A Burkean dialectical-rhetorical perspective on shifting design trends

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Abstract

This paper explores the dialectical-rhetorical constitution of stylistic design trends by analysing a prominent shift in interface design aesthetics, from 'skeuomorphism' to 'Flat Design'. The case study serves to illustrate the continuous negotiation between opposite design positions or 'design dialectics' in the debate surrounding the so-called 'Flat Design revolution' as well as related historical design arguments. This paper further considers the concerns related to accelerated trend dynamics, particularly in terms of sustainability. Aesthetic obsolescence, whereby products are prematurely discarded, is arguably exacerbated by highly persuasive dialectical design rhetorics. In response to this problem, this paper considers the potential of Kenneth Burke's dialectical-rhetorical approach to criticism, along with his notion of 'comic framing', as a means towards 'discounting' polemical design rhetorics.

Keywords: design trends; dialectics; interface aesthetics; Kenneth Burke; rhetoric.

Introduction

The visual treatment of design products is in constant flux. Throughout design history, new styles and movements routinely supplant mainstream aesthetic approaches. Furthermore, modernist aspirations have been replaced by postmodern pluralism since at least the 1960s, and along with it, stylistic trends now fluctuate faster than ever

before. Although design has always operated within the realm of creation and innovation, there are emerging concerns about the increasing acceleration of design change, leading to unsustainable production and consumption. A growing concern relates to the creation of *aesthetic obsolescence* whereby products become stylistically outdated and prematurely discarded. This is problematic insofar as it leads to the excessive exploitation of both physical and non-material resources and an increase in waste and pollution. For instance, in the technology sector, the shortened lifecycles of electronic devices not only increases environmentally damaging e-waste, but it also exacerbates socio-political and human rights issues related to natural resource extraction and poor manufacturing conditions. While a stylistic interface design update may not produce such direct material impacts, it still consumes valuable non-material resources such as time and attention, and further reinforces a wasteful ideology that encourages the continuous production and consumption of the new.

A number of design critics have referred to the impact of discursive or rhetorical practices that underpin or exacerbate this problem. For instance, Hella Jongerius and Louise Schouwenberg (2015) point out in their *Beyond the new manifesto*, that a major part of the contemporary marketing strategy is to consistently present an ethos of innovation. They deplore "the obsession with the New for the sake of the New" arguing that "newness for its own sake" can be interpreted as "an empty shell, which requires overblown rhetoric to fill it with meaning" (pp. 2-5). Similarly, Klaus Krippendorff (2006) refers to the "long term decay of culture and the environment" as a result of a design practice characterised by "[p]retentious semiotizations, inflating value through appearances, introducing insignificant differences [and] adding meaningless options" (p. 289). In such critiques, designers and marketers are charged with supporting the vast over-production of things by creating ill-justified promotional hype.

Throughout this paper, I respond to the above concerns by exploring, what I refer to as, the dialectical-rhetorical constitution of design trends. New design movements or trends often gain traction by being positioned as radical oppositions to what came before, or by utilising 'revolutionary rhetorics'. In other words, new design approaches that become significant stylistic movements tend to emphasise dialectical logics and utilise polemical rhetorics. A new style is thereby not only visually differentiated but also persuasively legitimated as radically superior. Such agonistic rhetorics are highly visible throughout art and design history, in myriad avant-garde movements and their manifestos for change.

This paper builds on a body of design studies literature that explores dialectical conceptions of design, and how conceptual tensions lead to dynamic design change or flux. From a 'static' dialectical position, a number of design theorists have commented on the nature of design as characterised by various 'tensions' or 'paradoxes' (Dorst, 2006; Reyburn, 2008; Schön, 1988). Others have explored how conceptual tensions in theories or philosophies of design, about what design ought to be and, by extension, what design products should look like, feature in historical design transitions. Paul Greenhalgh (1993), for instance, reflects on the starkly opposing views on design issues found throughout design history, explaining how "[d]epending on the writers one believes, the Industrial Revolution is either a blessing or a nightmare, […] popular culture is an alienating scourge or a vital element in the cultural structure, and decoration is indispensable and dispensable" (xviii). More recently, Anne Tomes and Peter Armstrong (2010) refer explicitly to the "dialectics of design" to interrogate not only how opposite positions are in tension, but how these tensions play out as fluctuating movements over time. In their study, *Dialectics of design: how ideas of 'good design' change,* Tomes and Armstrong (2010) offer observations on the dynamics

of design change, suggesting that any new conception of 'good design' tends to arise from a rejection of the values of the immediately preceding conception.

The above inquiries all identify oppositional or dialectical values as manifested throughout design history. But, as Helen Armstrong (2009, pp. 9;15) also notes, while the continuous movement between extremes was central in the development of modern *avant-garde* movements, they "remain crucial to contemporary critical and theoretical discussions of the field". In other words, while contemporary design trends are perhaps shorter-lived and less prominent than early twentieth-century design movements, they display similar kinds of dialectical logics.

This paper therefore sets out to illustrate how contemporary design trends continue to employ oppositional or agonistic manoeuvres, by drawing on perceived 'design dialectics'. By emphasising one design value over its previously-emphasised dialectical other, a new design trend can be rhetorically framed as the antidote to whatever is perceived as problematic or deficient in the mainstream. The new emphasis is achieved on both visual and verbal rhetorical levels. Visually, a new approach is more likely to garner mass attention if it appears starkly different from what exists. But in addition to this, as one sees in most prominent cultural movements or trends, the change or difference is also discursively legitimated and effectively promoted. This paper thus aims to augment an understanding of dialectical design change, as presented by Tomes and Armstrong, by offering a rhetorical perspective on this cultural dynamic. I therefore investigate how 'dialectical rhetorics' – such as 'ornamentation-versus-minimalism' and 'form-versus-function' – may be understood as resources whereby new design trends are constituted; that is, culturally reified through the persuasive justification and promotion of change.

To offer a contemporary illustration of the dialectical-rhetorical constitution of design trends, I refer to a prominent interface design trend that surfaced around 2012, namely the shift from 'skeuomorphic' or 'realistic' design aesthetics to 'Flat Design'. While there have been subsequent developments in interface design since, this particular instance serves as an effective case study for illustrating the persuasiveness of dialectical design rhetorics. In my analysis, I briefly explore how various common, or recurring, 'design dialectics' feature in the discourse surrounding 'Flat Design', while referencing similar arguments found throughout design history.

In the last section of the paper, I respond to some of the concerns regarding accelerated trend dynamics and aesthetic obsolescence by looking towards the work of cultural critic and rhetorical theorist, Kenneth Burke. Throughout his career, Burke was critical of capitalist ideology and industry, particularly in terms of how it produces harmful by-products such as unsustainable production, pollution and waste. Burke was also highly critical of polemical argumentation and extremism and through his dialectical method of criticism, he sought to nurture greater perspective-taking and the transcendence of divisive rhetorics. While this paper does not present an in-depth discussion of Burke's theories on dialectic and rhetoric, it considers Burke's overall dialectical-rhetorical approach to criticism, as providing suggestions on how to deal with the above concerns. More specifically, I refer to Burke's notion of 'comic framing' as well as the attitude of 'dialectical-rhetorical transcendence' – as interpreted by James Zappen (2009) – as possible means towards nurturing sustainable design values.

The dialectical-rhetorical constitution of design movements and trends

Stylistic design approaches are often framed in dialectical terms. In other words, a style often implies (and relies on) a counter-style. For instance, minimalist modernism was considered the opposite of decorative and ornamental aesthetics and found its identity

not as one stylistic alternative of many but as *the* alternative in polar opposition. While not all styles or movements will be characterised as polar opposites of others, the terms used to describe prominent movements are likely to draw on conceptual design polarities as a means to articulate particular visual characteristics in relation to others.

As mentioned previously, Anne Tomes and Peter Armstrong (2010) refer explicitly to the 'dialectics of design' in their interrogation of opposite design positions in tension, as well as how these tensions play out as fluctuating movements over time. They argue that "[w]hat appear to be design fundamentals at a given point in design history, […] are actually temporary points of stasis in a long term oscillation between relatively stable but opposed conceptions of virtue-in-design" (Tomes & Armstrong, 2010, p. 29). Tomes and Armstrong (2010, p.30) describe how any specific notion of 'good design' "tends to privilege certain virtues whilst neglecting or suppressing others. Because design can never satisfy all of its stakeholders, there is always the potential for a 'revolution' in which the virtues prioritized by an existing order are rejected in favour of those currently suppressed". They continue to explain how

> [e]ach era, each school of design, takes up a particular position […], and that position forms part of its idea of good design. Any position towards the extremes, however, involves a neglect, and sometimes an outright suppression, of the opposite pole of the compromise. Amongst those heavily involved in the production and consumption of design, the result is a simmering discontent with existing 'good design', which possesses the potential to explode in a dramatic change in taste and design practice, driven by manifesto in the name of the hitherto suppressed dimension of design virtue (Tomes & Armstrong, 2010, p. 38).

Tomes and Armstrong (2010) thus identify an ongoing dynamic: "a particular idea of 'good design' which crystallizes the priorities of school or era itself creates the discontents which eventually undermine it" (p. 38). This means that a new design movement will necessarily favour certain values at the expense of others, providing the

opportunity for a new movement to correct the imbalance, *ad infinitum*. Oscillations are further made possible through a kind of historical amnesia, insofar as designers tend to respond only to the immediate situation.

But while this process of design 'revolution' seems inevitable, it does not happen automatically. A new approach only becomes a widespread design movement through collective reinforcement or communal cultural reification. It is possible to argue that design trends only emerge and gain traction through a highly persuasive blend of visual-verbal rhetorical action. From this perspective, trends can be interpreted as highly mediated and discursively constructed, rhetorical products. Trends are a part of what Guy Julier (2008) refers to as 'design culture', which is enabled by "a complicated system of mediation and distribution" (p. 79). This 'culture of design' produces self-conscious or reflexive, meta-cultural products, whereby the relational, socio-cultural or symbolic value of products become more significant than functional use-value. In other words, the discursive rhetorics surrounding design objects impact how they are received and how they are taken up in the culture hierarchy.

As Julier notes, the 'culture of design' is produced collectively by a community of agents, including designers, marketers, design critics, curators and writers. Within such a network, the exact origins of design movements and trends are often hidden. However, while a widespread cultural trend may seem to emerge organically, it is constituted by deliberate kinds of discursive practices, including promotion and the creation of 'hype'. Visual and verbal rhetorical strategies here go hand-in-hand to mediate the reception and encourage widespread uptake, of a new design approach. These rhetorical strategies may be understood as dialectically-rooted, insofar as dialectical difference is emphasised and hierarchised. Through a process of visual and verbal dialectical antithesis, a new design approach is positioned not only as different

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but also as superior. In other words, dialectical difference enables the projection of newness, as well as the hierarchising of design value. In fashion industries, which tend to value symbolic or aesthetic features higher than instrumental or functional features, 'the new' is often valued simply for its own sake, or merely for being sufficiently dissimilar. However, in other design industries – such as interface design, which I explore in this paper – more value is placed on functionality or usability, which means more 'substantial', or function-related reasons are generally required to justify change. It is in this context that new design directions gain traction when they are positioned as solutions to functional, aesthetic or ethical deficiencies. This means that design 'innovations' or 'revolutions' are signalled by difference, but legitimated and valorised when framed as corrective solutions in direct opposition to previous ways of making.

It is worth pointing out that while the most prominent new trends are positioned as antithetical or revolutionary responses to the mainstream, another dialectical move may occasionally be observed in design practice and discourse. It is also possible for a new design approach to be framed as an 'evolution' or 'synthesis' when various design values are combined or bridged. Synthesis rhetorics can be remarkably persuasive in certain design contexts, where a combined approach that retains the 'best-of-both' is sensible. However, when it comes to stylistic design trends, the radically new tends to draw more attention and mass appeal. As Lanham (2006) points out, in our highly information-saturated environment, in-between positions do not attract the same level of attention as the oscillation between extremes.

From Skeuomorphism to Flat Design

In 2012, a popular new trend in interface design emerged, namely 'Flat Design'. It is possible to argue that 'Flat Design' became particularly prominent by exploiting the attention-gaining capabilities of antithetical and polemical rhetorics. 'Flat Design', as a

stylistic movement, is mostly framed in dialectical terms of what it *opposes* and *replaces*. Quite simply, 'Flat Design' is 'flat' in relation to what came before it: the realistic imitation of real-world objects and surfaces, or, the style that became known (in retrospect) as 'skeuomorphism'. Before proceeding to analyse how dialectical rhetorics feature in the discourse surrounding this aesthetic shift, I offer a brief overview of preceding visual interface design developments.

Since the first introduction of desktop computers in the early 1980s, graphic user interfaces (GUIs) were characterised by the use of physical and material metaphors. These metaphors, of which the ubiquitous 'desktop', 'folder' and 'trashcan' are common examples, served to make abstract digital functions more familiar and accessible to users, thereby assisting the adoption of new technology. As the graphics capabilities of computers and screens became more sophisticated, with more pixels and colours, interfaces became increasingly detailed and physical metaphors were more realistically rendered. It is worth pointing out that while all GUIs adopted this aesthetic approach, the technology giant, Apple, was seen as the design leader on the interface design front. That is, until the 'Flat Design' revolution happened.

In 2012, Microsoft ushered in the so-called 'Flat Design interface revolution', with the launch of their Windows 8 operating system. While Microsoft's new design language, known as 'Metro', was introduced as early as 2010, on the Windows Phone 7 (Figure 1, right), it only received widespread attention after Windows 8. It is easy to identify the stark visual difference between the highly detailed icons of the Windows Mobile 6.5 interface and the modular and minimalist Windows Phone 7 interface (Figure 1). And this difference may, in itself, be considered a valuable innovation. However, I believe that in order to understand the persuasive appeal of 'Metro' in

bringing about an 'interface revolution', one must look more closely at the discursive rhetorics surrounding its inception and promotion.

Figure 1: Left: Windows Mobile 6.5 interface (Kumparak, 2009); Right: Windows Phone 7 'Metro' interface (Microsoft, 2010).

While Microsoft does not state explicitly that 'Metro' is meant to compete with the interfaces of Apple and Google, it is clear that they intended to introduce a radically different design approach that could be considered "uniquely Microsoft" (Greene 2012). One of the key team leaders on 'Metro', Bill Flora, described it as "fresh" simply because "it wasn't Apple" (Greene 2012). However, the promotional language employed in describing Microsoft's 'Metro' features more 'substantial' design motives for change. These discursive motives strongly resemble modernist utopian agendas, such as those found in design manifestos of the early twentieth century. For instance, in their design system guide, Microsoft (2011) describes their new design language as

follows: "We call it Metro because it's Modern and it's clean. It's fast and in motion. It's about content and typography. And it's entirely authentic" (p. 10). Furthermore, Microsoft explicitly references modernist design ideologies as inspiration for 'Metro'. According to Samuel Moreau (2011), Microsoft's Director of UX Design and Research, two key influences include "Modern design – Bauhaus", which reduces design to its essence, and "International Typographic Style – Swiss Design", which he describes as "clear, honest and beautiful". 'Metro' was thus described as a 'revolution' at Microsoft and was presented as an overall design 'ethos', whereby a set of design principles, based on conventional design philosophies could be applied across all Microsoft's service offerings (Greene 2012).

As Microsoft's 'Metro' gained more widespread attention in the design community and many others adopted the style, it became known simply as 'Flat Design'. By mid-2013, amidst much controversy, even Apple overhauled their interface aesthetic to follow the flat trend (Figure 2). While all GUIs prior to 'Metro' utilised material surface effects and finishes such as textures, shadows and reflections, Apple was particularly harshly criticised for their over-the-top skeuomorphic effects, such as the faux-leather texture and 'stitching' treatment of the iOS Notebook application. Apple's move towards a more flat aesthetic thus reflected the widespread denunciation of interface 'realism' or 'skeuomorphism'. As Austin Carr (2012) explains, 'skeuomorphism' become "a catch-all term for when objects retain ornamental elements of past, derivative iterations – elements that are no longer necessary to the current objects' functions". However, it is worth reiterating that before the emergence of 'Flat Design', the term 'skeuomorphism' was never used in the context of digital interfaces. In true dialectical form, 'skeuomorphism' was only recognised and articulated in the emergence of its antithesis.

Figure 2: Left: iOS 6 skeuomorphic interface; Right: iOS 7 flat interface (Kettlewell, 2017).

While 'Flat Design' as a movement was highly influential in interface design as well as other areas of design practice, it has not gone without criticism. Debates about the role and use of material metaphors for digital interfaces, as well as the value of decorative effects, have continued. For instance, while some perceived 'skeuomorphism' as an outdated approach in a technologically-savvy society, others maintained that the imitation of physical materiality aids usability and enhances visual appeal. It is under these conditions that Google updated their interface design language in 2014, referred to as 'Material Design'. Google's response can be interpreted as a reconciliation or dialectical synthesis of the previous two contrasting approaches.

'Material Design' retains much of the minimalist flat aesthetic, while re-introducing subtly 'skeuomorphic' spatial metaphors, gradients and textures. Alongside 'Material Design' a widespread tendency emerged towards designing slightly less flat interfaces, referred to as 'Flat 2.0'. As the name 'Flat 2.0' suggests, the approach is an iteration of an existing movement and is therefore also described as "an evolution, not a revolution" (Cao, 2015). It is worth noting that while 'Flat 2.0' discourses present compelling arguments about enhanced usability, as a design trend it has not garnered nearly as much hype as the initial 'Flat Design' revolution. As discussed previously, this may be due to the highly persuasive nature of 'revolutionary rhetoric' which is clearly signalled by stark visual difference and justified on the basis of dialectical antithesis.

In what follows, I unpack a number of common 'design dialectics' as they feature in the rhetorics (both the visual aesthetic treatment and verbal discourse) surrounding Microsoft's 'Metro' design language and the subsequent interface design shift from 'skeuomorphism' to 'Flat Design'. Insofar as design and technology journalists and bloggers are highly influential mediators and 'co-creators' of trends, I refer to their descriptions of 'Metro' and 'Flat Design' throughout. The extent to which these dialectical positions may be considered perennial rhetorical tropes is illustrated by briefly referring to related historical design debates. I aim to show not only how design dialectics feature in design arguments for change, but also how various counter-arguments have challenged the legitimacy of these dialectical divisions.

The dialectical rhetorics of 'Flat Design'

Both Microsoft 'Metro' and the 'Flat Design' movement more broadly, are explicitly described as 'revolutionary'. Such framing is highly compelling and relates to the widespread current appreciation of technological 'innovation'. This powerful motive is a continuation of the continuous drive towards the *avant-garde,* seen throughout visual

art and design history. Revolutionary and innovation rhetorics emphasise radical change as imaginative and creative act, associated with an ethos of future-oriented optimism and valiant risk-taking. This ethos is reflected in the statement by Microsoft's Steven Sinofsky (2011), when developing Windows 8: "we took a step back and we said, what's the boldest thing we could say? And what we said is we're going to reimagine Windows. […] Windows 8 reimagines what Windows can be".

In addition to utilising highly persuasive 'god-terms' such as 'innovation' or 'revolution', the previous aesthetic approach is also framed as old-fashioned or backward-looking. For instance, Moreau (2011) refers to the previous interface icons as "relics of yesterday" and "antiquated". Proponents of the 'flat' style thus critique skeuomorphism for being "nostalgically rendered" in how it clings unnecessarily to traditional material metaphors (Baraniuk, 2012). As mentioned previously, 'skeuomorphism' became a negatively loaded concept primarily associated with Apple, and, as a result Apple's reputation as innovator and trendsetter was tarnished. Much of the industry controversy surrounding 'Metro' and 'Flat Design' emphasised the unexpected reversal of Microsoft and Apple's roles. Nick Bilton (2013) describes how Microsoft, the usual "arbiter of uncool" became the new design trendsetter, "a few years ahead of the rest of the technology and user interface industry". Apple was further characterised as 'anti-innovative' by following an evolutionary design process. For instance, Dieter Bohn, Aaron Souppouris and Dan Seifert (2013) argue that the "progression of [Apple's] iOS has been a steady drumbeat of new features that often felt inevitable". In such discussions, the 'evolutionary' design process is framed as predictable and lacking design intent. It is associated with an absence of risk, which further implies creative cowardice or laziness. 'Flat Design' is thus framed as a welcome antidote insofar as it makes a daring creative leap. The irony, of course, is that

Microsoft clearly acknowledged its look towards the past for inspiration, in the philosophy of the Bauhaus. However, neither 'Metro' nor 'Flat Design' are criticised for being backwards, reflecting the manner in which early twentieth-century modernism seems to remain perpetually contemporary.

Another reiteration of modernist rhetoric in the 'Flat Design' debate relates to the preference of minimalism over ornamentation. 'Metro' is described as "[c]lean, light, open, and fast: it is visually distinctive, contains ample white space, reduces clutter and elevates typography as a key design element" (Microsoft, 2010, p. 11). As part of this line of argumentation, clean, simple and uncluttered design is associated with material honesty or authenticity. Microsoft (2011) encourages developers as follows: "Let's be honest. It is what it is. Let's be authentic. After all, our hardware is naturally simple and modern. No decoration, no ornamentation, no need" (pp. 15-6). Microsoft (2010, p. 13) further discouraged developers from mimicking real-world objects or interactions when utilizing metaphors. These appeals to 'material honesty' and 'authenticity' are clearly persuasive. As Walter Naeslund (2011) echoes, 'Metro' is "*true in what it is*. While Apple goes the realism-route mimicking reality with wooden bookshelves and fake paper notebooks, Microsoft lets digital be digital. […] It's honest, and honesty is cool".

The above argument utilized by Microsoft also features prominently throughout the discourse surrounding 'Flat Design'. Stylistic justifications draw on the same notions of purity, transparency and minimalist functionality. According to Hobbs (2012), 'Flat Design' is perceived as materially authentic, because "pixels are treated as pixels". Similarly, Carr (2014) refers to the ethos of the 'Flat Design' movement, as influenced by the Bauhaus philosophy, as reflected in how "materials [are] treated in ways that speak to their essential nature". However, while the flat, blocky areas of

colour are, to some extent, reminiscent of more rudimentary pixel graphics, it is debatable whether this treatment is truly more 'authentically digital'. Nonetheless, the argument that 'Flat Design' is more true to digital substance has gained considerable traction. This makes more sense when considering what 'Flat Design' claims to negate or reject, namely, the imitative, ornamental aesthetics of skeuomorphism. In other words, the material integrity of 'Flat Design' is only recognisable and intelligible in dialectical relation to the perceived superfluous and 'fake' decorative effects of skeuomorphism.

The highly persuasive 'minimalism-as-authenticity' argument can be interpreted as a reiteration of Adolf Loos' well-known modernist credo, "ornament is crime". For Loos, a shifting aesthetic preference towards abstraction and minimalism was a clear sign of evolving civilization, visual literacy and design sophistication. Modernist aesthetics is underpinned by the philosophy that only that which is 'pure' or 'essential' to the medium should feature, with all else relegated as 'mere decoration'. Various modernist design manifestos and aphorisms reflect this search for the highest, purest ideal for design practice. A commonly cited example is *The Crystal Goblet* typographic treatise by Beatrice Warde (1955), which argues that typography should be as 'invisible' as possible, to allow for the neutral transfer of content. Warde's vision for typography as purely functional and perfectly efficient vehicle for content is clearly reflected in the discourse surrounding 'Metro'. For instance, Microsoft (2010) describes how 'Metro' emphasizes "content, not chrome" (p. 10). The 'chrome', or "the frame that separates one app from another on a screen", is removed because Microsoft realized "that the decoration around the app detracts from the experience of using the program" (Greene 2012). According to Microsoft (2011), "content should be elevated, and everything else should be minimized […] Simple as that" (p. 20).

It is possible to relate the above arguments with the perennial 'style-vs-substance' dialectic, insofar as it reflects the notion that style is a superficial, surface concern and therefore devoid of substance. It is worth pointing out that a similar charge against 'insubstantial form' or 'shallow style' is often found in relation to rhetoric in general. Both design and rhetoric are highly concerned with 'form' (albeit the functional value of form) and this concern is seen as in direct conflict with more functional or instrumental concerns. As Richard Lanham (2006) explains, "[i]n our common conversation, style and substance are contending opposites. The more of one, the less of the other" (p. 254). A clear distinction is thus made between matter (function or content) and manner (form or rhetoric) and to display a concern for the latter is often treated with suspicion. It is from this perspective that 'rhetoric' becomes a synonym for deception. We tend to "distrust self-conscious ornament, artifice that shows" (Lanham, 2006, p. 138). Similarly, 'skeuomorphic' design is mistrusted for being too preoccupied with superficial formal appeal, whereas 'Flat Design' is praised for emphasising optimal functionality.

This brings us to the interrelated dialectic of 'form-versus-function'. The argument that emerges here can again be seen as a contemporary manifestation of arguments by modernists such as Louis Sullivan (with his credo "form follows function"). 'Flat Design' capitalises on a powerful visual rhetorical convention whereby modern minimalism is automatically associated with greater functionality. However, it is important to point out the flawed logic in this argument. Windows 8, as well as other 'Flat Design' interfaces, were not experienced as nearly as functional or usable as they claimed to be. Historically, it is not uncommon for 'purely functional' modernism to be experienced as quite 'dysfunctional'. Barry Brummett (2008) explains how modernist

aesthetics is based on the "myth of functional form" (p. 16), where the rhetorical appearance of 'functionality', *via* minimalism, is more important than actual use-value.

The awareness of such dysfunctions ushered in an era of postmodern design aimed at correcting overemphasised dialectical positions. For instance, the postmodern deconstructionists of the 1990s subverted the modernist vision of 'purely objective' or 'neutral' typography. Similarly, Robert Venturi rejected the well-known aphorism "less is more", by claiming that "less is a bore". Many designers and theorists have since challenged the clear dialectical divisions between form and function, style and substance. For instance, Steven Heller and Louise Fili (2006) argue that style *is* substance: "it is the content, the mechanism by which concepts are communicated and ideas are expressed" (p. 8). However, while postmodern design has subverted aesthetic ideologies and prescriptions, and the above dialectics have to a large extent been contested, this does not mean all design approaches and their rhetorical legitimations, are now equal. At least not at any particular moment in time. Quite simply, this would not make good design business sense. In practice, clear 'design dialectics', along with the rhetorical hierarchising of partial positions, allow for the continued, highly profitable oscillation of stylistic trends.

However, as mentioned previously, this dynamic has accelerated and become highly unsustainable. Aesthetic obsolescence, as exacerbated by persuasive design polemics, contributes greatly to the vast over-production and consumption of things. In what follows, I explore a potential response to this problem, as inspired by Kenneth Burke's dialectical-rhetorical approach to criticism.

Towards dialectical-rhetorical transcendence

Kenneth Burke's theories on dialectic and rhetoric are intertwined throughout his work. For Burke (1945; 1962), linguistic dialectics lead to both rhetorical possibility (different

ways of linguistic framing make argumentation possible), and rhetorical necessity (amidst difference and tension, argumentation becomes necessary in asserting a position and enabling identification). Furthermore, his intellectual project can be described as largely concerned with ameliorating the negative by-products of the dialectical-rhetorical situation: a situation in which only partial perspectives can be held, yet are frequently asserted as absolute truth and with great rhetorical force.

From a Burkean perspective, the agonistic rhetorical force of 'Flat Design' discourse may be interpreted in terms of associational, or motivational 'clusters' (Burke, 1937; 1941). 'Flat Design' arguments make use of a variety of persuasive terminologies, which may be organized into two main clusters. In the 'god-term cluster', 'Flat Design' justifications are characterized by highly persuasive descriptors, such as 'revolution', 'innovation', 'authenticity' and 'functionality'. In the 'devil-term cluster', the discourse demonizes the previous skeuomorphic aesthetic as 'antiquated' and 'nostalgic' by emphasizing 'ornamentation' and 'form' or 'surface'. Throughout the debate, the design concepts or values in these two clusters are placed in opposition and treated as incompatible. However, such 'either/or' divisions can be challenged. For instance, the 'form-versus-function' dialectic may be transcended when form is understood as a significant contributor to functionality. Such an attitude, whereby the 'both/and' validity of dialectical positions can be considered, is an important virtue for Burke.

Throughout his career, Burke seeks to nurture an attitude of greater dialectical-rhetorical awareness, to defuse partisan or polemical rhetorics by acknowledging the dialectical nature of symbolic reality as well as the inevitable limitations of any particular rhetorical perspective. Burke aims to highlight how any perspective is but one of many 'different voices' in the larger dialogue. He explains how, in any dialectic,

none of the participating 'sub-perspectives' can be treated as either precisely right or precisely wrong. They are all voices, or personalities, or positions, integrally affecting one another. When the dialectic is properly formed, they are the number of characters needed to produce the total development" (Burke, 1945, p. 512).

Burke's (1941) 'unending conversation' metaphor – where one arrives late to the party, debates enthusiastically, but departs "with the discussion still vigorously in progress" (pp. 110-1) – also serves to illustrate how any argument is situated in a fraction of the larger historical scenario. For Burke, this realisation should encourage greater perspectival humility. Burke (1937) therefore encourages a critical process of 'discounting' insofar as it offers an alternative to the process of 'debunking', which he finds problematic. To 'debunk' a particular perspective simply leads to the assertion of some supposedly 'correct' or superior position, which will necessarily also be faulty in its limitation. Burke thus encourages a practice of 'discounting' all perspectives, including one's own.

James Zappen (2009) devises the holistic term, *dialectical-rhetorical transcendence,* to describe how Burke's dialectical method, combined with his rhetorical insight, leads to an approach that seeks to "encompass a diversity of individual voices in larger unities that preserve, but transcend, any one of them" (p. 281). Through dialectical-rhetorical transcendence, common ground between different perspectives is highlighted and differences become de-emphasised. This does not mean differences disappear, but rather that arguments based on difference become less powerful. Zappen (2009) describes the aim of this approach as neither "to exacerbate or to eradicate differences through the exercise of more persuasion (or mere persuasion)" (p. 297).

In light of the above, a linguistic education as promoted by Burke may allow for a different attitude towards design trends to be adopted. From a dialectical/dialogical

perspective, one can recognise any particular design response or trend as but a limited perspective in an ongoing conversation. In other words, a greater temporal awareness of design dialectics may assist both designers and consumers in developing broader perspectives and perhaps more responsible, modest or less extreme actions. A dialectical-rhetorical transcendence of design trends would thus entail a unified consideration of opposing design perspectives, towards disarming or deflating highly persuasive trend rhetorics. In such a way, similarities and common tendencies are identified, while particular stylistic differences are minimised, in order to gain insight into the cultural phenomenon 'in general'. To some extent, this paper attempts such a dialectical manoeuvre, by collectively framing various stylistic approaches in terms of a higher level category, namely 'trends'. In what follows, I present a more concrete example of dialectical-rhetorical transcendence, where the 'skeuomorphism'-vs-'Flat Design' debate is defused by employing, what can be interpreted as a Burkean 'comic frame'.

In the promotional animation and interactive game, *Flat Design vs. Realism* (Figure 3) created by the design agency InTacto, I identify a deliberate and strategic attempt at re-framing and transcendence. The drama depicted in this narrative mirrors the design community's debate surrounding the stylistic shift from skeuomorphic to flat aesthetics, but it also clearly serves as a critique. In the promo, the 'skeuomorphism' (realistic design) and 'Flat Design' movements are humorously personified as characters in streetfighter-style combat. The Realism character is depicted as an evil king who "dominated the world of digital design… an empire based on realistic textures, luminosity and ostentatious effects!" 'Flat Design' is depicted as a hipster-style revolutionary; "a rationalist leader… [who] imagined that the design of that world could be changed…".
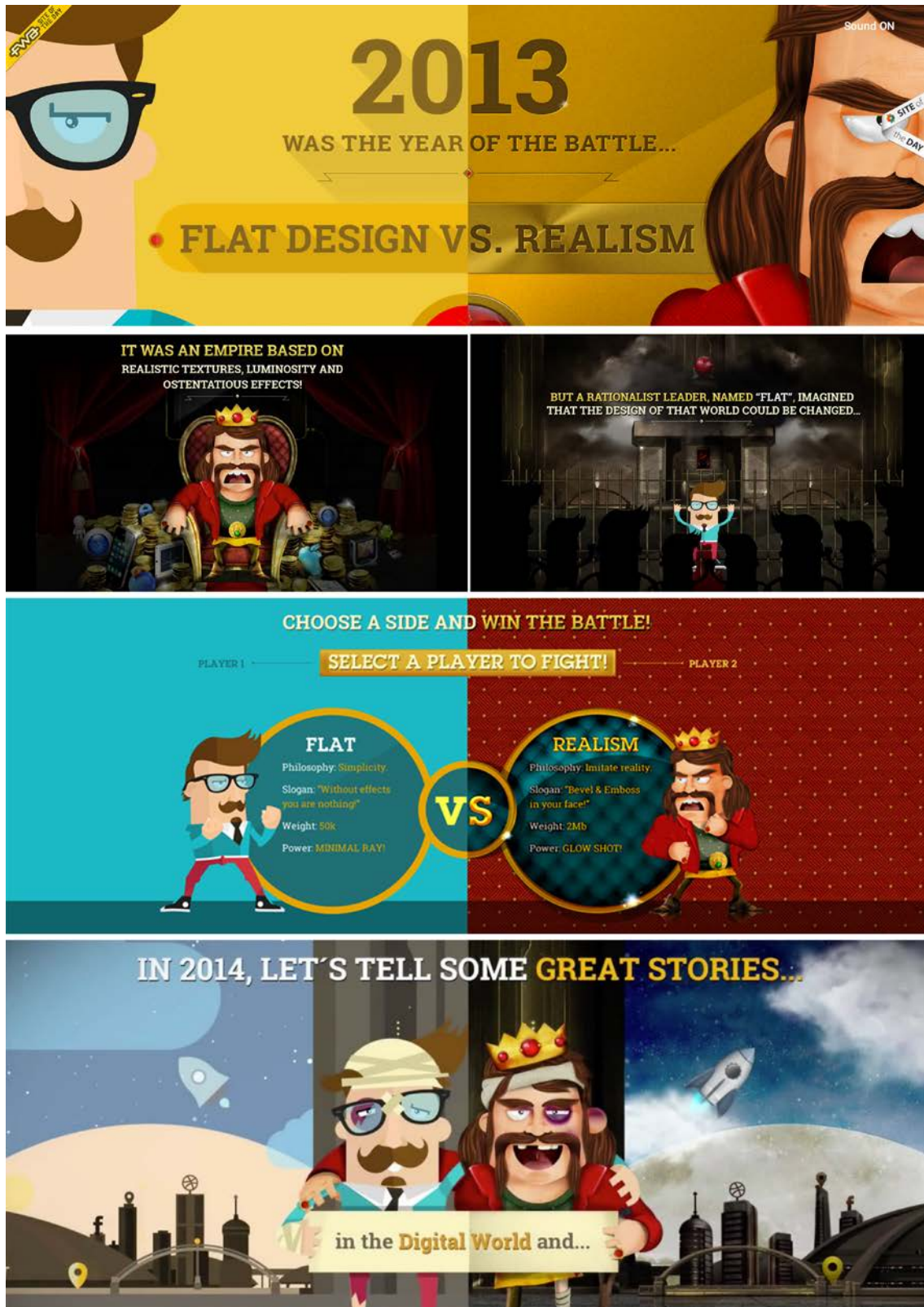
Figure 3: Flat Design vs. Realism [Interactive game]. (InTacto, 2013). Screenshots by author.

After playing the game, InTacto reveals their promotional intention *via* a closing statement: "It doesn't matter what style wins… because we like both flat and realistic design… But what we like most of all are awesome stories. In 2014, let's tell some great stories… in the digital world and… in real life…". The promo thus reflects how designers tend to employ polemical rhetorics and aims to show how transcendence is not only possible, but preferable.

I have chosen InTacto's promo as an example of trend transcendence because it also illustrates one of Burke's suggested methods for dialectical critique, namely 'comic framing'. Burke explains how the comic frame offers a way of interpreting "human antics as a comedy, albeit as a comedy ever on the verge of the most disastrous tragedy" (1937, p.vii). For Burke, the power of a comic corrective lies in how it contains "two-way attributes lacking in polemical, one-way approaches" and how it "is neither wholly euphemistic, nor wholly debunking – hence it provides the charitable attitude towards people that is required for purposes of persuasion and co-operation" (1937, p.166).

Herbert Simons (2009) describes comic framing as a "reconciliatory dialectics" and interprets Burke's notion of 'comedy' as the antithesis to 'melodrama'. Melodramatic storytelling is, according to Simons, characterised by "its excessive simplicity. All good on one side, all evil on the other. No in-betweens". Gregory Desilet and Edward C Appel (2011) similarly describe how "[m]elodrama aligns conflict according to highly polarized, value-weighted extremes consistent with traditionally clear dichotomies between good and evil, right and wrong, innocent and guilty" (p. 347). Melodramatic framing is appealing "precisely because of its clarity and simplicity", but problematic because it oversimplifies and vilifies other positions (Desilet & Appel 2011, p. 348). Melodramatic framing is thus characterised by overblown praise and unwarranted scapegoating, with little nuance to capture the

complexity of reality. It is for this reason that Simons (2009) describes melodrama as the "enemy of understanding, including self-understanding". Comic framing offers an alternative by enabling "people *to be observers of themselves, while acting*. Its ultimate would not be *passiveness*, but *maximum consciousness*. One would 'transcend' himself by noting his own foibles" (Burke 1937, p.171).

The InTacto promo may be considered a 'comic frame' insofar as it exposes designers' tendency to make overblown rhetorical claims. It pokes fun at the absurd intensity of the design debate, without 'debunking' any particular position. As a satirical critique, it highlights the melodramatic nature of the design debate, thus questioning the problematic logic of valorising any design style as 'ultimate' solution – but it does so without scapegoating any particular style or shaming any particular participant. Furthermore, the genius of this particular meta-critical design product lies in how it capitalises on trend transcendence, as part of a promotional strategy. InTacto is presented as highly reflective in their ability to transcend the debate by drawing attention to similarities or shared motives between different stylistic movements. They imply that instead of getting caught up in the debate, they choose to focus on more important design goals. From this perspective, the projection of 'transcendence' may itself be utilised as a rhetorical resource. This reflects Burke's (1945) recommendation to develop a 'critical-appreciative' attitude towards rhetoric, whereby through the study, appreciation and more nuanced application of rhetorical mechanisms, we can work towards more virtuous communication.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I aimed to show how design trends are dialectically and rhetorically constituted. I have argued that a number of persistent conceptual tensions or 'design dialectics' allow for competing ideas regarding 'good design' to emerge, and

thus offer a resource for dialectical-rhetorical oscillation. To illustrate this dynamic, I explored the dialectical rhetorics surrounding a recent shift in interface design aesthetics, from 'skeuomorphism' to 'Flat Design'. While the emergence of 'Flat Design' has been traced to a specific creative origin in Microsoft's 'Metro', I aimed to show how, as a movement, it gained attention and momentum through effective rhetorical mediation in the larger 'culture of design'. I further argued that the 'Flat Design' trend gained traction by exploiting the rhetorical power of revolutionary antithesis, both visually (by appearing starkly different) and discursively (by offering justifications based on the rejection or *correction* of 'skeuomorphism'). I identified the main dialectical rhetorics in the above case study as 'revolution-vs-evolution', 'ornamentation-vs-minimalism', 'style-vs-substance' and 'form-versus-function'. These dialectical pairs are frequently evoked in the motivations surrounding shifting design trends, as I aimed to show by referencing historical design examples. For instance, at various points throughout design history, 'functionality' was considered the superior value in the form-versus-function dialectic. However, as an unavoidably partial position that underplays the value of form, it has always remained open to critique and therefore subject to change. I have thus argued that an understanding of the presence of dialectical values in design theory and praxis helps to explain why opposing and conflicting views, on what design ought to be, continue to play out through fluctuating trends.

Trend rhetorics shape designers' practice and perpetuate consumer demand for the new. I have argued that highly persuasive polemical trend communications contribute towards unsustainable design production and consumption and that greater dialectical-rhetorical awareness could help to ameliorate this situation. While dialectical-rhetorical transcendence won't put an end to the perpetual oscillation of design trends, it might reduce the extremism of trend rhetorics, reduce the anxiety

associated with trend adoption, and thereby assist in some way towards increasing the longevity of products.

In closing, it is important to acknowledge that Burke's original critique, as well as his vision for critical re-framing, were developed in reaction to a deeply entrenched modernist worldview in need of 'discounting'. For Burke, absolute positions or dogmatisms need to be continually challenged, and art fulfils this role in society to challenge the *status quo* (1931, p. 104-5). From this perspective, fluctuating design trends seem to offer aesthetic reactions against established conventions and could be considered valuable acts of re-framing. However, the continuous change, as seen in accelerated trend dynamics, is arguably not the re-framing Burke had in mind. As Ross Wolin (2001, p. 58) argues, "Burke supports the cult of vacillation as a counterpart of the cult of the absolute; vacillate when faced with absolutes, not for the sake of vacillation itself. They are not separate choices for Burke, but a dialectical pair in which vacillation is a response to absolutism".

Today, rapid change may be considered the new 'absolute' worth challenging. It is for this reason that the overarching trend logic, associated with the endless drive for design innovation and revolution, needs to be questioned. The manner in which contemporary trend rhetorics (much like contemporary politics) employ melodramatic framing is highly effective by offering simplistic and confident arguments for 'good' or against 'bad' design. But this often involves the unwarranted scapegoating of a preceding design aesthetic. This dynamic is problematic not only because it encourages the premature discarding of functional products due to perceived aesthetic obsolescence, but it deflects attention away from the more complex, underlying reality that no design product or stylistic aesthetic can offer a 'perfect' solution. In other words, melodramatic

trend rhetorics lack a nuanced perspective on the inevitable limitations of any particular design approach, thereby setting up unrealistic expectations and inevitable discontent.

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