

From the Bookshelves: *What the User Tells the Designer*

Paul Stiff

Graphic designers' need for feedback is typically answered by other designers. They tend not to engage in the kinds of empirical evaluation which might yield feedback about readers' performance. Graphic designers also need generous and informative models of readers and their various objectives. In the absence of such feedback and models, designers may set themselves goals which neglect readers' needs.

This article reports informal observation of one reader's interaction with a series of texts—information displayed on the spines of a serial publication. The reader's interaction, which led to remedial intervention by that reader to correct a design fault, offers both strong unsolicited feedback about performance and an informal model of one kind of reading objective.

Department of Typography &
Graphic Communication
University of Reading
Reading RG6 2AU
United Kingdom

Visible Language XXIV.3/4
Paul Stiff, pp. 334-343
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Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, RI 02903

All designers need feedback about the results of their work. Most thoughtful designers think about how and when to get it, about the form in which it comes, and about how to assess its value. But few graphic designers engage in the kind of empirical testing that engineering designers, say, would do as a matter of course. Nobody would wish designers of bridges and airplane wings to adopt the methods of graphic designers.

One strong disincentive to formal inquiries about the results of design decisions is the common folklore that testing or research inhibits creativity and even common humanity. Despite the work of journals like *Visible Language*, to many graphic designers research appears to mean questionnaires in shopping malls, as in Neville Brody's recent *cri de coeur*: "clients who have been persuaded. . . to use market research instead of intuition. . . need to be re-educated by designers into thinking on a more human scale" (Brody 1990). Another disincentive may be that designers don't have the skills to conduct formal inquiries. Another is that designers are often concerned primarily with personal style: "The core of our philosophy is the belief that design is based on personal expression" (Minale 1989). Another may be that graphic design problems (to the extent that they are seen as problems at all) are held to be neither complex nor critical enough to require formal methods. So for most graphic designers, feedback first comes in the form of informal peer commentary (comments from colleagues while work is in progress, much as writers ask friends to read their drafts), and second (and often finally) from their client: "If it looks terrific, then that's all I care about. After the looks, and strictly of secondary importance, comes client approval" (Rand 1989). And this feedback usually comes in the form of statements of opinion about preference. It is much less common to get informal feedback from users, and about performance. So when evidence about user performance is available, and is also unsolicited, then designers should take note. What follows is a short account of this kind of evidence.

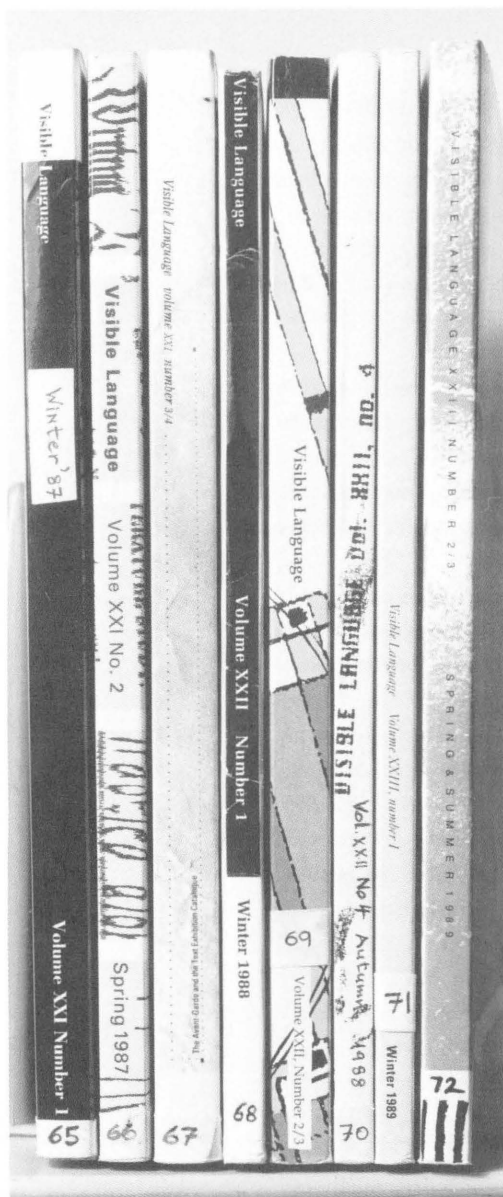


Figure 1.
Visible Language
on the bookshelves.

One of the sets of *Visible Language* taken in the place where I work is shelved in a small departmental reference library (figure 1). The clerk who looks after the library has about twelve hours each week to monitor the collection and keep the shelves in order.

Figure 2 shows how the clerk has redesigned the spine of *Visible Language*. She has added small labels to each spine, and has written a number on each label. She has introduced a new numbering sequence, overlaying this on the journal's own numbering sequence of volume numbers, issue numbers, years, and seasons. Given that time is short, why has the clerk taken so much trouble? The answer, and its implications, may be obvious. But spelling out the obvious is sometimes a worthwhile activity.

We could start by thinking about the good intentions which designers have. One of these might be expressed aphoristically: design for the reader. A problem with realizing the good intention is that designers often seem to think of readers as undifferentiated subjects and reading as a unitary activity. But

people have many different purposes for reading, and engage in many different kinds of reading activity, and do it in many different kinds of environment. So it may be that although the designers of *Visible Language* really do try to design for the reader, they only think of one kind of reader, and one kind of reading activity.

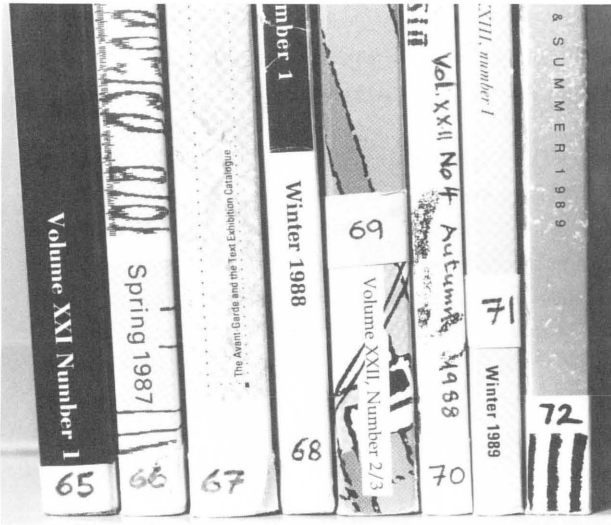


Figure 2.
The clerk has made
these additions to the
spines of *Visible Language*.

Think of the spine as a text, and the clerk as a reader, and the library, its patterns of use, and the clerk's available time as the task environment. Why does the clerk read the spines? What are her reading objectives?

One of the clerk's tasks is to physically arrange issues of *Visible Language* within limited shelf space. We can imagine many solutions to this arrangement problem. Arrangements could be: alphabetically by surname of author of the first article in each issue; or, in order from the thickest spine to the thinnest; or, in order from the darkest spine to the lightest; or, the clerk might rank each spine in order on a scale of personal emotional response. Or she might use one of these arrangements on Monday, another on Tuesday, and so on.

This part of the clerk's work is a form of designing. The arrangement she chooses—chronological, by order of publication date—is the one she considers best suited to the needs of library users. This default option is so conventional and universal that it hardly needs to be declared. Why? "Because that's the way libraries do it" is no answer. She, and libraries, do it this way because the arrangement of journals on shelves has to correspond usefully to the way readers and writers refer to texts, cite them, search for them, find them, and refer to them again. (When bibliographies at the end of articles in this journal start

referring to the extra thick issue of *Visible Language*, or to the one with the spine which scores 4.7 on an anger scale, then a different ordering principle will be called for.)

The clerk's reading objectives are first, to identify the journal as *Visible Language*; second, to discriminate and select information relevant to her ordering task (so her targets are likely to be year of publication, volume number, and issue number); third, to memorize that information in a form appropriate for the ordering task. So the question "Why did the clerk redesign the spine of *Visible Language*?" is answered by another question: what kind of information about chronological sequence of publication is given on the spine of *Visible Language*, and in what ways is that information visibly presented? An approximate answer is given in table 1. The table represents the information on the spines of the eight issues shown in figure 1.

Table 1. Information about chronological sequence of publication given on the spines of the eight issues shown in figure 1

volume	number	date
XXI	1	—
XXI	2	Spring 1987
XXI	3/4	—
XXII	1	Winter 1988
XXII	2/3	—
XXII	4	—
XXIII	1	Winter 1989
XXIII	2/3	Spring & Summer 1989

The year of publication is not always shown, so it is an unreliable target. When season is shown, its value is questionable. (Is the winter issue the first or the last of the four issues which make up a volume?) This leaves the volume number and issue number which together offer a simple hierarchical sorting task (given that issues are nested within volumes). Imagine that

thirty issues of *Visible Language* are in a heap on the floor. A likely sorting strategy might be: first put all issues bearing the same volume number into groups by volume; then arrange issues from first to fourth within volumes; and last arrange volume groups by volume number.

This might be a simple enough task if it weren't for the fact that roman numerals are used for volume numbers. The numerals present the reader with a translation task before the sorting can begin. Table 2 shows how volume numbers are presented, and what has to be done to translate them.

Table 2. The translation and sorting tasks

volume numbers are shown like this	so must first be translated into this form	before they can be sorted into this sequence
XXII 1	22.1	19.3
XIX 3	19.3	20.4
XXI 2	21.2	21.1
XXII 2	22.2	21.2
XXIII 1	23.1	22.1
XXI 1	21.1	22.2
XX 4	20.4	22.3
XXII 3	22.3	23.1

But before the translation can be done, so that the sorting can be done, the volume numbers and issue numbers have to be found. To do this, readers have to mask out, or filter, everything that is redundant—title, year, season, and background pattern (*figure 3*). For each issue they have to attend selectively, and engage in a search task (somewhat similar to finding place names on a map). When they make comparisons between issues, they may have to attempt to perceptually align (so to speak) the apparently randomly positioned arrays of target numerals (*figure 4*).

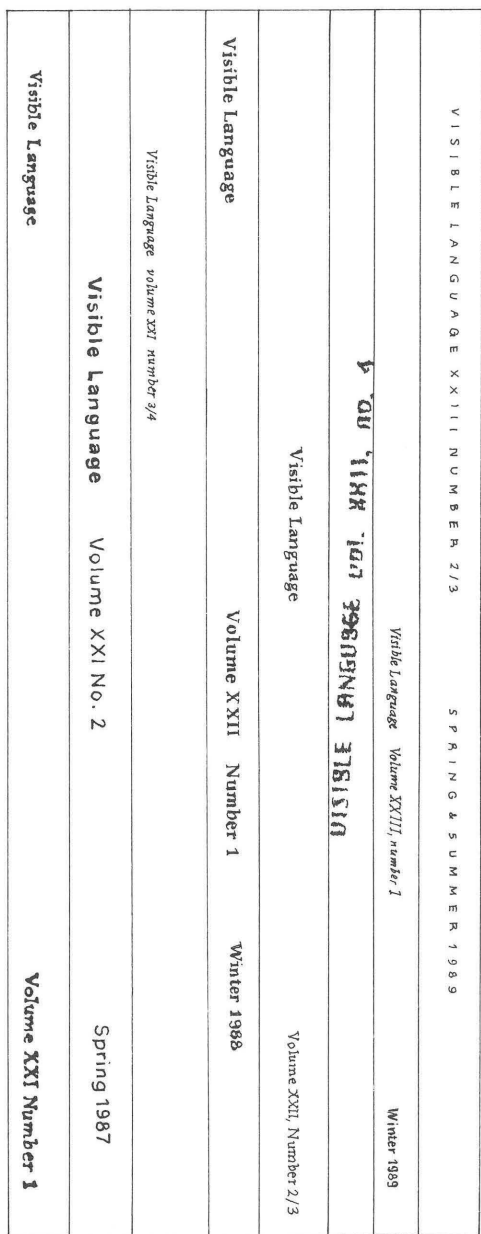


Figure 3.
Spine typography
after background
pattern has been
filtered.

The reason for the clerk's intervention is of course clear. Doing this task once, or even once a month, might be irritating but tolerable; doing it once or twice a week is intolerable. The clerk has taken remedial action to correct a design fault in order to make her task easier.

Strong unsolicited feedback of the kind offered by the clerk invites us to draw conclusions which are both particular and general. The particular conclusions might be of three kinds. First, the editors might consider dumping the volume and issue numbers altogether, and simply numbering future issues serially in one sequence. But that would mean starting a new series, with new pagination and consequent disruption of established patterns of referring to issues, so assume that this step is discounted. The remaining option is to abandon roman numerals. Second, the designers are invited to consider the virtues of constancy and predictability. These might be realized graphically by allocating fixed positions for different categories of information, which are thus aligned over a set of spines on shelves, to aid in scanning (*see figure 6*). Third, the designers might also appeal to homely virtues such as legibility, and so might consider how much background noise (from the graphic pattern) is acceptable, and what particular graphic attributes are required by the type on the spine.

This particular message from the bookshelves is not directed just at *Visible Language*. I should now admit to an association with a journal which has also been redesigned by the clerk. Figure 5 shows that the designers of *Information Design Journal* have similarly failed that user, and have sometimes even completely ignored the spine.

The general conclusions are more troublesome. The problem I have described is a trivial one, almost devoid of theoretical interest. If the work shown here had been produced by amateurs, we should say that there was nothing here which could not be solved by common sense and some elementary training. But this is not the work of amateurs, and we can assume not only common sense and elementary training, but also a high degree of competence. What has happened? What is the designer's problem? Limited powers of analysis? Many graphic designers would not regard designing a book or journal spine as a problem at all; they would think of it as something which barely requires 'analysis'; and we might agree that nothing so elaborate as 'testing' was required. Is the problem one of limited imagination? *Visible Language* often prints brief accounts of the designer's reasoning behind each issue. Here are a few samples: "geometric shapes relevant to the articles' content were used for the purpose of distinction, overall consistency, and to enhance the illusion of movement" (XXI, 1, 1987); "the purpose. . . is to challenge the viewer's reading and to propose an alternative view of the book as object" (XXI, 3/4, 1987); "the pages were designed to visually portray and build on the ideas presented in the articles. . . It is a worthwhile effort to sacrifice a comfortable, yet generic text presentation for one which involves and challenges the reader's imagination." (XXII, 4, 1988).

These accounts don't suggest a deficiency of a certain kind of imagination: couched in the terms of "artist's statement," they are strong on what is sometimes called design concept.

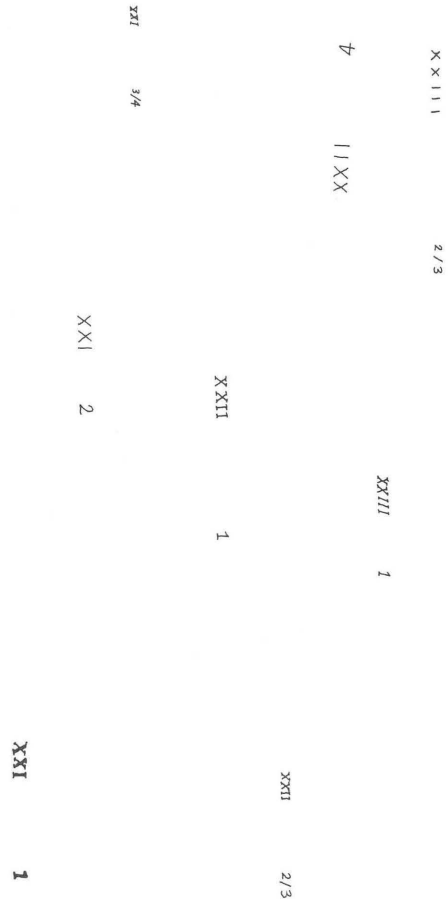


Figure 4.
Randomly positioned arrays of target numerals.



Figure 5.
Information
Design Journal.

What seems to be missing is any imaginative view of the reader, or, more formally, any useful model of the varieties of readers and of reading activities. These accounts make it clear that designers have set themselves other priorities; they recall Michael Macdonald-Ross's comments on the failure of certain kinds of graphic illustrations:

"It is usual to blame the artists or designers for their incompetence or lack of interest in the subject matter. But this is not a sufficient explanation. We have to ask ourselves: how is it that people can act with apparent disregard for the quality of their work? Surely because they have become separated from the natural feedback all of us must have, and in (desperation) substituted surrogate forms of gratification."

(Macdonald Ross & Smith, 1976)

One of the problems facing editors and designers of journals with titles like *Visible Language* and *Information Design Journal* is the pressure to be exemplary in deed. We might consider learning from scientific journals (figure 6). In the meantime, dissenting graphic designers who think that this kind of thing is just too dull will have to show that they can do two things at once: look good *and* make sense.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Alison Black for helpful comments on this paper, and to Ilona Hajdu for answers to questions.

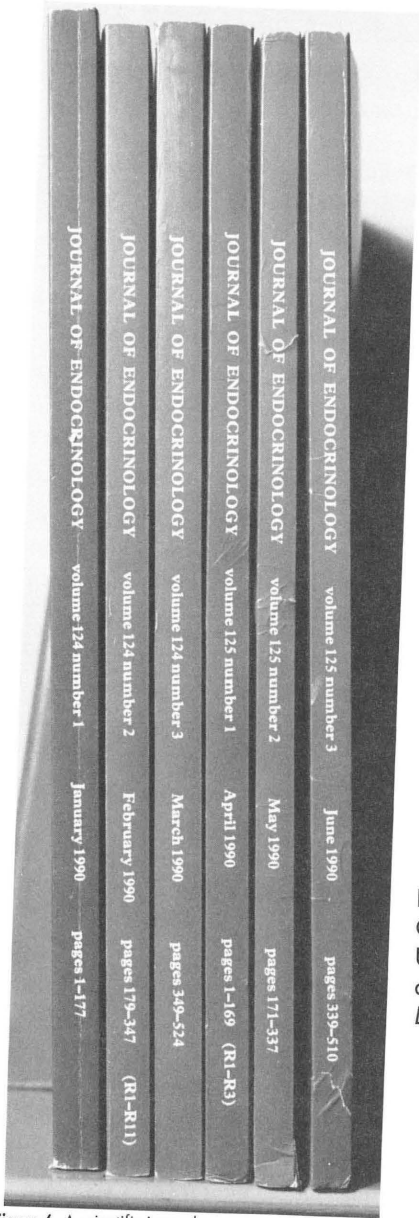


Figure 6. A scientific journal: plain, predictable, constant.

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Paul Stiff teaches Typography & Graphic Communication at the University of Reading, England, and is editor of *Information Design Journal*.