

design thinking

Matt Yoder

Design, at its very core, is
about making things right.

Critical

Design is by nature a critical discipline:
to make things right, the designer must
first identify what is wrong.

What's wrong with

photos?

Nothing, per se, except that they're becoming increasingly difficult to find. In the age of Flickr, traditional photography is quickly giving way to digital imagery. Many scholars argue that this endless array of pixels—the stuff of “photo-sharing sites”—is not really photography at all. Instead, they're calling it *post-photography*.


Photography directly corresponds to reality; post-photography doesn't. Photography captures to remember; post-photography captures to define. Photographers tell stories about photos; post-photographers tell stories with photos. Together these changes indicate a marked shift in the mindset of the people behind the camera.

In my essay *Flickr and the Postmodern Post-Photo*, I explore the ways that Flickr has both shaped and been shaped by post-photography. Read the full essay:

<http://flickr.mattyoder.com>

flickr and the Postmodern Post-Photo

Matt J. Yoder
Fall 2008



This is not a story about photos.

It is a story about how people use photos.

[Read on »](#)

• One of the 100 most interesting photos on Flickr today.

Introduction

Home | Not your mother's photo album

Background

"You press the button..." | Post what? | Reframing photography

Shifts

It looks like a... | R.I.P. | Remembering to forget | "Kodak moments" | Story time | Culture shock

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flickr and the Postmodern Post-Photo

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• Most recent photos on Flickr tagged with egg.

The photographic chicken and the digital egg

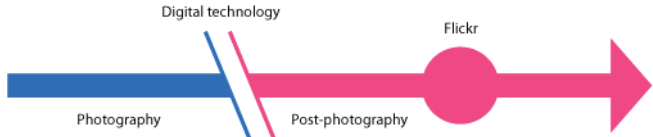
Flickr, photography, and culture

Flickr and post-photography clearly share some family resemblance. The question, then, becomes, which came first? Which is the chicken and which the egg? Or, perhaps more importantly, does it matter?

Old readings made digital technology the cause of post-photography.

As I have suggested, most scholarly treatments have equated post-photography with the advent of digital technology. (If this sounds unfamiliar, take a moment to review the [technological definition of post-photography](#).) They have assumed that digital cameras brought on the “post-photographic era” or, at the very least, caused it to blossom. As a result, post-photography largely has been reduced to a technological phenomenon that hinges on the inherent malleability of digital images.

This interpretation has some truth. Digital technology surely has played a significant role in the transition from photography to post-photography. Yet making it the only factor is problematic. Above all, it produces a picture of photographic history that is not altogether satisfactory.



For one, this model fails to explain the complex interaction between technology and culture. It assumes that cultural practices remain relatively static until a technological advance emerges, at which point consumers change their behavior to accommodate the new technology. Yet scholarship has demonstrated that this is at best a gross oversimplification and at worst an outright lie. José van Dijck has been so bold as to speculate that the digital camera got its function from culture, not the other way around (70).

Van Dijck has summarized the situation as follows:

“Digitization is not the cause of this trend; instead, the tendency to fuse photography with daily experience and communication is part of a broader cultural transformation that involves individualization and intensification of experience. The emphasis on individualism and personhood at the expense of family is a social pattern with roots that can be traced back as far as the late 1960s and early 1970s” (62).

Unsurprisingly, the 1960s and 1970s also saw the birth of postmodernism, which, as I have suggested, is closely linked to post-photography.

In a new reading, cause and effect are replaced by dialogue.

I would like to propose alternative to the model of photographic history depicted above. This new model envisions

What's wrong with

saying no?

Sometimes you just need to say “yes!” Visual language gives us an easy way to say “no”—the ubiquitous red circle with a line through it—but it doesn’t provide an equally convenient affirmative. In this graphic design exercise, I tried to imagine what such a symbol might look like.

In designing the symbol, I played off the characteristics of its counterpart: its red hue, its containing circle, its sharp angles and blocky negative space. Some of these I preserved while others I reversed. The result is a new symbol that evokes the old while clearly maintaining a distinct meaning. Round corners and fluid negative spaces suggest the possible while outlining the shape of encircling arms.

Still, this positive form is no pushover. It understands its opponent well—mimics it, toys with it, mocks it even. Design thinking requires that one become both a lover and a killer. The best solution holds its problem close and whispers “I love you,” just as it administers the lethal dose.





Modernism Lives On

by Matt Yoder

“Modernism was a faith,
a religion,
a mission
to which we committed ourselves with
passion and zeal. Paul was our
leader and inspiration.”

— Louis Danziger

On November 14, 1996, less than a month before his death, designer Paul Rand gave a lecture at MIT. At the speaker's request, John Maeda, the hosting professor, asked Rand a few questions. When asked how he got started as a designer, Rand raised his eyebrows. **“I think you should ask, how did I get started as a baby?” he replied.**

Indeed, the history of Paul Rand and that of American design are tightly interwoven. Though best remembered for his trademarks, designed for such giants as IBM, ABC, UPS and Westinghouse, Rand was instrumental in establishing graphic design as a respected profession. In the words of esteemed designer Louis Danziger, Rand “almost single-handedly convinced business that design was an effective tool.”

Despite his success and influence in the field, Paul Rand's design career—that is to say, his life—had humble

beginnings. The son of a New York grocer, Rand was born Paul Rosenbaum on August 15, 1914. In spite of his Orthodox Jewish upbringing, which prohibited the creation of images, the young Rand was drawing scenes from his father's store by the age of three. Though his father could not endorse his son's choice of career, he nevertheless paid for Rand to attend night classes at Pratt Institute. Afraid that being Jewish might prove an obstacle to his aspirations, Rand severed ties with his heritage as a young adult and changed his name from Rosenbaum to Rand.

Since little education was available in graphic design in the early 1930s, Rand studied fine art at Pratt Instituted and later at the Art Students League. There he studied drawing under Georg Grosz and began to build his portfolio. In 1932, Rand became an apprentice in the New York studio of George Switzer. Earning ten dollars per week, he designed advertisements for Squibb pharmaceuticals and packaging for Hormel meats.

Rand's first major break came in 1936 when he was approached by Apparel Arts to design a cover for an

What's wrong with

modernism?

Or, put differently, what's wrong with the legacy of Paul Rand? This giant of twentieth-century design created some of the most iconic and lasting corporate images—many for household names like IBM and ABC. So entrenched is his work that, when UPS updated his classic logo design in 2003, the move was met with staunch resistance from the design establishment.

In this designer profile, I examine the many faces of Paul Rand: his evolution as a designer, his timeless work in corporate identity and his utter dedication to modernism as a design philosophy. I conclude that, while the art of design owes much to Rand, his greatest contribution was in establishing design as a form of communication.

What's wrong with modernism, then? Only that it threatens to overshadow Rand's true identity: that of a brilliant design thinker.

APPAREL ARTS

Rand designed covers for Apparel Arts from 1936 to 1941.

DESIGNER PROFILE

anniversary edition of the men's fashion magazine. Noting his skill in creating an outstanding layout from average photography, the magazine promptly brought Rand on as a full time designer. After designing many successful covers, he was promoted to art director for Esquire, the parent company of Apparel Arts, and put in charge of fashion. There he distinguished himself through his design of covers, promotions and editorial layout.

In 1941, Rand left his position to join William H. Weintraub, another former Esquire designer, at an upstart advertising agency founded by and named after the latter. While serving as art director and advertising designer, Rand helped to redefine the very process of advertising design. Instead of allowing copywriters to set the design agenda, as was the custom, Rand

photography, the magazine promptly brought Rand on as a full time designer. After designing many successful covers, he was promoted to art director for Esquire, the parent company of Apparel Arts, and put in charge of fashion. There he distinguished himself through his design of covers, promotions and editorial layout.

After thirteen years at the Weintraub agency, Rand left to do freelance design from his home studio in Weston, Connecticut. In addition to illustrating several children's books

routinely tore up their sketches. "I was not going to let myself be treated like a printer on Pitkin Avenue," he said of the period.

After thirteen years at the Weintraub agency, Rand left to do freelance design from his home studio in Weston, Connecticut. In addition to illustrating several children's books

This illustration from Listen! Listen! (1970) is typical of Rand's design.

PULL RAND: MODERNISM LIVES ON

from the design establishment. In October 1996, at a retrospective of his life and work, Rand was asked if the modernism that he worked so hard to establish was dead. "I'm still alive," was his reply. Rand died of cancer the next month.

Rand was asked if the modernism that he worked so hard to establish was dead. "I'm still alive," was his reply.

Paul Rand inspired a generation of graphic designers. In this Apple Think Different poster, he is shown later in life.

ups

In 2003, UPS updated Rand's traditional trademark (left) and much controversy, for his daughter, Catherine, Rand did some of his most recognized work in this later period of his life. He designed trademarks for IBM, UPS, ABC, Westinghouse, Next and USSB, many of which are still in use and all of which have become classics in the age of branding. When UPS updated Rand's classic design in 2003, the decision was met with sharp criticism

The Evolution of a Trademark

BIG BLUE

IBM

Rand's original design, produced in 1956, included solid and outline versions. Both featured square counters in the **B** and large, blocky serifs on the **M**.

The outline version, which appeared in various colors, was eventually dropped to avoid confusion.

Over time, stripes were added to the trademark to soften its bold appearance. The stripes were inspired by the anti-conflicting stripes found on many legal documents and checks. The resulting trademark suggested IBM's commitment to security and made the company more visually distinctive.

The original striped design included 8- and 13-line versions.

As time progressed, IBM began to incorporate Rand's stripes in other aspects of its product design and packaging.

IBM's 1974 annual report used the trademark tilted at a 37-degree angle, a variation that became standard.

The trademark set at a 37-degree angle found its way onto many product lines.

The 8-line design eventually became the dominant trademark. Variations in the colors of the stripes and letters were used to quickly distinguish between products and lines.

After more than 50 years, Rand's trademark continues to distinguish the company's products.

What's wrong with

technology?

It could be that the Internet is not open enough. Or maybe it's that evil record labels have ruined the digital music industry. Maybe the problem is just that humans are trying to think too much like computers. Technology and writing have always been two of my great loves. In three essays, I bring them together with results that range from weighty to lighthearted. Regardless of the gravity, my writing takes a critical look at the ways that we shape and are shaped by all things digital. Read the essays at:

<http://expos.mattyoder.com/>



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[AUTHOR](#)[ESSAYS](#)[CONTEXT](#)

A Record Label from the Other Side

"WE ARE NOT EVIL"

NOVEMBER 17, 2006

"We are not evil," runs the mantra of the upstart online record label Magnatune. And, surprisingly enough, it's true. In a climate of anti-piracy lawsuits, fair play and a try-before-you-buy approach make Magnatune a refreshing alternative to the mainstream recording industry. Unlike its competitors, the label's uncluttered organization, quality music, and generous pricing and licensing make it downright virtuous.

When John Buckman founded Magnatune in 2003, he was frustrated with the music industry. As a consumer, he felt that CDs were too expensive and that all of the music on the radio sounded the same. As the husband of a musician, he saw his wife being cheated by her label. Despite selling more than 1,000 CDs, she earned only \$137 and lost the rights to her music for seven years.



Photo credit Sheila Newbery
Magnatune founder John Buckman

Three years later, Magnatune is the result of Buckman's frustration. The label currently boasts 236 artists, 505 albums, and 6,677 songs. Unlike iTunes and other online music stores, Magnatune sells entire albums rather than individual songs. And unlike these competitors, it allows you to listen to high quality, full length recordings before you make a purchase. After buying music, you can download the album in variety of full-quality and compressed formats such as MP3, AAC, and FLAC. For an extra charge, Magnatune will send you a physical CD.

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What's wrong with

peace and love?

In 1995, the Mennonite Church in North America began a historic experiment. The two largest Mennonite denominations—the General Conference Mennonite Church and the (Old) Mennonite Church—as well as one smaller group, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada, voted to become one. By the time they met for their general assembly in 1999, the groups were ready to unite as one denomination and to divide along national lines, forming what would become Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada. The United States denomination took effect on February 1, 2002 following a formal reorganization at the church's Nashville assembly. The change marked a new era for American Mennonites and began the delicate and laborious task of integrating two denominations that had operated independently for more than a century.

Part of this process of integration was the formation of new visual identity for the denomination. In September 1997, J. Ron Byler, the associate general secretary of the (Old) Mennonite Church General Board, and Dave Linscheid, the communications director for the General Conference Mennonite Church, called for a symbol and identity guidelines for what was then conceived of as a bi-national church (Byler, "Developing" 1). To address the need, Byler and Linscheid formed a communications task force that reported to the Integration Committee (Byler, "Developing" 1). In addition to Byler and Linscheid, the task force included Aiden Schlichting Enns, the director of communications for the Conference of Mennonites in Canada; Ruth Suter, a member of the Integration Committee; and Barth Hague, the vice president for marketing at Mennonite Mutual Aid (Byler, "Developing" 1). For design, the group looked to Glenn Fretz, a Waterloo, Ontario-based graphic designer with extensive experience in identity development and a long history of serving Mennonite organizations (Byler, "Developing" 2). Fretz, in cooperation with designers Judith Rempel Smucker and Ron Tinsley, developed a symbol and accompanying Visual Identity Guidelines, which were published in 1999 (Visual, 2005 1). In 2005, after the division of the United States and Canada branches, the task force published an update to the guidelines specific to Mennonite Church USA.

In many ways the Visual Identity Program produced a typical corporate visual identity. On the surface, it contained all of the elements of similar corporate efforts: a symbol, a logotype, signatures, and guidelines for typography, color, and layout. In the 2005 update, especially, the guidelines adopted the language of marketing and branding. Yet more than branding, the Visual Identity Program served as an exercise in imagination. It helped two denominations to imagine themselves as one and fragmented agencies to imagine cooperation. During this process of imagination, the vision captured by the designers was in constant dialogue with realities of a denomination being born. Some eleven years later, the dialogue continues within the denomination, expanding to include the wider church membership.

Read the rest of my research findings at:

<http://mcusa.mattyoder.com/>

What’s wrong with

playing god?

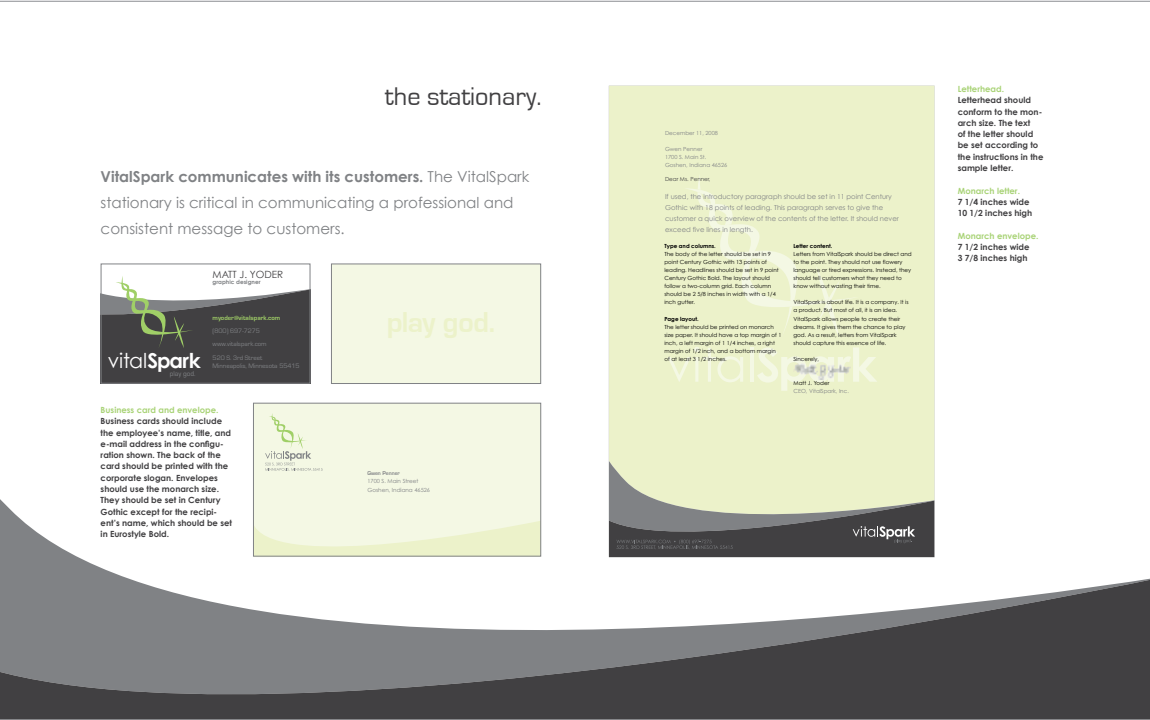
I’m the kind of artist who likes to play at the edge. So when I was asked to design a visual identity for an imaginary company, the edge is where I went. In bringing VitalSpark to life, I pushed the boundaries of what’s possible and what’s ethical. I created an image for a genetic engineering firm that encourages its customers to “play god,” and in the process, I raised questions about what it means to be a creator.

In designing VitalSpark, I wanted to create something that bridged the gap between science fiction and everyday, something playful but with a dangerous edge. I wanted the look to be cold but inviting, appealing but just a little bit frightening.

For the logo, I chose the form of a double helix, the building block of life, as the base. I intersected one of its unraveling strands with a simple starburst, evoking the “spark” in the company name. While the undulating lines of the helix invite the viewer in, the sharp points of the starburst remind her that this business of life is serious business. Playing god may be play, indeed, but it’s not without its risks.

Download the full visual identity manual:

<http://mattyoder.com/portfolio/vitalspark-visual-identity/>



Relational

Unlike other problem-solving techniques, the process of design is thoroughly relational.

Building relationships through

anti-racism

When I was asked to design the DVD artwork for *Two-way Mission*, I immediately started thinking about the visual problem. How would I find a photo that fit beneath the wave on the cover? How would I make it fresh but authentic, engaging but not busy?

Yet through conversations with my colleagues at Mennonite Mission Network, I discovered that the real challenge lay elsewhere. What did the interaction of the participants in the photo communicate about race relations? How did their posture and position in the photo speak to power dynamics? These were the questions that I need to ask, the problems that I needed to solve using design thinking. To do otherwise would be to be to trade a conversation for a monologue.



Building relationships through

software

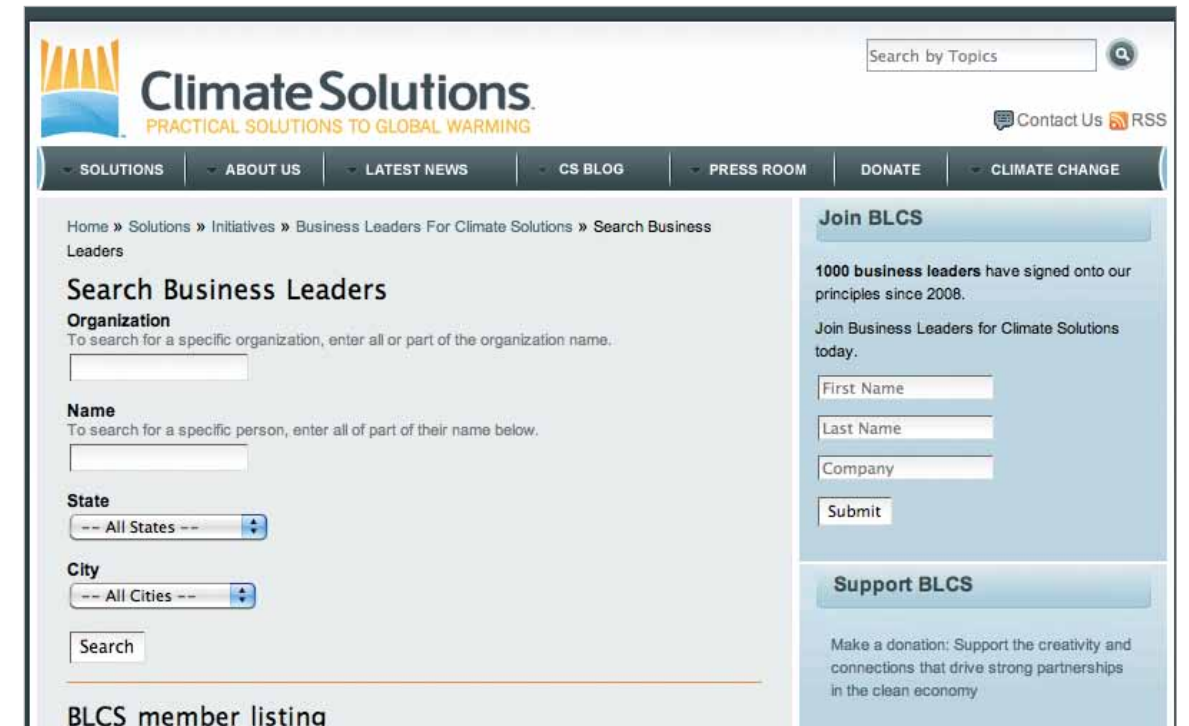
Climate Solutions wanted to feature their Business Leaders for Climate Solutions program, which organizes and energizes corporate leaders around clean energy. They asked me and my colleagues at Groundwire to build them an integration between their Salesforce database, where they track BLCS membership, and their Plone web site.

As the developer on the integration, I knew that Salesforce is great at tracking information about relationships. I also knew that I wanted to give Climate Solutions the maximum value for their investment. So when I built the connection between Salesforce and Plone, I did it in a way that's flexible enough to be reused for other types of relationship data. Three months later, Climate Solutions is preparing to use the same software to strengthen relationships between its constituents and climate experts.

Call it making connections. Call it leverage. Or, call it design thinking.

See it in action at:

<http://climatesolutions.org/solutions/initiatives/blcs>



Building relationships through

photography

Photography is by nature an intimate medium, and portraiture is among its most intimate forms. To explore that intimacy, I photographed—on film—five of my closest friends in their most intimate spaces: their bedrooms. I wanted to capture these friends surrounded by their belongings, to see them in the place they call home.

The resulting photographs range from silly to serious, but each portrait has something of an edge. I was asking my subjects to be vulnerable, to reveal something of themselves to a visitor—this camera—that they didn't fully trust.

Design thinking pushes us to move beyond comfortable relationships and to make connections that stretch us. It forces us to name our discomfort, to probe it and ultimately, to channel it for creative purposes. So doing, we, like the camera lens, see more clearly.



Building relationships through

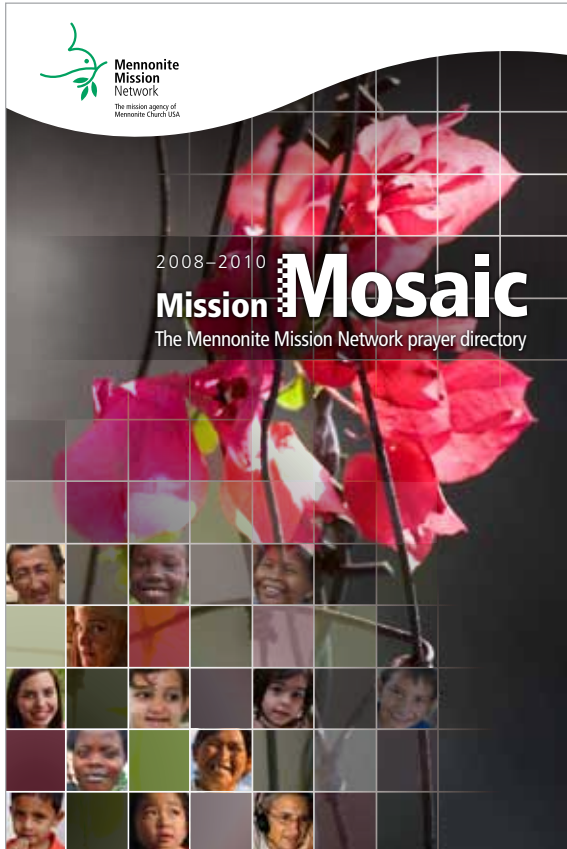
service

When I was asked to design the cover for *Mission Mosaic*, I started simply. I drew a grid, the simplest mosaic there is. Then I filled it with faces to represent the service workers whose stories fill the directory.

That seemed to tell part of story. It told the truth that service work is about finding your place, seeing where you fit into the larger grid. But it also missed something: some of the messiness and pain and beauty that come along with giving up part of your life for others. I experienced that messiness first-hand when I spent a year living in community and volunteering through the Mennonite Voluntary Service program.

So, I added some messiness. Against the structured, clean lines of the grid, I imposed a flower tangled in barbed wire—beauty and pain, the other half of the truth.

Service and design thinking, then, have something in common. They both ask us to build relationships, to notice what is happening and to respond to it. We take what's there, messy though it may be, and try to make it right.

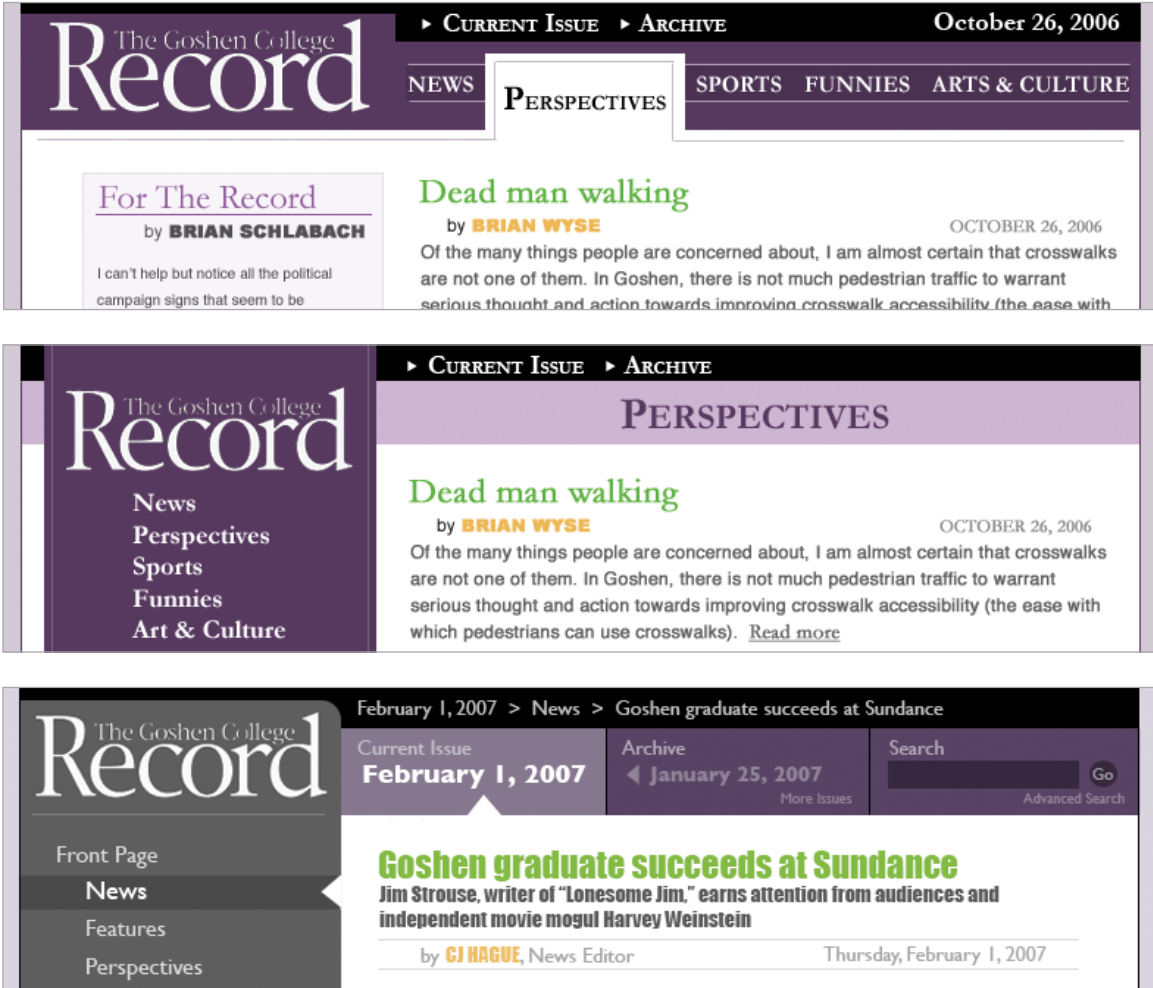


Building relationships through

trial and error

Every semester I served as web editor for *The Record*, the Goshen College campus newspaper, I thought about how to redesign the site. Some of these designs stopped at the idea stage, while others grew into reality. In all, however, I responded to what I was seeing on campus and online.

If design were not concerned with process as well as outcome, this might have been an exercise in frustration. As it turned out, it was just an exercise in design thinking.



Building relationships through

collaboration

Design thinking by the numbers:

6 images clipped from magazines

2 images selected by a partner

7 frames to make them meet

1 metamorphosis



Playful

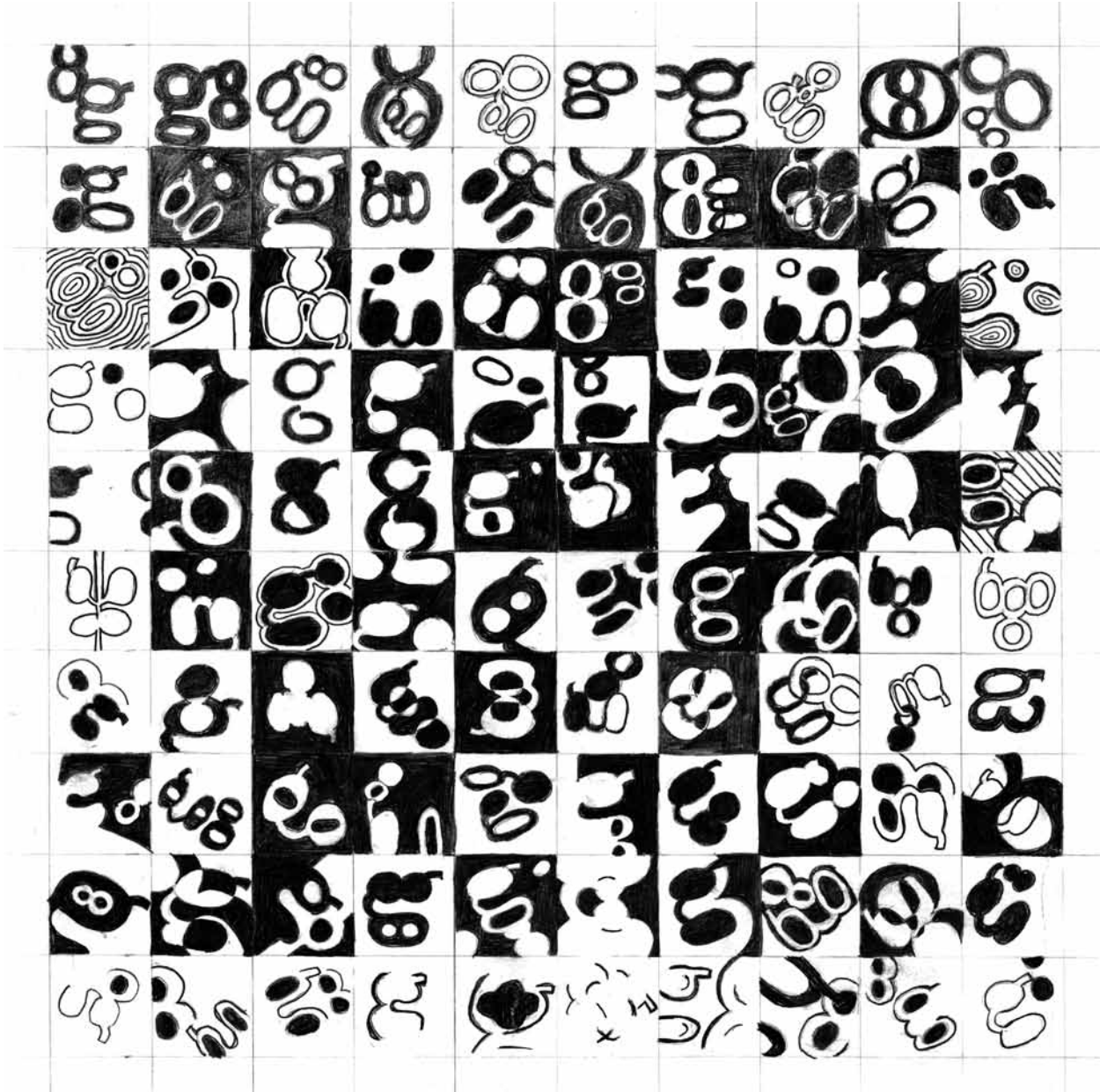
Design doesn't presume to know what "right" looks like from the start. The design process is playful and nonlinear.

Playing around with

letterforms

Q: How many ways are there to combine g and 8?

A: At least 100.



Playing around with

life and death

I didn't set out to make a philosophical statement. I set out to dress up a skeleton model in ridiculous clothing and photograph it. The apple was an afterthought, a whim that, once followed, changed the course of the project.

Design thinking, I maintain, is as much about being able to recognize "right" when it presents itself as it is about dreaming it up in the first place. That's not to say that great design is an accident; far from it.

Instead it suggests that the great designer is the playful one. When things start to go off course, she doesn't necessarily grab for the wheel. After all, in design thinking, a detour isn't a matter of life and death.



old and new

“Capture the Mennonite experience without confining it.” Those were my instructions from professors Ann Hostetler and Kyle Schlabach when they asked me to design and build them an online community around the topic of Mennonite writing. Design and build I did—but first I took time to play.

My first stop was the library, not the most playful of places, to be sure. Still, I needed some material to play with, and the Mennonite Historical Library was the best place to find it. I researched traditional Mennonite art forms like quilting and *fraktur*, pored over illustrations of tortured Anabaptists and bookplates of centuries-old Bibles.

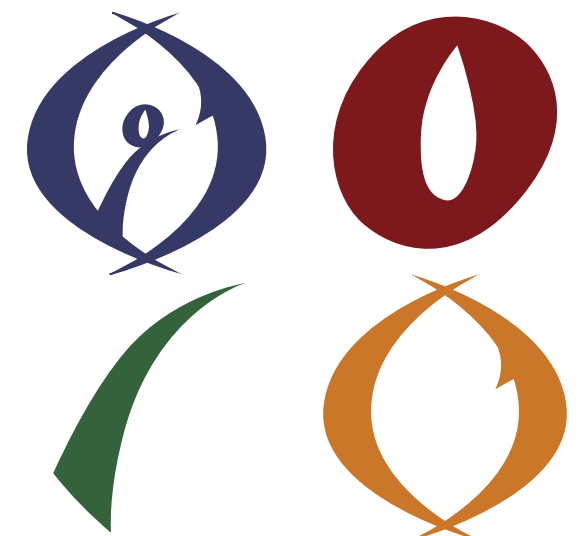
Finally I settled on an image—the Anabaptist digger—from the *Martyr’s Mirror*, a collection of Anabaptist stories. “Work and hope,” the inscription reads, and so I did.

For the site’s logo, I borrowed forms from the illustration, creating a symbolic connection if not a literal one. When it became clear that the site would need three distinct sections, I started playing with the idea of separating the logo into its component shapes: the digger’s head for the literary journal, his body for the online encyclopedia and the enclosing leaves for the discussion community.

Throughout the design process, I tried to keep my touch light, to allow the “Mennonite experience” of my inspiration to shine though, albeit obscurely. In the process, I discovered that my idea of design as play has a lot in common with the Anabaptist motto “work and hope.” Maybe design thinking isn’t such a new idea after all.

Visit the site:

<http://www.mennonitewriting.org>



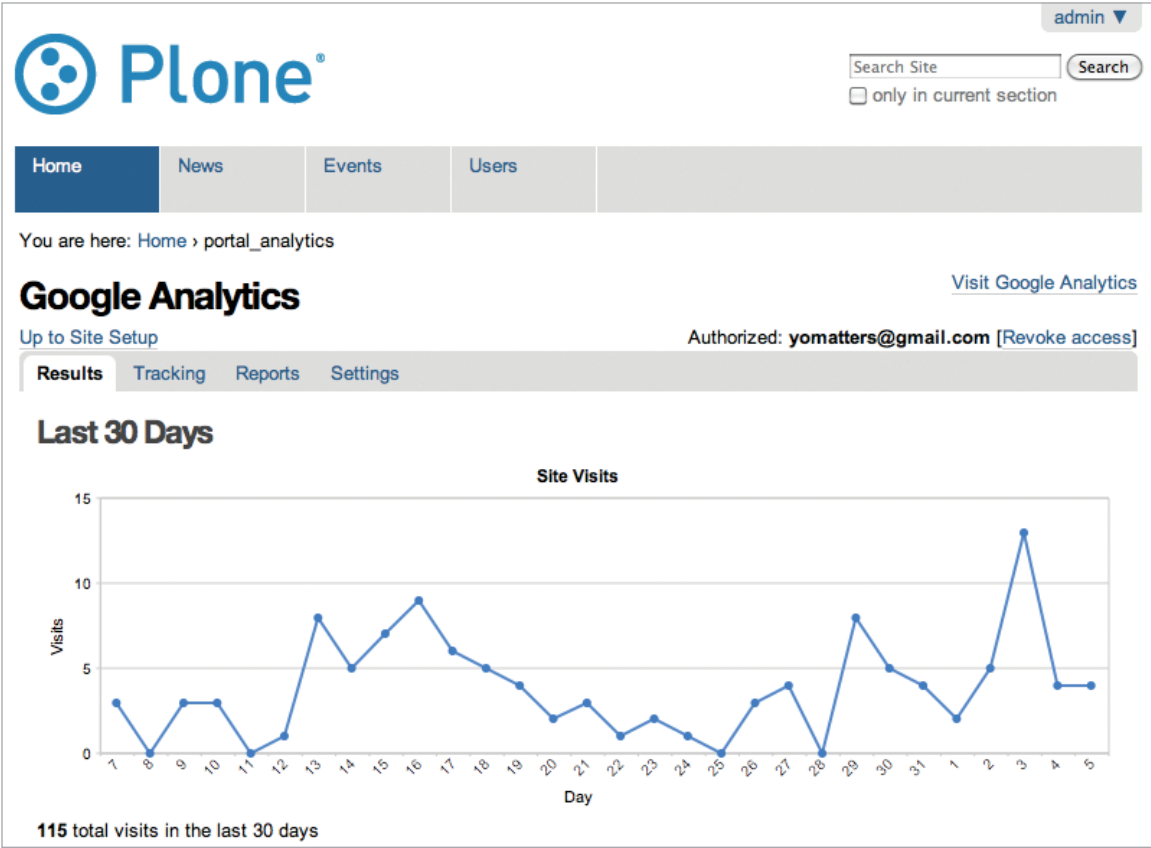
Playing around with

statistics

Google Analytics is great, especially for anyone who loves to play with data. It provides objective data about web site traffic that can help site editors make important decisions about their content. The trouble is, Analytics data lives at Google, and most content editors spend the majority of time on their own sites.

Groundwire asked me to create a tool to bring Analytics data back into the Plone content management system, where content editors can play with it while they work. Google Analytics for Plone (or collective.googleanalytics in Plone-speak) does that and more. It provides a full suite of tools for tracking additional data in Google Analytics and for reporting on statistics within the Plone site. See it in action:

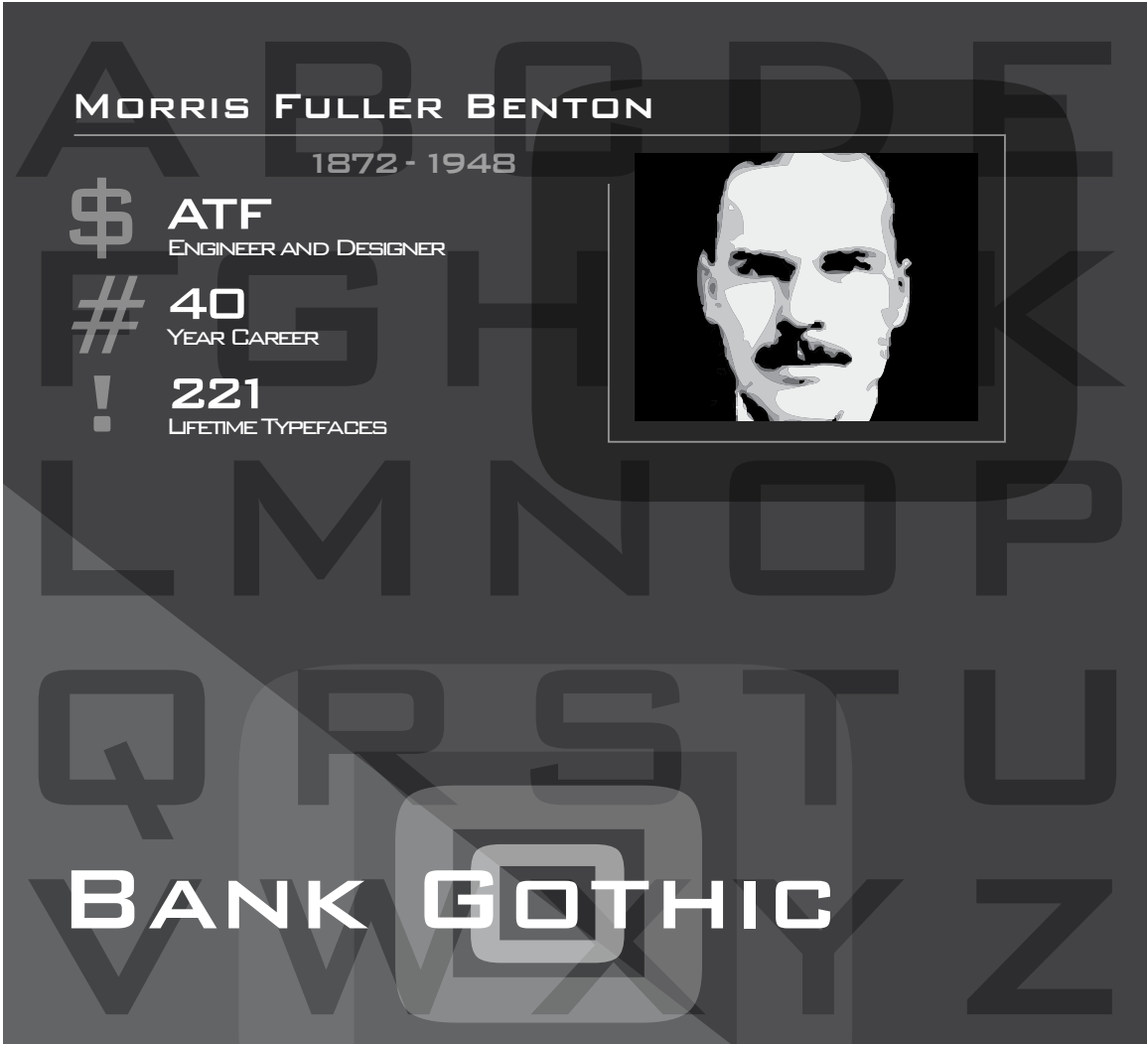
<http://mattyoder.com/portfolio/google-analytics-plone/>



Playing around with

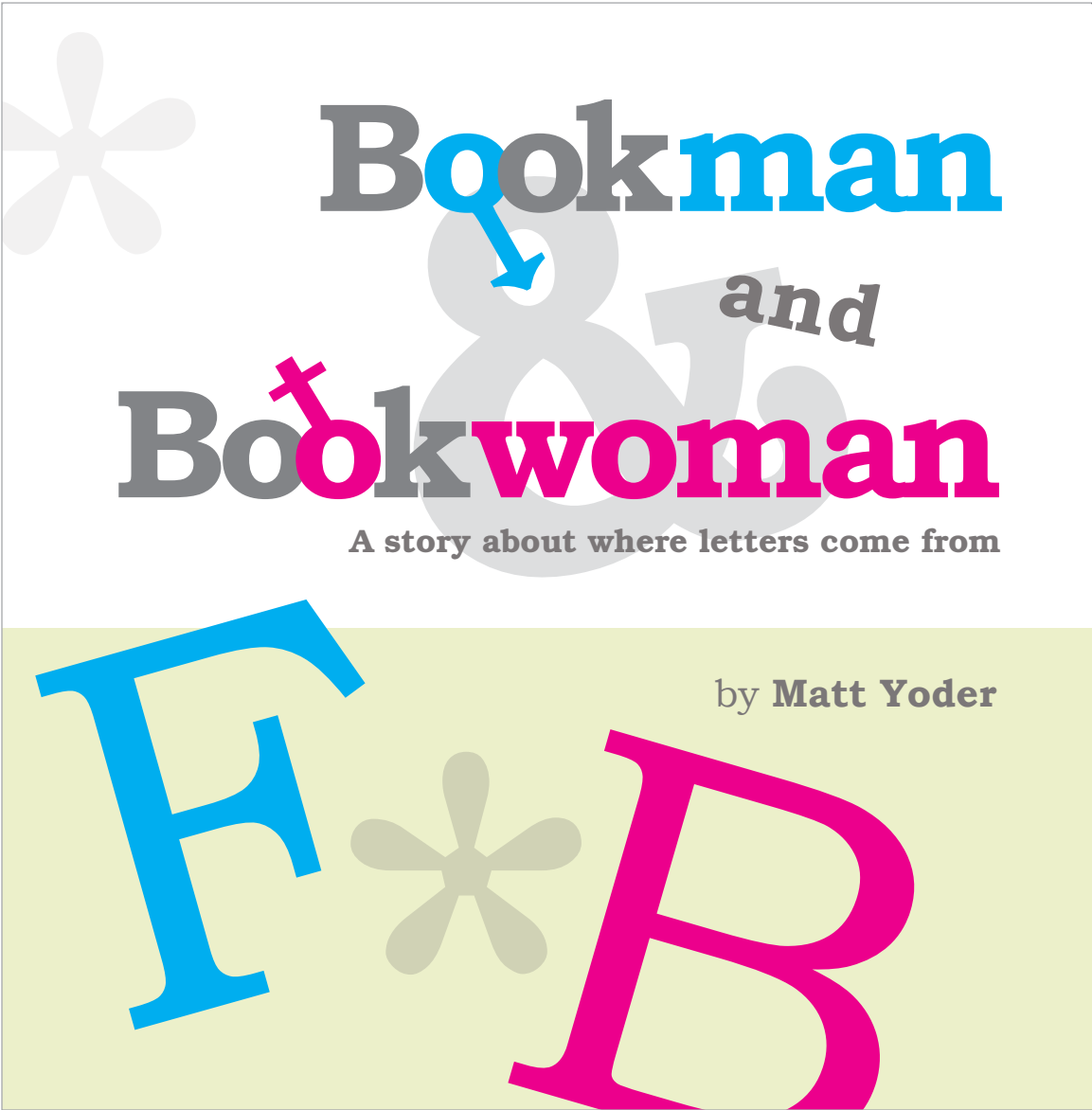
history

With more than 200 typefaces to his name, Morris Fuller Benton is among the greatest type designers. His typeface Bank Gothic has appeared in pop culture classics like *The Matrix*. Here I play with its iconic letter O while celebrating the legacy of a typographic genius.



Playing around with

sex



Where do letters come from? I set out to find out in this whimsical children’s story about one typeface, Bookman, and his counterpart, Bookwoman. While exploring the ins and outs of this font family, I defined and demonstrated a variety of typographic terms and techniques. The resulting story is nothing if not playful—and for designers unschooled in typographic reproduction, perhaps immensely educational!



Playing around with

self-reflection

Of all the web sites I've designed, my own was, without question, the most difficult. There's something about seeing one's name in the URL that makes all rational faculties instantly shut down. Without reason to fall back on, I did the only thing left to do: play.

<http://mattyoder.com>

