditional sense. The objective is no longer to enhance the visual to “move” the audience, but rather to use graphics and text and spatial elements to help people quickly detect what it is you’re trying to communicate. In my seminars I talk about “information architects” rather than “graphic designers.” Many graphic designers fear that this advocates for the visually mundane. Instead it is an argument for the visually comprehensible, within the context of an altogether new publishing medium.

This Web site is *not* an exemplar of that difference. The project began as a book. It took me (too) many years to realize that it would be more effective as a Web site. I learned several lessons. The first was very basic: why write about the future of publishing and publish it as a book? I wasn’t merely concerned about the logical narrative structure of books, but even more so that they take a long time to get from the written page into readers’ hands, and that they are complex and expensive to update. Obviously the future of publishing is a constantly moving target, with fascinating and important new information made available daily, and I did not want to have to wait a year or more to

update this material (assuming that the book sold well enough that the publisher was willing to invest in such frequent new editions).

More importantly, TheFutureofPublishing.com is really a guide to a wide range of information about publishing that is currently available in print and on the Web. It's always been of paramount importance to me to make my sources available. The Web itself was obviously a preferable mechanism for readers to gain rapid access to my primary sources.

But, at the same time, my own writing originates from a logical, narrative style. This is not necessarily the best style for Web users. For this I apologize: perhaps in the future I will create a version of the site that more closely matches Nielsen's dictums, of which I fully approve. In the meantime you have before you a book-like construct, modified to take the best advantage I could of what the Web affords. (Nielsen has also written about when longer text makes sense for certain Web sites. I can't find the article tonight, but recommend a thorough perusal of his www.useit.com site.)

Graphic Design References

It's perhaps an indicator of the anarchic creativity of the graphic design profession that an earlier version of this article appears *first* in a Google search for "future of graphic design." There are so many great minds (I'm not including my own!) thinking so many disparate thoughts, that the journey towards formulating your own opinion can be a long one. Here are a few leads:

1. I'm always a little leery of referencing graphic designers as a source of commentary on where graphic design is headed — we usually don't see eye-to-eye, to say the least — but I very much respect [the AIGA](#), the most important professional association of designers based in the U.S. As the association's Web site points out:

"AIGA's mission is to advance designing as a professional craft, strategic tool and vital cultural force.

"AIGA, the professional association for design, is the premier place for design—to discover it, discuss it, understand it, appreciate it, be inspired by it. It is the place designers turn to first to exchange ideas and information, participate in critical analysis, and research and advance education and ethical practices. AIGA sets the national agenda for the role of design in its economic, social, political, cultural and creative contexts.

"Founded in 1914, AIGA remains the oldest and largest professional membership organization for design. AIGA now represents more than 22,000 design professionals, educators and students through national activities and local programs developed by 64 chapters and 240 student groups."

This Web site offers many riches.

2. Why Design?

Published by the AIGA, undated:

(http://www.aiga.org/resources/content/3/6/1/0/documents/aiga_designingprocess.pdf)

This promotional brochure from the AIGA offers an intelligent analysis of the process by which design is created.

3. The Top Ten Web Design Mistakes of 1999

By Jakob Nielsen (<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/990530.html>)

OK, it's from 1999, but it's a very good introduction to Nielsen's worldview on Web design. I could recommend dozens of his articles. Why not start here?

4. About InfoDesign: Understanding by Design

(<http://www.informationdesign.org/>)

“InfoDesign: Understanding by Design” supports the growth and application of information design. Information design helps people and organizations achieve understanding through the creation of relevant, clear and memorable information.

“InfoDesign: Understanding by Design” is dedicated to the growth and improvement of the information and experience industries through the provision of a centralized online resource that serves all interested audiences. Launched in 2004, the site will continually evolve to meet the needs and desires of its participants. “InfoDesign: Understanding by Design” is a non-profit informational resource.”

5. Information Architecture Tutorial

By John Shiple, undated, published by WebMonkey

(http://www.webmonkey.com/design/site_building/tutorials/tutorial1.html)

As the introduction reveals: “Information architecture is the science of figuring out what you want your site to do and then constructing a blueprint before you dive in and put the thing together.”

6. Typography and the Aging Eye: Typeface Legibility for Older Viewers with Vision Problems

by Paul Nini, January 23, 2006, published by Voice: AIGA Journal of Design

(<http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm/typography-and-the-aging-eye> — the illustrations associated with the article are available at this URL.)

The author points to a well-documented problem, usually seen in the context of health care rather than publishing: “The population is rapidly aging and becoming a larger share of the marketplace. 13 percent of the population is currently over 65 years old. In 30 years that group will double to 66 million people.” While Professor Nini is more focused on signage than publications, he correctly points out that: “Typographic designers must

undertake a more comprehensive study of this subject and develop typefaces that work well with the common vision problems of the aging population.”

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