

## Advancing Knowledge. Transforming Web Design.

### Remix as best practice

Remix design occurs when the creative design and development of a Web project is influenced by references to other Web sites. This can happen when a client, manager or administrator says, "We want the site to look like the Gap," or in my office, where I work in higher education public relations, "we want it to look like university X." Sometimes it's not an overall look the client wants to remix, but a color scheme, type photo treatment, or a navigational style. Often, they want to infuse their new site design with bits and pieces from several other sites they like. This is when we really get into remixing.

"To understand remix as a cultural phenomenon, we must first define it in music."<sup>1</sup>

### Origin of remix

Remix dates back as far as the beginning of recorded sound. Modern remix had its roots in the dance hall culture of the late-1960s and early-1970s in Jamaica.<sup>2</sup> Remix consisted of:

- deconstructing and rebuilding tracks to suit the tastes of an artist's audience;
- manipulating separate tracks;
- any reworking of original musical work.

In the 1980s remix was fairly simple but becoming very popular as artists such as Madonna used remix to promote their careers. In the late '80s, house music was on the rise and a new form of remix came on the scene, where vocals were left intact but instrumentals were changed up.

In the '90s, as home computing was on the rise and access to more powerful audio tools, the mash-up was born; unofficial version remixes, often incorporating pieces from two or more songs. There were questions of legality with this kind of remixing, but some artists such as, Public Enemy not only embraced it, but encouraged their fans to remix their music.

In looking at a quote from the online exhibition site, "*postdigital remix culture and online performance*," we can start to find places where remix might extend beyond the realm of music:

“...in an era of information overload, the art of remixing and sampling as practiced by hip-hop DJs and producers points to ways of working with information on higher levels of organization, pulling together the efforts of others into a multilayered multireferential whole which is much more than the sum of its parts.”<sup>3</sup>

By 2000 the expansion of the term remix to other creative forms was inevitable. In 2002 Lev Manovich addresses the extension of remix in his article, “Models of Authorship in New Media.” He pointed out how people have been applying the term remix to other media as far back as the late nineties; leaving us to wonder why it didn’t expand sooner. Yet he notes an important inconsistency:

“Although the practice of remixing is accepted as a legitimate process in the music business, in other creative cultural realms, it is seen as copyright violation and stealing. So even though filmmakers, photographers, visual artists, architects, and Web designers regularly remix existing works, it’s rarely openly discussed, and there is no equivalent language to remixing to describe these other practices of sampling.” (Manovich)

### **Getting there**

In 2003, freelance new media designer Cameron Moll, published the article, “Good Designers Copy, Great Designers Steal,” a title adapted from a similar quote attributed to Picasso. In his article, Moll doesn’t make a direct connection between remix and Web design, but he gets closer than anyone else at the idea of remix as a legitimate design practice:

“I’m all for being as original as possible, but a beginning Web designer (or any designer, for that matter) should start out by copying other well-created designs.”<sup>4</sup>

In a more recent article on Web design, “Design by Metaphor,”<sup>5</sup> developer Jack Zeal considers design by metaphor as a way to describe comparison-driven design. Zeal then adds another important dimension to the idea of remix design. Design choices that are derived from one or several proven sources:

- give authority to your design choices;
- extend the use of standard design practices;
- provide a way to better communicate design choices to your client.

## **Comparison shopping not shop-lifting**

Whether you prefer the term borrow, copy, or steal, design by metaphor or comparison design, if a client tells you they want their site to “look like Nike,” you need to make sure you understand exactly what they mean. First, you don’t want to be in the business of lifting other sites whole sale and second, what works for one site will not necessarily work on another. It is important to understand what elements in a source site might work for your project and why. Remixing is about making deliberate choices, not cramming every cool thing you or your client finds, together, otherwise you are going to end up with Frankenweb—it’s alive, but it’s probably ugly and can’t communicate.

## **Laying down the client and user tracks**

In my work as a digital communications specialist for a major research institution, I review other college and university sites and corporate Web sites every day. I analyze layouts and information design. I look for the way the use and combination of colors, images, navigational schemes, support or detract from the messaging and branding. My eye is constantly looking for pleasing arrangements, configurations of visual elements and semantic texts that communicate a theme or message.

My job is to make sure that Web sites produced for services and programs at my institution consist of design that blends with and supports the copy, that the branding is in line with the unit and the institution, that every aspect of the site supports the strategic position: more than 150 years of tradition.

Information Web sites have to connect with users, ensuring them that they are at the place they are looking for, that has the information they need. And this all has to happen in the space of roughly 800 x 600 pixels and in a matter of nine seconds or less.

This is where the Web professional or communications specialist makes sure the needs of the stakeholders and users are met. In Web design, there is a whole other aspect of technology and standards that must be taken into consideration, if a site is to be successful.

## **Good sites don’t happen by accident**

The creative process in Web design is more like the design process of a product than an artistic piece, that serves more purely as artistic expression, for pure enjoyment, or to evoke a response. Educational, business or sites disseminating information or selling services, this is particularly true. Visual design is still important, but there are other considerations, such as Web standards and best practices.

Web Standards refer to formal standards and other technical specifications that define and describe aspects of the World Wide Web, such as the design of Web pages. The Web Standards Project (WaSP) explains the intention behind Web standards is to, “ensure that everyone has access to the information we are providing, and also make Web development faster and more enjoyable.”<sup>7</sup>

Another important organization to Web Standards is the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). The W3C is the international governing body that oversees the development of Web standards. It is their position that sites built to meet current web standards will be more accessible and more usable. W3C is headed by Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the primary author of the original URL (Uniform Resource Locator), HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol) and HTML (HyperText Markup Language) specifications, the principal technologies that form the basis of the World Wide Web.<sup>6</sup> He, together with Robert Cailliau, invented the World Wide Web.

“Tim Berners-Lee's dream for his invention, the World Wide Web, is a common space where users can share information to work together, to play, and to socialize ([The World Wide Web, A very short personal history](#)). As Web developers, creating business, social, and educational sites, we turn this dream into reality.” (WaSP)

### **Never get involved in a civil war in Asia (or design a Web site without best practices in mind)<sup>8</sup>**

When I first started as a Web Coordinator in 2002 the graphic designers in my department did very little Web design. They did lots of print design: brochures, posters, white papers, and logo and identity treatments— all the kinds of marketing materials you would expect from a public relations office. In the beginning, I was the only Web developer and I had a couple of programming students. I didn't have a background in design, so my Web designs were plain and boxy and frankly, uninspired. I knew what I liked when I saw it, but I didn't have the training to create the original graphics and compositions I wanted. To try to solve this problem I brought the graphic designers into process. In early collaborations, they were coming up with beautiful, striking designs, but they weren't designed with the Web in mind, other than they were 800 x 600 pixels wide. They were print designs in the shape of Web pages They didn't lend themselves to emerging trends in Web standards; layouts were constructed for aesthetic purposes, not for usability.

## **Usability experts are from Mars, graphic designers are from Venus<sup>9</sup>**

There is a particular name that will raise the ire and bring sneer the lips of many contemporary Web design gurus—Jakob Nielsen. Since 1998 Nielsen has been a leading Web usability expert, with expertise based on human factors engineering.<sup>10</sup>

There is a strong difference of opinions on Web design between the two camps. There are the new media designers who support the use of best practices and Web standards but believe that Nielsen fails to balance the importance of other user experience considerations such as eye appeal. At the other end of the universe, Nielsen believes in creating interfaces accessible to the disabled and other underserved populations, criticizing dependence on animation, Flash and large graphics, for a very minimalist approach to graphic design, that some would argue is non-existent.

## **The World Wide Web Negotiator: Remix**

The push and pull over design aesthetic and best practices, can be solved by using the multilayered approach of remixing music and apply it to Web design. In this multilayered approach, you start with laying down a base track, meeting user needs. Designers and usability experts can agree that for a Web site to succeed, it has to meet the needs of its user and the objectives of the client. At its foundation an information Web site has to facilitate communication. Just that piece is a complex and layered task. Whether you are talking about a corporation or a university, there are layers of messages that need to be communicated, especially in marketing publications.

## **Special Mix**

Wherever you work, every organization has its own special brand to work into the mix. This varies, depending on if a site is representing the entire organization or just a small part of it, will determine how much of the overall brand message has to be worked into the design of the site. Some organizations, such as the university where I work, have a strategic positioning process and specific strategic imperatives that need to be blended into all publications, including Web sites. This is another layer that has to be mixed into the site. Understanding how similar organizations layer their messaging into their sites is a useful way to ensure you understand established design and communication standards. Remix is necessary when a design practice has become a standard among any type of Web site.

## **Reviewing the Mix**

We've talked about:

- User needs

- Client needs
- Web standards
- Institutional branding and strategic imperatives

What else? There may be a number of internal influences on a design process. By internal I am thinking of:

- Creative director
- Marketing director
- Other boss-type people

Along with the end-users and your client, these are all stakeholders on your project. Anyone who has the ability to stop or make a significant impact on the project should be considered a stakeholder.

### **How do I make everyone happy?**

You can't make everyone happy but you can make most of them happy. More importantly, you want to make the right ones happy. This is one big negotiation of needs, one big love-fest remix. One of the best ways to get skeptics and detractors on board is to incorporate research into your project.

Research— it will spare you grief, save you time, and wipe that scowl off a disgruntled CEO, academic, administrator or anyone who thinks they have a better plan than you do.

In my shop, research is generally conducted by project managers, senior communicators or the marketing specialists. In smaller shops or where a Web designer is wearing all the hats—project manager, designer, developer, she would do the research herself. Even if the designer isn't conducting the research, they need to be in on the outcome before any design work begins. Getting a designer involved in an initial creative meeting with the client is another important way to get the mix right.

### **We don't need no stinkin' method, we're creatives!**

Sometimes the designers just don't want to get on board with the whole remix idea. Even in my office, where the designers are outstanding, the idea of using someone else's design idea is often considered bad practice. It's okay to look at other work for

inspiration but to remix a piece of someone else's design into their own...imagine seeing some rather disgusted expressions.

When they have almost won me over, freed me from the dark side of Schütze's spin, merge, morph, mix, mix again and remix<sup>11</sup> I stop in my ascent to envision a version of the world that scares me more than being shamed by my lust for copying, stealing and remixing EVERYTHING. I imagine the landscape that designer and teacher, Ross Olson talks about in his article "A Design Method," about the truly darker side: working in the limitless digital realm with nothing for inspiration:

"That place where limitations have not been set can be stifling! The worst prison I can imagine would be a blank world. No walls, no obstacles, no paths trodden or untrodden. It's a hell of a lot easier to have something to grab. Rules are often arbitrary walls of our own construction. Where would Pink Floyd be without The Wall?<sup>12</sup>

What really interests me is where he goes next. As Olden lays out his design method, he starts the same place I like to start, focusing the concept. This is nothing new. Having failed to approach projects this way in the past, I have learned the hard way that you will waste time and money if you don't understand the scope of the project right from the beginning. But it's the next step that really gets me giddy: Gather Supporting Materials. HA! Here is a designer, with a design method after my own remixing heart:

"Find out what the competitors are doing, what graphics and colors they use.

Get text, Word documents, PDFs and magazine clippings, newspaper articles and press release archives. Watch the videos and the TV commercials, listen to the radio commercials. Look at the business cards, the stationary, the envelopes of your client and their competitors, similar tier distributors in other markets, suppliers, and customers" (Olson)

Olson goes on to explain that the purpose of this process is to sort the good stuff from the bad and determining why it's good or bad and what you can work with. The entire process is a method of exposing yourself to lots of images, designs, words, and ideas.

This is not an elite or specialized point of view, using remix to launch a Web design project. We just never called it remix before. It's been hiding behind a wildly popular research technique, the competitive review:

"Seek inspiration. Your peers, your role models, and your competitors (in short, your environment) can all help you...(Stevenson).

“Exploring competitor websites offers the opportunity to discover what is working well for them ... if all the competitors are offering specific content and functionality, users will likely expect your site to offer similar content and functionality” (Withrow).

“All conventions start life as somebody’s bright idea...They’re very useful. As a rule, conventions only become conventions if they work. Well-applied conventions make it easier for users...There’s a reassuring sense of familiarity. Designers are often reluctant to take advantage of them. Faced with the prospect of using convention, there’s a great temptation for designers to reinvent the wheel...they feel they’ve been hired to do something new and different, and not the same old thing (Krug). Don’t Make Me Think. Second Edition. pp 34-35. 2006. New Riders.

Steve Krug isn’t a designer, he is a usability expert, but he gets to the heart of the debate between design and usability and maybe why user-centered Web practitioners see the fruits of competitive analysis more as sampling and remixing and less like ripping someone off or violating the sanctity of original expression.

### **One more communication tool and the words to explain it**

The significance of wide acceptance of competitive review as not just a legitimate part of the Web design process, but a necessary one, is that it opens the way to legitimize the way we use the results of those reviews; it’s an important step toward making remix an open and accepted part of the Web design process.

Although I have yet to see the concept of remix adopted as part of the vernacular, in our trade journals or other publications from the field of digital communications, the concept of competitive review and an emerging acceptance of design by comparison, is removing the concepts merge, mix, reassemble, sample and recompose, into the realm of Web design. Just as important, it is moving us away from the idea that these kinds of design tactics are anything akin to copyright infringement. In the end, remix is just another tool. It can be applied in a constructive way or just like a poorly mixed song, it can fall flat. As communicating in digital environments has become an increasingly more important part of our methods of communications, it is critical that we understand that remix in all of its meanings is a means of furthering the creativity of our communications and without continually reinventing and remixing the past, we have nowhere to go in the future.

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