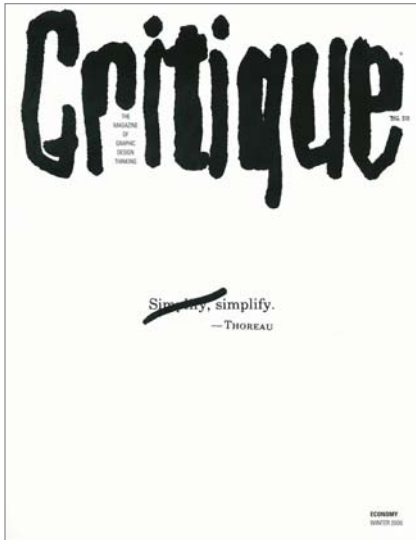


# The Next Web



Two part interview:

Part one published in  
**Critique**  
Number 14, Winter 2000.

## What impact is the Web having on graphic design now? Is there anything about all of this that's truly new?

The Web is an interesting medium that has great influence, but the profession is in the midst of a tremendous change that has to do with far more than just computing. It goes back to the beginnings of professional design at the turn of the century, when mass production—particularly printing—separated the making of a thing from the planning of making a thing. When you plan how something will be made from the beginning, as when the Industrial Revolution moved us into mass production, you make objects which are generally the same. Now, at the end of the industrial era, we're manufacturing things that can account for a lot of variation—custom PCs are a perfect example—and we're designing systems with their future permutations in mind. Customization is even more of an influence when you begin to design online communications. No one's experience is the same as someone else's, and everyone's experience changes over time. You have to ask what effect those differences will have on design.

Then, as you move into more complex systems—fully interactive sites with linked databases on the back end and so on—it's very difficult for one person to keep the entire system in his or her head. This has introduced the need for collaborators from many disciplines; and because you're on a team, and because the work is so complex, you have to be much more explicit about the processes you use. So, on top of everything else, the Web is changing the way we work.

## What effects will the Web have on design a year from now? Five years from now? And how is it changing the way we think about the role of the designer?

We've already seen the design profession move from a concern for publication design to a concern for information design and now a concern for system and application design. The main question we're addressing is how to integrate applications with databases and personalization. What that means is that we're finally design-

ing for the Web instead of using forms that have existed before in print or video.

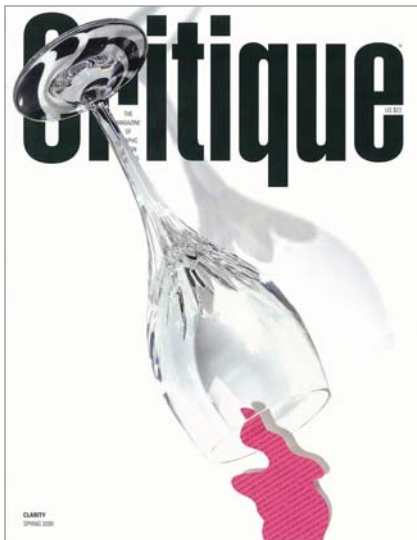
There's been a tendency for design to focus on the syntactic, or the visual, somewhat to the exclusion of focusing on the semantic, or pragmatic: to focus on how something looks rather than what it says and how it's being used. The real question is whether graphic design will change to be more concerned with meaning and message, or whether a new profession will emerge which will take on those considerations.

**What narrative or organizational structures seem to be the most comfortable for audiences? Are there certain conventions they're beginning to accept—and expect?**

There's a huge amount of work to do in the area of structure and convention, so this is a very difficult question. People haven't been trained to expect much beyond the idea of a link. In fact, there's evidence to suggest that people resist some of the more complex structures, such as hierarchical filing systems used in computer operating systems.

I also think the basic technology is structured in a way that's very limiting. Using the page as a fundamental unit of information on the Web seems arbitrary to me. The Web needs needs organization conventions built around blocks of information that are smaller than a page. And it needs larger collections of pages. Even the idea of a site, as a single location, has no formal meaning on the Web, since a site can stretch across multiple domains and servers—and a server can hold many sites.

Then there's the idea of links. We now only build two kinds of links: links within a page or links to another page, but eventually somebody designing a site for the first time will quickly recognize that there are many different types of links. There are primary navigational links and secondary links and help links, but we have no taxonomy of link structure. There's rich research on this stuff, but it hasn't been built into the Web in any formal way—yet.



Part two published in  
**Critique**  
Number 15, Spring 2000.

### **How much technical insight do designers need to make themselves useful on a web development team?**

Sure, designers should learn to program a little so they'll be familiar with the process. (Maybe everyone should learn programming in elementary school—it's really like learning a new language.) But programming isn't design. We think designers can play a more useful role by developing a shared mental model for each site in the concept phase, and then taking responsibility for visualizing that model. It's important for the designer to work at defining the user; to make the user real, and to define the user's goals. This is basic stuff, but you'd be surprised at how seldom it happens.

### **What technologies are the most significant in terms of realizing the potential for graphic design on the Web—and how do those technologies affect the way we think about design?**

Whenever we talk about the influences of technology, it's tempting to answer in the short term, but I think it's more interesting to look at the long term. Short-term, the technologies that will affect graphic design include very prosaic things, like style sheets, browsers with built-in object-orientated graphics, or database applications. Somewhat longer term, a number of people assume that content for the Web will somehow be repurposed or designed in such a way that it can work magically both on the Web and on smaller handheld devices—and that's going to be a real challenge. Designing for multiple devices create another level of complexity in already complex system designs. Long-term, our experience with computers will change as they continue to disperse into the environment around us—into cars and buildings and clothes—until they're part of the very walls of the places we inhabit. That will be an even more interesting challenge for designers.

### **Will enhanced bandwidth improve the quality of the graphic environment on the Web? In other words, what will enhanced bandwidth let designers design that they were unable to design before?**

I agree. Quality is not proportional to bandwidth. You can organize information quite well with a typewriter; often, the more constrained the problem, the better the solutions. Situations in which the work is unconstrained often lead to less than delightful results.

Beyond that, it will take quite a while for broadband to make a difference. It's not a technical inevitability. Nor will it be here in 18 to 24 months. When people hear broadband I think they somehow think of television coming through their computers, and it's just not going to be that way.

**Corporate America has, according to one long-time online, “taken over our gateway to the virtual world.” What does the increasing commodification of the Web mean for the creative community in general, and for designers in particular?**

The rate at which the Web has moved from being an also-ran delivery service vehicle for marketing departments to becoming a central element in many companies' business strategy has created huge opportunities for designers. It moves them from an ancillary service role to a central role designing primary products and services. For a long time now, designers have been claiming that they want to participate more fully in the development of their clients' businesses. Now they have the opportunity. Being involved in business development won't in any way preclude anyone's ability to publish things, or to form and maintain communities by making things available to the rest of the world. And the changes we're going to see in the way people work, and learn, and play in the future will be far greater than anything we've seen to date.