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iDMAa Conference

Antithesis, A Strategy for Developing Critical Design Perspectives and Creative Solutions

As a faculty member who teaches interactive design at a polytechnic university, the curricula of my courses prioritize students' development of skills and sensibilities that reflect the needs of the commercial design industry. While I believe the importance of this knowledge is self-evident, I recently became uncomfortable with the predictability and similarity I perceived in my students' work. In response to this, I created an interactive Web-based composition, *Untitled* (<http://untitled.robertfraher.com>) that is deliberately antithetical to several accepted best practices for commercial Web design. The purpose of making this composition was to serve as a teaching tool that exemplifies alternative interpretations of, and solutions to common problems.

This presentation will describe the process and outcomes of a learning exercise that seeks to help students develop their critical design perspectives and generate more creative solutions by questioning the validity of commonly held ideals and considering new design perspectives. The participants in the exercise are students enrolled in a mid-level interactive design course that is part of both the Graphic Design and Interactive Media program and the Game Design program at a public Midwestern university. The exercise consists of three parts: (1) independent analysis of the aforementioned composition; (2) large group critical dialogue about the composition; (3) independent idea generation session. The foci of the idea generation session are, first, description of how the antithetical characteristics of this composition could be refined and applied to a commercial Web site, and second, identification of what other aspects of a Web-based interface could be redesigned antithetically.

I will also explain how this exercise has allowed me to expand my discussions with students beyond the latest trends and technologies, and emphasize topics like design thinking skills and the fundamental characteristics of various media. As a result, students who participate in this exercise begin to reflect more rigorously on their own work, as well as engage more frequently and confidently in critical dialogues. It is my opinion that, by reconsidering the strategies and values employed in their work, these students develop

increased awareness of their personal design practices, as well as become better at articulating their critical design perspectives.

As an educator, I believe design education should prepare students for the responsibilities of professional practice. Perhaps the most important of these responsibilities is to reflect on why and how one designs. By promoting student reflection, design programs will not only produce competent professionals, but also innovative thinkers who have the potential to move the discipline forward.

Keywords

Web design, design education, design thinking, polytechnic

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Robert Fraher is an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin–Stout. He has a Master of Fine Art degree in graphic design with an emphasis on interactivity from the University of Minnesota. His research explores how interactive design and digital media can facilitate individual expression and community involvement. He has exhibited, published, and presented research in the fields of graphic design, art, instructional design, interaction design, and creativity.