

September 28, 2010

## The Design Lesson: 1 of 1

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*In web magazines, in blogs, and even on Twitter, many skilled and talented designers offer design advice, design tips, and design insights every day...and aspiring designers should probably pay attention to this advice.*

However, once you've learned, understood, and internalized the fundamentals of artistry (and every designer must), I hold that there is one and only one design lesson any graphic designer needs to learn.

### The Design Lesson: 1 of 1

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***In graphic design, nothing is what it actually is. Everything other than content is representative of something else. Additionally, much of the content is also merely representative of something other than what it actually is.***

As far as I am concerned, the above is the only design lesson any designer needs. All else is decided by talent, taste, enthusiasm, and one's capacity for hard work.

### Representative Elements

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*"If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary wise, what it is it wouldn't be. And what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?"*

- Alice from **Alice In Wonderland**

For the designer, a line is not a line. A box is not a box. A gradient is not a gradient. An arrow is not an arrow. A sharp or rounded corner is never simply that. And only for a purposefully-useless artist is any color used in design actually representative of the color itself. In essence, nothing is what it would seem to be.

If you actually believe that designing content means you should add a line or a box or a gradient for its own sake, you're no longer designing—you're cluttering. Be careful.

Once you have agreed to direct your efforts toward a specific design purpose, you make an error if you simply cast ornaments upon the content. On the contrary; you are sworn to eliminate everything contextually contrary or that gets in the way of communication. Lines and boxes and arbitrarily-chosen ornaments do not romance or enhance the content or its purpose at communication. Arbitrary structure only ever gets in the way.

As the designer, your purpose is to realize order (*proper* order), clarity, enhancement, and contextually-appropriate theme for the content so that its message may better be conveyed. Your purpose is to discover and accomplish the seamless reintegration of that which is obviously missing from the message found within or required by the raw content.

These required components may be few or manifold, but lines, arrows, gradients, boxes, specific text decorations, or corners of a particular character for their own sake are surely never among the missing elements. For every element that is not amongst the raw content and that you decide to include in the design, ask yourself: what is its purpose? What is this element representative of and how does that enhance the content, the context, or the message?

## Defining the obvious

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- **A line is not a line. It is a surface-level boundary.** What different means of separation might you employ in its place? Do you need surface-level interruption or some other sort of boundary?
- **A box is not a box. It is a bubble of context.** What other means of contextual compartmentalization might work?
- **Blank space is not blank space. It is the intimate, knowing look that lends emphasis to what comes next.** The larger it is the more gravity it holds. Why is that function required, and where might it best be utilized? Is the result of your use of blank space intimate or knowing?
- **A gradient is not a gradient. It is a directional mechanism, a dimensional metaphor, or an indication of some object or force not visible on the page.** Why would that be interesting or even necessary in your design? What else might fulfill its mandate?
- **A color is not its color. It is a metaphor for some personified quality.** How does it support or conflict with the message, the brand, or the theme?
- **A sharp or round corner is not its shape. It is an explanation of character and personality.** What are you trying to say with your corners and why? And do you need corners and the structures they inhabit at all?
- **Big is not big, small is not small, dark is not dark, and light is not light. They are the missing yet important components of the story as told by the content, used to define context and even layout navigation.** These qualities constitute the meta-story. **These qualities are, by the way, meaningless except by how they contrast with one another.**
- **A drop shadow is not a drop shadow. It is a mechanism for emphasis and the suggestion of invisible environmental forces.** How else might you emphasize that bit of content? Is the environment you're suggesting contextually required or even correct?
- **A texture is not a texture. It is an environmental and/or thematic metaphor.** Why is it required? What does it suggest? What other means of suggestion might work better?
- **A font is not a font. It is the flavor we impose upon the textual message (and everything around it) just as the chef seasons the meal and selects a specific plate and setting for it.** The font encumbers the word, the paragraph, and the message and there is no such thing as a neutral font choice; only lazy or vapid designers.
- **A word is not just a word. It is a picture of something.** Specific words have specific context and nuance, and the same picture may be described by a different word—did you use the right one?

## Okay, you get the idea

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A comprehensive example of the list above would be enormous. What I hope it conveys is that it is quite likely that your design process should be iterative; with each iteration realizing more efficiency and contextual cohesion. Also, that the obvious design choice may be the lazy one; more clutter than design.

As you mature as a designer, your efforts will likely become more efficient and your iterative process shorter. Ultimately, **you might accomplish in one stroke** what used to take ten or more iterations. Know, however, that no designer is likely to achieve any significant level of competence without the firm understanding that design requires the employment of representative components for representative purposes rather than literal components for any purpose.



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Practice

|                                           |                                          |                                        |                              |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Hungry For a Better Menu?                 | Where Wireframes Are Concerned           | My Precious                            | Rules and Context            |
| The Design Pro Show                       | Creativity is Not Design - Design Test 2 | Volume Doesn't Matter                  | Compromised Design           |
| Web Design is Product Design              | AIGA On Committees and Design Projects   | Calculating Hours - the Client Factors | Design Psychology            |
| Values vs. Compromise                     | Where the Buck Stops                     | How and Why: Styling Text Links        | The Dumbest Guys in the Room |
| The Designer Designs                      | Unify: A Fantasy Fulfilled               | Falling Down                           | Non-semantic Markup          |
| The Profession That Should Be             | Gestalt Principles of Perception - 5     | Bad Layout Conventions                 | Sensitivity Training         |
| Value, Cost, and Rational Professionalism | Gestalt Principles of Perception - 4     | The Tao of Deadlines                   | Objectivity Be Damned        |
| Advice for New Freelancers                | On Creativity                            | Elements of Communication, 2           | Logo Misapplication          |
| Profit, Lies, Theft, and Idiocy           | Dog and Pony Show Design                 | Elements of Communication, 1           | No Instruction Necessary     |
| Sales: The Fail Team                      | Of Brands and Commodities                | Don't Walk; Run.                       | Painting a Better Landscape  |
| The UX Design Education Scam              | Big Brand 1080px Design                  | Professional Thinking                  | Contrast in Context          |
| "Curations" from Unit Interactive         | Gestalt Principles of Perception - 3     | Quiet Structure                        | Designing a Guided Tour      |
| The Design Lesson: 1 of 1                 | Gestalt Principles - 2: Similarity       | Navigational State Confusion           | Anticipation                 |
| White Labeling 2.0: Black Labeling        | Complex Order, Simple Chaos              | Design Questions                       | The Layers of Design         |
| Stupid Is As Stupid Does                  | Gestalt Principles of Perception - 1     | Make Me care                           | Design Process vs. Result    |
| Lies, Deception, and Subcontracting       | Contrast and Meaning                     | Keeping Up                             | How Design Fails             |
|                                           |                                          |                                        | It's Not About the Website   |

Redux

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|---------------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| News Redux                | NRA.org Redux    | Fox News Redux    | Google Redux |
| USA.gov Redux             | CarMax.com Redux | Redux Anatomy     | eBay Redux   |
| Wall Street Journal Redux | Amazon.com Redux | White House Redux |              |

Culture

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|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Designers as Pawns and Useful Idiots  | Web 0.2                                   | Promises                  | Elite!=Elitist                  |
| Plato's Cave                          | The Design of (the wrong sort of) Dissent | Federal Reservations      | Seek Understanding              |
| The Demise of American Exceptionalism | The Opposite of Professional              | Web Misunderstandards     | Civilization vs. Responsibility |
| First Things First?                   | A Sense of Non-Commitment                 | Quality, Not Compliance   | Redesign Competitions           |
| Again With the Risks                  | A Brand Synopsis                          | Don't Just Read: Think    | The First Rule of Web Design is |
| Risk                                  | So Long <i>Design Observer</i>            | Anti-Social Media         | Design Showcase Pornography     |
| On Inspiration                        | Versus                                    | Want a Bullshit Sandwich? | With Apologies to Mr. Glaser    |
| The Boom of Doom                      | An Inconvenient War on Truth              | No Comments Here          | Agencies Behaving Badly         |
|                                       |                                           |                           | Design: The It Profession       |

Critique

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|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Journalism                        | Poynter's Eye-tracking Follies  | The Many Faces of AIGA   | Six Apart Loves Dumb Designers |
| The Blind Leading the Blind       | <i>CommArts</i> is Out of Touch | The Thin PMS185 Line     | Online Newspapers Are 99% Bad  |
| Criticism: Myths and Childishness | The Stepford Wives              | Poynter's Complete Waste |                                |

Miscellaneous

|                                        |                                 |                                |                                  |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Design Pro Thanks                      | Logo Design for Buffalo Bill    | Times New Omen                 | Life Chemistry                   |
| Blowing It                             | How To Become a Designer        | Unit Interactive: Labs         | Living Purposefully              |
| My Old Fantasy Writings                | Buying Shampoo                  | Nathan's Font Stacks           | Texas-Sized Instruction          |
| A Christmas Poem                       | The Trouble With RFPs           | Designer Survey                | A Groovy Little Unit             |
| How To Join AIGA                       | Epic                            | Unit's New Face & Office Space | May the Source Be With You       |
| I Once Guitar Dueled with Paul Gilbert | Redesigning Unit Interactive    | My Teacher                     | Life Lessons                     |
| Want to Work at Unit Interactive?      | Unit Interactive is Hiring      | Work With Me Here              | Andy is a 16-year Old Doofus     |
|                                        | What is Design Professionalism? | Tough Client: My Son           | Online News Just Got Interesting |
|                                        |                                 |                                | Give Your Website Away           |

Podcasts

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|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Design View Show #8 | Design View Show #6 | Design View Show #4 | Design View Show #2 |
| Design View Show #7 | Design View Show #5 | Design View Show #3 | Design View Show #1 |