

THESIS TEMPLATE

8000 Free and Beautiful Words
on Template Culture

Abstract

This thesis consists of two essays concerning *template culture*. Essay one explains the existence of the web template and its relation to web 2.0 and web standards. Essay two dives deeper into the possible side effects of working with templates: the role of the user customising and generating repetitive user content. How the template as a tool has created a shift from consumer to prosumer and what the consequences are for the (graphic) designer.

Introduction

A template is the “pattern or gauge for shaping a piece of work”, the *modelvorm* that guarantees two pieces of work (a brick, an image, a letter) are identical, created from the same mold. And if they’re not completely similar in looks, they are at least based on the same structure or framework.

The template exists everywhere: IKEA furniture, phone apps that promise to be tools that help you ‘design your life’ or the white walls of a gallery space. These examples show the broad interpretation of the word template I use, both literal and metaphorical. While I am especially interested in templates that are prominent in (graphic) design, web and lifestyle – from design tools to photo-sharing websites –, in some cases the term will be used to describe a situation where there exists a much imitated, conventional model: the template as a trope¹ or trend.

We’re surrounded with templates because:

A: They follow the same pattern we’re familiar with, we’re used to them. B: They require little work (or coding knowledge), because of their limitations

1 While doing my research for this text, I wrote down a number of “t”-words that, to me, define template culture. They are template, trend, theme, trope. A trope is a commonly used, often repeated, theme or device used in creative works. (Merriam Webster, 2014)

they make decisions for you. C: They are for everyone! Easy to understand, quick to generate. D: You can customise them to your liking!

Template culture

Templates were introduced to repeat a single task a certain amount of time, as a multiplication device to increase productivity. A device used in labour. But the current culture takes the template away from the area of manufacture and introduces it as a product, a tool that turns consumers into makers.

Skipping part of our work because it has already been done for us, employing tools developed by those with more skill, using the rules and regulations of those who've done more research as a guideline. Recognizing something for what it is, because it uses the same template can be a good thing. These are all valid and good reasons for using templates. But this thesis aims to look at the template from a more ambiguous standpoint, by asking some critical questions.

Are templates only helpful and liberating to those who use them? Or do they, in some way, limit their users as well? What if these templates become presets that generate not just a similar look, but also similar content? Applied to the professional field, templates could signify a design crisis. Or is it just a case of evolution?

Insert your content here

"The Theme" will try to answer questions about templates by focusing on those in the web environment. From the animated gifs and frame sets of the 90s, via browser wars and web standards, to the current age of "insert your content here". Why do templates exist, what made us use them? And how have they effected the shift from visitor to web author and from home page to post?

"The Dashboard" takes a closer look at the user, the user interface and user-generated content. Branded as a tool, a big part of a template's attraction is the promise of control and personification. Flexibility and customisation options are promised, but they are often limited and to go beyond the default, the template requires knowledge the average user does not have.

Do seemingly superficial add-ons and changes to the template really make you(r website) more custom, different, personal? Or is the result of using templates a similarity in appearance and a homogeneity of content and its

users? Microblog platform Tumblr and its Themes will be used as a framework to address these questions.

In both essays, I'll try to introduce the broader context of a possible crisis in professionalism. Something I aim to expand on in the final conclusion. What is the current role of the graphic designer, when users are being "empowered" (Tumblr, 2014) and given "tools of expression" (Halliday, 2012)? Is a designer now designated to create the tools, the templates, "the user-friendly environment"? (de Mul, 2011)

Essay I, The Theme

Introduction

There is more than one definition of the word 'template', the term is used in a number of fields. It's a pattern, a mold, a stencil, a molecule, a structure or a system. It's made of metal, plastic, paper, wood or code. And it helps us cut shapes, paint letters, create documents with a similar layout or generate designs for a website without any graphic design or coding knowledge.

What all these examples have in common is that they set a standard. Templates are the pre-defined form that requires content; be it paint, clay, text or image. A modelbord² that determines the shape of its copies.

The Dutch word for template is *sjabloon* and it's etymology stretches the meaning of the word a little further. A *sjabloon* is not just a physical object used as a stencil, but can also be defined as the conventional model. (M. Philippa et al, 2007) In an abstract sense, the word can be applied to anything that is often imitated or repeated.

To avoid getting lost in a big sea of templates, this essay will keep its main focus on those in the web environment.

It will explore web standards, graphic design and site building before and after Web 2.0. From the browser wars of the 90s, via user-generated content on Tumblr to the effects of mass customisation.

Choose a design, insert your content, generate a website!

In 2014, the first template that comes to mind, and appears in a Google search, is the web template that arranges elements of a website into a layout. What exactly is this phenomenon that completely appropriated the word template? When I google³ this question, I am surprised to find an honest and to-the-point answer, on the website 'WiseGEEK':

2 Modelbord: from Dutch, also means template. The plate that serves as a model. (M. Philippa et al, 2007)

3 Googling: "to google", using the Google search engine to find information. "Let me Google that for you" allows you to animate a Google search for "all those people who find it more convenient to bother you with their question rather than google it for themselves." (LMGTFY, 2014)

“What Are Web Templates? (with picture). A web template is a pre-designed webpage that only lacks content and photos. Web templates reduce or eliminate the need for a professional webpage designer. Many basic web templates are free online, while others are reasonably priced when compared to the cost of hiring a web design studio. Website owners can search for web templates that appeal to them by looking at images on vendor's sites.”(wiseGEEK, 2014)

Web templates enable us to place our content on the World Wide Web. They're often free, always quick and easy to install and they hardly ever look exactly how we want them to look. But we accept their limitations, because we're drawn in by the possibility of doing-it-ourselves, of saving money and of having custom options and therefore unlimited possibilities.

Web 1.0

Somewhere in the mid 90s, my parents finally decided it was time to connect our home to the Internet. I was fascinated from the start and have spent a lot of time – and money – browsing the World Wide Web, dial up speed slow via Netscape Navigator.

It did not take long before I wanted to create my own web pages. There was something quite magical about this world of animated GIFs and background colors, gradient text effects and visitor counters. The home pages were personal, the choices limited but not restricting.

The home pages and fan sites were personal declarations, created from a small palette of options, which of course resulted in some similar looking designs. Similarities made up by the contemporary culture, creations of pioneers exploring a new medium, but not set by pre-defined limitations.

As Olia Lialina writes in her text, “A Vernacular Web”: “There was a pre-existing environment; a structural, visual and acoustic culture you could play around with, a culture you could break. There was a world of options and one of the options was to be different.” (O. Lialina, 2005)

It is a difficult task, making a comparison between the liberating lack of possibilities of the early web and the very limiting restrictions of the online world we're currently experiencing, but perhaps the answer lies here somewhere.

In the early days of the Internet the options for creating a home page were few, because it was a period in its development that just did not allow for more. But in its current stage, the restrictions are not set by browser wars or lack of bandwidth, but by the commercial enterprises that have taken over: the social networks, the blog platforms, the (design) tools. Under the guise of making things easier, faster and more convenient for users.

And in this current phase, the template not just refers to the selection of default conditions that turns a list of content into a prettily laid out website. The way each 'genre' of content appears, increasingly, on designated websites, seems to follow a certain pattern: a template in a different form (expanded on in essay II). More and more the web is divided into spaces that serve a specific purpose. That follow a preset standard.

Olia Lialina words it better. “(...) the WWW of today is a developed and highly regulated space. You wouldn't get on the web just to tell the world, "Welcome to my home page." The web has diversified, the conditions have changed and there's no need for this sort of old fashioned behavior. Your CV is posted on the company website or on a job search portal. Your diary will be organized on a blog and your vacation photos are published on iphoto.”

Besides the theme to each website, there is also the range of templates (for blogs or social networking sites) to choose from that exemplify this management of user-generated content. Search for templates on the web and don't be surprised to be bombarded with links to lists⁴ of templates for any purpose or according to any style. “20 stunning Tumblr portfolio themes”, “High Res” and “Good for text” are all self-explanatory. A web filled with templates. Premium or free.

4 Lists: It is hard to avoid search engines while researching for a text which topic criticises digital culture. But I did not expect that it would be such a task to avoid results that were simply websites listing and linking to downloadable templates (“Society and Culture Templates | Page 1 – TemplateWorld”). Many websites, often top search engine results, just exist to point people into the direction of other websites. And here the template is visible in how these links are organised and how the websites are titled: “Ten Ways To”, “20 Images That”, “Hundreds Of”.

I was quite fascinated when I noticed that this way of presenting information has even made its way to a Dutch online news website, that posted an article titled, “Five things you should know about the search for MH 370” (J. Nederpelt, 2014).

The title of this collection of essays also references the abundancy of web templates found online: “Free website templates for free download (about 2433 templates)”

(Aside)

Index + Exhibit = Indexhibit

In 2000, UK artist Daniel Eatock created his web portfolio following a simple format: a list of links of the left side of the browser window would open project-pages on the right side. His 'list structure' is the core principle of the Indexhibit CMS system, created in 2006 in collaboration with Jeffery Vaska. The format has become predominant in artist or designer portfolios, to its founders evident pleasure (demonstrated on the official website): “Since its release it has been embraced by a diverse creative community helping establish the format as an archetypal display for the web.”

Indexhibit's popularity grew partly due to Eatock's desire for others to use his website as an example, making the web 'simpler' and 'easy to access', by encouraging repetition and copying. This way, the 'list format' became a *modelvorm* for the online portfolio, not just in the way it looks, but in the way it should behave.

Eatock would reward each site owner using a replicated structure by posting a link to their site on his own portfolio – specifically, on the invitation page that spurred users to comply to the template.

This reminds me of a chapter in James Harkin's “Cyburbia”. He writes about mutual back-slapping in the blogging community (not that far removed from the portfolio communities). The top blogs would link to other top blogs, making it very hard for newcomers to find an audience, as this audience is constantly being send back and forth between veteran blogs. The peer-to-peer network is not without flaws. Online we depend on our peers and we tend to go around in circles. (J. Harkin, 2009)

There is much to see, to visit, online and templates by Indexhibit make it easier for us to process the information we find. When walking past an empty building with white painted walls, my first association is the bare gallery space and I wonder where the art has gone. And when I browse to a website with a white background and a simple list of titles on the left side, I automatically know that I'm now dealing with an artist portfolio. It might not always be true, but on average, this way of sorting saves me a lot of time.

(..)

My first serious upload to the web did not occur until around the time Cascading Style Sheets, Javascript and Dynamic HTML appeared. Back then,

websites still employed frame sets, embossed navigation buttons and rather futile attempts to hide the source code by disabling right mouse button clicking.

I managed to teach myself how to build websites with the now outdated tools Paint Shop Pro, a graphic editing software, and Microsoft Frontpage, an HTML editor. The former was used to create graphics and with the latter I arranged them on the screen, adding tables, text, hyperlinks and some CSS-styling⁵. When I became more experienced I replaced the two programs with Adobe Photoshop and a text-editor; and although my increased technical knowledge made me feel empowered, image and code were never more clearly divided.

To emphasize this point, a few years later I was hired as a graphic designer for a web development company aptly named “Best4U Media”. My task was to create a design based on a form filled out by the clients, in which they answered questions such as “What kind of style do you prefer? A, minimal and professional, or B, colorful and lively?” This Photoshop file would then be used as a framework for the 'coder'. He would slice the file in separate pieces and add corresponding HTML⁴ to make the design into an interactive homepage.

The interoperable Web page⁶

In the pre-Web 2.0 era, code and design were the two isolated parts that needed to be combined to create a functional and visual webpage. It were also the days of browser wars and splash pages: introductory web pages that showed disclaimers informing visitors of the most compatible browser for viewing a website.

Web standards were introduced by the World Wide Web Consortium⁷ to put a stop to this browser clash, during which browsers rapidly updated and improved their software to render their competitors useless. By 1999, Microsoft had managed to take a very large chunk of Netscape's database, partly by making sure websites designed using Internet Explorer would not be viewed correctly by Netscape Navigator users.

Standards and templates are interrelated and their existence is probably well intended. Web standards and their restrictions are, in a way a necessity, a

5 CSS/HTML: “HTML provides the structure of the page, CSS the (visual and aural) layout, for a variety of devices.” (W3C, 2014)

6 The interoperable webpage: from WC3, see “WC3”.

7 WC3: World Wide Web Consortium, the International community that develops web standards, see it as their “to lead the World Wide Web to its full potential by developing protocols and guidelines that ensure the long-term growth of the Web.” (W3C, 2012)

website needs to work 'moderately well' across all available browsers. But because they are constantly updated, keeping up with these changes is a hard thing to do, it requires effort and time. A pre-defined template helps us avoid the almost impossible struggle of making *something work for everything, by everyone*. It is the guide that molds content into an average shape, its design already takes into account all constraints.

And so we move away from individual home pages and (subconsciously) start building a more global structure together.

(Aside)

One size never fits all

A template does not only exist on the web. And a standard isn't just used for "building and rendering Web pages". Standardisation is a firmly fixed aspect of modern life, from ISO standard paper sizes (like the A4) to what qualifies as a 'free range' product.

In their 2008 book "Standards and Their Stories", Martha Lampand and Susan L. Star agree that standards are a necessity, but that the social implications of the practice of standardisation remain largely ignored.

The writers highlight how standards are nested, there is a recursive element to how and why they work. An example used in the first chapter describes how the standard of making an appointment is linked to the standards of the computerized calendar, which in turned requires the standard of having a phone. So the person who does not own a phone is immediately excluded from making an appointment. One size never fits all.

The second essay within this topic of *template culture* will look further into the role of the user, the consumer. What are the effects of working with templates? Templates function just like standards in that they facilitate repetitive situations. Although their framework is easier to customise, maybe even personalise, users still need to conform to a set of standards.

An example is the template of Facebook. And here I am not talking about its use of the color blue (#3b5998)⁸, but about my Facebook user profile that 'demands' information: "Add Your Relationship", "Add Religious Views", "Add Political Views". (Facebook, 2014)

8 #3b5998: And yet another standard detected, the hex notation for the Red, Blue and Green (W3schools, 2014)

Because I have not yet had the desire to inform Facebook (and those who visit my profile) on Where I Went To College, it asks me this about 9 out of 10 times I log into my account. With suggestions compiled from the information my Facebook friends have provided.

(...)

A collaborative medium

All the experience I gained and the abilities I learned were quickly outdated. Along with web standards came “metadata, authoring, rich user experience and dynamic content” – the staples of Web 2.0, the second coming of the Internet. My creations quickly became too static, the user experience one-dimensional. We had moved away from home pages with frame sets to blogs with a comment section.

The role of the visitor browsing the web changed, as new developments allowed them to start contributing more. They started posting comments, writing blogs and uploading recipes. Most of them did not have to go through the trouble of learning how to build and upload sites to be able to do so. With social networking sites as their platform or toolset, visitors morphed into web authors generating user-generated content.

As Kristin L. Arola writes, “today being a Web writer does not mean creating a homepage, and it certainly doesn’t mean understanding how servers, the Internet, (X)HTML, and CSS work. Trace the decline of once-popular web hosting services such as Angelfire and Geocities alongside the rise of social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace and it becomes clear—for our students, the homepage has gone the way of the landline.” (Arola, 2010)

(Aside)

Welcome to my home page

Former net artist, current web artist Olia Lialina's fascination with 90's web culture and home pages is reflected most clearly in her recent collaboration with Dragan Espenschied, the project "One Terabyte of Kilobyte Age – Digging through the Geocities torrent".

When in 2009 Yahoo announced they would close Geocities, the Archive Team - "a collective of rogue archivists" - attempted to rescue all the Geocities' data they could. Using GNU Wget "to within an inch of its life", they've collected 640GB of data from Geocities, and offered it for download via a torrent.

Geocities.com was the go-to place in the late 90's to host your first attempts at creating websites for free. Founded in 1994, users were required to select a "city" or "neighbourhoods" (like Tokyo for "Far East-related topics, including anime"), to upload the content of their websites. At the height of its popularity in 1999, near the dot-com bubble peak, Yahoo! purchased Geocities. They introduced premium accounts for a fee, limited data transfers and claimed ownership of all uploaded content. Users left as fast as they could.

Lialina and Espenschied bought a 2 terabyte disk and started downloading the Geocities torrent. They've been creating an inventory of its contents. Although Lialina claims that when Geocities was in its prime, she did not appreciate the general 'template' of its websites, she now sees the archive as a very useful collection of elements (midi files, animated gifs, navigation buttons) that make up the amateur culture of the early web. "With these works I want to apologize for my arrogance in the early years and to preserve the beauty of the vernacular web."

(...)

Web authoring and social networking sites

One of Web 2.0s key features is the notion of user-generated content. Most apparent in social networking sites, it adds another layer of difficulty to designing and maintaining a website. UGC is the content that visitors add to a website, a very dynamic notion that requires a type of flexibility from a design unheard of in pre-Web 2.0 times.

Websites are more and more organised around the input of its visitors, the users that upload, share, review and discuss on their platform of choice.

The structure of a homepage in 1996 consisted merely of a few .html pages and some .gif images. A personal blog in 2014 requires a database, folders filled with plugins, scripts and .php pages. It has a user-friendly interface, a section just for templates and very intricate .css pages for every single piece of text, effect and image 'printed' on the page. As mentioned before, the web page is gone and “the post” has appeared. The post refers to an image, quote, text, Tweet or Status Update⁹. They've made websites resilient, but not flexible. Is your header image too big? It will be enlarged, reduced, stretched or decompressed to 800*300 pixels either way.

Blogs and other social networking platforms, or any site that allows users to upload their own content, use “pre-formatted templates”. The template becomes a part of the deal. Because the way the site works and how it will continue to work has determined the way it looks. Although template can be customised a little, it mostly functions as an example of how every detail of the structure of the site should ideally be displayed.

The design choices have shifted from making a (pretty) site based on its content to the editing and creating of content placed within a preexisting layout.

“Today, our students still choose photographs, words, sounds, and hyperlinks (clearly all rhetorical choices), but they choose colors, fonts, and shapes less and less.” (Arola, 2010, p.6)

Code and design

It requires access to and knowledge of the code, the structure of the website and its databases to be able to make it look and behave the way we want. But this knowledge is often only in the possession of the experts that create these platforms. The template becomes the pre-defined form that is outside of the control of the users. And although advertised as 'fully customisable', the choices of the inexperienced user are often narrowed down to: pick a font color, upload your header image, turn the infinite scrollbar on or off? The focus of the user is the generating of content and the template (or design) is merely the framework that facilitates the display of these comments, images, gifs and videos. “We are certainly posting information, but this information

9 Tweet: A post on Twitter, with a 140-character limit. (Twitter, 2014) Status Update: A post of Facebook, an image or text to let your friends know “What's on your mind”. (Facebook, 2014)

has become “content” placed in a “form” beyond the user's control.” (Arola, 2010, p. 6)

Not only have these changes altered the way users experience the Internet, they've made (graphic) designers into coders. Or, if that did not happen, it has separated them further from those who do understand the underlying principles behind a website. Which means, that since my time at Best4U Media, not that much has changed. The choice between “minimal” and “lively” is still being made. Now, instead of placing preferences in the hands of a designer to work with, a customer logs into the 'dashboard' of his blog, presses a button, selects an item from a drop down menu and in an instant brings his choices to life.

Code and design are currently not separated, but further merged into one another. While users have been liberated by being given a way to express, connect, broadcast themselves, graphic designers are more and more delegated to copy and pasting together elements of pre-designed structures into something that maybe, possibly resembles the design they had in mind.

Or, in case they have learned how to code, and in order to please the masses, they set the standard and design the template. And by doing so, give up some control over the final result.

Essay II, The Dashboard

Introduction

In the town I was born works an artist whose paintings bear a lot of similarities to those of Dutch musician and painter Herman Brood. Whether or not it is an act of plagiarism or just plain inspiration, it is no surprise that his paintings have become popular in and around Apeldoorn.

When I recently found out that the painter organises workshops (Jack's Artfactory) for “team building”, “brainstorming” and as a “client event”, I wondered if he himself saw the irony in using his 'own' method as a template for those who want to “experience the unique artists atmosphere in a real studio” (J. Liemburg, 2011)

There is much to be said for the usefulness of templates. If we want to repeat the same action, like painting a letter or formatting a document, over and over, we can rely on the template to speed up the process, to remain accurate and true to the standard we set.

Templates used to assist in labor. Before templates, a machine could break down and in order to fix it an artisan had to be found to create a part as close as possible to the missing original. But when machines consist of parts that are based on a template, replacing any broken component is not an issue. And this is just a small example of how the template boosts productivity.

A template can also be part of a style, a design. Currently, we may mostly associate it with the template that exists online. The wire frame of a website (header, footer, sidebar), the theme that changes the look of a microblog and the mockup that displays designs on the chosen screen.

A template isn't just a device equipped by a professional anymore. On the World Wide Web, it has turned into a tool wielded by users, as they contribute to the network. A product that turns consumers into makers.

This essay (or chapter) aims to take a closer look at the effects of using templates. The focus will stay on those in the web environment, with Tumblr as a case study. Other examples and asides that relate to advertisement, prosumerism and the Maker Movement will bring in a broader context.

Is the template just a handy action, download, mold or pattern? Does it empower the amateur and help out the professional? Or does their popularity only result in copies of copies of copies? How similar do they make us and the things we create?

*Create your own Tumblr blog today*¹⁰

Tumblr was established in 2007 by David Karp. It is a platform that allows its users quick and easy ways of publishing blurbs of text, image, sound and video on their own personal Tumblr blog.

The micro in microblog stands for Tumblr's fragmented use of content, it is the prime example of a short-form blog. Like Twitter, but more visual. Just the one image, the single thought, the quick clip: microblogging is posting brief and flighty information and quickly moving on the next. Content neither takes long to upload, nor to scroll through.

Posting blogs with 1000 word texts detailing daily life has been replaced by re-blogging animated pictures, inspirational quotes, selfies and graphics created from television shows or movies. Although its content can be divided in a few categories, Twitter's use is quite varied: from maintaining personal tumblelogs and fan sites to professional design portfolios. President Obama has a Tumblr, and so does Beyoncé¹¹.

Tumblr effectively incorporates all my definitions of the word template. Not only does it offer real templates (“Themes”) for the layout of the microblogs, but the repetitive content in both blogs and posts –symbolised by the infinite scroll¹² option– and its “trend-setting community” exemplify this current template culture. This last point is also evident in the often imitated visual language generated by its users.

10 Subchapter titles in cursive taken from: <http://www.tumblr.com/>

11 **Obama**: “Organizing for Action” (<http://barackobama.tumblr.com/>)

12 **Infinite scrolling**: Introducing another template. Infinite scrolling is a script that allows users a never-ending scroll through the content of a website. Instead of reaching the bottom of a web page, if available, new content appears. This can go on ad infinitum. The feature increased in popularity when browsing the Internet using mobile phones became a more common practice. Its narrow interfaces already asked for a more vertical view of the web (the rise of the “one-pagers”) and scrolling instead of clicking became the norm. This combined with the ceaseless amount of information that is constantly being uploaded and requested, accounts for the popularity of the efficient and effortless infinite scroll.

This is your dashboard

Tumblr is easy. *Tumblr lets you effortlessly share anything.* It takes just three steps (name, password, username) to sign up. Having a blog up and running takes only a couple of minutes. It makes me almost dizzy when I compare this to the time and energy that went into making a home page in 1996, when I was patiently waiting for an image file to upload.

With Tumblr, you simply drag its Bookmarklet tool to your Bookmarks Bar and you're capable of immediately sharing something you've come across while browsing.

Tumblr's community and social elements are narrowed down to symbols, with corresponding keyboard keys: like (a heart, the "L" key for "love") and repost another user's uploads (a recycle icon, alt/option + "R") or follow their blog (a plus sign).

Tumblr's options are efficiently limited, the Dashboard is childishly easy. It should neither be too difficult or too time-consuming to work. There is a briefness to the act of micro blogging. Everything occurs in real time, fast-paced and relevant to what is happening *now*.

(Aside)

The do-it-yourself mindset

"Awesome! This is one of the things that I and others mean when we say that we're entering a fundamentally new era in society and technology. Average people are being empowered individually and as emerging groups; technology is improving and feeding on itself, thus improving faster with a sort of synergy; and things are going to get really, really weird. Buckle your seat-belts." writes Ari Einbinder on his Tumblr, in reaction to an article posted on Makezine.com, an online community of "makers" based around MAKE magazine, which promotes the do-it-yourself mindset in relation to everyday technology. (Einbinder, 2011)

He quotes a part of the article that discusses the Maker Movement by outlining all the recent online developments that have supported this movement. It centers around Kickstarter, the crowd-funding platform, and the author states: "It really is true: if you can dream it, you can make it, and now you can probably get funding for it." (Torrone, 2011)

The template, the life hack, the Instructable, the e-commerce website, the crowd-funding platform: they're all part of a new counterculture fueled by technological progress and the reduced cost of electronic manufacturing. (Martinez, Stager, 2014)

Makers believe in being resourceful and self sufficient, in sharing their ideas and working together. This can result in tips on how to not lose your straw in a coke can to instructions on how to build your own “Pocket size Espresso Machine with integrated alcohol stove.”

The movement lives on our desire to go against the established order, to start a revolution, on denouncing the elite. The maker is the new hacker, Evgeny Morozov states in “Making It” (2014). And their goal is to go against large corporations, a third industrial revolution that aims to liberate the labourer.

(..)

You can customize everything

From the Dashboard we go into Customize, where we can Browse Themes. Premium Themes or Free Themes, created by users and professionals.

If we're living in a template culture, one of its prime arguments is the existence of the custom options. The trend of empowering the user seems to go along with the trope of the module. Examples are plenty: purchase web hosting and decide between the bronze, silver or gold package. After acquiring the mandatory basic health insurance, the Dutch government also offers supplementary insurance. Piet Zwart Institute will start teaching its prototyping classes in modules, select which ones apply most to your practice, or choose them all. The entire principle behind the sandwich franchise Subway is “providing consumers with choices”, which include: italian or grain wheat bread, toasted (yes or no), extra cheese (yes or no).

Part of the appeal of a web template is its promise to be 'fully customisable': that every aspect of its appearance can be changed to the users preference. This fits in nicely with the idea that a template empowers or gives control to the consumer. There is no more need for a programmer, just create an account, choose a template and start uploading!

But quite often, these options often do not go much further than background color and the choice between five font faces.

(Aside)

Game hacks

In gaming communities, customising is often part of the deal. Games are edited, changed, modded. Sometimes there is an 'open' element to the game that encourages its gamers to customise as much as they want: from changing the “skin” of an in-game character or object to using mods or hacks to alter the way the game behaves. In other cases the users who possess the necessary knowledge will offer these alteration for download, for free, or inform other gamers using tutorials. Or even handy software.

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The Unique User

Tumblr claims that their service “empower[s] people to create something extraordinary”. At the time of writing this, May 4th 2014, Tumblr has 184.5 million blogs (which makes me curious to who owns half a blog on Tumblr), 83.1 billion posts and only 255 employees. I know this, because this information is updated live on Tumblr's About page. (Tumblr.com, 2014) Just today, the users of the platform have already posted over 93 million texts, photos, quotes, links, chats, audio or videos¹³.

I wonder how many of these posts are seen only by those who post them. And how many Tumblr blogs have an active following, an audience that will appreciate, repost and comment on the “extraordinary” content they encounter.

Using a template, in this case I use the word to refer to the blogging outline provided by Tumblr, might automatically make the poster ordinary or common. He or she follows a standard. And not just one: the type of content is pre-determined by the service, a Theme can be Free or Minimal or High Res, but these have pre-defined associations.

The default has been set and to make drastic changes, to truly be unique, would be to alter Tumblr in such a way that it would not be recognisable as Tumblr: not just in the way it is displayed, but in how visitors interact with the

13Tumblr post: The 8 types of content on Tumblr are: text, photo, quote, link, chat, audio or video. And 'answer', which is the reply by a different Tumblr user to a question asked by the original poster. Whenever Tumblr detects a question mark, the user can “Let people answer that”, meaning the post will be tagged as a question for seven days, allowing other users to reply. (Y. Chang et al, 2014, p. 2)

content. And this type of alteration could come with a risk of not complying to the expectations of the Tumblr audience.

Create something extraordinary

Tumblr's users are most often younger adults (age 18 to 29), a research in 2012 has shown. (M. Duggan, J. Brenner, 2012, p. 2) I can only speak for myself, but the older I get, the less influenced I feel by peer pressure. This age group may explain Tumblr's evident community aspect: and the groups I most often encounter are those described as fandoms.

Sam Spratt writes on his Tumblr page, samspratt.tumblr.com, that he feels Tumblr is indirect peer pressure in its most powerful form. "No, I'm not talking about the nonsensical bullying of people into conforming to certain body types or commands on where they're allowed to put their breasts... I'm talking about tumblr's crazy ability to shove so many damn gifs of TV shows down my throat that I eventually give in and see what's so special." (S. Spratt, 2013)

Tumblr can be divided into groups, fandoms, categories of interest. But an even more interesting example of how it works as a template, is evident in the way the platform is often referred to. The Tumblr community has often been seen as one entity, while browsing the Web I have more than once encountered a "I am waiting for Tumblr to post (...) about (...)".

One might utter these words after watching a scene on a television show that just had to be giffed¹⁴ or a pretty photo shoot of a favourite celebrity that would make a nice user icon. Tumblr feeds on and maybe even determines popular culture.

I've also come across the term "Tumblr generation", as well as the statement "this girl is Tumblr in human form". Tumblr is something visual, a type of style, a level of obsession, one form characterized by (hey, they're back) Animated GIF's, selfies, memes, cartoons, even porn. A subculture that is hard not to get drawn in by.

To quote Sam Spratt again, "(...) and yet endless scrolling past fan fiction, fan art, gif collections, and people ranging from young girls to grown men exclaiming things like "ALL THE FEELS" and "I'M CRYING, adasdhjbasdlabhd"¹⁵

14 Giffed: Turning a short clip into an Animated GIF.

15 "All the feels": Here is being referred to forms of expression common on platforms related to popular culture. These exclamations (wether positive or not) have become so well known that they require no further explanation. I can type "All the feels" for when something is so amazing, it will made me cry. Often these terms were derived from pop

finally convinced me to give in to Legend of Korra.”

(Aside)

Fan labour

It is quite useful to have a dedicated group of fans creating fan art (or fan fiction) using your film, show, game or book as a template. While actively appreciating their favourite form of entertainment, they help to promote it. Labouring fans that, unpaid, help bring a creative work to the attention of the masses.

(..)

tumblr_n4hlg0FBx11tv1b5to1_1280.jpg

I've written briefly about Tumblr's typical visual style, how it is seen as one body that generates content following a template or a pattern. The user-generated content.

The content is repetitive, and in this massive stream of content, the original is most likely to get lost, to be delved under. This happens to content made for Tumblr, but as well to the reposted image or text found online. Tumblr always renames the images, deleting an aspect of the file that is crucial to its authenticity.

The template isn't just apparent in the posts, blogs are often dedicated to one topic, phenomena or file type (for example "selfies at funerals" or "9 film frames"). And there exist multiple blogs with the same purpose, name or style ("fucksyeah1990s", "fuckyeahdykes", "fuckyeahmiyazaki", and so on).

A template isn't meant to be flexible, it was made to generate the same result, copies, without fault. These copies are created from the same mold, one always needs to return to the original to alter the appearance of the copies. And without customisation this is also the drawback of a web template: no matter the content you pour into it, the site will look very similar to any other adopting the same template.

It is also rigid, in that changing a template shifts and re-orders its content. Adding a different Theme to a Tumblr blog drastically changes the appearance

culture, became a viral meme and then adopted by the masses.

of all of its posts, as if the content reapplies itself to the template. Not just the posts in the future but also the uploads from an earlier date. The quotes and pictures and videos fluctuate, they're shape-shifters that move between mediums and re-adjust themselves to their template. The content is malleable. Not the template.

Conclusion

To return to my own experience working with the web, I still see my early 'dabbling' in web design as that which influenced me to become a graphic designer. After four years of art school and almost two years of studying Media Design, you would expect me to think badly of the template.

But I don't. I still think it is a valuable part of my work, I would not be able to do my job half as easily without it: I believe that that restrictions often generate interesting results. Because pre-defined rules and limited options allow for a different kind of creativity. For a desire to break out of the mould.

For example, the .NFO-file creators who have made works of art out of 128 ASCII-characters, not just showcasing their creativity, but using the file as the visual style of their own subculture. They were originally limited to create as small a file as possible, but although with our current download speeds this is not a necessity anymore, the .NFO is still alive, along with the community we associate with it.

What I do think badly of is the fake 'empowerment' of the user that has been advertised by commercial companies, such as Tumblr.

One thinks of prosumerism, where the influence of a customer on a product being used is so active and engaged, that they determine its evolution. By giving feedback and reconfiguring or customising it to their needs.

And while I usually encourage anything that goes against any form of 'elite', I can't help but wonder who profits from such a movement. There is something very powerful about sharing knowledge, information and design. About being open. Moving away from mass production, focussing on craft and making. Which isn't a contemporary notion, but maybe a template: a recurring theme of technology meets subculture meets social movement.

But often these ideas are taken and rehashed by companies that have no feel with the original concept themselves. And they come to my attention when I browse the Internet and Youtube promises me to be a tool for expression. With a lot of advertisements.

In all of this, it might be most interesting to question where the designer comes in. How his or her role has changed. The graphic designer can be seen as both a user and a producer. Do we have to worry about a crisis in professionalism when there is no more need for "the pro", when the average user (or visitor) can take over and do it for themselves?

I think this might not be an issue at all. There is not a designer who does not use any form of template or standards: from the very lazy one who downloads web templates from the Internet and does not even bother changing the copyright information in the source code to the designer who uses Indesign's standard margins when creating a book.

I am, again, more worried about the upswings of websites that promise amateurs and professional designers alike a network of clients, a place to broadcast their portfolio and record their progress. While in fact, they're gamed up against other designers in an effort to create a winning design. This will create situations where so many designers have to work against each other that the actual focus isn't on making a good design anymore. It's on making as many as possible, for as many clients as possible, in the shortest amount of time. No wonder that downloading vector images, web templates, mockups and stock images is so tremendously popular.

The rise of the downloadable design that in turn needs to appeal to a large group of professional or amateur designers, along with the clients they are working for. Then the template becomes an average, the common denominator, not great, not bad, just default.

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