

Student Name: Abbie Wilson

P Number: 2103880

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Investigate the digital graphic design revolution of the mid 1980s. Discuss the work of 3 designers who embraced this new technology to challenge the past and define the future.

“For designers of today, digital tools are the norm” (Slattery, 2021) For most students studying graphic design nowadays it is almost essential to be in possession of, or have access to, a computer or laptop of some sort, be it apple or windows. For many, the idea of mark-making or practical based work is intimidating, almost scary to think about if they have had no background in fine arts. In only 40 years, this has become the norm, even though before this time period, practical design using print and traditional methods has been around for centuries prior. This, in itself, is a testament to how huge of a revolution the evolution of digital design was, seeing as it is vital for designers now to at least have a basic knowledge and core skill set for applications such as the adobe suite for even the possibility of a job.

It was the 1980's when digital design first was revolutionised with the introduction of the mac in 1984 and in typical human fashion, most designers were wary of the strange, 'new' technology. My intent in this essay is to explore the digital revolution through discussing the artwork of heavily influenced designers of the time period who decided to tackle the latest technology.

“Kare was not the first icon or typeface designer to work at Apple, but she was by far the most influential” (Ensmenger, 2018). Having only worked as a sculptor previously, Susan Kare was an unlikely choice to end up designing the original fonts and icons for the Macintosh, however after being hired in 1983, she spent only a year perfecting her initial

pixel sketches into fully functioning icons that would go on to become some of the industry standard.

These icons were designed to introduce picture-based commands to computing and to make the mac's interface easier and more intuitive for the general public to use, as for many years prior these machines were confined to mathematicians and scientists who could work with the intricate coding needed for even simple actions.

Her initial sketches of icons such as the paint brush and bin have been carried on through the years as staple icons that are now widely recognised for the actions they carry out in nowadays in applications like illustrator. However, in 1983 it was up to Susan Kare to create these images using the very constrictive pixel grid that was available at the time. She started out by marking out the icons in a squared notebook before moving on to spending her days “turning dots on and off” (Kare, 2018). Kare likens the digital artform to those like mosaics and needlepoint where the artist must take careful consideration for the placement of the tiles or threads and took inspiration from these styles due to having prior experience in each.

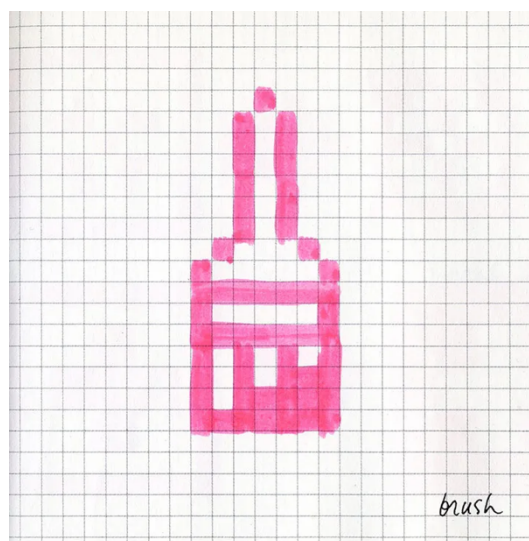


FIG 1. Susan Kare, Brush. (1983)

Kare also spent a great deal of time developing typefaces that were suitable for the pixelated screen. Each letter needed to fit in a 9x7 grid meaning that she did not have the freedom of long sloping letters, instead being restricted, once again, by the new pixel-based medium. She came up with the concept that due to the jaggedness of the letters produced within these constraints, it would work better if the lines were “only ever horizontal, vertical, or at 45 degree angles” (Kare,2018). The resulting typeface, that was originally named elefont, became the well-known font Chicago which would then go on to be used by Apple for the next 20 years.

Kare also was the first user of MacPaint app, producing many illustrations with the software to be used in the user manuals and advertisements to promote the application. These included images of gourmet baby food, a Japanese woman combing her hair and a pair of tennis shoes.

Many generations to come will have been influenced by Susan Kare. She created a brand-new style of carefully crafted intricate dots to develop typefaces and icons as well as becoming the initial user of MacPaint. Where some might argue that she only produced the icons and interface for the mac and didn't create complete artworks, she did design the tool that other designers would go on to use to inspire the world.

New Wave design combined aspects of Swiss modernism, with its contrasting shapes and multicolours, with postmodern influences. It included stark variance between blacks and whites and colours, lighter shades cutting through darks to produce striking visuals, however, New Wave was characterised by its looser, more expressive and artistic compositions, resulting in a much more engaging experience for the viewer.

It also built upon the capabilities of the mac, introducing the ability to freely manipulate type. This meant that the designer could stretch, contort and just generally have fun playing with typography in a way that had not been possible before the digitisation of the design world, leading to a whole new array of possibilities. Showcasing this new way of designing, Typogram, a New York digital typesetting service bureau, produced an 'ePage Electronic Graphic Services brochure' designed by KODE in 1988. It displays how the mac had influence over the design style at the time and how it was this new advanced way of achieving these design styles, leagues ahead, in terms of ease of use, than what had come previously beforehand.

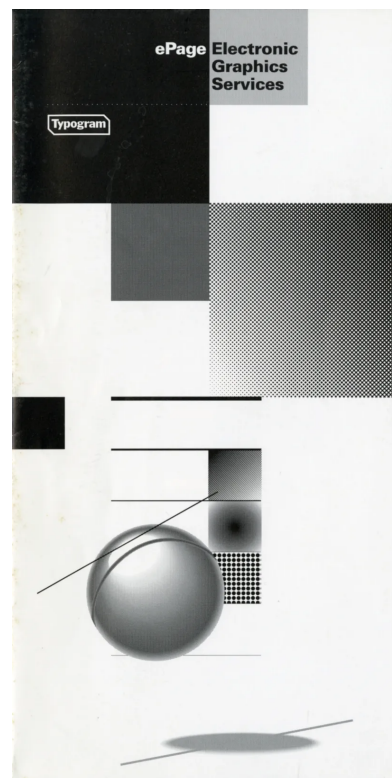


FIG 2. Typogram, ePage Electronic Graphic Services brochure. (1988)

April Greiman has been credited as the woman who initially brought this New Wave design style to America and was a pioneer in the beginnings of using the mac to create digital work. She embraced the “use of pixelation and other digitization “errors” as integral parts of

digital art” (April Greiman, n.d.) and combined these ‘errors’ alongside expressive colours and dynamic typography to produce work that is generally considered to have paved the way for the widespread acceptance of digital design; swatting away some of the mistrust and misconceptions of the new and upcoming medium that some traditionalists had a hard time recognising.

It was after an early TED conference, led by one of the mac’s inventors, Alan Kay, when Greiman decided to purchase her first Mac – the 512K Mac Plus – in 1984. She at first was just curious, experimenting and playing around with the mac’s capabilities, having fun. As she became more familiar around the tools and the actions it quickly became one of the most important tools in her design arsenal, one which she heavily relied upon and in turn popularised.

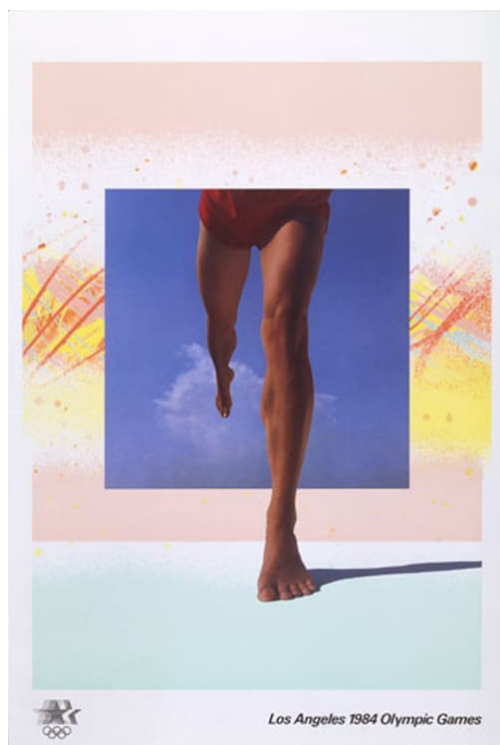


FIG 3. Greiman and Odgers, 1984 Olympic Poster. (1984)

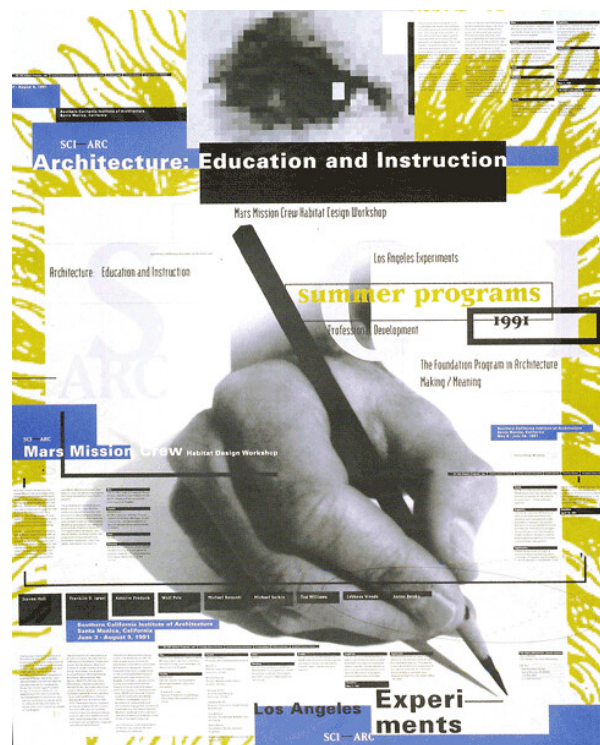


FIG 4. April Greiman, Southern California Institute of Architecture summer programs poster. (1991)

“For her, the computer is a conceptual “magic slate” which opens a new era for the graphic designer” (Madparis, 2013)

Even before the mac came about in 1984, Greiman was already experimenting with digital medium – using film and video after enrolling and completing computer programming courses in attempts to experiment with the new technologies emerging.

In figure () Greiman collaborated with Jayme Odgers to create the 1984 Olympic poster for the LA games. It shows off their willingness to strip back all unnecessary information and to rely on the fact that the visual imagery was strong enough to convey the point needed. I think that with such a big event like the Olympics that this tactic worked well from a design point of view and also as a way of introducing digital design to the mainstream masses, mixing abstract design with photo imagery in an almost surreal way.

Her experimentation with ‘hybrid imagery’ in figure () can also lend credit to the fact that her work could be described as post-modern with her “eclectic visual language [drawing] from surrealism, Art Deco and ornamental pattern-making” (Poynor,2003). Postmodernism as a design style is notoriously difficult to define or condense into a box, but despite this there are some key characteristics of the style that Greiman frequently draws upon, including vivid, contrasting colours and the theatrical, chaotic compositions. These exploratory and innovative compositions lend themselves brilliantly to digital technology as it provides the ability to produce multiple different versions, with slight tweaks to each one, before finally settling on the final piece.

Greiman challenged the social norm at the time by diving headfirst into the brand-new technology; making every effort she could to understand the new medium as it popped up

and grew, leading her to embrace innovation and forward her style in ways that would not have been possible if she hadn't had experimented.

Another artist intent, from the start, on breaking the commercial rules of graphic design was Neville Brody. Even before dabbling into the mac and digital technology, he was adamant that whatever he designed would be different and he was constantly being shot down by teachers for his "uncommercial" designs.

The 1970's was the 'era of punk rock' and as this seeped into the design world, Neville Brody became highly motivated and influenced by the iconic style. It was highly emotive and expressive filled with ripped up typography and distorted imagery. Punk initially emerged as rebellion against both the restrictive modernist and the Swiss minimalist style popular at the time, rising against what was considered mainstream. It too was a sub-category of the post modernism movement and many of Brody's typographic offerings were punk-inspired sans-serifs.

The typography that rose from this time period was the 'ransom note style' which at the time was used due to the fact that the traditional typesetting processes were expensive and provided a very restricted view of what the final outcome would be until it was finally printed, whereas this new punk form of typography meant that the designer could use cut-out letters and place them in front of them, immediately knowing what it would look like. This sort of working was then very easy to transfer onto computers when they were developed as this kind of immediate working was the advantage that they provided, just on screen.

'Fuse', his and Jon Wozencraft's digital magazine, was launched in 1991 as an 'interactive' disk-based magazine of typefaces, with the purpose of trying to demystify digital technology for the general designer. In an interview with Eye magazine, he discusses further about the confusion and almost timidity around technology and computers at the time.

"People are using the computer in a very rigid, pseudo-religious way and we are trying to say that the technology is simply a tool of communication and should be treated as organically as any other tool."

(Brody, 1992)

This interview was conducted at a time when the general designer was still slightly intimidated by the concept of working digitally and many traditionalist artists and designers at the time were sceptical about the legitimacy of working only digitally and not using tactile and practical hand work. Here Brody is merely wanting to put across that there should not be any misconceived apprehension directed towards technology, it should be used as if it was a palette or a pen going on to paper, a tool to learn, to get comfortable with and embrace, not to be condemned as foreign.

There is also the point that the people who were using the mac, were not, in Brody's opinion, utilising it to produce its full potential. Instead, being timid around it and not having fun or going crazy, not changing up the pre-determined settings or guidelines.

In the interview he then goes on to state:

"If you are going to use a computer you have to really struggle with it, otherwise it will make all the decisions for you."

(Brody, 1992)

This makes a point out of the fact that although the computer is an incredibly useful tool, it must be utilised by the designer as a tool and not as a method for design. Letting the mac make design decisions for you results in a very generic-looking piece of work, whereas realising that you, as the designer, are in control means that you can really make the design personal and truly your own. The importance of employing the tools that the computer provides but still being in control is critical in Brody's design style and ethos. He also makes a point that with 'Fuse' he wanted to make a digital magazine dedicated to typefaces and to blur the line between graphic design and set typography, showcasing how they can almost become one and the same – a strong piece of typography carry the design and be centre stage.



FIG 5. Neville Brody, graphic design award by yamaha 2014 identity (2014)

Here in figure (5) Brody demonstrates this idea that typography can be the central idea. He uses the type as the full background with a duo chromatic theme and then uses the white text to cut through the business. The typeface was achieved through the utilising the extensive capabilities of the mac.

He also designed a large collection of well-known typefaces, leading to the nickname “star typographer”. Many of these typefaces gained publicity due to the original way he combined the typography and graphic design elements. One of the typefaces he developed for this digital magazine is FF Blur. Its form is very simple with a slight blur (as the name suggests) along the edge and I really like how Brody demonstrates how, just because these typefaces are digital, it does not mean that they need to be complex to be effective. This typeface was also selected by the museum of modern art New York (MoMA) as part of its permanent collection.

All of these designers and many others throughout the 1980’s digital graphic design revolution contributed to furthering the development and experimentation of the new and exciting medium that was the mac. In doing so they had to go against the leagues of traditional artists who looked down on the new technology, denouncing it as non-practical based. As well as needing the drive to explore the new features, they also needed to devote time to learn how to effectively utilise the latest technology to their advantage. However, all this combined brought about numerous innovative and brand-new ideas that would go on to become inspiration for generations of designers and artists alike to come.

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Figures

Fig 1. *Brush*. Susan Kare. 1983 (Accessed: 1st Dec 2022)

Fig 2. *ePage Electronic Graphic Services brochure*. Typogram. 1988 (Accessed: 2nd Dec 2022)

Fig 3. *1984 Olympic Poster*. Greiman and Odgers. 1984 (Accessed: 4th Dec 2022)

Fig 4. *Southern California Institute of Architecture summer programs poster*. April Greiman. 1991 (Accessed: 4th Dec 2022)

Fig 5. *graphic design award by yamaha 2014 identity*. Neville Brody. 2014 (Accessed 5th Dec 2022)