

The Franz Kline phenomenon



Writing a column for a Web-based publication—something I've been doing for almost three months now—has been an interesting challenge. Part of it is the difference in cadence. Writing for a print publication, even if the material eventually winds up on the Web, provides some distance, particularly in terms of time.

Computer magazine writers, for example, know that anything they write will contain inaccuracies brought about by the passage of time: prices change, model numbers shift, products are cancelled and added, bugs get fixed, and major shifts

can occur without warning, especially in Internet-related industries. Thus computer writers learn to hedge in certain ways; readers know this and know they have to constantly seek newer information.

The Web removes that pleasant fog of temporal distance. In preparing for the launch of *adobe.mag*, I took on the interesting and slightly vexing task of trying to write about a moving target. Obviously, I've done this before in columns and features about the Internet—but not on the Internet itself, which is the most immediate of mediums. The lead time for *adobe.mag* is about four weeks, but the ability to change material up until the second it goes online (and even afterwards) creates a strange nervousness. And, as it turned out, of the four columns I wrote for the April 1, 1996 launch issue, three had to be revised to account for changes to sites like those of the IRS and Netscape.

When I think of those changes, I'm reminded of Franz Kline, the painter identified with the Abstract Expressionist movement, who was never satisfied with his work. Even after he sold his distinctive pictures—which consisted

mostly of bold, black, almost calligraphic strokes against white backgrounds on large canvases—he would show up at the home of the buyer, pull out his paints and continue to work on the images where they hung.

This motivation surely drives those of us in this medium. In discussions with Karen Fishler, the editor of this fine collection of electrical impulses, I wondered how we would update the rapidly accumulating back issues when things mentioned in the stories changed. Then I realized—when she told me—that we weren't going to; the articles reflect the contemporary reality, not the ever-changing day-to-day bustle.

But there will certainly be times when a self-styled Kline like myself will want to pop by the *adobe.mag* offices, open up an old column, and start tweaking.

Guardians of time and space

One of the innovations of Digital Equipment Corporation's Alta Vista Web indexing and search engine (<http://www.altavista.digital.com>) is providing the

modification date of any document it lists for you. This is one of those low-level facts that most users on the Web aren't aware of; part of the **protocol** that governs communications between browsers and servers dictates that the server sends a lot of information the user doesn't need to know about, like the modification date. The browser uses some of this information to help "age out" old, locally stored copies of files when they're updated.

Alta Vista displays this information like a scarlet "A" for everyone to see: look at the Freudian Symbolism, Inc., home page! It hasn't been updated since February 10, 1995! The datestamp of modification adds a pricetag of perishability to everything visited. The plus side is that it reduces wasted time when you're trying to find up-to-date or up-to-the-minute results. The negative side is that perfectly good resources, things that may not have changed in their basic nature in years or decades, appear less useful and interesting than if they were not datestamped in this way.

And this, in turn, challenges the basic nature of archiving and authenticity. In a medium like the daily newspaper, subsequent developments in a story

result in follow-ups and entirely new pieces on different facets. This is true in other temporally bound media, like radio, as well. Just before taxes were due this year, I heard a piece on “Weekly Edition” from the National Public Radio archives—a game show takeoff on opening an Individual Retirement Account (IRA), which constituted a “new” kind of retirement account at the time of the original broadcast in 1979.

After the piece was over, the host spent ten minutes with a guest discussing all of the changes that had been put into effect since the 1979 broadcast. The rebroadcast provided a nice historical background, but, in the interest of presenting clear information, they could have rerecorded the piece with the new details. Should they have? Not really; that would destroy the spontaneity and authenticity of the original satire.

This question assumes more importance on the Internet and the Web, where the text exists—as I say facetiously above—only as a set of electronic impulses. There’s no “authentic” or “original” physical object that represents one of my columns or any other electronic piece.

This subject was previewed in a classic essay by the short-lived German critic Walter Benjamin (for extra points, you pronounce his name Valter Ben-ya-meen), “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936)—for more, see **footnote**. Benjamin argued in favor of the immutable quality of original works of art, and postulated that the new medium of *his* time—film—lacked the authentic: there was no original per se, only duplicates.

In the same vein, the Web provides only an endless succession of duplications of electronic impulses, but there’s no physical arrest of the process. (“Under Construction” icons are misleading; the entire medium is dynamic, always in process, always by definition under construction. An “Under Construction” icon actually defines one of the few still points in the vibrating Web.)

Whither reality?

As newsrooms continue to convert their resources and new publications erupt onto the Web, at some point the question will be asked: will there be only one “master story” per distinct news item, that changes daily as new facts

are uncovered, and becomes encrusted with annotations, links, sidebars, on every imaginable facet?


Or do the stories that were once written become enshrined as the closest thing to the authentic that we can capture, preserved in amber; new stories elaborate, revise, update, but each story becomes, in turn, captured and frozen? Will news become like Talmudic commentary, where the original is so encrusted with reference that they're almost indistinguishable?

The point of maintaining archives makes sense when those archives are a digital representation of the physical thing: the newspaper's morgue, for instance, where back issues and research are stored for future reference. But does it make sense to continue to house inaccurate information that has strayed from reality because of the course of time? Or that has been proven factually incorrect?

As little as any reporter and writer might want to recognize the fact, these issues form the backdrop of the transition from physical permanence—or even from throwaway ephemera—to an electronic culture.

Ultimately, Web writing and media could mutate into one giant exquisite corpse, reminiscent of a game played by the Surrealists earlier in the century; each person draws on a large piece of paper on which all he or she can see at any given time is a little overlap with the work of the other people who are playing the game. The final result is more monstrous than artistic. This may be the eventual fate of the constant revision the Web makes possible.

A little credit

This piece popped into my head after reading Ole Kvern's "House of Tips" piece on reference and resonance in design (April 1, 1996). The tone- and frame-breaking nature of his piece made me want to take stock of the currents underlying the transition to digital writing. 

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Footnote

Benjamin offers some prescient insights in this essay, which simply goes to show that anything we think of as modern has already been thought of or anticipated, like Jules Verne's description of the fax machine. Particularly nice is Benjamin's quotation from Paul Valéry, which can be seen as a premonition of television or the Web or both:

"Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear or disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign."

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Glossary entries

Protocol. A standardized method of call and response; a system of exchanging information according to precise rules. All systems, including human society, are guided by protocols. When your Web browser connects to a remote Web site, there are several protocols involved: TCP/IP (Telecommunications Control Protocol/Internet Protocol), which governs the interaction of both the physical (wire) and software (data) levels of communication; modem protocols like V.34 and MNP 5, which govern the exchange of data over analog phone lines; and HTTP (HyperText Transfer Protocol), which controls the exchange of information between a Web browser, or client, and an HTTP server. This is actually a simple case that omits the many other protocols involved, including what your microprocessor is doing and what the chips in the other devices you've connected to are doing. It's rarely important to know the details of a protocol unless you're a technician or low-level (which is

actually a misnomer) programmer having to deal with the nitty-gritty. Most designers and high-level programmers need to know only that it works, and some of the bits most useful to them. The end-user shouldn't ever have to think about protocols, really.