

## Oulipo Redux: Extensible, Exegetic, Ex Post Facto

*Graphic design is essentially about visual relationships — providing meaning to a mass of unrelated needs, ideas, words, and pictures. It is the designer's job to select and fit this material together — and make it interesting.*<sup>1</sup> — Paul Rand

When I agreed to design the online Oulipo *dossier*, scheduled to run in *Drunken Boat*, No. 8, I knew nothing about either. Nor did I guess at the (eventual) scope and scale of the project. Nor did I understand how far (and how fast) Web design had moved — far away from the nested tables and spacer GIFs I relied on to design previous sites. Powered by XHTML (Extensible HyperText Markup Language) and CSS (Cascading Style Sheets), today's Web is a far richer and more nuanced (and sustainable) environment than the one I thought I knew. Consequently, *code* has firmly re-established itself as *law*, at least in cyberspace.<sup>2</sup>

What I did recognize, almost immediately, was that this project would constitute a unique online publishing opportunity — the chance to participate in a substantial group project, uniting multiple cultures, disciplines and perspectives, bridging gaps in both language and space, even contributing to a sort of *creative commons*,<sup>3</sup> a concept I wholeheartedly support. As a bonus, Oulipo presented me with a timely opportunity to revamp my *dépassé* Web design skills.

Oulipo, in and of itself, presents the open-minded reader/viewer with a cornucopia of interestingness. The prodigious output of the Oulipians hardly requires a graphic designer to add spice or lend order to such complex and varied material. More often than not, Oulipian creations are *about* order — products of innovative and rigorous systems of constraint, deftly and consistently employed.

Not that I am unfamiliar with constraints; design is replete with them. Technical limitations, meager budgets, unreasonable deadlines, competing interests, inaccessible resources, endless revisions, uncooperative materials — constraints *drive* the design process, even as they obstruct it. Page dimensions, color requirements, screen resolution, the legibility of a typeface — any or all may influence the outcome of a project, in ways a designer doesn't always recognize, and isn't always prepared to accept.

After all, what is a grid — a fundamental part of any graphic design toolkit — if not a basic method of constraint? And yet, why do some designers (and many students) regard the grid as a kind of cage, a prison, an obstacle to true creativity? "Limitations focus the mind like gravity," as David Barringer declared last year, in what (sadly) proved to be the penultimate issue of *Émigré Magazine*.<sup>4</sup>

A grid is a set of rules, at once literal and figurative. Outside of typography, more than any other design element, a history of the grid is a history of graphic design. The grid cleared a path for graphic design to enter the Modern era — strengthening its credibility, effecting its transparency, campaigning for its universality. Yet the grid can be seen as spurring the development of Postmodernism, too, its dissolution and disruption serving alternately as exposed framework and exhausted cliché.<sup>5</sup>

A grid is a series of definitions, both denotative and connotative. This goes *here*, not there. That can be this big, or *this* big — but not *this* big (or this small). Use any shape you want, but don't exceed the margins (or overlap that hairline). This arrangement is *cleaner* than that one, don't you think? The width of these columns says *newspaper*, at least to me.

A grid is a means of control. It can be bent, but not broken. It encourages repetition, but not stasis. It proposes hierarchy, in the face of anarchy. It serves to contain, but not extinguish. A grid is ever-present, though (usually) invisible. Felt, more than seen. A way to guide the flow of the content, to connect disparate parts and errant ideas. A grid is never random, yet still allows for surprises, unexpected delights. A grid is always there when you need it, more present than absent, more reliable than unusual. Shelter from the storm. Light at the end of the tunnel. What you recognize, then forget.

Even as the grid has re-asserted its value, facilitating organizational logic and stylistic consistency in a chaotic global marketplace, so too has another design tool increased in prominence, establishing what might seem, at first, a case of opposing forces.

Code is another means of control. The foundation on which the Web was built, the connective tissue, the Net/work without which communication would cease. Code is constraint. A way to build, a reason for rules, a means to an end. Code is (also) potential. Can I make this link to that? Can I replace three lines (of code) with two? Does necessity preclude elegance? Will accessibility subvert style?

This Oulipo dossier as it will now reside indefinitely on the Web might be considered a personal *ode to code*, representative of the limitless *potentielle* it promises alongside the persistent stumbling blocks and inconsistencies it guarantees. Even as I wrestled to make the site widely accessible yet stylistically consistent, errors and idiosyncrasies mounted with each new uniquely shaped poem, each new oddly structured text. Struggling to make sense of so much variety, the code began to implode, new rules conflicting with previous ones, new colors clashing with the old.

But design ideas can also spring from code-driven constraints. Since pages with backgrounds built from small pattern elements load more quickly (as desired), why not make use of the many [ambigrams](#) I was provided to create background patterns for the bio pages? Why not make extensive use of `<pre>` — the [CSS](#) “preformatted text” tag — to format the poems, and make the unique amount of space between particular letter and word combinations easier to preserve (along with the author’s intentions)? And as [text sizing](#) can be difficult to control on the Web, why not use color more often, instead, to create variety and visual interest?

After all, clean and consistent design, alone, would be a disservice to such distinctive material. While the use of a grid lends a sense of order and purpose to content on the Web, as elsewhere, perhaps style matters more than ever, when attention and patience are in such short supply. As social critic Virginia Postrel suggests, in her landmark treatise, *The Substance of Style*, we are now living in the age of “look and feel,” such that the “universal appeal of thoughtful, well-balanced graphics [now] coexists with the demand for novelty, variety, emotional resonance, and personal expression.”<sup>6</sup> Now that readers can “have it all,” they demand it all, too.

Ultimately, Oulipo exposed the limits of my skills and knowledge, as someone who set out to build an extensive (and *extensible*) Web site, one line of code at a time. I learned that designing for today’s Web invites the *slings and arrows* of tiny but memorable compromises, on a regular basis. Initial decisions concerning ways to organize and format such elastic material can create headaches when the project evolves in unexpected directions. The phrase “competing interests” takes on new meaning when balancing a designer’s *will to style* against the accessibility requirements of many different readers. And while designing back and forth in two (or more) languages is a welcome challenge, it’s hard to shake the feeling that something is inevitably *lost in translation*.

However, such contestable terrain is not a bad place for a designer to explore. If we are really doing our job, we “mine raw bits of tomorrow,” as Sci-Fi writer and design critic Bruce Sterling has stated, so as to “shape them for the present day.”<sup>7</sup> As in so many aspects of our existence, it is not the rules themselves that hamper our potential, but the degree of effort, and the quality of imagination, with which we deploy them.

– Shawn M. McKinney © 2006

#### Notes

1. [Paul Rand, \*A Designer’s Art\* \(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, pp. xiii\).](#)
2. [For an extensive discussion establishing this premise, see: Lawrence Lessig, \*Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace\* \(New York: Basic Books, 1999\).](#)
3. [See: Lawrence Lessig, \*The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World\* \(New York: Vintage Books, 2002\).](#)

4. [David Barringer, "American Mutt Barks in the Yard," in \*Émigré Magazine\*, No. 68 \(New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005, pp. 28\).](#)
5. [For an original perspective on the use and meaning of grid systems throughout the history of graphic design, see: Butler, Frances, "Reading Outside the Grid: Designers and Society," in \*Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design\*, Michael Bierut, et al, ed., \(New York: Allworth Press, 1994, pp. 91-100\).](#)
6. [Virginia Postrel, \*The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture, & Consciousness\* \(New York: HarperCollins, 2003, pp. 34-65\).](#)
7. [Bruce Sterling, \*Shaping Things\* \(Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005, pp. 62\).](#)