

Alien Forces Invade Graphic Design! Will it Survive?

Back in the very early '80s, I was living in Boston and working as a graphic designer for a small publisher. It was at this moment—when the term “computer” still evoked images of huge refrigerated rooms with men in white lab coats—that I attended a talk given by Muriel Cooper. She introduced our AIGA chapter to her Visible Language Workshop, the now well-known enterprise devoted to exploring the relationship between graphic design and computers. What she described seemed so space age. I was dazzled and charmed. This was my future—my ticket to graphic design Mars.

Meanwhile, back at the office, my boss, Lenny, was amorously engaged with his new IBM PC. He was determined that we could produce books on this clutzy DOSwhatyouseeisNOTwhatyouget system. It was like putting a book together blind and with no hands. (This was still a few years before Apple introduced the friendlier Macintosh, and Pagemaker made an appearance.) Late into the night, Lenny and I would play Russian roulette with code. We'd bang out a macro, compile it, and then dash down the hall to the Compugraphic phototype machine—linked God only knew how to the computer—to see if the output corresponded in any imaginable way to what we had intended. To our surprise—nay, shock—we actually produced a fairly complex book.



Cooper's enterprise, as we all know, went on to become part of the legendary Media Lab and to influence a generation of the software tools for manipulating type and image. But what is less recognized is that the graphic designers who were the substance of the Workshop were getting the boot in favor of programmers. That I was doing design by manipulating "if thens" (code) instead of actual words and images—the meat and potatoes of graphic design—only seemed to validate the topsy-turvy alien experience of graphic design that we were encountering. That non-designers might be doing graphic design, or that I might be doing graphic design by writing instructions to a machine, wasn't the Utopia that Cooper's talk had led me to dream about. I had something in mind more like graphic creativity liberated by the convenience of machine technology from the drudgery of cut, paste, and paint labor, cutting the lag time from my imagination to realization with the push of a button. A graphic design washing machine, so to speak.

But to go on with that '80s moment, while the introduction of computers onto our drafting tables wasn't quite as earth-shattering as naysayers had said, we did encounter a shakeup in terms of labor. Typesetting and print production crept into our cordoned-off area of responsibility and expertise, giving us a momentary identity crisis. But it quickly passed and we all went gracefully about our business despite the loss of good friends and allies. And, to make lemonade out of the sour moment, we did get to change the typography up to the eleventh hour, and eventually discovered we could even layer and space the stuff. Besides, permutations in the division of labor weren't new to the profession.

Questions of where graphic design as a profession was going and what it meant to be a graphic designer surfaced again when PARC Xerox research scientist Dan Russell offered me a glimpse of a project he described as "dynamic typography." Okay, I thought, computer science and typography: I pictured something to do with words that would evolve and reshape according to new contexts. That would be cool. On second thought, computer scientists doing typography—that was scary. Would this signal the final demise of a profession that hopefully could do more than format whirling 3-D Times Roman text? Then I saw Russell's engineered system "read" a text and redisplay the data according to user-established parameters. (For instance, the user would tell the system: "Reduce this 20,000-word article to a 50-word synopsis.") How was this typography? It seemed more like...well, engineering and maybe editing. Then, in a bonk-in-the-middle-of-the-forehead moment, I remembered that typography was about the graphic display of thought. Duh. This was what letterforms and the arrangement of text had to do with, after all. I realized that my initial notion of what Russell had to offer—words that would evolve and reshape according to new contexts of meaning—was exactly what I had witnessed. I began to recognize the familiar role of graphic design in something that at first glance was wholly alien. Typography, born of that earlier revolution in the display of thought—print technology—was being reconsidered in the contemporary terms of customizable digital data. Only now the conditions for the display, which included typography, were integrated into the meaning-making process. Content, form, and technology were as inseparable as dancer and dance, or DNA and chromosomes—you couldn't consider one without the other.

So what do new and rapidly evolving communications technologies really mean to who we are as graphic designers? Do current circumstances point toward the inevitability of some evolution in the species of graphic design—and would this mean we're becoming better fish or turning into dinosaurs? Or is a new species evolving—mutant designers—and if so, is the species coming into being out of a mass pool of disciplinary amino acids or out of our own DNA? This is the territory that this issue of the *AIGA Journal* will explore.

