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A new global visual language for the BBC's digital services

Post categories: **GVL, uxd**

Bronwyn van der Merwe | 18:10 UK time, Tuesday, 16 February 2010

The BBC website began its **official life back in December 1997** with this very simple design.



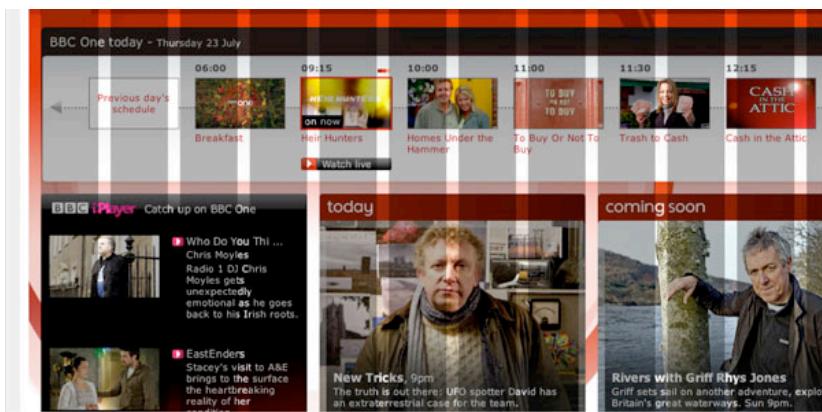
It was a basic offering with two sections to the site. Over time it has grown to encompass a great deal more. However due to the organic way in which the website evolved and the old structure of the business, with dozens of small design teams working independently of each other, the site had a fairly schizophrenic nature once you delved into its depths.

About 2 years ago, after printing out the site onto what has now become jokingly known as the 'Wall of Shame' we decided to embark on an ambitious project, called **Global Visual Language 2.0**, with the aim of unifying the visual and interaction design of bbc.co.uk and the mobile website.



We created a new wider, centred page template to take advantage of wider screen resolutions and for the first time created an underlying grid.





We rationalised the hundreds of different banner styles into a new global and local branding and navigation system.



We discontinued the scores of different audio and video players and created a universal **embedded media player**.





And we **redesigned the homepage** creating a visual style that began to ripple through the site and onto the mobile platform.

The BBC homepage from January 4, 2008, features a large image of Jack Johnson performing live. The page includes sections for News, Sport, Weather, and Radio. The Weather section shows a five-day forecast for London with icons for Fog, Sunny, and Heavy Rain. The Radio section lists Radio 1, 1Xtra, and Radio 2.



We've lived with and loved the distinctly 'web 2.0' design for a while now and it's done us proud. However, time's moved on, and in autumn last year we decided it was time to resurrect the project.

We set out to broaden our ambitions; to create a design philosophy and world-class design

standards that all designers across the business could adhere to. We wanted to find the soul of the BBC. We wanted something distinctive and recognisable; we wanted drama. We knew whatever we created needed to be truly cross-platform and that we needed to simplify our user journeys.

We didn't do it on our own. We pulled together representatives from across the business, led by the project's Creative Director, Ben Gammon, to form a Global Design Working Group, and we created a GVL Steering Group to help manage and direct the course of the project. We also went out into the industry to find a partner to co-create the styleguide: **Neville Brody** and his agency, **Research Studios**.



After going through a tender process in which we invited six agencies to pitch for the work, we chose Research Studios because we felt they had demonstrated a good insight into the BBC, its public purposes and the way in which it functions. We were also impressed with the work created for the pitch and **Neville's back catalogue of work**.

Together, over the last four months, we've spent countless hours and created countless iterations of designs,

components, mastheads, footers, polar maps, word documents, pdfs and grids... and whilst it's still a work in progress, I'd like to share with you where we're at with both the design philosophy and the latest version of our global visual language styleguide.

We wanted to create a design philosophy, or a set of values, to unite the user experience practitioners across the business. We settled on nine keywords which we think sum up what we're about and what we're trying to achieve:

Modern British

We want to create a modern British design aesthetic, something vibrant and quirky that translates outside our national boundaries.

Current

It needs to feel current and reflect what's happening in the UK right now, in real-time. We curate a timeline of Britain and create links to the past - to our rich **archive**.

Authentic

Wherever we are heard we need to sound authentic and relevant, warm and human. We want to reference the BBC's iconic design and broadcasting heritage. We value the trust placed in us.

Compelling

We engage our audiences with compelling storytelling. Our voice ranges from serious and authoritative through to witty and entertaining.

Distinctive

We stand out from the crowd. We strike a balance between overly templated, cookie-cutter design and beautiful anarchy. We are bold and dramatic.

Pioneering

We pioneer design innovations that surprise and delight. But we take our audiences with us.

Joined-up

We view all services and platforms as one connected whole but deliver experiences that are sensitive to their context of use.

Universal

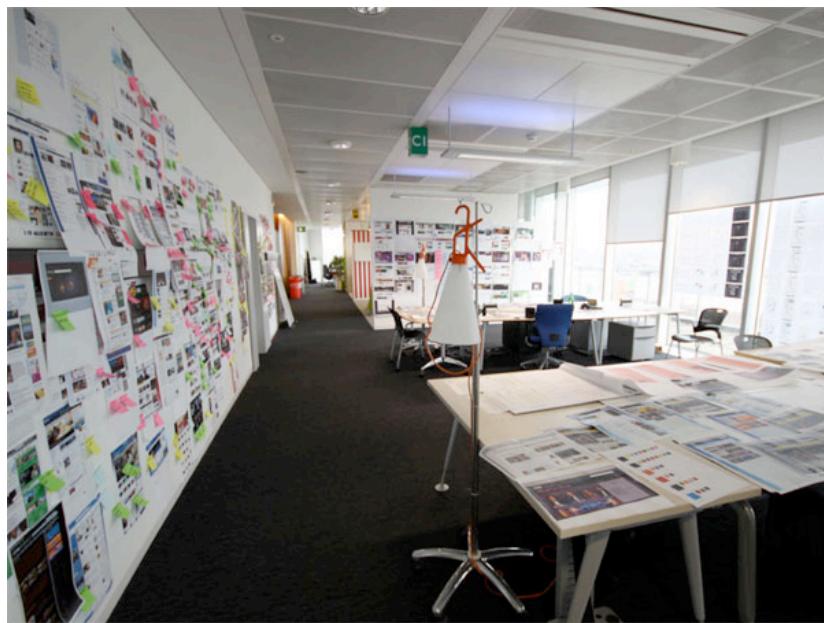
Our services are open and accessible. Our interfaces are simple, useful and intuitive.

Best

Our ambition is to be the best digital media brand in the world.

Armed with our new philosophy we began creating conceptual designs for various

properties: BBC news, homepage, search, iPlayer, programme pages and the embedded media player.



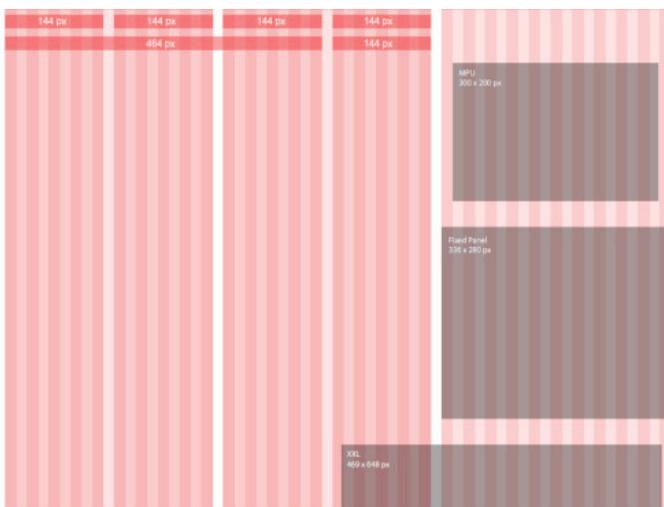
Through doing this work we began to distill the essence of a new visual style. I'm going to take you through some of the key elements, starting with the page grid.

We took **inspiration from many sources**. What we were trying to achieve is an underlying grid system that was flexible enough to enable many unique design variations whilst still feeling coherent and considered.

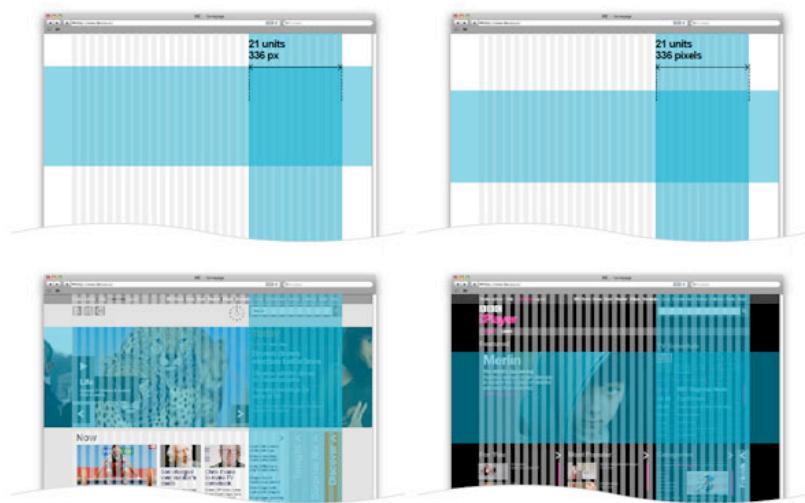


The new grid is based on 31 sixteen pixel columns with two left hand columns that can be split into four, and one wider right hand column, which accommodates the ad formats that appear on the international facing version of the site.

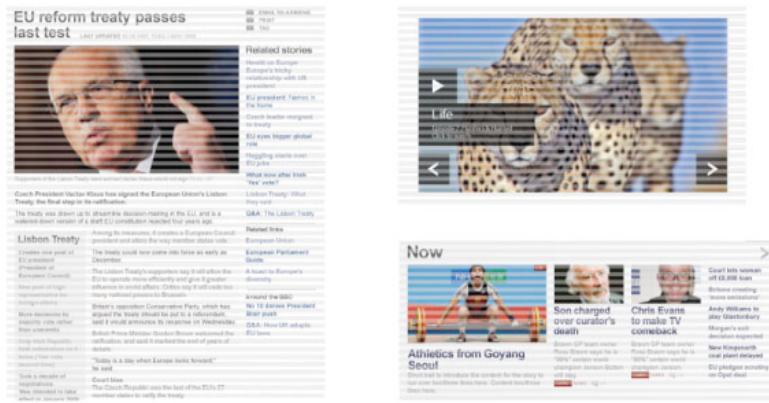




We're looking to create the effect of interwoven vertical and horizontal bands, making a feature of the right hand column across the site.



Along with the 16 pixel vertical grid we've also for the first time got an integrated 8 pixel baseline grid so that we can align elements on a page both vertically and horizontally.



A key feature of the new GVL is a much more dramatic use of typography. As well as Gill Sans we've introduced big bold type in Helvetica or Arial and restricted variations in size so that we have much greater consistency across the site.

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Here's an example of it all pulled together on a new story page, and examples of typography styling in promo drawers. We focused on signposting and articulation; you can see the time stamping treatment and signposting for live content.

EU reform treaty passes last test

LAST UPDATED 10:00 GMT, TUE 9 NOV 2009



Supporters of the Lisbon Treaty were worried Vaclav Klaus would not sign Photo: AP

Czech President Vaclav Klaus has signed the European Union's Lisbon Treaty, the final step in its ratification. The treaty was drawn up to streamline decision-making in the EU, and is a watered-down version of a draft EU constitution rejected four years ago.

Lisbon Treaty

- Creates new post of EU president (President of European Council)
- New post of high representative for foreign affairs
- More decisions by majority vote rather than unanimity
- Only Irish Republic held referendum on it - twice ("Yes" vote second time)
- Took a decade of negotiations
- Was intended to take effect in January 2009

Among its measures, it creates a European Council president and alters the way member states vote. The treaty could now come into force as early as December. The Lisbon Treaty's supporters say it will allow the EU to operate more efficiently and give it greater influence in world affairs. Critics say it will cede too many national powers to Brussels. Britain's opposition Conservative Party, which has argued the treaty should be put to a referendum, said it would announce its response on Wednesday. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown welcomed the ratification, and said it marked the end of years of debate. "Today is a day when Europe looks forward," he said.

Court bias

The Czech Republic was the last of the EU's 27 member states to ratify the treaty. Mr Klaus signed it shortly after the Czech constitutional court rejected a complaint against it, ruling that it was in line with the Czech constitution. A BBC correspondent says Mr Klaus accused the court of bias and said the Czech Republic was no longer sovereign.

The Eurosceptic Czech leader had recently said he would no longer attempt to block the treaty, after receiving the promise of an opt-out from the EU's Charter of Fundamental Rights.

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Now



This is an example of a call to action for a piece of video and a pull quote. You can see again the dramatic use of typography and big bold iconography.



Here's another couple of examples of typographic styling; type over images and the use of scale to create hierarchy and drama in link styling.

Optional black overlay



Black overlay required





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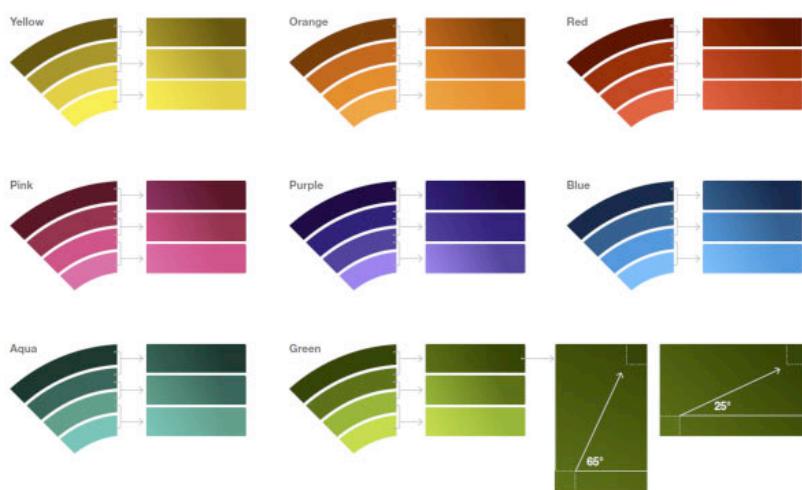
Tiger Woods will struggle, believes Bernard Gallagher

We've developed a highlight colour palette for non-branded areas of the site, or areas where the BBC masterbrand talks directly to the audience (eg the BBC homepage, search, some of our genre areas). Each colour has a tonal range to be used in contrast or in unison with each other.

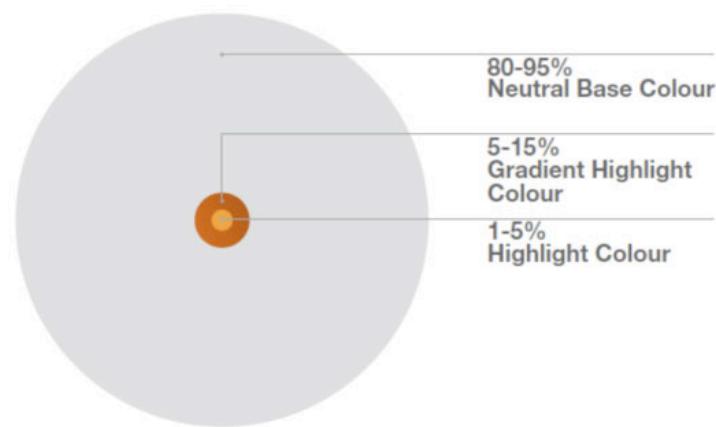


We've also got a neutral palette and a much more restrained usage of gradients where the colours are situated next to each other in each tonal range on the colour wheel.

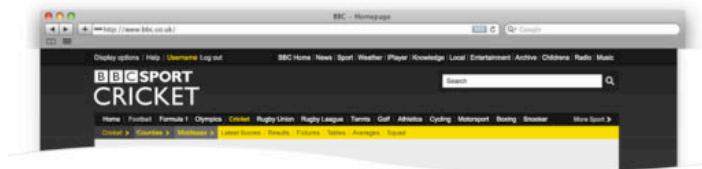
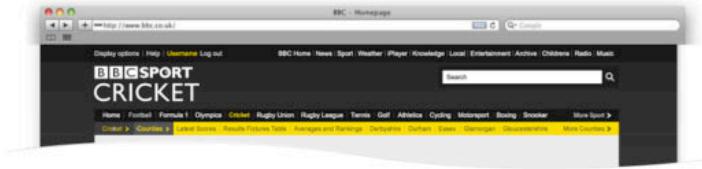




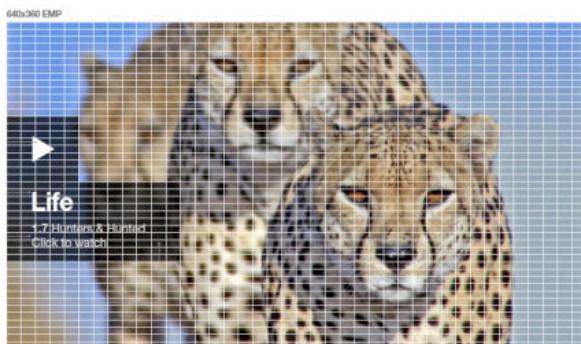
Our recommendation is that pages have a predominantly neutral colour palette with colour being provided by large and dramatic imagery. The highlight colour is used sparingly to create vibrancy and draw the eye to key areas of the page.



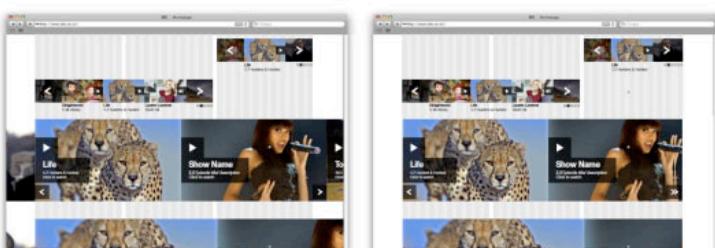
We're moving away from left hand navigation to consistently placed, horizontal navigation across the site. Here's an example from Sport:

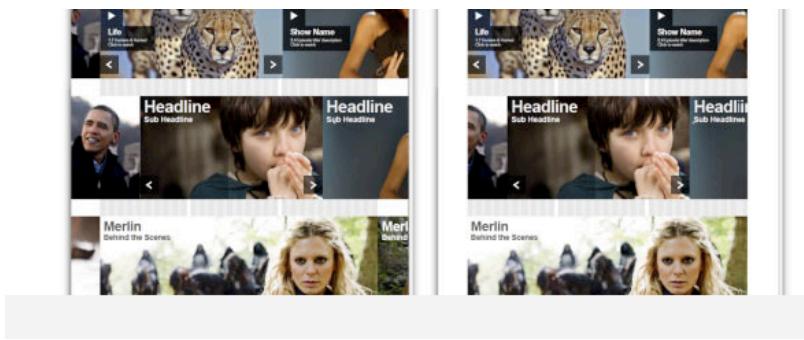


We're designing a new look and feel for the embedded media player - it's still a work in progress but you can see the bold calls to action and typography.

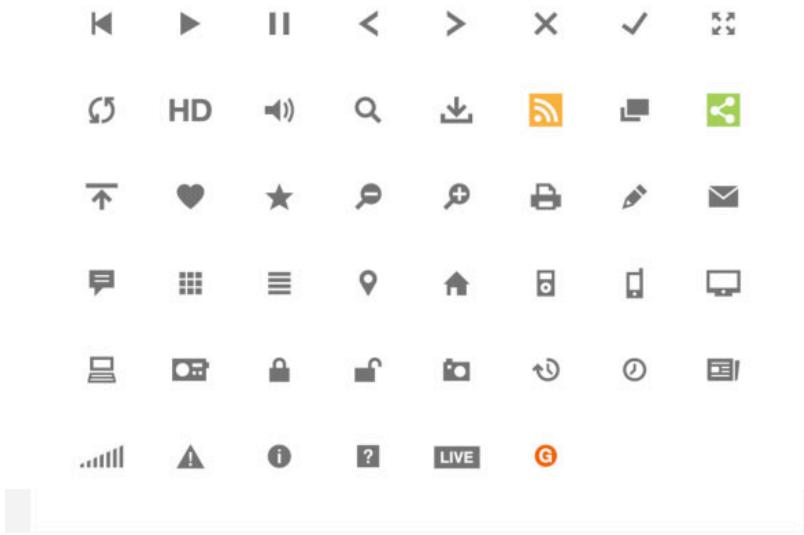


We've got four types of carousel - one that fits right hand column, one for the double left hand columns, a full-width version and one that breaks out of the page grid and extends to the browser edges to create a cinematic, full screen experience.





And finally, we've created a new set of icons.



This style guide is a set of page elements that can be pulled together in any number of ways. We wanted to create something that is flexible enough to allow all our brands their full expression whilst uniting them into a coherent user experience. We also wanted to strip out any superfluous decoration and allow the content and imagery to shine through. To me, this new visual language is exciting and refreshing. It feels timeless, yet very of the moment. I hope you agree.

Next steps; we need to finalise the masthead and footer. We're looking at mobile and IPTV as well how we treat social elements on the page (social bookmarking, share functionality, comments, ratings, reviews etc). We'll also be working through the components in the glow widget library and pulling it all together into an audience-facing design and code patterns library along with a new set of standards and guidelines.

I hope you like what you see. We're always interested in your feedback on both the philosophy and the styleguide.

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