Technology in the Twilight Zone

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Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol19/iss1/17

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Technology in the Twilight Zone

I met my first computer in 1987. We were employed at the same design agency and working across the room from each other. Management brought him in one day, introduced him, and left him there. We had all heard that his resume indicated he was strong and powerful and that he knew all the best, new shortcuts and time-saving devices. He was so composed, so silent and so intimidating. Secretly, we all believed his strong exterior was just a cover for a fragile nature.

For three months we smiled at him uneasily across the room and left him alone while we did our work. The company provided no help in breaking the ice. There were no “get acquainted mixers,” no training sessions and no “how to get along” manuals.

In those three uncomfortable months I talked to a lot of friends who knew him and had worked with his family. (They’re a very prolific Scottish clan.) Everyone told me, “They’re consistent and methodical. If you give them a job with the same instructions as a previous job, they will do the exact same thing and obtain the same results every time. No surprises! They only screw up when you give bad instructions. Give them garbage to work with and they give you garbage in return.”

Now, as an artist, I enjoy surprises, serendipitous happenings, unpredictable results, doing every job differently and capitalizing on mistakes. But, there is also a part of me which likes consistency in routine work. I find it comforting to subtract the neat columns of black numbers in my checkbook (or at the end of the month, to add the neat columns of red numbers) and come up with the same total that the bank believes is correct. I

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file everything in my office and house alphabetically (spices are filed from Allspice to Turmeric) and I become annoyed when things don't fit my neat filing categories (if zucchini goes under Z in a recipe file, where does yellow squash go?). As a supervisor, I had a huge work load, lots of deadlines to meet, and a lot of the work was fairly routine. This guy was beginning to sound like the heaven-sent answer to my problems. I began working with him on a 32 page newsletter.

Almost immediately, I discovered his fragile nature. I accidentally threw one of his folders in the trash (his “System Folder”) and he lost his mind! He became totally incoherent and we had to call the medic to restore him.

Then he contracted a terrible virus which began nibbling away at his memory. The symptoms resembled the advancing stages of Alzheimer’s. Every day he remembered less and less until, eventually, he could not perform even the simplest of tasks. This disease required sending him to a clinic for a one week R&R.

My hopes of him being reliable had been destroyed but, I still believed he would be consistent.

Then came the day when I asked him to print a calendar page, a nice neat grid of little 1" x 1" squares, seven squares across and five squares deep. The test results looked great. I told him he could quit for the day and we would do the job the next morning when the quality paper arrived. The next morning when I told him to go ahead and print, I knew immediately that he was having another one of his “episodes.” He was printing each square as a 1" x 8" rectangle. I remembered, “They only screw up when you give bad instructions.” But, I had not given him any instructions since the previous day! We had shut the office down and started up again in the morning. For two hours I tried to find out what was troubling him. Did he have another virus? Was he running at a low energy level? Had I given confusing directions? After two hours I gave up and told him he could quit for the day and get some rest.

That first awkward experience set a pattern for a series of co-workers. One day, a group of the faculty members of the Macintosh clan approached, on my behalf, and asked for a series of co-workers. They were careful to maintain distance at all times. Even though some of his family to work in his area, I had been on a first name basis with just “Macintosh,” “Mac,” or “Mac,” who misbehave, “that’s just dreadful but unavoidable.

This semester, with the new faculty members, I let them revitalize the last-name-only professionalism. In an effort to be more friendly, we began to be more individual and unique. The Mac clan was named and twenty took the name Macintosh.

Paul Wittenbraker was a strange goings-on. One day the room was experiencing pixels on the screen look soft and fuzzy. We noticed that it was not the Mac’s new name but Close’s huge paintings. The halftone dots which made his paintings, the dots appear with a brush, appear soft.

“OK,” you say, “this is evidence but does not prove plagiarizing the artists personal style.”

Next, Paul was discovered, Oppenheim, an artist, who had Disney characters in every painting. He immediately sued by plagiarizing. When he left...
The next day he was powered up and full of energy. Bright and early, with no change in instructions, he printed the entire job perfectly with nice neat little 1" x 1" squares. Claims of consistency were obviously another myth.

That first awkward partnership paved the way for a series of co-worker relationships with members of the Macintosh clan. All have been approached, on my part, with well warranted caution and some degree of mistrust. I have been careful to maintain distance and professionalism at all times. Even though I have allowed some of his family to work in my home, we have never been on a first name basis. It has always been just "Macintosh," "Mac" or, in the case of the ones who misbehave, "that MacHine." (Sorry . . . a dreadful but unavoidable pun.)

This semester, with encouragement from other faculty members, I let down my guard and violated the last-name-only, cardinal rule of professionalism. In an effort to make our classrooms more friendly, we baptized each computer with a more individual and unique name. Twenty of the Mac clan was named after famous designers and twenty took the names of contemporary artists. Paul Wittenbraker was the first to notice some strange goings-on. One of the Macs in his classroom was experiencing a problem in which the pixels on the screen began to blur together and look soft and fuzzy. When he went to take down the Mac’s new name to report the problem, he noticed that it was now named after Chuck Close. Close’s huge paintings are enlargements of photographic reproductions, complete with all the halftone dots which make up printed images. In his paintings, the dots, because they are painted with a brush, appear somewhat soft and fuzzy.

"OK," you say, "this is an interesting coincidence but does not prove the computer is assuming the artist’s personality."

Next, Paul was discussing the work of Dennis Oppenheim, an artist who appropriated Walt Disney characters in one of his works and was immediately sued by the Disney Company for plagiarism. When he looked around the room to see if Oppenheim was present, he discovered that not only was he there, but he was hooked up to the scanner.

Even if you believe this is coincidence, you must appreciate the delicious irony.

I began observing and now I am, quite honestly, becoming somewhat alarmed. A student in my class complained that her computer was extremely slow to start up. Everyone else was up and running and fifteen minutes later she was still waiting for hers to wake up and get going. She was working with Seymour Chwast, a designer who made his name in the 60s and is somewhat older than most of the artists we selected. I told her, "After you have been in this business for 40 years it might take you a few minutes to get kick-started in the morning too. Be patient. Once he is awake, he will be a dependable partner."

Another student had an unexplainable type problem. She had closed her document and when she re-opened it, a font which had been working perfectly began to "bitmap" or go all "jaggey" on the screen. The font was still in her system and should have been available. She happened to be working with April Greiman, an artist who intentionally "bitmaps" her fonts to make them look computer generated.

One of my students was trying to get type on the page and called me over for help. "Hardly any of my type fonts are work-
ing!” she complained. “As far as I can tell, there are only three I can use.” Her use of the words “only three” helped me guess without hesitation, “You’re working with Massimo Vignelli! He believed there are only about three typefaces worth using!”

It is true, this could all be coincidence but it is beginning to feel a little eerie. I, for one, am staying alert! Looking at the personalities we have invited in, I wonder what other problems we should anticipate in the future.

Chuck Anderson uses only three shades of brown in almost everything he designs. I’ll keep an eye on the color palettes on that one!

One of Rick Valicenti’s favorite methods of working is to use old hardback books as sketchbooks, drawing and painting over text, obliterating and emphasizing words as he goes. I’m watching for type legibility on any jobs created with him.

Herb Lubalin created the Avant Garde and Lubalin Graph typefaces. I’m waiting to see if students working with him develop a preference for those two fonts.

P. Scott Makela ignores the parameters given him by the client and often, to the client’s dismay, creates pieces which de-emphasize and confuse their message. I am double checking the work of any student working at that station to make sure they have followed all basic project guidelines.

Joseph Beuys was a spokesman for use of intuition over rationality and imagination and inspiration over logic and understanding. The methodical Mac clan is going to have one helluva hard time digesting that one!

Nam June Paik once created an artistic statement about our passivity to and interaction with the media by laying a live wire across videotape and erasing blocks of the recording. Was it at all wise, I wonder, to even include this artist in our electronic environment?

Thinking ahead, I noticed that in our inattentive haste, we put Paula Scher and Milt Glaser in different rooms. Though both have quite separate design careers, they are a married couple and Scher has admitted that her husband, who has been in the business considerably longer than she, has been one of her main influences. Will her work suffer from the separation? Will his? Will one or both of them become cranky and irritable? As many of us know, separate careers can be rewarding but it is still nice to occasionally spend the night in the same room as your spouse. I am actually feeling sorry for them and am wondering if I dare ask Instructional Technology to help set up a visitation schedule. Do you think they will be sympathetic?