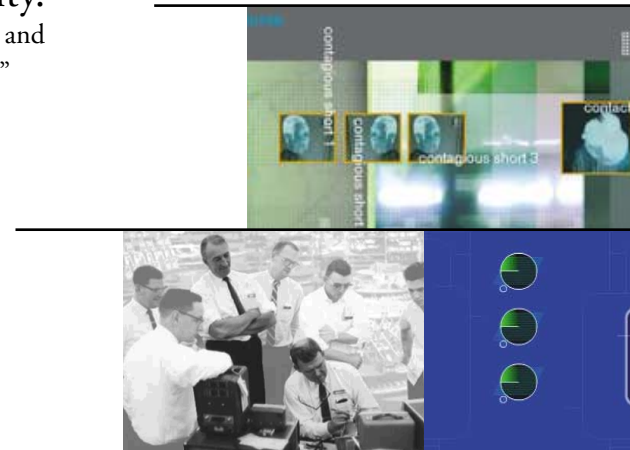




Minimalist to the Max {

Most people view the Internet's various constraints—pokey dial-up modems and spindly, data-clogged telephone wires—as annoying hurdles to creating compelling work online. But for Hillman Curtis, a noted Web designer in New York City, **limitation means opportunity.**

Curtis's work, which includes online ad campaigns for Intel, Lycos, and SonicNet, is a perfect example of the often-touted, seldom-seen “less is more” school of Web design. It allows for simply sketched (but cleverly whooshing) planes in a British Airways spot, a dissolving slide show for Hewlett-Packard, and disintegrating images to promote Y2K awareness for Iomega. In stark contrast to the “interface-as-rave” aesthetic so common on today's Web, Curtis exploits the Internet's limitations to create work that combines a poetic economy of graphic design with the narrative wallop of broadcast video. Indeed, his best pieces are often ethereal and otherworldly, using still images to suggest a nickelodeon's flickering pictures as filtered through 21st-century eyes.



The medium, the message

About a recent spot for 3Com's HomeConnect DSL service, for example, Curtis says, “3Com wanted to communicate three points: simple, fast, and easy.

Everything moves, which shows energy. The

background is completely white, which conveys

the notion of simplicity. And we know we are

dealing with an audience that does other

things while watching this—so the message

has to come across in 10 to 12 seconds.



People who use computers are developing what I call 'multitasking attention deficit'—they're using the computer and listening to headphones, or there's a bunch of stuff happening around them at the office. If you fail to take that multitasking reality into consideration, you'll lose the audience. Another mistake that graphic designers often make—and I'm guilty of this myself—is creating 30-second spots for the Internet. Nobody has time to watch that," Curtis states assuredly from his Manhattan studio.

Web designer *Hillman Curtis* exploits the limitations of the Internet

By *Michael Kaplan*

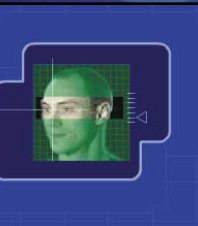


Given such a small amount of time to capture the viewer's attention, Curtis emphasizes the need to strip away all but the essential elements of the message. "For me," Curtis says, "the focus a good director puts into a film is inspiring. *[It's] storytelling not only through the dialogue, but through the lighting, through every camera move, the score, the choice of lenses, and the rhythm of the editing. This is what I try to do; and again it comes down to identifying the theme and supporting it.* It's strange, because I now prefer a simple text fade-up to complex text floats, peels, wipes, spins, ghost moves, or any of that. More Pablo Ferro than Kyle Cooper or Garrison Yu. I am trying to dial in rhythm and pacing and pull everything else out. It forces me to focus on the message. Everything has got to support it. If a piece has an element in it that looks cool but doesn't contribute [to the message], I start to really hate that element," he says, explaining that an early Internet ad, which he created to promote Lycos's Interactive Zone, defines the kind of mixed emotions that can sometimes develop. "The Lycos piece is beautiful; it's dark and ethereal and I love it. But there is nothing interactive about it. For that reason I consider it to be a failure."



Green ambition

But failure is rare in Curtis's life. In fact, his appearance—big, black-framed glasses, unruly hair, and the ultra-casual uniform of the new media elite—hints at his first big success: rock 'n' roll. For somebody who grew up within driving distance of Silicon Valley, Hillman Curtis was relatively uninterested in joining the region's booming computer industry. After majoring in film and English in college, he joined a rock 'n' roll band called The Green Things. The band was good enough to get signed by MCA Records, leading



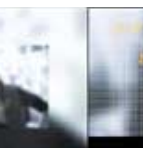


Eight is enough

Hillman Curtis never veers from his primary rule of online design: no download should take more than eight seconds, regardless of how slow a Net surfer's modem might be. "After waiting eight seconds for a download," he says, "people tend to move on. As a result, we find ourselves building 20K and 30K ad spots with interactivity."

Like a monk sworn to a vow of poverty, Curtis embraces the Internet's limited means as an opportunity to distill deeper truths. "A lot of guys like to push the envelope, but you need the latest browser and a big T-1 line to enjoy seeing their work," he says, sounding a little bit bummed. "I enjoy watching that stuff, but it's not what we're doing. We recently did a Hewlett-Packard spot, for instance, that needed to be translated into 12 languages, including Polish. That meant it would be shown in at least one country where just about everybody is on 28.8 max. We made it with a lot of voice-over; it downloads within eight seconds, and it corresponds with HP's broadcast spot about the garage. I think our [online] work gives the broadcast spot a run for its money." You can check out Curtis's work at his Web site at www.hillmancurtis.com.





Curtis to drop out of school to tour England with them. The son of a high-school art teacher, Curtis soon discovered another talent when he proved to be the band member most adept at making posters to promote their gigs.

By the time the group had one of its songs used as part of a soundtrack for “Beverly Hills 90210,” Curtis was interested enough in design that he used his royalties to purchase a Macintosh computer. He taught himself Adobe Photoshop and multimedia design, quit The Green Things, and, as he puts it, “bluffed” his way into a few design jobs before landing the position of art director with Macromedia.

In 1997, the company acquired FutureWave Software (the original developers of FutureSplash Animator, the product that eventually became Macromedia Flash) and Curtis was asked to explore the new technology. “At first I thought Flash was limited,” he remembers. “Then I saw that [the small file format] was perfect for the Web. It helped me become what I wanted to become: a motion graphics designer. It opened the door to doing film titles, broadcast spots, and narrative film work.” A year later, Curtis moved to New York, started his own firm, and quickly established himself as the king of motion graphics on the Web (so much so, in fact, that some Silicon Alley ways have dubbed him “Grandmaster Flash”).

Recently, Curtis has been putting Adobe LiveMotion through its Flash-production paces. “It’s going to fit right in for [designers] who know their way around other Adobe programs,” he notes. “Quite an intuitive interface all around.”

Poetry, sparingly

The staff members in the studio are as devoted as Curtis to the relentless pursuit of the essentials of Web design. Their shared passion for the simple power of narrative extends even into their personal projects, including an online reading by poet Christina Manning created for the design and literature site *bornmag.com* and a more sentimental exercise, a short film entitled *Simple Simon*, which stars the grandfather of Curtis’s art director, Ian Kovalik. Both projects could just as easily have been shot on video and preserved on tape, but the designers here want no part of that bulky end product.

One might assume that the emphasis on a spare style is for the accessibility, the ease with which the public at large can log on and view the work online. But Curtis insists that there is something more important at stake.

“There is an aesthetic,” he says. “Look at the poetry piece as an example. There is one shot of the poet, looking down and looking up. I use that shot over and over again.

Then there is a different perspective, and you see somebody walking down the street. But overall there are only six or seven bitmaps in there. I use very CPU-unintensive moves here. You get an illusion of floating that supports the poem.”

As for the future, Curtis’s talents seem ideally suited to the much-ballyhooed prophecies of superfast connections and downloads. An inevitable question arises, however, one that seems especially relevant to an artist with Curtis’s minimalist aesthetic: will the broadband future prove to be too much of a good thing? He makes assurances that there will be nothing to worry about. “I look forward to the quality improving,” he says confidently. “The bigger the pipe, the better my stuff will look. My sound will be better, my imagery will be better, but my focus will still be solidly on the message—and I will remain devoted to communicating that message.”

Michael Kaplan is a freelance writer based in New York. He is a frequent contributor to Communication Arts, GQ, and Details.

