**EXCERPTS FROM A VERNACULAR WEB AND VERNACULAR WEB 2 BY OLIA LIALINA**
**WITH FOREWORD AND AFTERWORD BY KEVIN BEWERSDORF**


*[The following text contains excerpts from two seminal essays on the subject of internet aesthetics by Olia Lialina. Both essays can be read in their entirety at http://art.teleportacia.org/observation/vernacular/*

*The first essay, "A Vernacular Web," was written in 2005 for a talk given at the Decade of Web Design conference in Amsterdam. Lialina attempts to describe and classify some of the early aesthetics of "Web 1.0," an era characterized by personal or "amateur" design choices within generally static, unstandardized home pages that were viewed under the constraints of slow connection speed. Simultaneous with the publication of this essay, the so-called "Web 2.0" era solidified and fully pushed Web 1.0 aesthetics into obscurity. This current era of the internet is characterized by blogs, social networking and distribution sites like MySpace and YouTube, and refined visual aesthetics that have been carefully engineered by corporate design professionals for seamless interaction. The Web 2.0 era has been heralded as a new civilization for internet users, but Lialina investigates what we have collectively lost in this changeover in her 2007 essay "A Vernacular Web 2."]*


## Excerpts from *A Vernacular Web*

### *The Indigenous and The Barbarians*

When I started to work on the World Wide Web I made a few nice things that were special, different and fresh. They were very different from what was on the web in the mid 90's.

I'll start with a statement like this, not to show off my contribution, but in order to stress that -- although I consider myself to be an early adopter -- I came late enough to enjoy and prosper from the "benefits of civilization". 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.

So what was this culture? What do we mean by the web of the mid 90's and when did it end?

To be blunt it was bright, rich, personal, slow and under construction. It was a web of sudden connections and personal links. Pages were built on the edge of tomorrow, full of hope for a faster connection and a more powerful computer. One could say it was the web of the indigenous...or the barbarians. In any case, it was a web of amateurs soon to be washed away by dot.com ambitions, professional authoring tools and guidelines designed by usability experts.

I wrote that change was coming "soon" instead of putting an end date at 1998, for example, because there was no sickness, death or burial. The amateur web didn't die and it has not disappeared but it is hidden. Search engine rating mechanisms rank the old amateur pages so low they're almost invisible and institutions don't collect or promote them with the same passion as they pursue net art or web design.

Also new amateur pages don't appear at such amounts as ten years ago because 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. There's a community for every hobby and question.

This is why I refer to the amateur web as a thing of the past; aesthetically a very powerful past. Even people who weren't online in the last century, people who look no further than the first 10 search engine results can see the signs and symbols of the early web thanks to the numerous parodies and collections organized by usability experts who use the early elements and styles as negative examples.

Just as clothing styles come back into fashion so do web designs. On a visual level things reappear. Last year I noticed that progressive web designers returned to an eclectic style reincorporating wallpapers and 3D lettering in their work. In the near future frames and

construction signs will show up as retro and the beautiful old elements will be stripped of their meaning and contexts.

In the past few years I've also been making work that foregrounds this disappearing aesthetic of the past. With these works I want to apologize for my arrogance in the early years and to preserve the beauty of the vernacular web by integrating them within contemporary art pieces. But this is only half of the job.

Creating collections and archives of all the midi files and animated gifs will preserve them for the future but it is no less important to ask questions. What did these visual, acoustic and navigation elements stand for? For which cultures and media did these serve as a bridge to the web? What ambitions were they serving? What problems did they solve and what problems did they create? Let me talk about the difficult destiny of some of these elements.

### *Under Construciton*

The "Under Construction Sign" is a very strong symbol of the early web. It reminds us of the great times shortly after the scientists and engineers finished their work on the Information Highway. Ordinary people came with their tools and used the chance to build their own roads and junctions. Work was everywhere and everywhere there was something that wasn't ready, links were leading to nowhere or to pages that didn't quite exist and there were signs on the pages that warned of broken connections and the lack of navigation.

[...]"Under Construction" images changed their meaning from a warning to a promise that this page will grow. The symbol became a hybrid of excuse and invitation. It could appear on an empty or properly functional site as a sign that the project was growing and being updated. Often you could see the newer sign, "Always Under Construction.

"Always Under Construction" didn't mean the site would never work but actually the opposite. It informed users that there was somebody who was always taking care of the site so it would be interesting to return again and again."[...]

### *The Starry Night Background*

Another heroic element of the vernacular web is the outer space background, also known as the "Starry Night." Ordinarily it's a black, dark blue or purple image tiled through with light static or blinking particles. It was very popular with the first web makers probably because there were a great number of science fiction and computer game fans among them.

Their desire to make the web look like the futuristic backdrop of their favorite pieces was justified. Not only by their taste but by the hope the new medium was offering. The Internet was the future, it was bringing us into new dimensions, closer to other galaxies. So the look of the internet had to be an appropriate one like in Star Crash or Galaga. It had to be like the inside of a computer or somewhere out there. Space wallpapers made the Internet look special. This was obviously a space with a mission that other media could never accomplish."

[...]Day by day the hope for an extraterrestial web future was giving way to the present reality of newspapers, magazines, electronic offices, online business, and other serious intentions. "Starry Night" backgrounds reduced proportionately; from being a symbol of the future they were turning into a sign of the web's early years. Its meaning shifted to the opposite: from future to past.


   *[2 years later...]*



## Excerpts from *Vernacular Web 2*

...To me, what defines the history of Web is not just the launch dates of new browsers or services, not just the dot-com bubbles appearing or bursting, but also the appearance of a blinking yellow button that said "New!" or the sudden mass extinction of starry wallpapers. Jenkins wrote in his 2002 article Blog This!:

"We learned in the history books about Samuel Morse's invention of the telegraph, but not about the thousands of operators who shaped the circulation of message."

To rephrase him, I'd say we've studied the history of hypertext, but not the history of Metallica fan web rings or web rings in general.

The relationship between ordinary users and the Web of the 90s is a very interesting subject to study, because it's a relationship filled with love, hate, all kinds of drama – in other words, it's a full-blown relationship between a new medium and its first users, a relationship that's exalted, complex, sometimes silly – whatever it is, all that matters is that it existed.

Today, that relationship is gone. And for a good reason. The space that we've researched as a new medium for the last ten years has turned into the most mass medium of them all. Nothing more than a mass medium, permeating our daily lives to the point of becoming invisible. Its numerous users are busy working, having a good time or expressing themselves, and they have almost perfect tools and services at their disposal. Connection never breaks, distinction between a server and a hard disk, between your desktop and that of another person has almost vanished, and there's nothing that could contribute to the development of user-media relationship, nothing to provoke us.

Web 2.0 propagandists can't stop talking about the multitude and power of today's web amateurs, the new users who love to dance, compose songs, write encyclopedic articles, take photos and film videos, write texts and publish it all on the Web. And yet, they are rather indifferent to the Web itself.

So, here's the question: how does the Web look now, when it's no longer seen as the technology of the future, when it's intertwined with our daily lives and filled by people who are not excited by the mere fact of its existence?

At a first glance, this question looks like a purely aesthetic one. One might think it's almost unimportant. But in fact, nothing demonstrates the state of the Web in general and the state of its services, in particular the ones that follow the Web 2.0 ideology, as clearly as the style and look of ordinary users' home pages.

### Garden Gnomes

I guess I took it a bit too far when I called them "home pages". Home pages no longer exist. Instead, there are other genres: accounts, profiles, journals, personal spaces, channels, blogs and homes. I'd like to pay special attention to the latter ones.

Professional web developers and designers scorned home pages (namely, personal home pages) starting from the mid-90's. In an 1998 interview to W3J, Tim Berners-Lee formulated his attitude to private home pages:

"They may call it a home page, but it's more like the gnome in somebody's front yard than the home itself."

Pioneer of Russian web designer, Artemi Lebedev, included home pages and their creators in his hate list, next to boiled onions and the Caps Lock key.

Two years ago, the Dutch interaction designer Hayo Wagenaar, with whom I shared a panel at the Decade of Webdesign conference, flung a remark:

"The question is, what do we think of amateurs getting involved in web design? It feels like getting stuck on the highway behind a caravan."

Little by little, home pages became the lowest possible lifeform on the Web – it became terminally uncool, and in the end, useless to have one. Now, if you want to expose yourself to the world simply and effectively, you're supposed to go to a site specifically designed for this purpose. The new generation of Web users create accounts, profiles, journals, spaces, channels, or blogs. The old generation had to move as well.

I'm far from imagining this process as painful and dramatic, though there are examples that cause mixed feelings – like, for instance, when the heroes of the 90's such as Peter Pan

convert their pages to another format, to the language of MySpace.

It's worth noting, and can be of special interest for designers, that home pages in the other sense – meaning first pages of sites or projects – lost their significance as well. Nobody really needs them anymore. They have been replaced by a modest-looking Google start page, which wraps itself around every website like a dust jacket.

Interestingly, even though home pages no longer exist, every other service invites its users to re-create the feel of a home page, offers ways to personalize their space quickly and easily.

In March this year iGoogle, formerly known as Google Personalized Homepage, announced six new themes for their users: Seasonal Scape, Tea House, Bus Stop and others. On this occasion, Jessica Ewing, Google Product Manager, wrote in the official Google blog:

"… you can choose between the classic theme and the six new themes we've designed. We hope this feature makes the Google homepage feel a little more like, well, home."

Why does Google want us to feel like home on their pages? Not to bind us to themselves, that's for sure – they don't need that; they've already got us hooked. When they offer me to "feel at home", they mean something different. They mean home as opposed to work. What they're saying is "Relax, have fun. Play around while we work. We are professionals; you are amateurs."

In his preface to "0 Comments" Geert Lovink noted – it was related to a different subject, namely the CC license, but I still want to quote him –:

"The exclusive focus on young and innocent amateurs that just want to have fun, and the resentment against professionals is not accidental. Amateurs are less likely to stand up and claim a part of the fast increasing surplus value (both symbolical and in real money term) that the Internet is creating."

It might sound paradoxical, but by encouraging the user to "feel at home" services create more distance between the users and themselves. Simplistic, silly graphics, senseless gadgets, customized pages with virtual puppies and kittens of the day heaped together with CNN news and bites of wisdom from Oprah – all of that subtly serves to show the user his proper place.

It would be futile to compete with iGoogle in absurdity, but I think that a young artist Helene Dams managed to put it very well in her work iGnomes. Ten years later, Tim Berners-Lee's caustic remark "But it's more like the gnome in somebody's front yard than the home itself" acquired a new sense. It is also clear now who owns the home with the garden and who are the gnomes grimacing on a manicured lawn in the company of plaster ducks and real flowers.

I wonder if there are class elements at work, too. In America poor people often have yards full of junk and the rich aspire to the "spare artist loft" look. Amateurs can't hire their own CSS designers and end up filling up their pages with those garden gnomes because they don't know any better. Whereas a website with money backing hires an "interior decorator" whose first instinct is to get rid of all the junk.

[...]

### *Glitter*

If you ever talked about the Web with me – or talked with me at all – you probably know that my favorite thing in the world are animated GIF files and starry sky wallpapers, preferably animated as well. I just like the way they look, and I like them as a reminder of fun times when the users made a travesty out of the worldwide digital network.

The online life of a today's user is full of diverse attractions, and yet it follows very strict standards. It is disciplined and fomalized. There is a particular service offered for every format a user may want to share with the world, a community for every interest, a network for every social group. And mash ups for artists, and SL for 3d and furries. And there is something for animated GIF makers, too – there are glitter graphics generators and collections of ready-made graphics.

Generators such as this one allow you to enter as much text as you want and make it glittery. You get to choose from the unbelievable array of sparkling things. Such collections offer glittery graphics for every occasion – whether you need to say hello or goodbye, to thank someone, wish a good day or just to sparkle and let your cursor and userpic sparkle with you.

I think there are two important aspects to the glitter graphic phenomenon.

Firstly, glitter became a trademark of today's amateur aesthetics, and I'm certain that in the future sparkly graphics will become a symbol of our times, like "Under Construction" signs for the 90's. Glitter is everywhere (in the universe of user-generated pages), it has become a meta category. It has absorbed all other categories of ready-made graphics – people, animals, buttons, sex graphics. I missed the moment when glitter graphics were born, and didn't notice it until two years ago, when I stumbled upon glittertextgenerator.net. Since then, new sites have appeared:

    * glitterfy.com
    * glittermakercodes.com
    * addglitter.com
    * glittergraphicsnow.com
    * glittergraphicsweb.com
    * glitterglobe.com
    * It seems like every word with "Glitter" in front of it is now a site name.

Secondly, I can't stop marveling at how similar to each other and dull they are. Even naked gals from the "Glitter/Erotic" category don't move – they just sparkle, even my favorite hero Felix, the never-stopping Felix, is frozen in mid-air.

This is the animation trend for the times when templates and generators rule the Web. Let's call it Rich User Experience for the poor. But the reason for it's popularity is not just because it's easy to generate.

The social networks researcher Danah Boyd from Berkeley University notices "flashy look of MySpace resembles the Las Vegas imagery that attracts millions every year." → See the 2007-08-21 addition at the bottom of the page

My daughter, who is almost fourteen, thinks that glittery graphics is the same thing as glittery stickers (only digital). Among pre-teens, glittery stickers are considered the most valuable objects. You can get several non-glittery things for one that glitters.

My almost former student Dennis Knopf, a big expert in the online booty and move that thing segment, sees a direct link between glittery graphics and the pimp pop culture, which before MySpace we knew mainly from hip-hop videos.

I agree with both of them, and there's something I'd like to note in the end. If we take glitter and starry backgrounds out of context, they will look almost the same – the particles of flickering light on a darker background. But there's a huge gap between these two. Starry backgrounds represented the future, a touching relationship with the medium of tomorrow. Glitter decorates the web of today, routine and taken-for-granted.

-Olia Lialina


       *[Lialina does not leave much of a conclusion, nor any clear predictions about how the web might evolve and mature from its embryonic status. She has, however, clearly described where we are and where we have been -- moving from a time of unorganized primitive explorers, wandering alone and lawless with nothing but simple tools, to the beginnings of an evolved civilization with cohesive standards and rules. For better or for worse, the web seems to be moving from great disorder towards greater and greater order. Just as it has been up to artists to track and respond to changes in the world, it is now up to net artists and theorists such as Lialina to track and respond to the changes of the web as we move into Web 3.0 and beyond.]*