

## **"Design" Versus the "Idea of Design": Moving from experiencing artifacts to consuming memes**

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The impact of computer technology on design has been profound, with an almost complete digital swallowing of the means of production in the graphic domain (desktop everything), and an ever-growing penetration into the methods and processes of industrial design (3D modeling and rendering tools, CNC tooling, rapid prototyping).

Attendant to the changes in work process has been—for better or worse—what many would consider an awesome increase in the power of the tools of creation. What is interesting however, is that these new powers of creation have hit at the same time as the equally impressive and decidedly new modes of dissemination—i.e. the internet.

Here, we see a perfect storm (or a perfect bazaar) of buyers and sellers; of design minds—and not necessarily "credentialed" designers, for the record—creating artifacts of design, and a seemingly limitless audience ready to experience those designs. The internet provides an infinite, instantaneous, indexed medium for these exchanges, and, as they say, there's no turning back.

Of course, this perfect storm is raging across all manner of human endeavor, from user-gen commercial production to the sharing and selling of goods and services in SecondLife. But in design, the power of the tools of creation, met with the speed and ease of sharing—and collaborating—on the fruits of those tools, is creating something novel, potentially wonderful, often stupid, and dare I say even green: the transition from the "experience of the artifact" to the "consumption of the idea of the artifact."

Let's take a look at how this plays out in a few examples from the graphic and product design worlds, starting with everyone's favorite from a couple of years ago, the on the site yayhooray.com (gathered nicely at <<http://tinyurl.com/2gaccx>>). Here, participants modified all sorts of popular logos in the style of "web2.0" vernacular—glassy surfaces, baseline reflections; playful coloring, vowel-free spelling, and version numbering. Scrolling through the myriad examples is entertaining and weirdly satisfying—favorites are the Quaker Oats and Chevrolet logos; funniest is the AT&T logo, because it's the same both before and after its 2.0-tizing! Some visitors look through a few studies, others stay a long while, but these are

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little pieces of candy; empty-calorie one-liners, perhaps, but surprisingly tasty.

We can also enjoy the impressive Photoshop contests at [worth1000.com](http://worth1000.com), where members photoshop images, altering them based on a given competition theme—from Alternate Reflections and Shadows 3 <<http://tinyurl.com/ysowdz>> to Supersize It! 7 <<http://tinyurl.com/2332ax>>. I'm a big fan of Alternate Materials - Wood <<http://tinyurl.com/23frzj>>, but things start to bump up against the real world when you get to the product design stuff, as in the competition to design Apple's Next Product (A conspicuous number of toilets show up in this last competition; favorites here are the "iReallyGottaGo", the "iToilet," and the "iPotty." And yes, apparently this is what the internet was invented for.)

Certainly, this kind of second-guessing the next Apple iIteration has been going on all over the place for ages: Early forums were [ipodlounge.com](http://ipodlounge.com) <<http://tinyurl.com/2adn4w>> and random posts throughout [engadget.com](http://engadget.com) <<http://www.engadget.com>>, but you see it everywhere. And juried design competitions are, by definition, sandboxes for creating ideas for things that don't exist—call them "fictional products"—so this is nothing really new. But what *is* new, again, is the high power (and low price) of the tools used to create these fictional ideas, coupled with the speed, ease, and reach of the tools for distributing them. Here, like in everything internet, we've got low barriers and viral carriers. This creates new opportunities for creative people everywhere, and new opportunities for communities of people to enjoy and share the work. So the question tempting us is: Will this *change* the work?

(On the "fictional" term: My favorite usage here is from Stefane Barbeau and Duane Smith of Vessel <<http://www.vessel.com>>, who have famously called their well-known commercial home product line their "non-fictional design work," and their conceptual, non-commercial Release1 work <<http://www.release1.net>> their "fictional design work." There has always been something sad about that "non-" moniker to me; that non-fiction plays second-fiddle to fiction. But it's actually refreshing to see it employed in the design realm!)

Back in iWorld, we see things move from toilets to a current favorite of designers, the toaster. This has particular resonance for me, because one of the most heavily trafficked pages on [Core77.com](http://Core77.com) is the ROLLERtoaster <<http://tinyurl.com/y6vqmqz>>, an award-winning design, but arguably one of the most unsafe, annoying-to-use products ever to be conjured. It's not real, but it's irresistible, and the internet has rewarded it for its novelty. (It's been posted at every design blog you can name.)

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And over at a relatively new site called Idealist, <<http://idealist.blinkr.net>>, designers upload images of fictional products that they concoct in 3D rendering software, and post for critique...in the form of everyone's favorite internet metric: voting. Here, lego's Lego's Ice Bricks ice cube tray <<http://tinyurl.com/2hqrok>> as garnered 224 votes, while Anna Lopez's Cario Notebook <<http://tinyurl.com/266svb>>—a catastrophically *bad* idea—has tallied up a mere 12.

If you step back from the quotidian logos and toasters and ice cube trays though, people let their hair down a bit more. Over at Flickr, several memes have captured the delight of many. "Transparent Desktop" <<http://tinyurl.com/26quum>> and "Transparent Screens" <<http://tinyurl.com/3ulzf>> challenges people to create and share images of computer screens manipulated to appear transparent. (Favorites are Bennecontentos' "Transparent Desktop" <<http://tinyurl.com/229s74>> and mag3737's "Magic Screen" <<http://tinyurl.com/2cmnyo>>; while //bwr's "Double Transparent Screen" <<http://tinyurl.com/ynqt23>> ups the ante, with schiwago 08815's "Transparenter Desktop 02" <<http://tinyurl.com/2yac8j>> reaching for a nice surprise.)

My personal favorite Flickr meme, also from a couple years ago, is "Cameratoss" <<http://tinyurl.com/279any>>. This is where people set their cameras to a long exposure, hit the shutter button, and toss them up into the air. The results are mesmerizing—El Ray seems to be a virtuoso here <<http://tinyurl.com/25mefq>>—but what's fascinating about this meme is that these pieces aren't really about the graphic image; they're about the *throw*. El Ray isn't a better illustrator than anyone else; he simply has a better arm. (I'd give him 100 votes, if the system allowed.)

And finally, we have to make a stop at Front Design's infamous "Sketch Furniture" stunt, blogged the world over and enjoyed by most as a YouTube video <<http://tinyurl.com/y4arqw>>. Now, the thing about the Front Design piece is that it is perfectly consumable as an idea. We probably don't need to see it live (we *couldn't*, actually, since that thrilling line tracing over the drawer's hand at 00:03:22 is superimposed onto the live-action video), and we certainly don't need to buy or own the furniture itself—it's probably not very good by any straight metric. But it's REAL good as an "idea"—for exploring the relationship between 2D and 3D; the nature of manufacturing and production; the notion of mass customization and personalization; or the grace notes of dance, or poetry, or instant gratification, or myriad other lenses you could view this video through.

And after you watch the video—after you consume it—you have a decision to make: You can forward it to a friend in an email, or you can blog it if you're a

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blogger, or you can simply close the window and get back to work. The Front Design video has served you well, I'd argue, without creating a bit of solid waste. (That's not to say that consuming the video, or other uses of the internet, has no ecological footprint. Far from it. <<http://tinyurl.com/ybpzq7>>)

Oh: Don't forget to spend 9 seconds checking out the "Walking Table" video on the way out <<http://tinyurl.com/wthfr>>. That one's the best! (I don't need to own that table either, by the way—though I wouldn't mind pushing it across a gallery floor.)

To me then, these ideas, or memes, or internet phenomena, even when they're absurd, provide something that is very worthwhile. They're editorial. They amount to gestures—discursive, narrative, and evocative in nature, and shared by many. They travel virally, probably exactly *because* they are there first to tell a story, then second to serve a function. And when you think about it, this isn't a bad place for design to be right now. Too many of our products are function first/form second, with narrative nowhere to be found. How bad would it be if our products started with narrative in the first place; with an idea of the experience of the product in mind—before that product ever had the *chance* to turn into landfill? Not bad at all, really.

So what does this boil down to? Well, in a classic design worldview, we can say that designers are in the business of creating artifacts. (Those artifacts can be signs, posters, books, products, exhibits, buildings, etc.) And that these artifacts—at least the well-designed ones—belong to systems. (A logo is part of a brand; a TiVo is part of a home entertainment system, broadcasting infrastructure, etc.) And that the way we move through those systems is by experiencing them. Add up all those experiences perhaps, and you arrive at culture, or at least pieces of culture. So it looks like this:

Artifacts  
Systems  
Experiences  
Culture

Perhaps now, we are seeing something different; something that reflects the move from artifact to the idea of artifact. Here, the "thing" is replaced by the "gesture" of the thing. And these gestures collect into *gestalts*, or sets of symbolic ideas that add up to more than the sum of their parts. And perhaps most significantly here, the way we move through *these* kinds of ideas is by consuming them. And ultimately, this translates into a *zeitgeist*, or a spirit of the times. So now our chart looks like this:

Artifacts -> Gestures  
Systems -> Gestalts  
Experiences -> Consumption  
Culture -> Zeitgeist

Does this represent an inevitable shift, or simply an artifact (ironic!) of the changes and powers of creation and dissemination? Does the move to consuming ideas of things rather than the things themselves signal something different in kind, or simply a predictable stage in the commoditization of everything we touch? Should things created on a computer be *consumed* on a computer?

Who knows. But you could take a picture of that last question, toss it up into the air, and see where it lands. Just don't forget to get a shot of it on the way up, and a blog post out of it on the way down.