

What is Web Design?

A compilation of issues, process and practice in design for connected interactive experiences.

Review by Shelley Evenson

What is Web Design?, Nico Macdonald, Rotovision, 256 pages August 2003 ISBN: 2880466865

In the decade since the word "dot" became a part of our everyday discourse many things have changed. We've moved through a time when people and organizations had an almost indistinguishable face, to the world on the Web, to the "gold rush" time when differentiation and innovation (often in absence of a business model) were all-important. Today we understand that design, technology and business must all work seamlessly together to enable people to participate in activities and achieve their goals in a networked world.

Do we need another book on Web design ten years after? If it's a cookbook on html, scripting, Web tools or design by bad example, the answer is no. "What is Web Design?" fulfills a need for the community as a compilation of issues, process and practice in design for connected interactive experience and sets the stage for the conversation about the effective integration of design with business and technology. Author Nico Macdonald writes from experience: as a respected journalist and consultant.

The book invites interaction. It is divided and color-coded into three major sections -- issues (green), anatomy (white) and practice (black). It is nicely cross-referenced with smaller indented text and amply illustrated. The approachable content has the potential to appeal to students of design, clients in need of Web design services and Web design practitioners.

In the opening of the Issues section, Macdonald defines Web design, provides a history of the Internet and digital computing, and an explanation of the technical platforms that influence design. Unfortunately, a simple definition of Web design is hard to glean from the two-page spread that is dedicated to it. With a book with this title, you might be concerned -- but don't be. The history, background and technical subsections within the Issues section are compelling. Also within Issues, the author seeks to "develop design principles that will be as relevant to the future technological developments as they are today." The "principles" subsection is actually an abundant mix of a few principles, (such as simplicity) considerations (users and stakeholders) and techniques (brainstorming) that are useful in developing effective design. The "elements" subsection is a mixture of topics at several levels of abstraction that, though nicely defined and abundantly illustrated, puts much of the burden of integration and placement within the design process on the reader.

One of Macdonald's most significant contributions is the detailed analysis of the most common elements of a project in the section called Anatomy. Definitions, criteria and deliverables are outlined for each stage. Some readers may disagree with the stages, the components or possibly even their timing, but by and large they are complete enough with just a few exceptions. For example, as with most discussions of the topic, the author

glossed over the transition between research findings to design implications. Functional specifications are separated from design "blueprints" without mention of the possibility of integrated specification. These are minor issues.

More importantly, Macdonald has included models of various aspects of the design process from BodyMedia, Cooper ala Dubberly, and Dubberly. These diagrams are presented as alternative and complimentary models to the author's Web design project workflow that provides the framework for the Anatomy section. Macdonald's own model is revealed as a diagram at the section's close. A discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each model (and a legible version of the MetaDesign process) would have been nice addition.

The Practice section is a series of cases that brings Macdonald's sections on Issues and Anatomy to life. There is a nice range of cases from large feature-rich sites to more simple information sites. Some are available to the public at large, while others are only accessible to an internal audience. Some example sites support collaboration, while others are optimized for personal use. The author also includes some networked applications as cases.

The book closes with an extensive set of annotated references and glossary. It's a rich assemblage that even the experienced design professional will find useful.

Overall, "What is Web Design?" is a well-written collection of material that can and should influence design for the Web, as well as design for any connected interactive experience.

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