

HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

In January of 1990, the *Houston Business Journal* recognized Steven Sessions as an industry leader at the forefront of the emerging computer technology and its application in the design field. Laurel Calkins interviewed him on the subject and it was published in February of 1990

TEXT OF INTERVIEW January 5, 1990

HBJ: Steven Sessions is one of Houston's premier graphic designers

His work has won many national awards, including top honors from the American Advertising Federation, the American Institute of Graphics Arts, the International Association of Business Communicators, the New York Art Directors Club, the *Financial World* Annual Report Competition and the Society for Typographic Arts

In 1989 alone, Sessions was awarded one of only five gold medals presented by the Houston Art Directors Club, received the annual Creativity Award from *Art Direction* magazine, had his work selected for the ninth year in a row for inclusion in *Print* magazine's Design Annual, and received a special "Best Ad of the Decade of the 70's" award from the Houston Advertising Federation for the very first ad he ever produced -- a black and white ad created for the American Heart Association

In 1989, he also radically changed the way he did business. Investing more than \$80,000.00 in computer equipment and bringing to his design studio the technical expertise and creative talent of Graphic Designer Michel Godts, Sessions plunged into the world of computer graphics. In the following interview, we explore with Sessions and Godts how "state of the art" computer technology has extended the boundaries of graphic design.

HBJ: Computer graphics have been available for almost a decade. Why did you decide that now was the time to introduce this capability in your work?

Sessions: I think I realized years ago the tremendous potential of the computer in graphic design. But until very recently, it was simply that --potential. Three important problems had to be resolved before a truly practical application was possible: system development, output capability and speed. Lately, there have been quantum advances in both hardware and software, giving knowledgeable users a tremendous range of typographic, illustrative and page layout capabilities

HBJ: How are software and hardware advances related?

Sessions: I remember reading once that the development of the skyscraper was predicated on the development of advanced hydraulics for elevators -- there wasn't much sense in building a ninety story building if people had to climb stairs to get to the top floors. Imagine the tremendous power that's now contained in a small unit like a PC, the ability to assemble and integrate literally millions of bits of information. But that power is virtually worthless to a designer unless there is software in place which allows him to direct that power in very specific ways, to the completion of specific tasks. As a graphic designer, my hat is off to both the system designers and the computer programmers for having developed such wonderful tools

HBJ: Is that how you view these computer graphics capabilities -- as tools?

Sessions: Fundamentally, yes. In the same way that a poorly written novel does not become a masterpiece simply because it's generated on a word processor, bad design won't get better just because it's created on a computer. On the other hand, I assume that actually producing a manuscript becomes easier if the word processor has a built-in spell checker and thesaurus, block editing capabilities and similar tools

Perhaps a better analogy is that of a fighter plane and an ace pilot. Pilots need to be technically competent in order to operate the jet, and they have to understand the principals of aerodynamics. But there are those special pilots who have an intuitive sense not about planes but about flying, for whom the plane itself is both an extension and an expression of themselves. Technical competence with the hardware and software is merely a prerequisite, as is an understanding of the principals of design. Good design comes "out of the computer" only when good design is going "into the computer", and that's part of the creative process

HBJ: Specifically, what are the advantages of computers in graphic design?

Sessions: Basically, I think there are three advantages

In the first place, the technology gives the designer greater control over the finished product. For example, typesetting and film assembly are now in the hands of the designer, where they should be. Camera-ready art is a diskette; four color process film can be produced electronically, in position with registration marks, etc. The correct line screens, angles and type can be produced according to a publication's specific requirements

Secondly, "what if" questions are easily and inexpensively answered. What if we move this design element slightly to the left? What if we choose this specific color over that color? What if we use these typefaces rather than those? In the past, the graphic designer had to either rely exclusively on his imagination or produce a series of hand-made (hence, time-consuming) layouts to answer these questions. Now, with a movement of a mouse, you have the answer! Finally -- and this is tied into the first two points -- the designer can produce work in a more timely manner and less expensively for his clients. And, since ours is a business typically involving tight deadlines, to the extent that he can do more in less time, he's probably doing better work as well

HBJ: Where does the technology go from here? Godts: That's a very difficult question. Who would have imagined in the Sixties, when a "computer" filled a room, that the very same capacity would be sitting on a desktop today? Certainly there will be advances in storage capacity, probably through the further development of compact disks for computers. Image files -- pictures generated on the computer or scanned photographs, for example -- take up a great deal of memory, so memory will have to be greatly expanded

Output of printed images will continue to improve dramatically, as it already has in the form of output on high resolution monitors

Perhaps most significantly, the designer will be more involved in pure design and less in specific application

Sessions: Certainly what we have witnessed in the last few years is an integration of communications media. Telephone lines are used as much to transfer data as they are for conversation; the high resolution computer monitors that Michel refers to will impact the development of tomorrow's television screens; computers and videos are becoming closely inter-related. As a result, new media will rapidly emerge to replace or supplement the old.

Who knows? Tomorrow's homes may very well have "holographic television sets"; art galleries may one day hang "live computer art", billboards may become gigantic monitors. Whatever the specific application, tremendous opportunities and creative challenges are just around the corner for the graphic designer. It is, truly, a brave new world, and it's exciting to be part of it

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