

ASK THE HOMEGURRRR!



Outstanding Web Magazine

BY LYNDA WEINMAN

Excerpted and edited with permission from Lynda Weinman's newest book on Web design, <deconstructing web graphics.2>, published by New Riders Publishing and distributed in Canada by Prentice-Hall.



@TLAS IS A NON-COMMERCIAL, WEB-BASED MAGAZINE THAT showcases photography, multimedia, design, and using the web to its best advantage. The publication is devoted to growing with technology and showing the world what can be done with new tools, making art for art's sake. @tlas shuns commercialism, predictability, and the clichés of digital art.

The three partners of @tlas are a synergistic and unlikely match. Creative Director Olivier Laude is an extroverted photojournalist who loves to put people and ideas together. He is the glue that holds @tlas together; it was his idea to assemble the team, and he works as a producer/editor/motivator on many of their projects. Michael Macrone is a successful author who makes his living writing about Shakespeare, classical literature, mythology, the Bible and programs the @tlas web site in his alleged spare time. Amy Franceschini was trained as a photographer, though her digital illustration and collage work on @tlas has garnered her assignments from THE NEW YORK TIMES and MSNBC.

What is most striking about the team, aside from their obvious abundance of talent, is their devotion to artistic integrity. A key part of the synergy of their partnership is their ability to be self-critical and pound hard on the pixels and each other (with the deepest respect, of course!). They don't get paid for their work on @tlas, though attention to their site has brought them paying web design projects from Nike, Autodesk, and Live Picture.

It's one thing to say you're going to create something outside of the box and

another to actually achieve true originality. @tlas is unlike anything else on the web, and even though much of what you'll find there might have no apparent purpose other than to surprise, disturb, or inspire, it is exciting that someone on the web is motivated by sheer experimentation and the challenge of a new medium.

@tlas

<http://www.atlasmagazine.com>

@tlas is the only site that we chose to review both in the original *Deconstructing Web Graphics* and its sequel. With each new issue of @tlas the site keeps changing, evolving, taking new risks, and demonstrating new ways to use technology artistically. The site is created from the heart (and for free) by three exceptionally talented individuals: Olivier Laude, Michael Macrone, and Amy Franceschini. This Homegurrrl installment will showcase their work with photography, graphics, Dynamic HTML, and creative uses of the web.

Web Design Firm: @tlas
Client: @tlas Magazine
Type of Site: Editorial: (photojournalism and multimedia)
Original URL: <http://www.atlasmagazine.com/>
Server: Sun Netra
Server Software: Netscape FastTrack Server 3.01
Producers: Olivier Laude, Amy Franceschini, Michael Macrone
Webmaster: Michael Macrone
Programmer: Michael Macrone
Art Director: Amy Franceschini
Creative Director: Olivier Laude
Development and Production Platform: Apple Macintosh
Design Software: Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator, Infini-D, BBEedit, Macromedia Dreamweaver, BoxTop GIFMation

CREATIVE PROCESS

It's hard to get a straight answer from any of the @tlas team about who originated which ideas. What becomes apparent is that they all have ideas and talents, and that the object in a brainstorming session is not the ownership of the idea, but the strength of the idea.

The answer to what drives @tlas — technology or art — is blurry. Sometimes the approach is that a new technology looks really cool and they examine what to do with it. Other times the opposite tack is taken, where really cool artwork finds a home with the appropriate technology.

"Michael usually gets really excited about something new, like DHTML," Amy related, "and my first response is often to think it's really lame. Then I go home and my brain sticks like a broken record on the capabilities of what he described to me. Even if my first response is to dismiss it, I almost always rise to the occasion and present Michael with something visually compelling with which to test the new feature. Michael is like a kid in a candy store when it comes to a new browser or programming features. He is so amazing. There is virtually nothing I can present to him that he won't figure out a way to make happen."

One thing is apparent when interviewing this team: They all mutually respect each other's ideas and talents and enjoy working together. The work is often frustrating, and real-world issues like paying rent are not absent, but the rewards on this site are creative, not monetary.

@TLAS LOOK AND FEEL

@tlas' sole designer, Amy Franceschini, was surrounded by artists as a child. Her stepfather was a concrete poet (a style of poetry popularized by the dada movement, which creates visuals out of words and typography) who put out an international biannual magazine of mail art and poetry called KALDRON. She remembers receiving a daily stack of submissions from around the world, which she would beg to steal for the walls of her bedroom. Her birth mother and father were very visual people, so she was introduced to different ways of seeing at an early age.

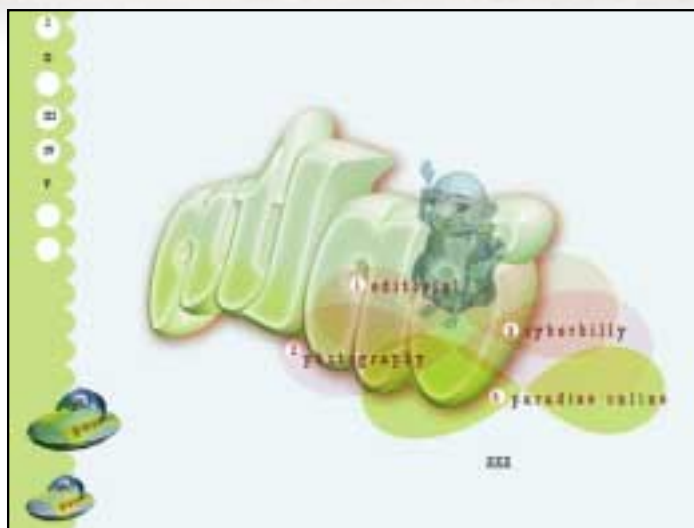
Amy studied photography at San Francisco State's art department from 1990 to 1992. She credits this experience as "invaluable." During art school, she learned about how to capture an emotion or a moment in time and how to tell a visual story. After receiving her degree, she floundered around and eventually got an internship at a small photography magazine called PHOTOMETRO. She worked under the guidance of Henry Brimmer, a designer who graduated from Ulm Design School in Germany. She worked closely with Henry for seven months, reviewing portfolio submissions, editing work, laying out pages, and scanning. She worked in exchange for computer classes, while support-ing herself as a waitress and saving for her own computer.

While learning to use *Photoshop*, *Illustrator*, and *Quark*,

Amy was immediately struck that she had finally found the tools to express her ideas in totality. "People at the magazine would look over my shoulder and say 'you're such a good designer,'" she remembers. It was as if she had found the right vehicle for her work, and the outside world gave her immediate confirmation of that truth.

@TLAS LOGO DESIGN

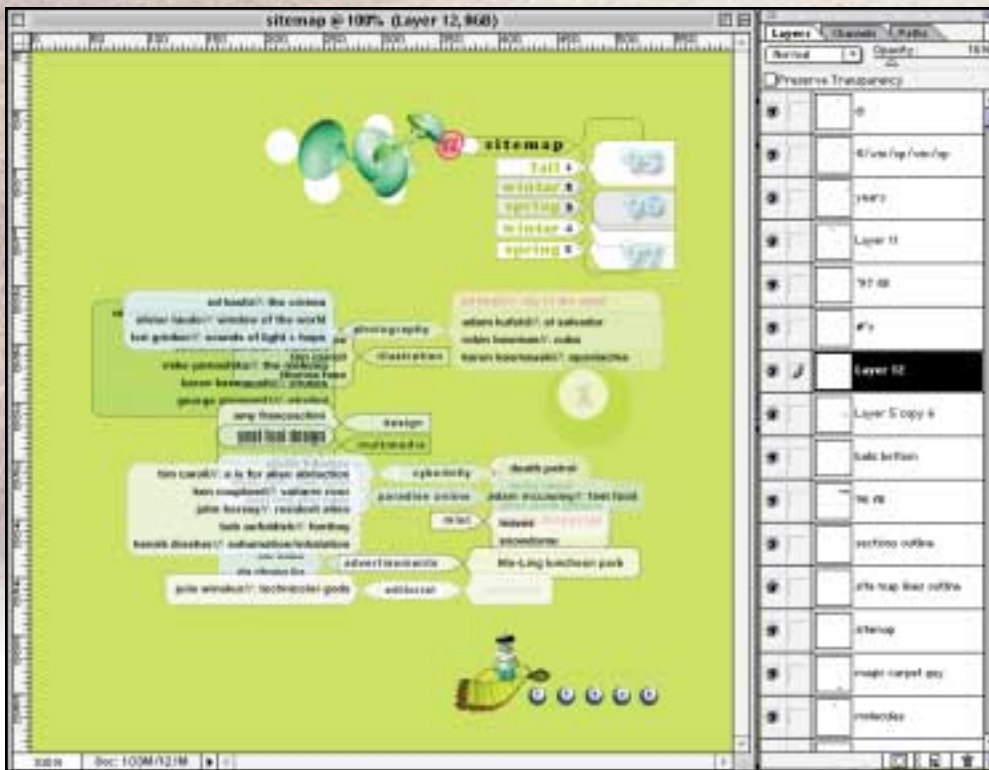
When asked what Amy had in mind for the @tlas logo, she responded, "Maybe the question should be, what don't you have in mind? When I am designing logos for @tlas, I'm not really thinking of it as a logo, but more of a morsel; something you could almost hold in your hand. The 3D aspect of the logo lends itself to jumping out of the page. I like to embellish the logotype with imagery and smaller type to create a sense of dialog between the elements that tells a



The finished logo.



Another version of the logo. Michael programmed the front end of @tlas' Winter98 edition to load either logo randomly.



4.0 browsers and DHTML, Michael created an innovative strategy to ensure the maximum amount of design control over @tlas' content.

Here are some of the problems that Michael set out to conquer in @tlas:

Font Size: At the system level, Macs and PCs display type very differently. This difference in standards creates a situation where 10-point type on a Mac looks more like 13 or 14-point on a PC. Add the fact that monitors are set to different standards — on Macs 72 ppi (pixels per inch) and PCs 96 ppi — it becomes difficult to feed the same

Interface Innovations

There are a number of original approaches to interface design issues in @tlas. Typically, Olivier presents Amy with artwork or photography, Amy presents Michael with a layered Photoshop document, and Michael figures out how to get it up on the web. This is a screen shot of one of Amy's Photoshop files (75 layers deep!) that was given to Michael to program as a Java-Script rollover. As your mouse rolls over the various issues of @tlas (1-5), different categories light up, showing which magazine issues covered which subjects. The numbered billiard balls at the bottom of the screen offer links to the various magazine issues.

story. I try to capture enough of the story in the logo to get people to explore further."

For the logo design, Amy used a combination of software tools. Starting with *Illustrator*, she created the 2D font. Next, she used *KPT Vector Effects* to warp the logo in *Illustrator*. She then imported the vector data into *Infini-D* and created an extrusion and bevel. She lit the 3D model in *Infini-D*, picked the right angle, and saved the results as a PICT file, which she brought into *Photoshop*. From there, she turned the single file into a *Photoshop* file with 15 separate layers, where she created numerous drop shadows and added extra illustration elements.

DESIGN CONTROL ISSUES

If you care about control, the web is perhaps the most unfriendly design medium in the world. Control over positioning, typography, color, and behavior is taken for granted in other digital design mediums, but on the web it's a hard fight to have control over anything.

To gain precise artistic control over the @tlas site, Michael used his programming ingenuity to fight browser and platform discrepancies. Turning to the new features of

type measurements into a cross-platform compatible site and come up with consistent results.

Monitor Resolution: Monitors are set to many different resolutions, independent of Windows or Macintosh platform differences. A web page looks big on a monitor set to 12 inches and small on a monitor set to 21 inches.

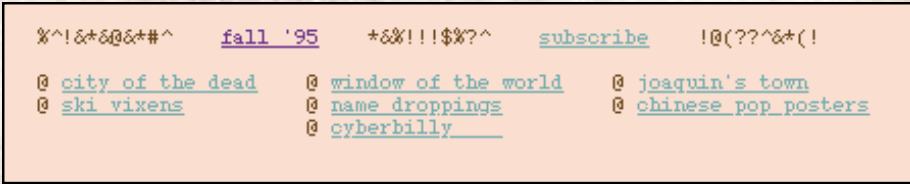
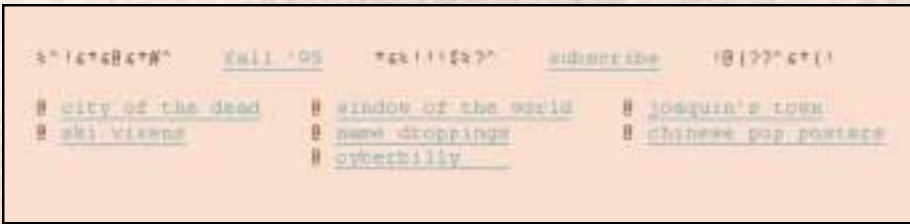
System Fonts: Macs ship with Helvetica; Windows ships with Arial. There are differences between the Mac's Courier and the PC's Courier New. The font names are different, but so are the widths and sizes, making precise layout a nightmare, especially when using precise HTML tables. Type in one typeface might wrap, while in another it would look small and have too many spaces.

Of course, it's impossible to solve all the problems just listed. Michael turned to solutions within HTML 4.0, including CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) and JavaScript, to ensure that @tlas looked as good as it could under a myriad of different conditions. This section will examine his use of these technologies for the purpose of achieving precise design control.

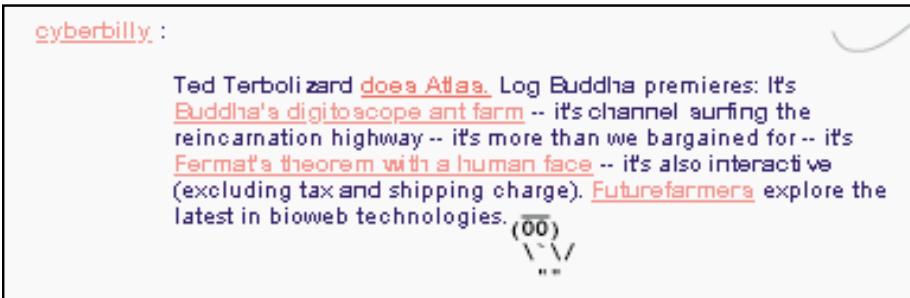
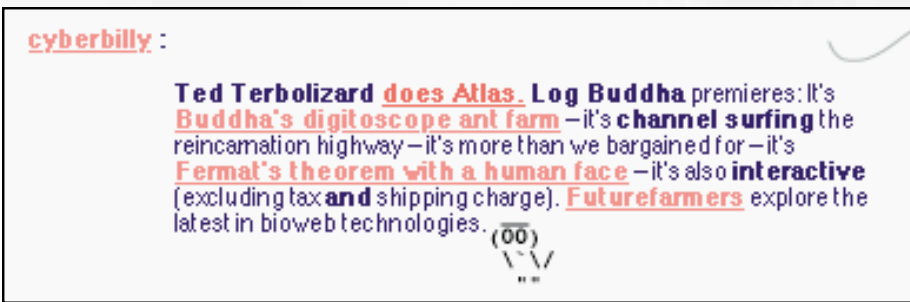
CASCADING STYLE SHEETS

Before looking at Michael's innovative use of CSS, let's first offer an overview of style sheets and how they work. This section covers the origins, specifications, and different implementations of CSS.

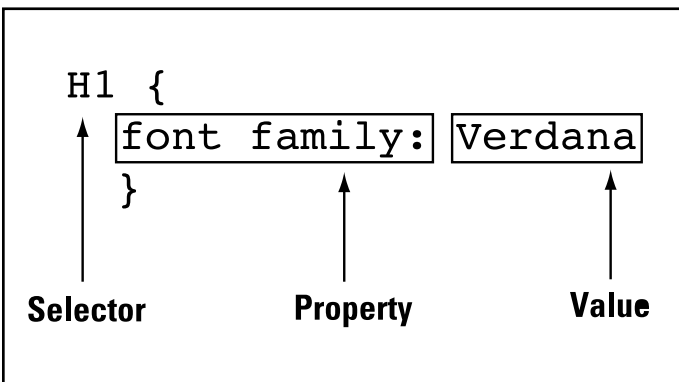
When the web was first developed, it was never expected to offer precise design control. HTML was created as a portable document language, meaning that it could be viewed and authored from any number of computer platforms or operating systems. It was specifically intended to



Under identical browsers, the fonts on a page can vary sizes simply because of the differences between Macs and PCs.



Different fonts not only have different appearances, but the differences in weight and size make precise layout impossible.



The construction of a style.

be customizable by the end user. If an end user had vision problems, the fonts could be altered to display larger; if an end user was color blind, colors could be changed; if an end user was blind, ASCII text could be interpreted by a voice reader. It's actually a pretty wonderful philosophy, as HTML originated with the intent of displaying content for anyone and everyone. In this context, HTML was developed to be a display medium, not a design medium.

Along came web developers who saw the web as a design medium, whether it was intended to be or not. Its capabilities of merging images, sounds, movies, and text combined with hyperlinks made it an attractive multimedia environment. Netscape was the first browser to break a lot of HTML conventions to offer tags that appealed designers. HTML purists and standards organizations went crazy fighting these unstandard tags and they lost. Whether or not the web was invented for the purpose it is being used for cannot change the fact that people want to use it for well-designed content.

The web is ultimately a communication medium. It is proven that visually well-designed content enhances communication. Designers and HTML purists at heart have the same goal: to communicate. OK, so where do style sheets fit into all this philosophizing?

By creating two sets of specifications, one for style sheets and another for HTML, the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) was able to make a separation between HTML content and style content. Style sheets are a vehicle for design templates that apply to HTML documents in order to describe how to display the content. CSS documents define the properties of tags and elements in HTML.

A style sheet document can be contained within an HTML document. This type of implementation is called an "internal" style sheet. Style sheets can also be independent documents that are self contained. This type of style sheet is called an "external" style sheet. External style sheets are particularly powerful because multiple HTML pages can be set to reference a single external style sheet.

Style sheets can describe precise positioning, precise

fonts, precise font sizes, precise colors, and precise type spacing. For this reason, they were chosen as a solution for @tlas' quest for precise design control.

PROGRAMMING CSS

The structure of a style contains a Selector, a Property, and a Value. The Selector specifies where the style should be applied. It could be used for an existing HTML element, such as H1. In Michael's code, he made up his own names

Teach Yourself JavaScript and DHTML

Michael taught himself how to program CSS, just like he taught himself HTML, JavaScript, and DHTML. Whenever he first hears of a new web programming technique, he searches the web for online tutorials and demonstration sites.

Occasionally books are helpful too, but they are often outdated or inaccurate. Here's his list of favorite resources for learning CSS and related technologies.

Cascading Style Sheets: Designing for the Web ■ Bert Bos and Harkon Lie ■ 256 pages ■ \$29.95 ■ Addison Wesley (These authors are part of the W3C committee who developed the CSS spec. It doesn't cover the latest CSS2 specifications, but it's an excellent book for learning the basics.)

Recommended URLs

A list of CSS attributes that work in Internet Explorer.

■ <http://www.microsoft.com/msdn/sdk/inetsdk/help/dhtml/references/css/attributes.htm>

An excellent gallery of CSS examples.

■ <http://www.microsoft.com/gallery/files/styles/default.htm>
Includes links to helpful sites about DHTML.

■ <http://www.atlasmagazine.com/dhtml/>
A helpful tutorial on CSS.

■ http://webdeveloper.com/categories/html/html_css_1.html
Check out the tutorials on CSS.

■ <http://www.webcoder.com/howto/article.html>
The CSS spec from the W3C.

■ <http://www.w3.org/Style/>
Resources for CSS absolute and relative positioning.

■ <http://www.w3.org/TR/WD-positioning>
A complete list of properties.

■ <http://www.w3.org/TR/WD-CSS2/propidx.html>
A complete list of descriptors.

■ <http://www.w3.org/TR/WD-CSS2/descidx.html>

for selectors, such as ".text1" or ".bolder." The curly braces "{" and "}" enclose the body of the style, which contains the Property and the Value. To the left side of the colon is the Property, and to the right side the Value. Semicolons are used to separate multiple sets of Properties and Values.

In this example, the browser is being instructed to use Verdana at 24 pixels high for the H1 tag:

```
H1 {
    font-family: Verdana;
    font-size: 24px;
}
```

When creating styles for text, it's necessary to decide what unit of measurement to use for the size values. CSS allows you to use pixels, points, picas, ems, ens, x-height, inches, centimeters, or millimeters. Here's a handy chart for CSS units of measurement:

CSS	Item/Description
px	pixel: A pixel is the distance from one dot to another on a computer monitor.
pt	point: A point is 1/72 inch. How many pixels that translates to depends on the resolution of your screen, but it is one pixel on 72 dpi systems.
pc	pica: 12 points.
em	em: The "body size" of a font. If the font is 12 points, one em is 12 points.
en	en: 1/2 em.
ex	x-height: The height of a lowercase "x."
in	inch: The length of the thumb of King Henry VIII.
cm	centimeter: 1/100 meter.
mm	millimeter: 1/1000 meter.

MICHAEL'S VIEWS ON PROGRAMMING

Anyone who's dedicated enough to make multiple versions of a site in order to achieve precise design control is clearly passionate about their work. Michael spends a great deal of energy figuring out the workarounds in this medium. His JavaScript work includes conducting endless experiments to ensure no one gets a JavaScript error on @tlas pages. His work with understanding how fonts and size relationships work on cross-platforms and browsers is unparalleled. Michael puts a lot of thought into the end user experience, from both a practical and artistic perspective.

Michael has watched the evolution of the web since the early days of gray backgrounds, through the features of frames, tables, and colored fonts. He's bored with HTML now and spends most of his time working with JavaScript. "Let's face it," he says. "There's very little new stuff one can expect from HTML. All the new innovations are appearing from outside sources, such as style sheets, JavaScript, and DHTML."

He's very enthused about new tools, such as *Dreamweaver*, but notes, "*Dreamweaver* is a great tool if you know what you're doing. It doesn't shield you from

needing to learn how to program, but it can be a tremendous time saver if you know what you're doing. You still need to troubleshoot this stuff in order to work reliably with it, and no editor can save you from that eventuality."

Interestingly, Michael says he actually spends less time dealing with the code these days and much more time ensuring that the images are compressed properly and look their best. He uses a host of software tools, which include:

GIFmation <http://www.boxtopsoft.com/>
DeBabelizer [http://www.equilibrium.com/
photoGIF](http://www.equilibrium.com/photoGIF) <http://www.boxtopsoft.com/>
GIFWizard <http://www.gifwizard.com/>

WHAT'S NEXT FOR @TLAS

Amy has formed an outside multimedia firm, called Future Farmers: cultivating your conscience. Working in partnership with Stella Lai, a 3D artist and designer, AirKing (music), Pants (programming), the firm (<http://www.futurefarmers.com>) offers both commercial illustration and multimedia design.

The metaphor of "farming" is to reappropriate ideas in order to create artwork, producing a fertility of resourcefulness. The projects of Future Farmers are playful and provocative and definitely err on the abstract side of the commercial fence.

When we last touched base with the team, Amy was busy with futurefarmers.com, Olivier was off to Ecuador on a shooting assignment, and Michael was working on a programming assignment for an outside contract. It might seem like none of their minds were on @tlas at all, but this team works best by letting everyone have freedom and flexibility, and then coming together and producing a new issue that is better than the last.

Michael closed with this statement: "@tlas' philosophy is not to necessarily build a site that the people are going to love. We're always going to shove something unexpected their way. Regardless, there are certain lines you have to draw. We don't exist to annoy people or crash their browsers. It's up to us to make the experience of @tlas more about the evocative content than the technology used." *

■ tip

Use Pixels (Most of the Time)

Because of cross-platform differences, a point or a pica might mean very different things on different operating systems. Michael recommends that you use pixels or percentages as your unit of measurement for type in style sheets. This usually ensures consistent results on different systems.

Michael uses pixels when dictating margin and padding positioning with CSS. He claims that working with absolute positioning can turn into a minefield because some of the same terms don't work in IE that work in Navigator. This is another reason for his reliance on separate external style sheets.

There are always exceptions to rules. One of the style sheets Michael wrote for Windows uses points, because when he was playing around with different measurements those results seemed most reliable to him. Some users get angry if you use pixels, because it disables their ability to adjust font size. If you specify sizes in points, they can still use the larger font or smaller font features of their browser. Sometimes points can yield more consistent results, and this unit of measurement still lets end users change their font size, but many artists don't want to let end users do this because it ruins their designs. The decision of which unit of measurement to use in CSS depends, in part, on your artistic and overall goals.

Bottom line: Until you've programmed style sheets for a while and worked with all the value variants, you really can't understand how to troubleshoot all the different factors. Experience, experimentation, and practice are paramount.

■ site summary

@tlas

@tlas is a place to visit when you want to see fresh, inspiring, technologically challenging art. It is a place where personal vision is respected and nurtured, and team members work with each other's ideas and tools. Michael's views about JavaScript and the direction of HTML are prophetic and point to new directions of the web medium. The voices from this site come from the hearts and minds of three individuals who are breaking new ground and walking where few have yet walked. To summarize, we covered:

- The use of JavaScript for browser detection instead of CGI because of its better object handling.
- Amy's use of 3D and 2D graphics showing the influence of Photoshop as an editing tool to create hybrid imagery.
- Understanding how Amy gets ideas and inspiration teaches how her approach makes her artwork personal and individualistic.
- Working with CSS allows for better creative control over typography, despite the fact that browsers and platforms interpret the code differently. Until standards are set, Michael's approach of using multiple External Style Sheets is the only way to ensure optimal results between platforms and browsers.
- Looking at some of the innovative interface designs for @tlas shows the range of possibilities that have not yet been explored on the web.