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minimalismmaximalism

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College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
in candidacy for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Minimalism and Maximalism
by Jason Gould
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Abstract

www.jmgould.com/simult

Designers look for inspiration and motivation for the creation of their artwork, by studying both contemporary and historical examples of art and design. Many art and design students have spent much of their education in research and the survey of art and design history. Criticism and research are critical in the development of a solid conceptual and aesthetic base from which they develop. By understanding the work which came before them, and to view and think about artwork critically, students are able to produce work which has more meaning to themselves and to their audience.

I made an attempt to address current trends in digital art and illustration by examining artwork— and the concepts behind them—both from a contemporary and historical approach. Much like a survey course in art and design history, this project presents the work and ideas of some of histories greatest artists. It then addresses how this research can be applied to contemporary art and gives designers a chance to realize how so much of what we do can be attributed to ideas and inspirations from our past.

By utilizing technology available in current design applications , we are able to take the information off of the printed page and create a richer environment in which to discuss and view artwork. By presenting the research and artwork in an interactive application such as Flash, we are able to create new ways to learn and experience art and design.

Thesis Problem

The minimalism.maximalism thesis project deals with the question of defining what is Minimalism and what is Maximalism, both historically and in contemporary work? And can Minimalist and Maximalist characteristics be found in digital art and design today?

The question of what ideas and artwork came before us, and what ideas and concepts drove the production and presentation of the artwork, became one of the key aspects of this project. Its difficult to study trends and characteristics of art and design today, when there are very few resources available that really look at current digital artwork. Communities exist which serve young artists and designers in presentation and group discussion, and there are several major galleries and organizations such as the Los Angeles Center for Digital Art who cater to digital work, but for the most part, contemporary artwork does not have a large forum in which to discuss ideas and to examine the work critically, or to make connections to the past.

There were two major problems in the completion of the minimalism.maximalism thesis. The first being how to research an area of art and design that has not been addressed yet, thereby making it groundbreaking. And two, to utilize current technology to explore this research and deliver the content in exciting and new ways. Finding a research topic and thesis question became the first task, and would drive the goals and content of the project. The second task was to research what was currently available in terms of Flash-based learning and multimedia applications. Were there any Flash-based websites or applications currently taking art and design history this direction? The answer was no, there were not many available, and those that were had just barely scratched the surface. Organizations like the Metropolitan Museum have used Flash to create small learning modules whose target audience are children. These applications presented information in a strict linear fashion, and with little interactivity. It became the goal of this thesis to break new ground by examining the connections between historical and contemporary Minimalism and Maximalism, and then break new ground further by presenting this content with improved design aesthetics and interactivity using Flash and other design software.

Target Audience

Due to the nature of the content and themes associated with the content, the target audience for this thesis project are students ages 14 and up. Anyone interested in art and design at this age can gain an appreciation for the work and content contained within, but much of the content is directed towards students currently enrolled in an art or design school.

It would benefit anyone viewing this project to have some educational background in the arts, as I have used language which is frequently found in an art criticism course or a survey course dealing with art and design history. I did however, allow for non-students of art and design to understand the content with reasonable accuracy. The project does not make the direction or interactivity overly complex, and the content itself is not difficult to grasp if you are not someone affiliated with the arts.

Breakdown of Target Audience:

Age Range: 14 and up and those interested in design

Education: Literate in English, basic understanding of art criticism

Gender/Ethnicity: Male and Female, Any Ethnicity

Technical: Audience needs access to a computer with a DVD player installed. Flash player 8 is required to view the content and the user must have a basic understanding of interactivity and navigation.

Design Research

While researching ideas about a thesis topic, I began to notice quite a bit of discussion among designers about how to approach both print and digital design in terms of aesthetics and usability. A question of whether or not to utilize all the tools available and create a "maximal" aesthetic or whether to keep it simple and practice a "minimal" approach. This same discussion came up in almost every project, whether professionally or in education. It became clear that digital design was now being broken down into two formal categories, one that was minimal and one that was maximal.

This project required that I research what was currently being done with interactivy and web-based learning in the fields of art and design, and to also find any research being done on finding minimal and maximal characteristics in today's digital art and design. Initially this thesis was going to explore how to use Flash and other digital media to discuss Minimalism and Maximalism during the mid-twentieth century. At that point, the project was going be breaking ground in how the content was going to be delivered, and offered a new approach to learning about these historical art movements. However, after a few weeks of research I began to notice there was quite a bit of professional discussion about current trends in art and design, especially in digital illustration. It was the typical amount of discussion one might find in any design annual or periodical, but it was enough for this project to change direction and examine contemporary issues rather than just focus on the historical.

One article in particular, came from Print magazine's November 2006 Regional Design Annual by Steven Heller. The article entitled *Nouveau Redux* talks of a growing trend in art and design where academic art is being replaced with the exotic and decorative characterists of movements like Art Nouveau. Heller says, "these days, vegetative-styled ornament is back, incorporating swashes, swirls, spirals, and florid decoration…bringing one good old-turn-of-the-20th-century look into the brand-new 21st (Heller, 2006)." Other sources leading the way in digital art and illustration, such as Computer Arts magazine out of the UK, mention these trends as well. Computer Arts dedicated a large portion of the January 2007 issue to this topic. The article titled *Future Trends,* discusses how

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over the course of the next two to three years we will see an increase in the use of craft and illustration as part of both digital art and design (Penfold, 2007). A May 2006 Print Magazine article entitled *Everything is Illuminated* by Rick Poynor, also mentions these trends toward a revival of styles reminiscent of Art Nouveau. Poynor's article covered the last decade of design and tracks the progression of these trends over the last few years. Typographic embellishments were the first to show up in design, appealling to the aesthetic senses of the audience and came as a reaction to Modernist typography. This ornament eventually found its way into other aspects of digital art and design, where technology allowed artists to push their work beyond what they were capable of just a few years earlier. With the advent of these software applications and technological advances, there also came a rise in the number of amatuer efforts in the digital world of art and design. The Poynor article argues that much of the ornamented, decorative, and maximal digital art we see today comes as a reaction to these amatuer efforts. Artists are making every attempt to bring "craft" back into the creative fold in order to set themselves apart from the surge of new amatuer artists (Poynor, 2006).

Image Credit: Radim Malinic

Image Credit: Radim Malinic

After researching these contemporary trends, the project began to move away from a purely historical- based project, and moved towards creating an environment where current events were examined and reinforced with examples from our past. The historical research of this project was

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now going to be used to supplement my findings and research on contemporary art and design. I felt that in order for this thesis project to be relevant and interesting to students today, the project needed to address ideas and concepts which were currently happening. My personal interest in Minimalism and Maximalism was enhanced once I began to make this project relevant to what I was currently experiencing in my professional and educational careers. User feedback reflected this as well, and I discovered that much of the testing I did showed that my audience was much more intrinsically motivated to learn about Minimalism and Maximalism when they were presented with both historical and contemporary examples and concepts.

The historical research of this project progressed along a typical path and timeline. I collected text from libraries, bookstore purchases, and examples provided by members of the RIT faculty. A considerable amount of time was spent looking at art examples and evaluating them from an aesthetic and conceptual standpoint. I approached the research of Minimalism during the 60s, and Abstract Expressionism of the 40s and 50s much the same way a lecture course might play out. I began by reading as much as I could to understand the fundamentals of each movement and get a basic understanding of the ideas, concepts and participants within each movement. Then I proceeded to examine the artwork from a critical standpoint, and further supplemented this criticism by reading more in depth versions of text and articles about each artist and/or the movement they were affiliated with.
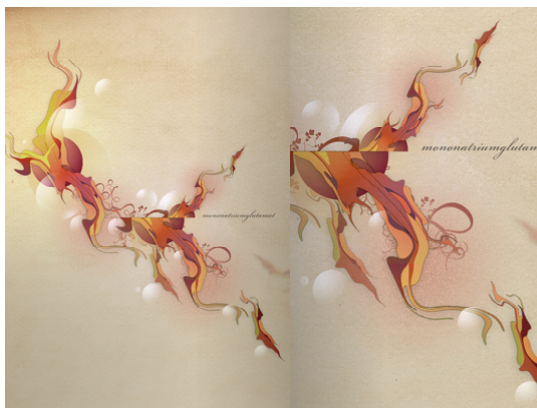

Image Credit: Heiko Klug, Contemporary Minimalism

Image Credit: Neil Duerden, Contemporary Maximalism

Design Research

Researching the contemporary work was much more difficult and much more time consuming due to the fact that I had little written content available to me. I needed to essentially research the artists and artwork based upon what was available to me via online communities and word of mouth. I needed to find artwork that I could categorize into Minimalist and Maximalist styles, and then contact the artists themselves to get feedback and permissions to study and present their work. Similar to the research I did for the historical content, I followed a similar pattern of examining contemporary artwork, made critical conclusions based on what I saw, and then documented how I felt this work had similarities and differences to the movements of the past. In the beginning I started with how Maximalism and Minimalism might affect all areas of computer graphics...like motion graphics, interface design, digital art, and 3D. I explored how both styles might effect the speed of motion, use of decoration and ornament in interface, 3D modeling, illustrative design, and how information design (navigation, content presentation) could be broken down into minimal and maximal terms. But the connections were a little weak, and the scope of the project became too involved and would have extended the completion beyond a reasonable timeframe. So in keeping with the historical aspect of the thesis, and because design is very closely linked to what is happening in "art", I decided to narrow my research down into Digital Art. I defined Digital Art as any static imagery created as an illustration, or fine art piece meant for exhibition.

The bulk of the time spent on this thesis project was spent in research, and finding ways to approach a proper thesis question or problem. What was left was finding a visual and interactive way to present this material, and to spend the remainder of my time overcoming technical constraints, trial and error in organizing the information design, and in correspondance with the participating artists. Many of the participating artists who allowed me to show their work were international and it required patience on my part in order to hear back from them and to establish myself as a credible person whom they could entrust with their work. I made every attempt to communicate with as many artists as possible during this time, because I realized that I may not hear back from the majority of them. The artists who did respond, were very enthusiastic about submitting their work, and offered any additional help if needed.

Design Considerations

The most important part of this project was getting a good base of artists from which to present ideas about Minimalism and Maximalism. Opening the lines of communication with artists in England, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland and Poland (and others), was a critical part of this project. Once these goals were accomplished, I felt that the content of the project would begin to solidify and the project could truly become a thesis worthy.

After completion of the research portion of this project, I began to experiment with the aesthetic decisions which would finally bring the content to life. I knew from the outset that the color palette should be minimal and that the focus would be on the content itself, not the design of the interface. Because this project would require the user to read much more than a typical website or Flash application, I did not want there to be any distractions away from the imagery or the text. Keeping graphics, special effects, and complex movement too a minimum was both a personal preference and a conscious decision to unify the content with the application.

Because of the amount of imagery present in this project, there needed to be a decision made on background color choices that would allow for the greatest amount of readability. I looked to gallery exhibitions, online electronic galleries and software applications for inspiration. I found that most galleries were either white or black, and most physical gallery space placed the artwork on white board, and many of the photographic compositing software for "on-screen" use, such as Lightroom, Adobe Bridge, and Apple Aperture use a dark or black background to allow the images to stand out on-screen. After reviewing the images I compiled from the contributing artists, and the imagery I created myself, I decided that a dark aesthetic would be best for viewing the imagery.
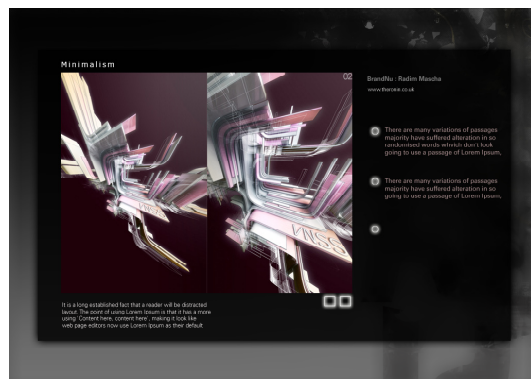
Screenshot from Artist Spotlight section of Flash application. Black background was chosen in order to allow the digital images to stand out.

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Choices then needed to be made for the general look and feel of any graphics that would be incorporated into the project. Because the content was a discussion about two opposing styles of design and schools of thought, it seemed appropriate to carry that over into the design itself. Much like the content itself, the design shows that there are two unique styles incorporated in the project, so there is an area of the interface which shows minimal use of graphic imagery and color, while another portion uses ornament, color, and decoration to achieve the look and feel of Maximalism. In the final solution however, it was decided that adding excessive color to any of the interface graphics might distract the audience from the artwork. Because much of the artwork has vivid color, adding additional color to the interface would cause conflict. In the end, the graphic elements were maintained, however all color was removed.
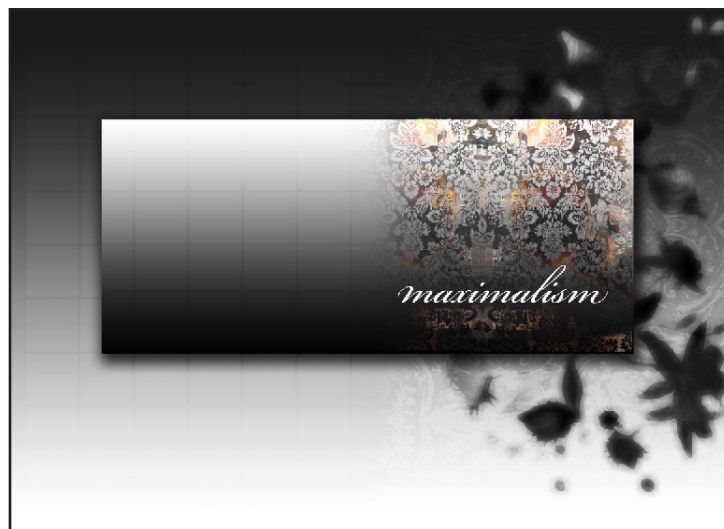
Screenshot from Introduction Page of interface. Left side shows minimal characteristics while the right side shows maximal characteristics.

After I arrived at a final interface design, I needed to make a decision on navigation. What I chose for navigation was a very basic system of buttons that adopted a minimal approach. Rollover states did not incorporate any special effect or movement, but I did give enough indication of interactivity without pushing it too far. I made sure that all buttons which indicated an external link or a popup had a similiar rollover state, and any text that led the user to one of these links for popups was red in color. These color choices and navigation systems were uniform throughout the entire project.

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Another aspect of production involved the creation of both Minimal and Maximal artwork which would be used in the interactive portion of the application. Inititally I had planned on ordering high resolution files from the participating artists, which some had agreed to provide should I decide to incorporate them. But in the final stages, I decided to create my own artwork, both to allow for more creative freedom and to add a personal element to the project. I worked with Professor Alan Singer in the creation of these pieces, and we made sure that the files maintained an aesthetic consistent with the goals of the project. The images below are the two files created. They were created as high resolution files so they could be printed in large format, and at some point exhibited in a gallery space or exhibition.

Screenshot from Maximalist artwork created in Photohop and Illustrator
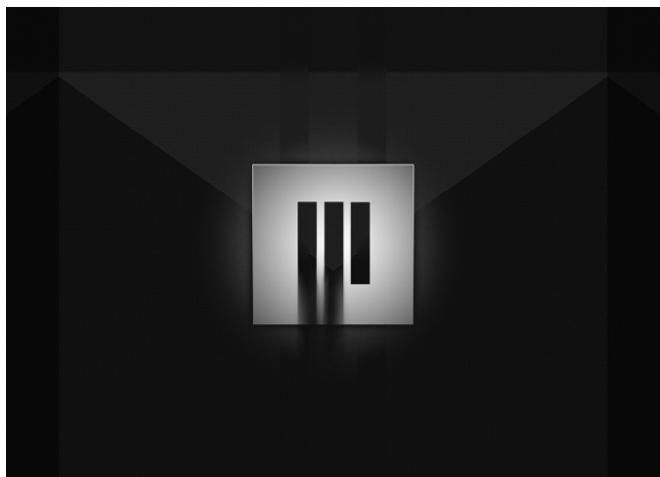
Screenshot from MInimalist artwork created in Photohop and Illustrator

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The information, imagery, and content were developed similar in nature to a web-based application, where button navigation was used to proceed from section to section. Unlike instructional multimedia where information is designed in a linear fashion with goals and items to be completed, this project was meant to have each section be a stand-alone application if need be. A viewer could gain an understanding by viewing just one section at a time, and in no particular order.

With that said, the navigation was placed in an order of preference, and helped create a unified story for the whole project. I wanted to treat this like an art history or criticism course. You are assigned reading (history section), and within that section you have some minor image reinforcement. You then explore further and start to develop complex ideas, make connections between content and imagery (theory and artist spotlight sections). You reinforce this further by really critiquing the imagery provided with interactivity (interactive artwork section), and finally you compile all this is one application that paints the entire picture. This is ideally how a user would progress through this application, but again, each section is capable of standing alone. Benefits of having each section independent, was to allow for a user to read only one section and still gain some benefit and understanding. A user would not have to read the historical section on Minimalism in order to get a full understanding of the historical section on Maximalism, they could be read separately and still be a learning experience.

This project was intended to be compact, and the user was to be able to spend anywhere from fifteen to twenty minutes with the application. With the amount of information obtained through research, it would have been very easy for the content to have overwhelmed a user. By simplifying and compacting the information into manageable pieces, I was able to avoid overwhelming the users.

Technical Issues

This project focused on simple and practical presentation of the information about Minimalism and Maximalism. Because the project was driven by this presentation of research, there werent any major technical problems or hurdles to overcome. Because this project does not need constant updating or changes, it did not require the content and imagery to be loaded into the project dynamically. All imagery and text are embedded in the file itself, and all content is loaded into a main .swf file through external .swf files. Screen dimensions did not have any restriction either, as this project was not meant to be viewed from a website. The project expands to fit the user's sreen, and runs off a downloadable file or DVD.

The interface design posed several hurdles, in that the effects created within Photoshop took an extensive amount of time to save and render. Throughout the project, Surface Blurs were used to create the ethereal effect that can be seen, and each save took nine minutes in order to complete the render and generate the full resolution composite. These render and save times were even longer when they were run on the accompanying artwork I created for the interactive artwork section. Because this artwork was meant for large format printing, each image was created at 400 dpi with a canvas size of 30 x 40 inches. The maximal piece alone has a file size of 1.5 gigs, and requires as much memory as possible to work with and manipulate.

Final technical issues involve the creation of a functional DVD, with an autorun capability for use on a PC, and a projector file for use with the Mac OS. All other technical issues dealt with basic file management, graphic design, typography and digital illustration. All of which posed no major problems other than the length of time to work with all the pieces of the final design

Conclusion

The completion of this project helped to bring about several things, first, a fully functional Flash application which can be used to educate students about Minimalism and Maximalism. And two, it has paved the way for a much bigger endeavor where the relationships formed with an international group of artists can be turned into a brand new project for the future. There is much discussion among those interested in digital art about where the artform is headed, and how can we find ways to explore new styles and new ideas. Many of these artists are still just designers and see their artwork only as something they can share on online communities with other artists when they have spare time. But how can this work be presented to larger communities, such as universities? This is where a much bigger project might find a place, one where we use the knowledge gained from this thesis to expand its capabilities and resolve an even bigger problem.

The artists involved in this project have many ideas, and have a lot of thoughts about the future of their work. So the next question deals with how can this project and it's content, imagery, and the artists involved with it begin something entirely new that hasnt been done before. The next step for me, will be to communicate again with the artists involved, and consider their thoughts about bringing their ideas and images to a university. At this stage of its development, the project becomes something entirely new and no longer resides as an application.

In the meantime, its my hope that this project would become one component in a bigger series of applications that discuss modern art. Similar to the television and online series by PBS called *Art21*, it would be an educational tool from which students and educators can learn about contemporary or historical art. Using imagery, video, and interactivity, this project could run in museums, be part of university curriculum, or become part of an online series.

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