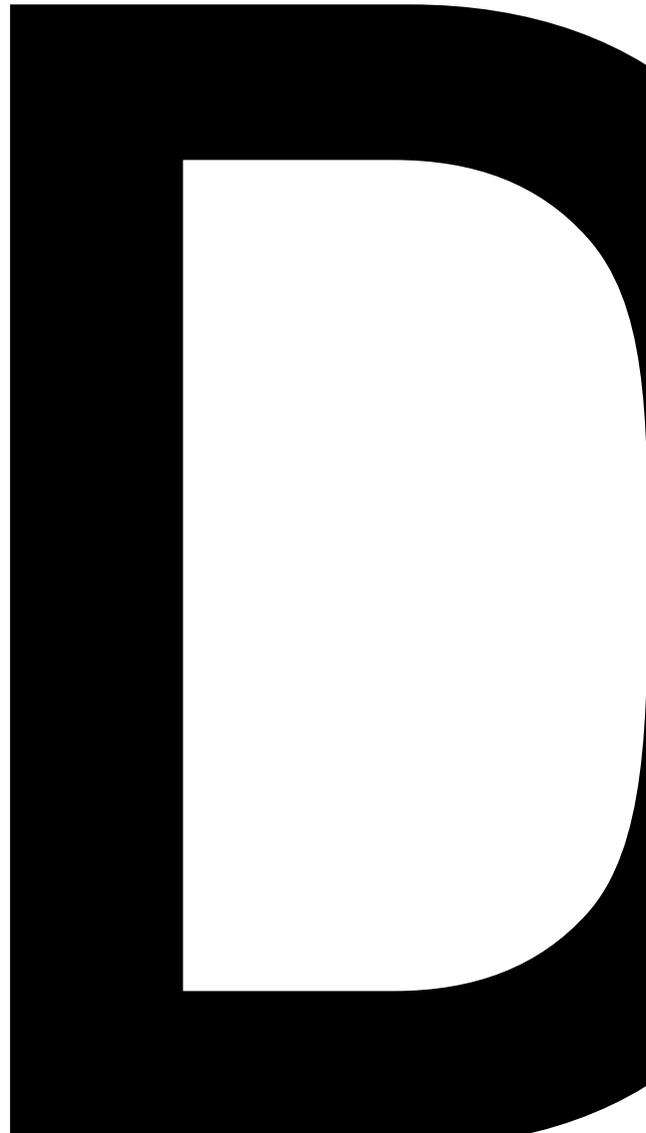


Designer Dictator

Essay by Marc de Bruijn

MA Media Design

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But hey, I just want kerning!

01

Inside almost every designer there's a control-freak. A demon who wants to come out and take control of every aspect in the design, while ignoring the points that really matter.

Not long ago I was in a meeting with a graphic designer who had designed a website which I was to develop technically. While talking with him about the design it became clear that, although we both have a graphic design background, our ideas about what makes a good design for the web were quite different. His ideas were much more about realising the project in a Flash movie format, so that the graphic designer could for example exploit all the possibilities of having custom fonts - other than the Verdana or Arial - and being able to apply word spacing. To me, the concerns about not being able to totally control every little visual detail possible and using the Flash format didn't seem like a better option as opposed to dynamic HTML and CSS. True, one cannot use custom fonts and have total control with regard to word spacing when using HTML and CSS, but this shouldn't "break" the design. When a design fails because of this it's safe to assume that it's not a good design, because it's not dynamic and adaptable to change, which is one of the key aspects of the World Wide Web.

When talking about the design it felt like talking about the design of a book or brochure and all the aspects of traditional print design, rather than design for the web. Why is it that graphic designers often approach the web in that way and where does this urge to control every aspect of the design, from the global scope to every little detail, come from?

The WWW as a medium

02

In order to establish what good or bad design for the web is, or why the practice described in the introduction is bad, one needs to make clear what the web itself is as a medium. The World Wide Web as conceived by Tim Berners-Lee is centered around four main technologies or ideologies, being hypertext (branching documents which can cross-reference or hyperlink to each other), server technology, semantic markup language (HTML and more recently XHTML) and resource identifiers (URLs or URIs). Berners-Lee posted a general concept summary of the Web on Usenet in 1991:

“The WWW world consists of documents, and links. Indexes are special documents which, rather than being read, may be searched. The result of such a search is another (“virtual”) document containing links to the documents found. A simple protocol (“HTTP”) is used to allow a browser program to request a keyword search by a remote information server.”

[“WorldWideWeb: Summary”, Tim Berners-Lee, alt.hypertext, 1991]

Some say, notably hypertext’s main propagandist Ted Nelson, that the hypertext implementation in the Word Wide Web is flawed and therefore doesn’t really qualify as hypermedia.

“HTML is precisely what we were trying to prevent — ever-breaking links, links going outward only, quotes you can’t follow to their origins, no version management, no rights management.”

[“Ted Nelson’s Computer Paradigm, Expressed as One-Liners”, Ted Nelson, ted.hyperland.com, 1999]

In spite of these criticisms and ten years of technological development hypertext as an idea has remained one of most important pillars of the World Wide Web. To Berners-Lee and other people involved in formulating the concepts of the WWW at the beginning of the 1990s often described the Web as being a huge collection of interconnected information or knowledge (called a “web of information nodes” by Berners-Lee), accessible to anybody.

“The current incompatibilities of the platforms and tools make it impossible to access existing information through a common interface, leading to waste of time, frustration and obsolete answers to simple data lookup. There is a potential large benefit from the integration of a variety of systems in a way which allows a user to follow links pointing from one piece of information to another one. This forming of a web of information nodes rather than a hierarchical tree or an ordered list is the basic concept behind HyperText.”

[“WorldWideWeb: Proposal for a HyperText Project”, Tim Berners-Lee and Robert Cailliau, W3 Consortium, 12 November 1990]

The structure proposed by Berners-Lee is inherently dynamic and accessible to anybody. The initial focus of the project was on providing a text-based medium, as Berners-Lee describes it in objectives section of his project proposal:

“The project will not aim to do research into fancy multimedia facilities such as sound and video.”
**[“WorldWideWeb: Proposal for a HyperText Project”, Tim Berners-Lee and Robert Cailliau, W3 Consortium,
12 November 1990]**

Usage of the World Wide Web as envisioned by Berners-Lee and others hasn't changed that much. The “web of information” is still used by people as such. One of the main purposes of the web is to do research, read the news or gather any other information, the increased range of available data formats (video, sound, etc.) hasn't changed that.

“Finding information - in order to learn - is the most common reason that people use the web. Indeed, the current state of web development is a strong reflection of this, emphasizing content, navigation and usability.”

**[“There Are Only Four Things That People Do On the Web”, Dirk Knemeyer, Experiencethread.com,
December 4, 2003]**

In her essay “Information design and the New Media”, consultant and information designer Melinda McAdams identifies two different users, searchers and browsers and talks about how information should be designed for those two groups.

“For both kinds of users, an information space must do more than provide access to information; it must be organized and navigable, and it must provide comfortable ways to handle the information once it is called up.”

[“Information design and the New Media”, Melinda McAdams, interactions, October 1995]

Making it usable?

03

The core concept of the web, being a dynamic pool of knowledge accessible to anybody, is being advocated quite fiercely by a number of persons. Notably web usability expert and consultant Jakob Nielsen, who is a vocal critic of the practice of what he calls “bad (graphic) design” on the web. To him a lot of graphic design for the web obstructs the dire need for accessibility on the web.

“Evil design is where they stop you from doing what you are trying to do, like putting an advert over the top of the page. That’s the wrong way to do it. Google has made billions by putting the ads where people do want them, rather than where they don’t want them.”

[“Lazy, stupid and evil design: An interview with Jakob Nielsen”, Jack Schofield, The Guardian, June 23, 2005]

Nielsen’s publications on his website useit.com and in many other media, have attracted a lot of criticism. Frank Sippers, also a usability expert, has questioned the way Nielsen states his guidelines and opinions, which read almost as dogmas. Nielsen being almost the only well-known and therefore inherently recognised as the foremost authority on web usability adds to Spiller’s accusation below.

“It’s rich to criticize something as if no other dependencies exist. Even better to pretend like you have all the answers and that no humans (with feelings) were ever involved in the design. By taking the National Enquirer (a supermarket tabloid newspaper) approach to communication, Nielsen is doing a disservice to the usability practitioner community by not imparting best practices in communicating usability insights.”

[“How Usable is Jakob Nielsen?”, Frank Spillers, Demystifying Usability, April 7 2004]

Writer Clay Shirky and Jakob Nielsen wrote a series of open letters in 1999 and one of Shirky’s critical responses nicely describe what Nielsen’s attitude towards web design is and how Shirky perceives it:

“Where we disagree, however, is on both attitude and method - for you, every Web site is a piece of software first and foremost, and therefore in need of a uniform set of UI conventions, while for me, a Web site’s function is something only determined by its designers and users - function is as function does. I think it presumptuous to force a third party into that equation, no matter how much more “efficient” that would make things.”

[“Open letter to Jakob Nielsen”, Clay Shirky, CACM Mailing-list, 1999]

The publications of Nielsen generate a substantial amount of critical response from the community of usability consultants and web engineers. The graphic design community doesn’t seem very interested in the practice of making designs “usable” (Frank Spillers describes this in his aforementioned article as being about “understanding human behavior”) or in the criticisms expressed by Nielsen, making the whole debate seem like an issue of sole interest to web engineers. To clarify, “graphic designers” in this case aren’t the designers who exclusively design for the web and recognize that medium as their primary field of operation. Those people would rather qualify as a web designer, although large parts of their work require the skills of a “classic” graphic designer. “Graphic designers” in this context are people with an extensive and long-term background in print design who at some point took up the

practice of web design alongside their work with the paper medium. This practice has become quite common with the popularity of the web since the mid-nineties.

As said earlier, the whole debate about accessibility and usability of websites is more or less neglected by the majority of graphic designers. The main interest of this group is to create work which is similar to their design for printed matter. Applying the print design approach onto a completely different medium, a designer defies all the specific aspects – whether positive or negative – of a particular medium. It's like imposing a certain structure onto something which is clearly not fitted to be structured in that way. Something which a designer should avoid and has learned to avoid when working with the medium of print.

Another of Ted Nelson's notorious oneliners might be in order here:

"The Web is a special effects race, Fanfares on spreadsheets! Just what we need! Instead of dealing with the important structure issues – structure, continuity, persistence of material, side-by-side intercomparison, showing what things are the same. This is cosmetics instead of medicine. We are reliving the font madness of the eighties, a tangent which did nothing to help the structure that users need who are trying to manage content."

["Ted Nelson's Computer Paradigm, Expressed as One-Liners", Ted Nelson, ted.hyperland.com, 1999]

Way too advanc3d...

04

A good example of neglecting the characteristics of a medium and the special effects race Nelson mentions is the website of design company 2advanced studios – 2advanced.com, currently version 5. 2Advanced is a company specialised in, as they state, “creative solutions” and “progressive design technology”, but when visiting their website one might easily get confused as to what the website tries to “be”.

The website makes heavy use of animations and hidden, multiple ways of navigation that don’t add up to a very clearly structured website. Also, because of the intro animation albeit short, it takes some time for the user to actually engage with the content, let alone search through with either an internal or an external search engine. What remains is a cinematographic experience and the impression of pompous technical grandeur. Now it’s hard to tell exactly what the reasons for 2Advanced are to choose Flash as their main focus of development, but one of them must be that the usage of HTML, CSS, Javascript and other scripting languages restrain them in their quest for visually dynamic movie-like websites.

Eric Jordan, the head of 2Advanced says the following about Flash as a technology in an interview conducted in 2002:

“Flash is a springboard for an entirely new type of interactive platform that we will eventually dream up and implement. The virtual environments you see in movies aren’t just a disjointed fragment of human imagination. I know we will make that type of stuff a reality because we shape the future according to the way we imagine it. We always have. Based on that notion, I think Flash is a step toward accepting advanced interactivity, and we will always have an underlying desire to take it to the next level.”

[“Eric Jordan from 2Advanced Studios”, Flashdevils.com, 25 May 2002]

Although Jordan tends to call the possibilities of a self-contained format like Flash “advanced interactivity”, designers can and will get carried away by those technical possibilities, something which clearly happens in the work of 2Advanced.

The intro animation is full of little flashes, moving objects and lighting effects, in fact their whole website is built like this. When moving the mouse over the entire website, things start to move, flicker, etc. The texts are very small and unreadable for people without problems concerning their vision or proper glasses. It seems that the designers sacrificed the notion of a clearly defined structure in favour of motion graphics.

When asked about receiving complaints about their website and improving upon them, Eric Jordan answered:

“Most of the complaints we receive are focused on the size of our fonts. We tend to discount them however, as we design for a younger audience who typically has excellent vision. Call us biased. We like 2advanced just the way it is.”

[“Eric Jordan from 2Advanced Studios”, Flashdevils.com, 25 May 2002]

Furthermore, the designers intended the website to look like some kind of system – the metaphor of navigational panels, loading of modules, etc. – but in the end it has only the looks of a system with a pretty science-fiction graphic in the middle of it.

There is no meaningful structuring of data and more importantly it isn't clear why the science-fiction look is so specific for 2Advanced, in spite of their claim to be progressive. The website might as well be a site for promoting a new mystery/science-fiction blockbuster.

Learning to care about the WWW

To summarise things, where does the design of the website of 2Advanced fail? It fails both as being a clear message of what 2Advanced is, or what it represents, and as an information provider. The latter part being something which has been the one of the core elements of what the webs is, as pointed out earlier.

Both the site of 2Advanced and the example in the introduction paragraph about the graphic designer are examples of the designer wanting to control every element of his design and achieving this by using Flash as a controlled environment to realise the design of a website. 2Advanced uses Flash to ensure that their movie like animation qualities are represented fully and the graphic designer just wants to do whatever he's able to do when designing a book or a poster. A Flash movie offers total controllability for the designer and the end result will be the same on every end-user machine, provided that they have the Flash plugin installed. According to a recent NPD Online survey, conducted in April 2006, the number of people who have this plugin installed is 97.7% as opposed to SVG (Scalable Vector Graphics) which is a similar format, but better according to many, has a mere 9,3% of "market-share". (NPD Online survey, http://www.adobe.com/products/player_census/flashplayer, April 2006) When looking at the 97.7% choosing Flash as a platform for serving content on the web isn't at all a strange practice. However, choosing Flash for its qualities as a self-contained media format, where the author is in total control of every pixel, is.

It is of course true that Flash offers more control over word spacing, text-flow, custom typography and shapes, as well as providing animation tools, all of them requirements when designing motion graphics or a brochure for example. On the other hand the format is very inaccessible for disabled people and search engine bots and very often text cannot be selected or enlarged. Additionally, the ample use of animations (i.e. flying graphical elements and text) and the invention of very unconventional navigation structures often strikes users as being awkward or even unusable. This echoes the website of 2Advanced described earlier.

Limited knowledge of web technologies also feeds the feeling of being restrained in what one can and cannot do with HTML on a visual level is one of the main reasons for designers to choose for a self-contained format like Flash. Another technique which is quite common is building websites totally consisting of image-maps. Every part, including text, is an image. This means almost total control over the end result while sacrificing the dynamics of HTML and the ability of the end-user to manipulate certain aspects of a website - enlarge text for better reading, turning styling of for better reading contrasts, etc. Such a website might well be a designer's jewel, displaying beautifully balanced texts and elegant typography, but it cripples the user experience. For example when a visitor wants to copy a text, search through the website or refreshes the content and is confronted with a Flash movie restarting and beginning to work it's way through all those animations the user has already seen.

Circumventing a design problem by converting a complete design into an movie, image or multiple images might be the easiest “solution”, but it doesn’t show the willingness of a designer to engage a certain problem and come up with an elegant solution, something which should be an integral part of the job of a designer. One might as well design a a brochure in InDesign or Photoshop and upload it to his web-space for people to download and view on their desktop.

This parallel might sound absurd, but it’s essentially what’s happening when using Flash or images to represent a complete design. Both methods go against the theories about information accessible to anyone and the ideology of semantic content which form the foundation of the web from the very beginning.

Aforementioned usability expert Jakob Nielsen is a fervent opponent of the “image technique” and the usage of Flash in virtually any form on the Internet in particular. Nielsen as a person and his rather extreme viewpoints may be the subject of controversy and parody. While a website approved by Nielsen - viz. compliant with all his rules on accessibility and end-user usability - will most likely result in an extremely bland website, many of the things he writes about the disadvantages of using such formats is certainly valid.

“Although multimedia has its role on the Web, current Flash technology tends to discourage usability for three reasons: it makes bad design more likely, it breaks with the Web’s fundamental interaction style, and it consumes resources that would be better spent enhancing a site’s core value.”

[“Alertbox: Flash 99% bad”, Jakob Nielsen, Useit.com, October 29, 2000]

Overly focussing on relatively minor visual issues, having custom fonts or not being able to control the flow of a text in HTML, often results in neglecting other parts of web design which should be integral to the design process. Presenting information as clearly as possible is one of them. Something which is also vital when designing a book. Every graphic designer will acknowledge that a book without a clear structure isn’t attractive to its potential readers, how nice it may look. In spite of this obvious statement, designers seem to repeatedly fail to successfully target issues regarding end-users when designing a website. The “visual niceness factor” is more important to them than how a system will be used and perceived by a regular end-user. Designers prefer the looks over actual content. This may be inherent to the web as a medium, because when speaking about print design, or even design in general, a lot of designers claim that it is not only about how something looks, but also about concept, structure and problem solving.

Web design for another approach, a method which engages more the technical aspects of web. Graphic designers who design for the web and actually build websites should have a certain level of knowledge about coding HTML, CSS and other languages.

As Clay Shirky puts it in his essay “View Source... Lessons from the Web’s massively parallel development”:

“Web design, and in particular Web site design with its emphasis on architecture, interactivity, and structuring data in an implicit order or set of orders, is not graphic design but rather constitutes a special kind of low-level engineering.”

[“View source... Lessons from the Web’s massively parallel development”, Clay Shirky, Shirky.com, April 1998]

To come back to the example of custom typefaces for headings one could create a complete Flash website for that reason, or one could look for other solutions and come up with a combination of Flash, Javascript and CSS, known as sIFR (scalable Inman Flash Replacement, <http://novemberborn.net/sifr>). While this technique requires Flash, the actual implementation is smarter. The sIFR content is searchable and indexable by search engines, users can select and copy text and the headings downgrade to normal CSS styled ones if the Flash plugin isn't installed on a machine. The implementation however requires more technical skills than just learning a few very basic Flash principles.

A common sentiment is that designers who come from a "classical" graphic design background are shackled by the seemingly limited set of possibilities of HTML. Furthermore learning a certain language, whether it's a markup and programming language – is also something which creates a tendency among designers to extensively use "What You See is What You Get" (WYSIWYG) editors and don't bother with any of the code at all. Because they feel that that aspect is too complicated and prefer the more visual approach – drag and drop features, objects instead of blocks of code – of a WYSIWYG editor. Those editors, like Dreamweaver and GoLive (Adobe) and Freeway (Softpress), are often used because they resemble DTP applications to a certain extent, the tools with which a "classical" graphic designer is most familiar with. And while being able to dropping images onto a canvas or dragging the borders of a table might give a sense of control, in reality one only touches on a limited set of characteristics. By applying a new layer of abstraction (user-interface) on top of a markup language, a WYSIWYG editor is trying to impose the metaphors of print design on a totally different medium and in the end establishes a disconnect between the designer and the medium one designs for. For example, a designer who solely depends on building websites in a WYSIWYG application will have a hard time determining why certain elements of a design look or are positioned differently in various browsers. While a designer who doesn't depend on the WYSIWYG concept engages only with the code and therefore has an advantage over the designer who tries to solve bugs by dragging the rightmost column of a table a bit further to the left in order to structurally change things.

Graphic designers need to know about their medium and appreciate that it's not an extension of print design. The metaphor a lot of designers use, "the website being your business card", is in that light a false one. Websites should be designed with the medium itself in mind and reflect the fundamentals of the web as fleshed out by Berners-Lee in the early nineties to a certain extent.

This awareness is still absent among a lot of graphic designers. On one hand because it isn't an integral part of their regular education. On many art academies the graphic design courses focus on traditional values of print design and typography, while a separate department of other students exclusively study so-called "digital media", an overarching term for video, sound, motion graphics and the web. The hybrid form of a graphic and web designer doesn't fit into that system and graphic design students who want to learn the practice of web design are often left to found out themselves or directed towards a WYSIWYG solution.

In his "Design Theory" essay, John Chris Jones describes what the principles are of design theory. His second point ties about choosing the right methods and tools to accomplish a job, describes what the ideal approach of both students and teachers towards the particular problem of learning the fundamentals of web design:

"...both teacher and students, collectively and consciously, choose appropriate methods to suit both the design problem and their varying states of mind as designer-researchers (or artists of science?). And they change methods at intervals, accordingly."

["A theory of designing", John Chris Jones, Softopia]

Another explanation is that few designers, who were already established when the web was still being developed at CERN or didn't exist at all, simply didn't adapt the new media as it was meant to be. Certainly, the practice of web design only became common and was taken seriously by graphic designers only until after the mid-nineties.

"Around 1997 professional web sites were distancing themselves from the amateurs with the complete opposite of modular design. Graphic designs victorious expansion on the web had begun."
["A Vernacular Web: The Indigenous and The Barbarians", Olia Lialina, A Decade of Web Design, January 2005]

Having relevant knowledge of contemporary web technologies and ideas about what makes for good web design is of course not enough. The animators and engineers of 2Advanced clearly master a lot of skill in the field of web technology, but fail to apply the other philosophies regarding well-structuredness, accessibility of information and so on.

An ideal process for web design would merge elements from traditional print design, interactive design and programming. So the end result wouldn't be a brochure transformed into slides with clickable hotspots in them. But rather a fully-fledged, logical system, which has seen multiple beta versions, user-testing sessions and sound structure as its basis. This is not the strict software approach of Jakob Nielsen as characterized by Shirky in his open letter to Nielsen, but more like the best of both worlds. Following all the usability dogmas as written by Nielsen in various publications systematically as a fixed ruleset doesn't result in good design. In any case, adhering to any extreme of the spectrum will likely result in flawed design. In another paragraph of the open letter to Nielsen Shirky writes:

"You despair of any systemic fix for poor design and so want some sort of enforcement mechanism for these external standards. I believe that the Web is an adaptive system, and that what you deride as "Digital Darwinism" is what I would call a "Market for Quality". Most importantly, I believe that a market for quality is in fact the correct solution for creating steady improvements in the Web's usability."
["Open letter to Jakob Nielsen", Clay Shirky, CACM Mailing-list, 1999]

The balanced combination of elements from the world of programming and graphic design as described will result in better design, and only then will they succeed in fulfilling the principles of designing described by John Chris Jones in his theory of design:

"I guess you mean the ability of people to arrive at new designs that are noticeably better (more imaginative, more inspiring, more useful, more profitable, less damaging) than what exists. A seeming magic."
["A theory of designing", John Chris Jones, Softopia]

Marc de Bruijn
MA Media Design, Piet Zwart Institute
Rotterdam, May 2006

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