

The Non-Designer's Design Book, 2nd Edition by Robin Williams
Reviewed by John Davey

The personal computer brought many benefits to humankind, but as with any advanced technology, there have been drawbacks. One of those is that anyone with a desktop can now try to be an artist. The Web accentuated everything by allowing any user to project his or her work product throughout the universe, or at least to those parts with access to a web server. The result is that the Net is awash with poorly designed and even downright ugly web sites.

Sometimes, the reason is simple naiveté. Good design is an art and a science, and with the exception of those who come by the skill naturally, the concepts have to be learned. The combination of the technical and the artistic is one of the attractions of web design for many of us but also one of the challenges. It is not enough to have information planted some place on your web site. It has to be effectively organized and attractively presented. Otherwise the results can range from boring to ineffective to having your site be the daily entry on Web Pages That Suck (<http://www.webpagesthatsuck.com/>). Since many web creators arrive at the job from a technical background, they may simply not know what they don't know when it comes to design.

Peachpit Press (www.peachpitpress.com) has gone into this artistic breach with a series of books by Robin Williams called the Non-Designer's Books. The first of these was Robin Williams' The Non-Designer's Design Book published in 1994. Ms. Williams followed with Non-Designers books on scanning and print, type, and web design. Her latest entry is the second edition of the original Non-Designer's Design Book.

I have used both the design and the web books. In fact, I organized a presentation to our SIG last year based on the design book. Oddly enough, for web masters who are as new to this field as I am, the design book is my recommendation if you are only going to buy one of the two. At least for me, the concepts were so new that I needed to work on them specifically more than I needed to learn how to apply the principles to web pages.

Ms. Williams effectively describes the concepts of proximity, alignment, repetition and contrast and shows how they work in practice. More importantly, though, she bases her book on the theme that one must learn to recognize and explicitly identify elements of design in order to be able to use them. To that end, she provides numerous examples and quizzes that train the reader to be able to verbalize what works, what does not, and why. If you have ever seen web sites that just looked better than those that you create, this material will give you the vocabulary to define what makes them better.

At fewer than 200 pages of text with many graphics, this book is not lengthy, but it does require active participation by the reader. That participation will be rewarded, however, as you will think about your next web page very differently when you have finished.

For those who already own the first edition of The Non-Designers Design Book, there is no substantial reason to buy the new version--certainly the principles of design have not

changed in the last ten years. For new buyers, I would recommend the second edition even if you can find the first one at a bargain price. Ms. Williams has updated some of the material and added new examples, and there is an entire new chapter on tips and tricks that show how to bring the concepts together for different types of projects.

For those trained in design, this book would be elementary. For those of us without that background, The Non-Designers Design Book, 2nd Edition, is highly recommended.

The Non-Designer's Design Book, Second Edition

By Robin Williams

Peachpit Press

ISBN: 0321193857

Published: August 28, 2003

200 pages

John Davey is Co-Leader of the Philadelphia Area Computer Society Web Design SIG. This article is solely the responsibility of the author and does not necessarily express the views of the Philadelphia Area Computer Society, its board of directors, or anyone else.