Neo-Modernism

By Nick Shinn
Graphic Exchange
Nov./Dec. 2000

neo

Rules echo the vertical stripes in the subject's jacket

White space exists as contrast to...

The "greater than" math character acquires new meaning

An iconic narrative complements the pictorial and the literary narratives

Tweaked alignments subvert the grid

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once a year—deep inside the bowels of a las vegas hotel—a tribe gathers to bow before the gods of atari and colecovision. welcome to classic gaming expo, where *donkey kong* still rules and the eighties never died
>text by matthew mckinnon >photographs by dale gold

once upon atari

"The burden falls upon the survivors to tell this tale of the old days. This was an era of eight-bit processors with one- or two-MHz clocks, and graphics systems so primitive that in some cases the computer had to actually guide the scan down your television screen, line by line. These were game machines that had perhaps 128 or 256 bytes of scratch RAM and could accept a program ROM cartridge of no more than four or eight thousand bytes. The challenge, in those bygone days, was to use those primitive tools as a platform to create something fun and interesting and maybe a little bit complicated. Into this world was born *Beamrider*."
—*from the homepage of David Rolfe, programmer of Intellivision's* Beamrider *and "celebrity" guest at this year's Classic Gaming Expo*

The premise behind CGE is simple: Round up every piece of hardware, software and memorabilia from gaming's glory days and invite fans to come and play. Put

62

another way, it's like a high-school reunion for anyone who ever thought life's greatest joy came from sitting cross-legged on a basement floor drinking Tab and playing *Gorf*. The annual event, which began as the World of Atari convention in 1998, brought 750 people to Las Vegas's Plaza Hotel and Casino on the last weekend of July.

A lengthy list of speakers—most of them former hotshot programmers for Atari, Intellivision, ColecoVision and Activision (does anyone else remember *Ghostbusters* as fondly as I do?)—spent the weekend reliving their crowning achievements and showing off more recent work (that is, their post-1984 output). Over in the vending area, CGE Services, the conference's parent company, rolled out a pair of new ColecoVision titles. A third came from Intellivision Productions, a company composed of former Intellivision programmers who bought back the rights to their work after Mattel laid off its entire gaming division in early 1984. The programmers, formerly known as the Blue Sky Rangers (Mattel hid their identities to prevent poaching from rival firms), also offered up two new titles for the venerable Atari 2600.

IP's booth was also home to the weekend's undisputed highlight: a videogame karaoke contest in which contestants mimicked thirty seconds' worth of beeps and blips from *Astrosmash*, *B-17 Bomber*, *Major League Baseball* and *Frog Bog*, all in the hope of winning games autographed by their programmers. Score! ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

shift>**october.2000**

modernism is the tool that Carmen Dunjko (*shift*) and David Pratt (*The Globe and Mail*) are using to project the message. It's a step beyond the old bare-bones functionality. By Nick Shinn

...brown space

Constructivist hardware: 36 pt. Helvetica 55 periods and hyphens
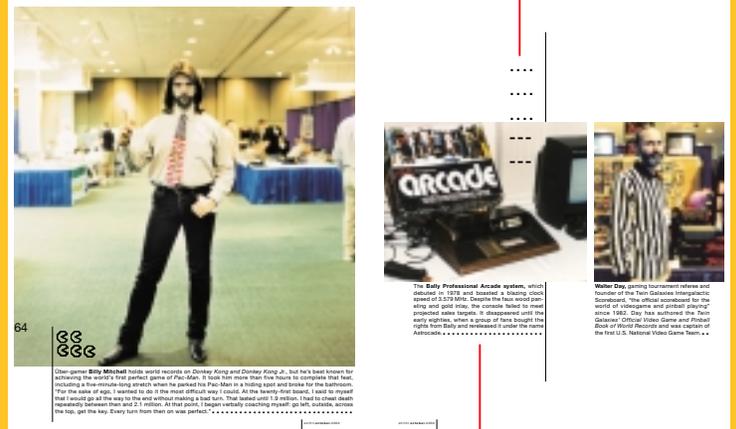

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63

David Rolfe poses with an Intellivision II and a promotional jacket from the 1983 Activision game *Decathlon*. Rolfe programmed Intellivision's operating system and its first game, *Major League Baseball*, in 1978. ∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙

shift> **october.**2000

The shelf suggests the baseline for the headline

Oversized periods square off captions into rectangular masses in their own right

Blown-out area of the photo is a statement of pictorial/graphic ambiguity

64

Über-gamer **Billy Mitchell** holds world records on *Donkey Kong and Donkey Kong Jr.*, but he's best known for achieving the world's first perfect game of *Pac-Man*. It took him more than five hours to complete that feat, including a five-minute-long stretch when he parked his Pac-Man in a hiding spot and broke for the bathroom. "For the sake of ego, I wanted to do it the most difficult way I could. At the twenty-first board, I said to myself that I would go all the way to the end without making a bad turn. That lasted until 1.9 million. I had to cheat death repeatedly between then and 2.1 million. At that point, I began verbally coaching myself: go left, outside, across the top, get the key. Every turn from then on was perfect." ∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙

The **Bally Professional Arcade system**, which debuted in 1978 and boasted a blazing clock speed of 3.579 MHz. Despite the faux wood paneling and a gold inlay, the console failed to meet projected sales targets. It disappeared until the early eighties, when a group of fans bought the rights from Bally and rereleased it under the name Astrocade. ∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙∙

Walter Day, gaming tournament referee and founder of the Twin Galaxies Intergalactic Scoreboard, "the official scoreboard for the world of videogame and pinball playing" since 1982. Day has authored the *Twin Galaxies' Official Video Game and Pinball Book of World Records* and was captain of the first U.S. National Video Game Team. ∙∙

Ah, white space. Asymmetry. Lower case Helvetica.

The pages of *shift* have a certain familiarity.

But wait a minute, who moved the grid? And isn't that Sabon? And where did all that typographic bric-a-brac come from?

Guess it's not your professor's International Style after all.

In fact, style has very little to do with creative director Carmen Dunjko's method, although like all smart design *shift*, which she works on with art director Malcolm Brown, is extremely stylish. The impetus is functional, and that's the heart of both modernism and neo-modernism.

THE DYNAMIC LAYOUT

"How can the layout become informed so that the reader relates to it in as many ways as possible?" asks Dunjko. Speaking of the above article, an 8-page photo essay, she answers, "The photo edit comes first. I'm looking for the rhythm of the images, the narra-tive sequence. On the main spread the shelf in the photo becomes relevant, it's the baseline for the headline. The dark area behind the subject is mirrored in the white space above the headline. The striping in his jacket implies a vertical echo in the rules opposite."

This sharing of graphic and pictorial qualities between picture and layout becomes profoundly intriguing at the bottom of the right hand page, where the white surface the gameboard rests upon is completely blown out of the photo and viewers can't be sure whether they're looking at an image of a white tabletop, an unprinted area of the page, or both.

After the main spread the story continues through 6 pages with an implied sideways scroll across a series of low-key portraits stacked along a horizontal axis, accompanied by extended captions in 10 pt Helvetica, much larger than the main body text Sabon. The captions are squared off with oversized periods to form rectangular shapes in their own right. Discreet typographic

66

Space Invaders icons

CGE transformed the Plaza's convention hall into a **vintage arcade**, with approximately thirty old-school games on display, all of them set to free play. Gaming contests ran throughout the weekend, including a tournament in which gaming champion Billy Mitchell offered $5,000 to anyone who could beat a 1985 *Joust* high score. (No one did.)

67

Ralph Baer, "The Father of Videogames." His 1967 "Brown Box" prototype became the Magnavox Odyssey, the world's first videogame and console (*Pong*, in case you're wondering, didn't come along until 1972). Here, Baer, a former military intelligence operative recognized as an expert in small arms, takes aim with a toy rifle that he and a colleague converted into the first gaming gun in 1966.

68

Patrick Wyrick took home $300 as the champion of a weekend-long decathlon consisting of five Atari games (*Yar's Revenge, River Raid, Kaboom!, Berzerk* and *Asteroids*) and five ColecoVision titles (*Zaxxon, Mr. Do!, Donkey Kong, Lady Bug* and *Mousetrap*).

"I can watch a person play for five to fifteen minutes and know more about their skill level than any high score will tell me. But these high scores do tell me that the player is often tenacious and determined in their pursuit of... excellence. We challenge because challenge is part of the human spirit—it's in our guts and genes."—an excerpt from the *Twin Galaxies' Official Video Game and Pinball Book of World Records*.

69

Ian Baronossky, one of eighteen vendors plying their wares at CGE. Look for him at next year's expo. Same time, same place, same shirt.

iconography provides a third force, after type and pictures, that adds a slight depth to the surface of the design. The pictures stop one pica short of trim. It seems that for every alignment to a putative grid, there is a corresponding off-grid alignment keeping things real, a nudge away. "Breaking the rule of the grid is where the fun, surprises, and excitement come in. For the reader, there's freshness."

It's the white space that makes these layouts work, making them different, and allowing decoration without clutter.

So much depends on the simplicity and bigness of the pictures. Dunjko favours a spare, graphic style of photography, with strong shapes she can play off in the layouts. The end result is the invention of a unique form of picture-caption relationship that does not adhere to a rigid magazine-wide formal structure or grid, but which yet conforms to a consistent use of graphic language. This is the design system, the graphic brand.

THE ICONIC NARRATIVE

"*Shift* is a magazine about digital culture. I wanted to express what was going on in our lives, what helped us to get information quickly – to make my design informed by the culture, the daily experience of being a browser. I'm designing for an audience, not a market. I'm trying to genuinely understand them, and share as much experience as possible.'

The empathic strategy is revealing: it explains much about the appearance of the magazine.

The typefaces, for instance. In new media there's not much choice, usually Helvetica/Arial and Times. And lots of lowercase. So that's what Dunjko used. (Times would have printed too heavy on the absorbent 10% post-consumer stock, hence Sabon, Tschichold's understated, reliable 1966 version of Garamond)

The use of rules, boxes, and dashes as plastic graphic elements of the page, which was anathema to old-school modernists – dismissed perjoratively as decoration – is embraced by Dunjko. "It's not strictly decorative. I ask the editors and writers to provide visual references, which I can use as typographic components, looking for the opportunity for typography to become interwoven with the message of the piece. Here, it's the spirit of Pac-man!" Hence the little Space Invader and Pac-man icons that have marched onto the page, along with a variety of dashes and periods (set in text boxes) that suggest primitive computer game graphics.

In this way, Dunjko's use of typographic hardware is at once both symbolic of modernism (here the subject may be obsolete technology, but it's digital nonetheless), and functional in that it adds a layer of resonance to the design. This has always been the purpose of decoration, but it's interesting to see the functionality of that recognized in a modernist piece, and not positioned at odds with the reductionist tendency of traditional modernism to equate logic with minimalism.

A prime example of the way new media informs (as Dunjko would say) the old is her use of the "greater than" mathematical symbol, in place of dashes, bullets, colons, spaces even. This character has two specific meaning in new media, as a signifier in

Modernism was a progressive cultural movement which began in industrial Europe after the First World War. Always ideological, it promoted simplicity, directness, honesty, standardization, economy, and the machine aesthetic. It was equated with functionalism, and opposed to ambiguity, ornamentation, individuality and complexity – all that later became Postmodern.

Since the days of the Bauhaus school, 1919–33, modernism has been associated with the ideal of graphic designers not as artists, craft workers, or technicians, but as educated communications professionals dedicated to improving society.

The modernist style of graphic design is characterized by:
• Asymmetric organization of design elements on a grid
• Flush left text setting
• Sans serif type, to represent the spirit of the age
• Cool, understated copy and images
These formal characteristics have become part of the graphic vocabulary, worldwide, since the 1930s.

In the West, most countries developed Bauhaus-inspired design schools after 1945, and the mainstream design establishment of the '60s, '70s and '80s was thus thoroughly modernist. The look was known as Swiss design, or the International Style.

Around 1985 – parallel with the rise of DTP – postmodernism, typified by David Carson's *Raygun* work, and supported by a post-structuralist intelligensia, emerged as a coherent graphic movement and was bitterly attacked by the old school.

Attempting closure of the conflict in 1995, Steven Heller wrote, in *Emigre* #33, "Modernism ran out of steam over a decade ago. But at its core was an ethic – the responsibility that a designer has to actively contribute to, indeed enhance, the social, political, and cultural framework – that continues to inform even the most diehard Post-modernist. It would be prudent to reassess the breadth of modernism and the complexity of its leaders. In fact, it's foolish to deny that anyone who seriously explores the outer limits and the inner soul of visual communication is not in some way a modernist."

code, and in emails as the indicator of a message that is being replied to. Sure, ">" has a digital vibe, and that looks cool, but there's also a searching, a creating going on. Programmers have given new meanings to the character, and Dunjko is, like many designers, experimenting with new graphic meanings. They don't have to be specific. Connotation is just as legit as denotation. This is, after all, art.

FOR THE MASSIVE
While Dunjko casts herself in the role of the intuitive artist, *The Globe and Mail*'s art director, David Pratt, readily compares himself to an engineer. And what a piece of machinery a large circulation daily newspaper is. Six designers, dozens of editors (including five picture editors) and hundreds of writers produce over 600 pages of the *Globe* each week. Only six designers?

The Globe and Mail was redesigned this Fall by Pratt and deputy editorial art director Carl Neustaedter. Their new style guide for the paper runs over 100 pages, nailing down typographic specifications for every facet of the publication, with WP codes used by writers and editors to assign "style-sheets" to the copy. It's not so much a style guide, more a technical manual, or a firmly enforced legal document.

How then to account for the rich aesthetic quality of a single page, — where everything is in exactly the right place, and interestingly so — given the limited amount of design time spent on individual pages, and the strict rules which circumscribe the in-

put of designers and editors? It's the design system.

The distinction between the page design and the design system is important. It's not always obvious, because we use the same word for both. The one design is immediate, and is the particular arrangement of a specific instance of content; *this* picture, sized, cropped and positioned in *this* way, *this* length of headline, *this* depth of deck or breakout. The other design (the redesign), is meta-design, the design of the system, of the toolbox, the formal framework within which the immediate is iterated.

Speaking of the redesign, Pratt says "Designers [of specific pages] should respect the design but find ways to exploit it." He gives them as little room as possible: "We basically chased the visual interest into the headlines and the photos."

This is the way functionalist modernism works. The strict, grid-based system simplifies page-layout, pushing it towards an abstract arrangement of shapes on the canvas of the page, rather like the *Compositions* of Mondrian. Once you get it, and providing you stick to the rules, the layout part is easy. You're free to focus on the content — the way the words and pictures interact.

In the page shown over, designed by Gudrun Gallo, content is king, and that's to the reader's benefit. Headline and photo work like a Big Idea conceptual ad from the '60s. It requires a little humility on the designer's part, to forgo leaving your mark on the page, but once you do, you move into a higher discourse, where really crazy stuff can happen. The tight, precise cropping of the main photo is marvelous, but it could be on a billboard or in a magazine. What make this page uniquely, edgily newsy is the

"Symmetry suggests repose, but we wanted activity."— David Pratt

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The Globe Review newspaper page

Globe Review — THE GLOBE AND MAIL · CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER · GLOBEANDMAIL.COM · WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2000

The latest soundtrack to Moby's life: calm — INTERVIEW, R3

Going on night safari in Singapore — TRAVEL, R7

He put a spell on them

The late blues singer Screamin' Jay Hawkins may have sired more than 70 children. Maral Nigolian has a mission: Find them

Rock 'n' roll: We thought it was the end of history

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bizarre juxtaposition of skybox portraits, front cover icons pointing to some real cultural attitude.

GLOBAL POSITIONING

The redesign, launched this Fall, was positioned against two others: the previous design, and that of the *National Post*. Robert Lockwood's 1997 *Globe* redesign (coinciding with its belated introduction of colour and the launch of the *Post*) was traditional, featuring centred headlines in one weight of one typeface. Lock-

wood staked out familiar turf for a conservative institution, but it was blown away by the sheer pizzaz of Lucie Lacava's *National Post*, in particular the extreme typographic contrast inherent in Miller (by Matthew Carter & Tobias Frere-Jones), a Victorian revival in the Scotch Roman style, which she used in upper and lower case for text and feature heads, and further contrasted with a bold condensed sans serif all-cap setting for news heads, in a neo-retro face (comissioned by the *Post* from Jim Parkinson).

"The *Post* presented a certain kind of image of itself, self-conscious, post-modern. I wanted the *Globe* not to be like that, to go

for functionality, and see what look came out of that," says Pratt.

What emerged with the launch of the redesign, was, not surprisingly, neo-modernist.

"Symmetry suggests repose. But we wanted activity. The symmetrical approach bases itself on something abstract, relating not to the objects on the page, but an invisible line down the middle. With asymmetry, the alignment is visible, rather than implied. The content has its own shapes in relation to one another. Things are more decisive now. The grid is being applied rigorously."

Pratt has had to enforce the law because in newspaper culture headlines that are "shy" of a full measure are considered wimpy, as if it's a mistake to not make your point as aggressively as possible by filling up all available space. That crowds white space off the page, and you can't have modernism without white space.

"The white space is all in one place. As soon as you start concentrating it, it has a strong organizational effect, and it projects the headline. With the flush left style of heads and decks – used with almost no exception – the finished effect is neat and tidy, giving an impression of decisiveness and credibility," says Pratt.

SIZE-SPECIFIC FONTS

For all his rigor and functionalist minimalism, Pratt departs from classic modernism with the complexity of his display typography. Where the International Style emphasized visual unity by sticking with one type face throughout – usually Helvetica, because it looked efficient – Pratt deploys four different versions of what is ostensibly the same typeface, for use at different sizes, to impart a controlled texture to the headlines and decks.

The typeface – Walburn, designed by the author – is essentially a condensed regular weight modern (in the Bodoni sense) with fine details that discreetly mimic the letterpress process: a faux finish. To keep the effect suitably subtle, it is scaled to the intended usage-size of the font. As that size increases, the weight of the font decreases, the hairlines and serifs become thinner, the serifs and sidebearings become narrower (for a tighter fit), and the characters are further condensed.

"We are able to super-refine the design in layout terms because we have these typefaces. We deliberately removed all the icons and maple leafs," says Pratt. "We are able to make the design as rigorous as it is because we have visual relief in the fonts."

Like Carmen Dunjko's use of ornament, David Pratt's use of size-specific fonts adds a subtle visual richness to neo-modernism which offsets the reductive quality of the old school.

The precepts of functionalism, it would appear, have endured more than its original, harsh style.

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Piet Mondrian Composition 2, 1922 Oil on canvas

De Stijl's rectilinear abstraction strongly influenced the pioneer graphic designers of the 1920s

Member literature, Society of Graphic Designers of Canada, 1995

The moral dimension of the International Style (introduced into Canada around 1960) made it the standard, in a heraldic sense, of the professional establishment.

Reich Remixed CD sleeve, 1999

What type of face would complement a digital dance music that was converging with the high-art minimalist electronic tradition? Welcome back to Hip City, Helvetica.