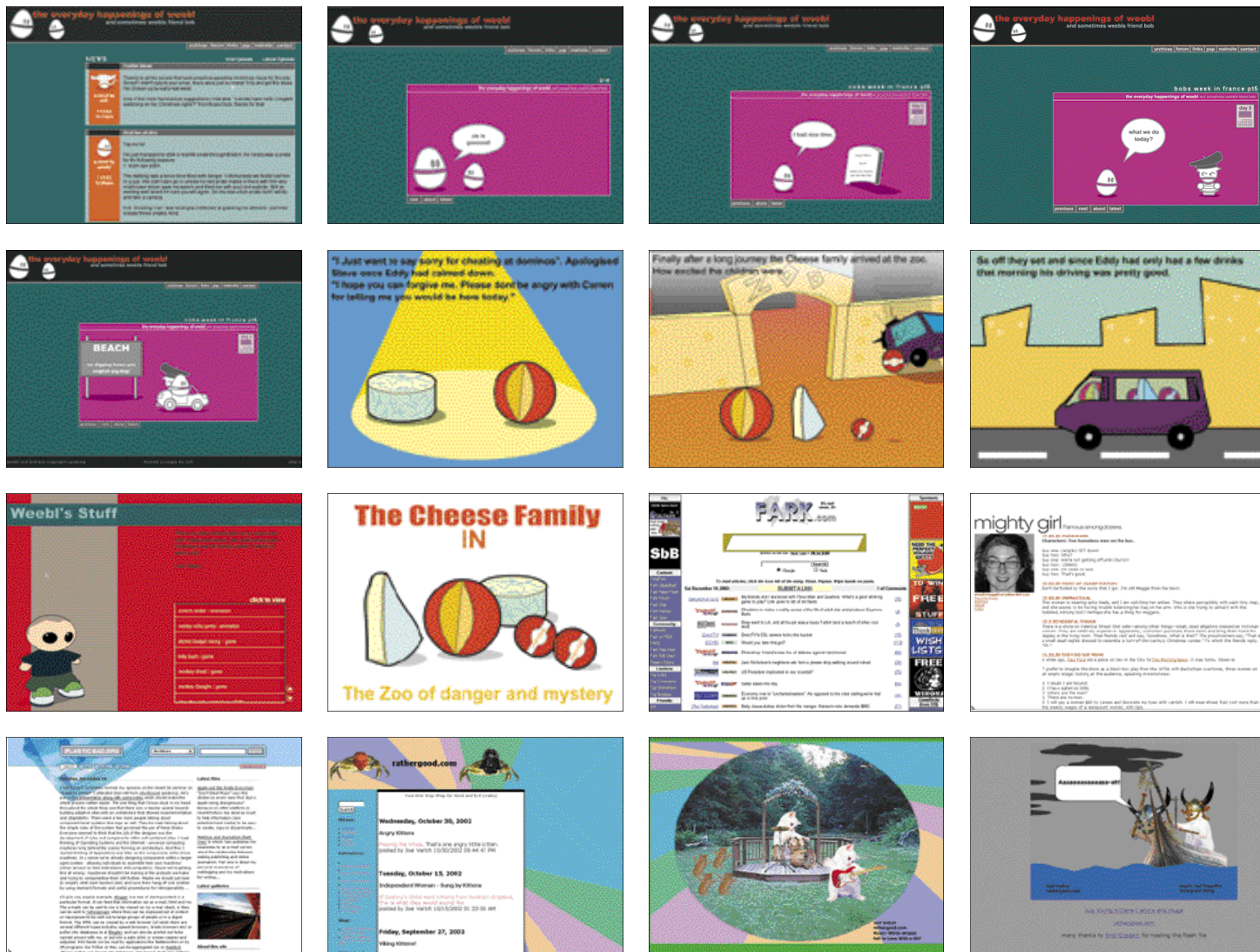


# Lo-fi allstars

*Typical – just as we get the bandwidth to cope with all-singing, all-dancing flash sites, website design is going lo-fi. Liz Bailey takes a closer look at Undesign.*



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- 1 | Weebl & Bob blog
- 2 | Weebl & Bob first
- 3 | Weebl & Bob in France
- 4 | Weebl & Bob in France 2
- 5 | Weebl & Bob in France 3
- 6 | Weebl Cheese dad & dad-in-law
- 7 | Weebl Cheese family at zoo
- 8 | Weebl Cheese family in car
- 9 | weebl stuff
- 10 | weebl Cheese Family
- 11 | Fark.com
- 12 | mightygirl.net
- 13 | plasticbag.org
- 14 | rathergood.com
- 15 | rathergood.com/punk\_kittens/ (White Stripes)
- 16 | rathergood.com/vikings/

In her profile of Tibor Kalman, Design and Undesign, Liz Farrelly writes that he “presents complex ideas in the most transparent of visual languages”. Since the dot-com bubble burst, the web too has begun to show greater transparency and – like hemlines rising during a recession – signs of a new aesthetic austerity. The web equivalent of the miniskirt is an increasing trend towards simplicity: fewer technical bells and whistles, and an emphasis on content, not design for design’s sake.

Usability guru Jakob Nielsen has always stressed that ease of use should be given greater weight than design. The commercial aspect of the web now reflects just this: a recent US study found that most e-commerce sites basically look like Amazon. But, as the former web editor of wallpaper.com once said, “If everyone followed all Nielsen’s guidelines, the web would be a pretty boring place.”

The new, uniquely online aesthetic – termed ‘undesign’ by some after Tibor Kalman – isn’t so

much about utilitarian minimalism as usability, reductionism and subtlety. According to Justin Kirby of viral marketing specialist Digital Media Communications Ltd, “The web has finally found its voice. Design has become a way of bringing content out, not an excuse for lack of content.” He sees undesign as a backlash against overdesigned visual language on the web: designers from print, video games, contemporary music or street fashion whom he accuses of “...not understanding the craft of information design”.

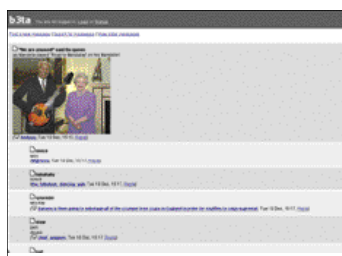
Kirby is not alone in this belief. In spring 2001, Rob Manuel co-founded a ‘blog’ (weblog), b3ta.com, with Denise Wilton and Cal Henderson. Blogs are one of the purest forms of undesign: “My own website’s set up using free, downloadable DIY software such as blogger.com’s or moveabletype.org’s,” explains Manuel. “We set b3ta up out of frustration from working in the web design industry and seeing websites dominated by visual design rather than ideas.” He remembers “listening to people arguing over whether it’s

purple or blue, and not what it’s meant to achieve”.

“Weblogs have definitely affected the look and overall feel of the web,” says San Francisco-based designer Jason Kottke, who has run a blog for over four years. “The design doesn’t matter so much. It’s not even really design. All [bloggers] want is something reasonably readable and distinct – and even the distinct part is optional.”

“Blogs are functional in nature,” says Kottke. “There’s so much content flowing through the site that the design is almost a non-factor. If people can read the posts and if the design isn’t getting in the way too much, then it’s done 95 per cent of its job. “The weblog is always a work in progress. The writing is never done, so why would the design ever be done either? Everything is malleable. Get a bad design up... if it works, tweak it using the feedback from your audience, and if not, throw it away and start over.”

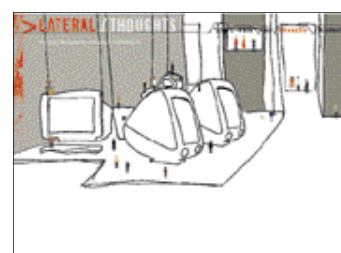
Kottke, who was lead designer on the Moreover site for nine months, created two sites that embody undesign: web.0sil8.com and kottke.org. “I don’t →



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1|b3ta.com  
2|messageboard  
3|bitterpill.org  
4|littlegothgirl  
5|media.orgculturejam  
6|FuckedCompany.com  
7|moreover.com (Jason Kottke)  
8|undesign.net  
9|web.0sil8.com 13.013 words (Jason Kottke)  
10|web.0sil8.com silkscreen (Jason Kottke)  
11|slashdot.org homepage  
12|k10k.net 2| messageboard  
13|blogger.com  
14|movabletype.org  
15|kottke.org  
16|lateral.net

www.undesign.com  
www.kottke.org  
www.b3ta.com  
www.weebls-stuff.com  
www.weebl.jolt.co.uk  
www.rathergood.com  
www.komplot.dk  
www.dogme95.dk  
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really know what the undesign movement is," says Kottke, "but I thought it was a nice term to describe my approach – undesign vs over-designed." Kalman may even have influenced him. "I had recently removed a graphic element from my site, and I was pondering what to replace it with. I was in the SF MOMA bookstore and saw the book with the word 'undesign' on the cover – it got me thinking that I didn't need to replace it with anything. The words are the important bit and nobody sees the design after two or three visits anyway, so it became... an undesign."

Some undesign has an actively anti-design subtext. "You can be really slapdash about visual presentation if you've got the ideas right," says Manuel. "The general public aren't that fussed about the minutiae of design. People working on the project need to have a full understanding of what they want to achieve, not bamboozle the client with glossy presentation." Such as uncalled-for use of technologies like Flash and Shockwave, for instance? Jon Bains, chairman of online agency Lateral, describes using unnecessary design to communicate simple ideas as "Flashturbation". "If you don't need to have type flying around the screen just for the sake of it," he says, "why do it?"

Does undesign have an aesthetic? "Most of the web is meant to be functional," says Kottke. "So there's a necessary aesthetic attached to that functionality... like all doors having handles, for instance." The reductionist aesthetic that characterises blogs, says Manuel, means "...the item hits you in the face – there's no clicking

through. If you have to click on a link to find more stuff like it, it dilutes the actual thing you're trying to get people to like. You have to be ruthless and pare things down."

Humour and DIY also characterise undesign. "In the early days of b3ta," says Manuel, "we came up with the phrase, 'Shit is good'. This was the idea that making stuff very quickly, very crappily, was good: using stolen images, badly cut-up things and our own singing." Now, b3ta's philosophy is "trying to do things with speed of execution," says Manuel, "very cut and paste. I was frustrated by bad design, so I do it now with two fingers stuck up. I'm concentrating on stuff that creates a reaction."

Undesign aims for a response: "I am really into the idea that what I respond to on the net is the stuff with the creator's personality left in," says Manuel, "...things where you can see their rough edges." Manuel worries that "all the little weird personal quirks can get so sucked out, doing client work". He recently had to airbrush dirty fingernails out of a photo of his hand for a client. "That's the hook gone."

And it's the rough edges that give undesign its commercial appeal. Jonti Picking, Mata Haggis and Joel Veitch, all of b3ta's messageboard, have been picked up by other media; MTV airs Picking's Weebl & Bob twice daily; and Channel 4 uses Veitch's kitten musicians as the ident for Born Sloppy. Veitch's punk kittens even attracted interest from the White Stripes' NY-based PR person, who, says Manuel, offered Veitch free CDs and said, "please do more". Haggis' 'Little Goth Girl' will appear on MTV2 in spring 2003.

Blogesque undesign, too, has great commercial appeal. "My design, and the weblog-type design I do for my clients, is meant not to be noticed," says Kottke. "When someone visits my site for the first time, I want to leave an impression with them: clean, open, and emphasis on the text. They are going to notice the bright green bar at the top, but as the visit continues, all that drops away and they're left with the text only. Just as people don't really notice the McDonald's logo when they stop in for a hamburger, people stop noticing the design and just deal with the content. So visually, I try to create strong elements that brand initially, but eventually disappear and don't interfere with reading content."

Undesign, too, is discernible in other industries: product design (Jakob Nielsen's co-consultant Don Norman is a long-standing advocate of designing products with 'invisible' technology); film (the Dogme 95 collective); furniture design (Danish design consultancy Komplot's "non-designed" table and chairs); maybe one day even advertising will begin to be, as Kirby says, "more about ideas than production values".

Perhaps Kalman himself sums it up best: "I've always tried to do good by being bad," he once said, having happened upon "...the notion that ugliness is more interesting than beauty." □

*Weebl and Bob on MTV at 4.58pm and 9.58pm daily; kittens appear as the ident for Born Sloppy on Channel 4; Tibor Kalman: Design and Undesign, by Liz Farrelly (Thames & Hudson, 1998), £9.95*