Style versus Design

Why understanding the difference is what it's all about.

By Jeffrey Zeldman

My father was a Sunday painter, and his art books played a formative role in my childhood. Like many kids, I was fascinated by sheer representation. I lost myself gazing at painstakingly rendered engravings of battling gladiators, picturesque villages, and Roman ruins at sunrise. I understood art to be synonymous with drawing well. The more painstaking the detail, the more lines in the etching or leaves on the tree, the better the artist in my childish, unformed estimation. Later, I discovered comic books. Still later, museums. Maxfield Parrish made me want to take drugs, and also made me realize I could never be a painter. Paul Klee seemed like a bad artist who couldn't draw. Andy Warhol was a cheater because he used assistants.

I do not pretend to understand art today, but I do know that my earliest impressions had little to do with the nature of art, and everything to do with pure visual sensation. Like Disneyland and the circus, art was spectacle. But you can only ride the Matterhorn so many times, and you can only chomp so much cotton candy, before nausea sets in. From sensation, I graduated to style. Steve Ditko's Spider-Man. Pop art. Rock, and then soul, and then punk album covers. I was a Style addict. I could not tell good from bad, but I knew what was cool.

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Many young web designers view their craft the way I used to view pop culture. It's cool or it's crap. They mistake Style for Design, when the two things are not the same at all. Design communicates on every level. It tells you where you are, cues you to what you can do, and facilitates the doing. Style is tautological; it communicates stylishness. In visual terms, style is an aspect of design; in commercial terms, style can communicate brand attributes.

It can also convey the designer's contempt for the subject matter. "This is boring, so here are some stripes and here's a drop-down menu, so you'll know I'm better than this stupid assignment." On this level, style is an underground language, from one peer to another, having nothing to do with the site's visitors or purpose. Indeed, this stylistic appliqué can interfere with the site's purpose. Then the usability gurus step in, blaming Design for the failings of stylistic fetishism.

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Designers driven by Style can succeed if they are lucky enough to pick and choose projects that benefit from their stylistic obsessions. Most web designers do not have that luxury. But that doesn't stop them from applying the stylistic vocabulary of leading designers to the projects they do have to work on. And so we end up with e-commerce sites that resemble rave flyers, and informational sites embellished with occasionally dazzling but more frequently misguided and inappropriate intros.

The web used to look like a phone book. Now much of it looks like a design portfolio. In fact, it looks like the design portfolio of 20 well-known designers, whose style gets copied again and again by young designers who consider themselves disciples. Distinctions between graphic design and communication design are lost on these designers. As is the distinction between true style, which evolves from the nature of the project, and derivative pastiche, which is grafted onto many projects like a third arm.

When Style is a fetish, sites confuse visitors, hurting users and the companies that paid for the sites. When designers don't start by asking who will use the site, and what they will use it for, we get meaningless eye candy that gives beauty a bad name—at least, in some circles.

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Trouble is, we live in a society obsessed with surfaces (and afraid to peer beneath them). In a consumer culture where we buy $200 sneakers because they look cool and Beck's song was used in the commercial, flash and dazzle are the highest-prized commodities of all.

For some clients and too many young designers, multimedia Flash projects have become synonymous with web design. If it doesn't sing and dance, it must not be good—and it certainly isn't cool. Great work is being created in Flash (SWF), and it's receiving overdue recognition in award shows—particularly in traditional, high-profile award shows, where "the digital stuff" precedes the multimillion-dollar TV commercials. Judges expect TV commercials to have a brilliant concept and higher production values than most commercial films. Naturally, they expect web sites to blow them away, too.

Boundary-busting, stylistically baroque experiments built with the latest technology will continue to win awards as long as judges continue to view them in the latest browsers on wide-screen G5s and Pentiums with T1 connections. And, it goes without saying, they will win these awards only if they are prize-worthy in their graphic design and programming. We're not talking about bad design, here. We're talking about design at the highest levels—but design of a certain type only.

Most of my colleagues design sites like this. My jaw drops when I witness their achievements, and I cheer when they take home their well-deserved prizes. But I also worry.

I worry because this type of design, which is appropriate in certain settings and inappropriate in many others, is the only type of web design achieving recognition. Thus it is the type of design young designers are emulating, not only in their personal projects (which is great), but also on commercial projects where it may cause harm.

I worry because young designers who confuse style with design are learning to copy their heroes' technical tricks and stylistic flourishes, but not necessarily learning to communicate in this medium. "Bullet Time" is great for "The Matrix," but not for documentaries. And since much of web design is informational—or is supposed to be—the wholesale grafting of other people's stylistic achievements onto informational sites does not advance the medium; it just makes it confusing.

I worry because there are designers who will never evolve their own, individual styles, let alone learn to evolve brand-appropriate styles for particular projects. Because recruiters lack critical vocabularies, and will place people whose portfolios demonstrate a knowledge of "what's cool" in jobs where they will be miserable. ("With your talent, you'll turn that place around.") Because eventually traditional designers who do understand branding and communication design, and who do know the difference between Style and Design, will enter this market and displace some young designers who have never had the chance to understand the craft they practice.

I worry about the medium, because not enough designers are working in that vast middle ground between eye candy and hardcore usability where most of the web must be built. And there are fewer and fewer incentives for web designers to toil in these fields, since this type of work pleases web users but wins absolutely no recognition from the industry, aside from a paycheck. ("My God, it loaded so quickly and worked so well, even in IE3 on my Dad's old Dell machine." You know how awards show judges are always saying things like that? Neither do I.)

Most of all, I worry about web users. Because, after ten-plus years of commercial web development, they still have a tough time finding what they're looking for, and they still wonder why it's so damned unpleasant to read text on the web—which is what most of them do when they're online.

As long as our society values Style over Design, surface over substance, this situation is not going to improve. Of course, I think the same every four years, when I have to vote.

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