

Each foot step on the pavement and I stare past my feet. Just a gray mass, but then I begin to see something that I dismissed before. The pavement beneath my feet is not a solid surface, but in fact it is composed of millions of shapes and a variety of colors. Colliding small angularities and larger round shapes. Mixing shades of blue and pink and green and white. These individual parts congeal to become the surface I walk on.

Noise Exists

I believe that white noise exists in the visual world and that information and meaning are hidden within its density. This simple, albeit obvious, statement propelled me into an act of collecting – from the natural, man-made and digital world – visual elements. What began as a mere collection has grown into an exploration and living research document. A design(ed) experience and homage of sorts to the collected and created noise(s) that we all encounter daily. Please visit the online experience (as an equal accompaniment to this essay) at www.agrayspace.com/gd503/03_thingzine/00_welcome.htm.

All words or concepts (marked by italic and annotated in the marginalia) are defined by my own definitions. I use the terms to provide a base understanding. However, rather than relying on the default/traditional description I have adapted, altered and/or loosely translated the terminology for my own purposes.

► For clarification, my definition of visual *white noise* is not a literal adaptation from the traditional definition of audio white noise. Although that basic premise helps to establish the concept defined as “acoustic with equal intensity at all frequencies.” (Costello) Rather, the visual white noise I am referring to contains a density of information, which – through our (un)conscious editing process – has become transparent to our mind’s eye. Visually this idea can be random or patterned, but it is built on the premise of small parts combined together to make a larger mass. Visual white noise is similar to its audio sibling because it is a mixture of parts that extends over a wide area to make a whole. The density is fairly heterogeneous in nature until examined at a micro level. It is the pure concentration of information – that is not readily accessible (or perhaps ignored) – and our participation and reaction to it that intrigued me to explore further. It is the forest *and* the trees.

All of this noise is clashing and flowing around me and suddenly a dense environment filled with textures and patterns surrounds me. The bushes, the grass, the roof on that house. The trees, the chain link, the phone pole with fliers.

There is an abundance of information in the visual world that our eyes filter. Indeed, we are not capable of absorbing or processing it all at once. As the eye focuses on a particular spot all else shifts focus. Or, as my walk explains, instead of seeing all of the patterns and parts, we simply see one solid mass. This subconscious act allows us to filter the world, but in doing so, we have ironically become immune to the reality of our existence.

It is not a new declaration that visual noise exists. Just as audio white noise is often used to mask out unwanted noises, a visual patterning also provides a desired human comfort. Noise is sampled and re-appropriated throughout our constructed environment on everything from ar-

chitecture to clothing. Even in the urban/cultural context, densely populated areas beneficially generate an “intimate exchange among people and ideas.” (Lupton 75) The environment is in fact pulsing with information and if the senses are trained, we can see beyond the surface.

Visual white noise requires active participation on the viewer’s behalf to penetrate – or sift through – and obtain what is hidden inside. Perhaps, the “first layer of info is not the truth” so the first assessment of the space is misleading (Butler 109). In the article, *Demotic Typography*, Frances Butler refers to the Postmodernist tendency towards layering and complexity over clarity and simplicity and identifies how this induces “creative reverie.” In a similar fashion, a form of digital euphoria occurs through the discovery of the information hidden within *noi-z-en*.

For the sake of expediency, I titled my project “noi-z-en” and refer to it as such throughout this essay when referring to the online-research-fanzine-document-design-experience.

Now I am aware that noise is everywhere. As I enter a building, built brick by brick, I see how we are madly replicating patterns in the physical world. As I pass through another doorway I wonder, what would happen if all of this noise – that is normally transparent to our mind’s eye – became opaque? I wonder what would happen if all of the noise was erased? More importantly, I see what I hadn’t seen before and wonder what else is hidden?

Imagine a rock garden with its deliberate landscape of groomed rocks and manicured trees. On the surface you may only see these attributes, but the richest understanding does not occur by merely scanning the scene. Simply put, the practice of Zen is focused upon meditation in the pursuit of enlightenment. During my explorations of visual white noise, this idea of enlightenment intrigued me and led me to explore some principles from the Japanese tea ceremony and Zen rock garden. Michael Heim, author of *The Virtual Reality of the Tea Ceremony*, skillfully connects *digital space* to *spirituality*. He explains that the tea ceremony is an ideal model for cyberspace with its specific activities, utensils, atmosphere and most importantly “the frame of mind or spirit which mysteriously grows out of the combination of all these factors.” (Heim)

I define the digital space as the everywhere and nowhere locale of the web: filled by time, interaction, democracy and all things new.

I have adapted the term to include preparing for the journey ahead, honing our visual literacy and slowing for a period of reflection – all of which culminate in an experience where we can truly “see” the noise.

Visual noise exists on a gradient of transparency to opacity. We (un)consciously edit what information we absorb and therefore do not see all the noise at once. Just stop and take a look around...what visual noises are surrounding you at this very moment? With focus and awareness we begin to see that which may have previously been transparent, as it transitions before our eyes. As exemplified by the tea ceremony and Zen teachings the act of making artificial (or opaque) helps to “regain lost harmony” with nature (zen.thetao.info). In our daily visual lives most noise remains transparent, however after I pointed out the subtle, yet chaotically speckled flooring one colleague declared she would never look at the world the same again. A powerful thought. So it is true that “when transparent media fail to satisfy us, opaque media become necessary to our experience of ourselves... instead of trying to be in the presence of the objects of representation, we then define immediacy as being in the presence of media.” (Bolter 236)

My walk has been a lush experience and I am energized as I enter my studio, sit at my desk and open my laptop. I can’t help but be distracted by the wood grain surface clashing against the patterned carpet on the floor, but soon I am immersed in the digital world. I wonder how the visual white noise that I identified on my walk occupies this artificial space? I wonder if it is misused or misunderstood? Or perhaps, and more likely, is it placed there as a basic comfort?

In addition to all of the patterning and noise found in the natural world, I have identified a need to mimic or appropriate these naturally occurring noises in the man-made world. Think of a street grate, tile wall or crochet blanket and how their patterns are derived from nature. Steven Holtzman, a writer on computer science and art, contends that virtual worlds should be more than “mere reflections of the natural.” (Holtzman 61) While this is an apt statement, I believe that we have established a good practice of looking to nature to render our manmade world more comforting.

I want to emphasize the idea of noise-as-comfort by citing the pervasive use of “digital wallpaper.” In a recent conversation, my peers and I discussed the popular use and meaning of these decorative elements. The commonplace tiled web page backgrounds are made up of small units that cover the intended web space. Often the patterning is a referent to a historic or antiquated aesthetic – which is based upon the tendency to imitate nature in fabric design and architectural ornamentation. The proliferation of digital wallpaper is partially due to the affordances of the medium because these small tiling graphics are certainly a technological foundation of html programming. This patterning is applied as a soothing treatment to (what can be labeled as) a cold digital space. Another testament to noise-as-comfort is revealed through class comments that the noi-z-en’s saturated aesthetic is in fact visually pleasing.

When I launched my email application my mailbox invariably filled with the unwanted vernacular we know as spam. Of course! Here is the cyberworld’s white noise that I have been overlooking. So with a deep breath I move in closer hoping to discover what else I can find. What have I not seen before?

In reality, the digital world we live in is an “info polluted world” and its comforting nature might not be apparent. (Heim, *Metaphysics* 13) But it does not have to be that way if we look to nature and noise to inform our experiences. Zen teachings can inform our actions as both the *makers* and *participants* of the digital world. Similar to the physical world – and because of our previous online training – digital white noise is often transparent and hard to identify. Once again we have become unconscious of the editing process. It is easy for us to overlook an “interface that is hard to see” and to get bogged down in the dense information landscape (Heim 80).

Honesty to the medium

At the beginning of the semester I wondered aloud “what is honesty to the medium?” The basis for enthusiastically contributing to – and participating with – the digital space is acknowledging visual noise as the illuminator on our path to *digital Zen*. By training the senses for the (noisy) experience the participant is readied for all of the knowledge that the digital space offers. By acknowledging the technology – and utilizing its affordances – the participant reaches an experiential enlightenment. Through noi-z-en I have exploited this idea with the active participation and acceptance of the medium, ultimately revealing its true essence.

Because of my heightened senses, as I scroll down the email window I no longer overlook the browser, interface, and mouse movement. Beneath the garish “enhancement” ad I read a set of words that are a loose kind of poetry. “The fates lead the willing, and drag the unwilling. Love is a conflict between reflexes and reflections.” This alone is enough to entice further study.

This adapts the practice of Zen to include honesty to the medium as well active user participation.

Currently, new media is in a state of adolescence (hence the name). J. Bolter's idea of remediation contends that digital media is replicating its older siblings – a refashioning of earlier media. As an example, the web constantly replicates the aesthetics and functionality of television, film, print ads and books. I recognize that this act of mimicry occurs and my manifesto supports a form of remediation from nature (renaturation if you will). In the growth cycle it is essential to learn from our predecessors but ultimately one needs to be true to oneself. I am modifying Bolter's theory to include honesty to the medium, which asks the digital experience to leave behind the adolescence of remediation and enter adulthood.

Allowing new media to live to its fullest potential – no longer contained by other media expectations or limitations – is my answer to the aforementioned question from the beginning of the semester. As with any media, interactivity was not conceived with a full understanding of its design possibilities or cultural implications. Today, the graphic designer and computer live in tandem, yet the medium has become stuck in the antiquated metaphors of desktops and book-like pagination. Indeed, print is not a sufficient mold and the break from remediation is imperative. Being honest to the medium is about embracing the technological affordances, or so-called faults and eccentricities. As Bolter states, “the computer intervenes anyway” so I say we might as well embrace it! (Bolter 46) These eccentricities are often viewed as “technical and aesthetic problems associated with Web design” but through training and flexibility our participation furthers understanding (and comfort with) the inherent noises (Shaughnessy). Marshall McLuhan summed it up succinctly when he said, “The medium is the message.” It is *this* message that undeniably surrounds (and influences) the understanding of content. As designers, we need to not only acknowledge the container of the message but to incorporate and fully exploit it to our advantage.

In order to explain this ideal, my loose explanation of the tradition of the modern highlights how art no longer tries to emulate – or remediate – its predecessors. (Bolter 122)

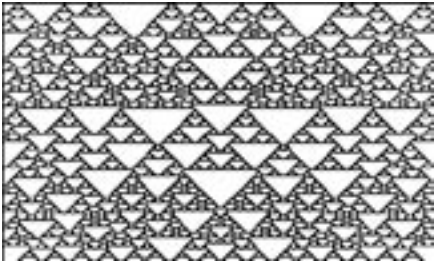
For example, in painting's adolescence it attempted to mimic the real but once photography provided the desired reality, painting was allowed to be true to its form (e.g. the de Stijl movement's bold geometry and color palette).

This process may be informed by heightening our awareness, making opaque and constructing the new. The self-constructed Pachuco culture in LA in mid-20th century exemplifies the ideal of deserting their parental cultures and creating their own unique and specific identity.

By Bolter's definition media will not surpass its tendency to remediate. However I side with Holtzman's argument against Bolter that says the way to “discover new worlds of expression” is to exceed the old. (Bolter 49) In its adolescence interactive media tries to be a book or film, but by entering *adulthood* it can be true to its form/self. The modern painting tradition exemplifies my ideal of adulthood by embracing color and brush stroke over realistic representation, just as new media should truly embrace the technology of html limitations, browser incompatibilities and user malleability. Indeed, this trend is emerging within the design community. Firms like 2x4 and m/m Paris are “going back to basics” with an eye on the “Utopian spirit of the early pioneers.” (Shaughnessy)

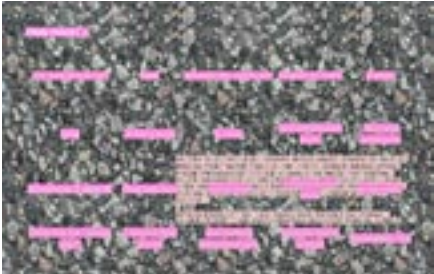
Throughout art and literary history – from Dada to *Ostranenie* (making strange) – we see the example of making opaque that which had previously been transparent. In the Futurist movement, for example, their ideals were declared through the practice of embracing technology as well as decontextualizing letterforms. However, the typical web designer is not currently in the practice of *Ostranenie*, but rather is producing a “bland digital equivalency” that renders the digital space short of its potential (Shaughnessy). Presented with this false masquerade, it is time that we reconsider the digital space.

I wonder what else is hidden in this newly defined visual white noise that exists in cyberspace? What else have I edited out or been unconscious of? Thus, here I began my journey to seek digital Zen and ultimately embrace the visual noise in the digital (and natural) world.

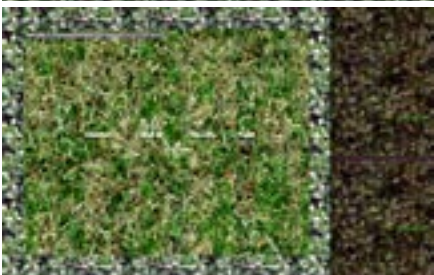


By my definition, this form of patterning provides an excellent visual example of noise.

after selecting all



before and after manipulation



Taoism – with its total mind and body awareness for spiritual enlightenment – is also applicable to the idea of manipulating the web space through “the act of simple steps [which] induce mental reverie.” (Butler 89)

Embrace the space!

The first step in allowing media to stand on its own is to understand the tool. Steven Holtzman challenged the digital designer to turn the medium’s limitations into strengths. (Holtzman 151) Despite (and most likely because of) a decade since this call to action, I have rejuvenated this notion by designing noi-z-en predominantly with basic (yet inventive) html and a thorough consideration for the web’s affordances. Artificial life Scientist, Stephen Wolfram experimented with “cellular automata” in which simple mathematics generates a complex patterning reflective of nature (Holtzman 69). The idea that minimal rules produce intricate results exemplifies why a visual landscape of seemingly impenetrable information is basically composed of small units. But accessibility is possible when we break it down to the simplest elements.

The tendency in the digital medium may currently be passive, but that does not have to be its nature. Ann-Sargent Wooster suggests that the audience become an active participant in the decoding of the message. I agree with her prodding for “artworks in which the spectator is a necessary component of the work and completes it.” (Wooster 280) In noi-z-en’s “story portals” a majority of the text is small or hidden on the background pattern, so accessing content/navigation requires keyboard commands and browser manipulation. The screen invites the user (through font size and copy) to move close to the screen – an analogy for viewing noise at the microscopic level. The commands, which are inherent to the digital medium for accessibility, have been fully integrated into the navigation of noi-z-en. As example, the participant must implement *command +* or *select all* in order to read the text that is too small and to find navigational links.

Unique to the digital medium, the browser size varies from monitor to monitor and is always resized by each individual. The ability to control all aspects of the design has left the hands of the maker and rests in the mouse of the user. Since it is the “interface [that] supplies shape and form” I have chosen to fully acknowledge and incorporate the democratic nature of the medium in both the creation and participation stages (Heim 80). In several areas transparent gifs are used to hide the content and require physical manipulation of the browser frame in order to reveal the hidden information below. For instance, an image of grass hides text but by simply adjusting the browser frame parts of a quote are revealed. Roland Barthe discussed the importance of an *open text* in which the reader is an active participant. Ellen Lupton fittingly applies this concept to typography and the interactive environment by stating, “we may play the text, but it is also playing us.” (Lupton 73) In the making of and interacting with this site’s navigation I have adapted the concept of “playing” to both the maker and participant.

An ancient *Taoist* story about an old man hand-pulling water from a well can teach us about full absorption with our work. When a youth showed the old sage a pulley he declined by saying, “*If I use a device like this, my mind will think itself clever. With a cunning mind, I will no longer put my heart into what I am doing.*” Although the Taoist sage feared technology, this fable teaches the importance of working for the results rather than allowing the technology to transparently move beneath our cursors unnoticed. Ultimately, I hope to express the idea that both the *maker* and the *participant* need to employ the tool to their advantage. Only then can we obtain full access to navigation and information within the space. This experience requires a mental shift in the perception of place in the digital world. By honestly engaging the medium, the maker/participant becomes “hyper aware of how each detail of the site contributes to the whole” and begins to interact on a more patient and thorough level (T. Galloway).

Through this project I have honored inherent facets of the Internet space: the browser, pop ups, scroll bar, table frames, key commands, tiling, and alias type. It is through the process of manipulation that these formally transparent noise(s) are made opaque – bringing honesty to the digital medium. This form of relishing is what Bolter defines as “hypermediacy.” Add to that Michael Heim’s thoughts on the *Metaphysics of the Digital Space* and we begin on the path towards digital enlightenment. A path rooted in the understanding that the maker contribution to noi-z-en is as equally weighted as the user participation with the project. Just as focus is required to see beyond the rocks in the Zen garden, digital white noise requires mental flexibility and patience.

The overall navigational and visual experience that I have created is not rooted in clarity of information. Usability guru Jakob Nielson professes that we (as makers) should not ask users to “struggle with a deviant user interface.”(Shaughnessy) Likewise, the Modernist praise for white space chooses to strip noise from the page. But, the usability or modernist tendency for “clarity” (however differently conceived) is not only a fallacy to noi-z-en’s character, but I also believe this single-minded approach contributes to the numbing plague of the typical online experience. Interactive designer, Florian Schmitt, believes that the lack of web innovation is because “users are impatient, and not willing to find things out for themselves.” (Shaughnessy) While the medium is youthful, I pronounce that it is time to stop spoon-feeding.

before and after manipulation



In addition, I am proposing a heightened level of awareness before the user can even penetrate my site and understand my intentions. This process is analogous to a *koan*: unanswerable riddles given to a student by a Zen master which are not answered logically, but through the student’s insight into their true nature. “*Two hands clap and there is a sound; what is the sound of one hand?*” Navigational access is achieved by selecting all, enlarging the text, opening the source, or a slight adjustment to the browser frame. So just as the koan’s answer is different for each student, there are multiple ways to travel through this experience.

A question hidden in noi-z-en’s source code is “what kind of reader are you?” Visual noise reflects the idea of hidden information but also induces empathy from the participant. Holtzman reinforces this notion with his understanding of Derrida’s dense writings when he summarizes that “the difficulty of understanding his point *is* his point.”(Holtzman 150) Similar to a koan, the essence of Derrida’s word play may not be understood by everyone. Likewise in my project it is fine, even preferred, if a participant does not successfully extrude every bit of information. The emphasis on empathy over clarity follows the literary example set forth in *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*. In Gloria Anzaldua’s personal essay a direct translation is not provided but – despite the lack of clarity – an empathy with the author’s message is achieved. “[S]ometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. A veces no soy nada ni nadie. Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo soy.” (Borderlands 60) A trip to Babelfish.com is unnecessary because the reading experience itself induces empathy for the author’s unique and dissonant language space. In the same respect I ask the participant to learn a navigational code, which provides a more empathetic experience for both visual noise and the digital space.

Since noi-z-en requires a different syntax, specific clues are included in order to prepare the participant for the journey ahead. Visual hints in the introduction page, open source code and portals help to establish the required patience and an empathetic acknowledgement for the content. Similar to the early Postmodern designer’s visual request for the viewer to search out

Fragmented text on introductory page



Zazin is the mental and physical preparation preformed by Zen followers before meditation.

Japanese tea ceremony



information beneath layers – or to physically interact with the object (turning the page sideways to read text) – I too am asking the participant to engage in a mental/physical workout in order to reveal information. Similarly, the rock garden’s deliberate arrangement makes nature’s essence opaque. In an attempt to heighten an awareness of the web’s eccentricities the html table cell is revealed by fracturing the introduction paragraph into small-animated gifs that delete portions at random intervals. In another example, the rapid cycling of suggestions (which then slows to a readable pace) is there to inform the reader that they are exiting the high-speed online experience and need to mentally “reset” before embarking upon this journey (establishing *zazin*, if you will).

DIGITAL ZEN

The proclamation of my manifesto is to love and learn from natural and digital noise. Within the vast digital landscape, visual noise provides a mental comfort as well as access to information. As a “fierce advocate of visual density,” Edward Tufte champions this ideal through “maximizing the amount of data conveyed on a single page or screen.” (Lupton 75) The behavior/personality of that maximized information space can take on many paradigmatic forms. I believe one way to access the surplus of information is to heed Holtzman’s call to “exploit the virtual world, sculpt the substance of cyberspace.” (Holtzman 62) Zen occurs as the participant journeys further through the discovery of content and navigation. By making opaque, that which was previously ignored, acknowledging the medium, and developing focus we obtain a level of visual literacy. The tea ceremony, rock garden, Taoism and even the I Ching – with its yin and yang so akin to ones and zeros – all point to the interactive experience. This knowledge reveals the depth of meaning discovered within the dense noise of the digital world, which ultimately reflects a deeper understanding of the natural and hopefully will even inform one’s reality.

The collection, creation of and participation in this online research “zine” has confirmed my theory that visual noise exists, and that it is in fact packed with information and provides us comfort. This exploration led me to skim Asian methodologies as a reason to inform the training and participation with the experience and ultimately to embrace the digital environment. Encoding my site with navigational riddles and building it by simple means strengthens the flexibility of mind and mouse. Although not literally applicable to every online experience, I believe this process can influence our overall digital relationship. My project explores one angle in-depth and (as a living research document) will evolve to other facets in time. I am not advocating this as the only answer, but rather as a philosophy that can inform our participation – by acknowledging, accepting and embracing technology – with other aspects of new media in our digital lives. By acknowledging the medium, allowing it to be true to itself and participating wholeheartedly with unfettered mind we may attain an enlightened digital experience. As both designers and participants of interactivity we should use noise to our advantage – tapping into its density to enrich our digital (and real) experiences.

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