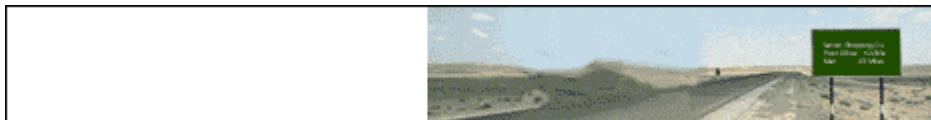


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Good design is non-partisan

By *Andrew Shalat*

The voters of Palm Beach, Fla., and the United States are victims of bad layout and design.

We designers are often viewed by our corporate clients as inessential cogs in the great world of commerce. Marketing professionals (who busy themselves looking at trends and spreadsheets) and programmers (who aren't interested in the "look and feel" of user experience as long as they get the data right) must take pause this week. The [Palm Beach ballot](#) is a prime example of how bad design can confuzzle the world.

The layout of the land

Who would have thought that a simple layout could have such repercussions? The fact is that a page layout is a conversation between the reader and the elements on the page, and it needs to make sense. It can be a complete and well articulated dialog, or it can be unintelligible and non-sequitur. The designer's job is to understand and anticipate the reader's eye, and to move that eye in a smooth and pre-determined path across the page.

Great layout is invisible. It's part of what makes the Mac OS GUI successful, because rather than bringing attention to itself, the GUI stays quiet, letting the user's familiarity and intuition guide their productivity.

This contrasts with the view of many programmers and Windows users. But let the programmers have command lines and straight rows of code; we designers are not denying their necessity. We just don't think that's where it should stop. Whether form follows function, or the other way around, both elements are essential. And the election controversy should heighten our awareness of how even simple design informs our lives.

Caveat voter

The Palm Beach ballots were confusing, requiring heightened attention lest voters punch the wrong slot. The politicians who dismiss the ballots' bad design as unimportant are wrong. They are saying, in a libertarian way, that even with such a flawed layout, let the voter beware. But this is partisanship. Good design, in and of itself, is not partisan. When it is partisan, we call it "propaganda."

No matter which way the election turns out, much of the blame for this historic quandary goes to the poor slob who laid out those ballots, with a healthy portion going to whoever proofed and approved the design. However, unlike a print job, an election is not something that can be scrapped and re-printed, though the prospects for Internet voting raise interesting possibilities here.

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Maybe so. But someone has to choose the font, and that's where designers come in.

Andrew Shalat is a Los Angeles-based [designer](#), illustrator and writer. The last government document he designed was for the Fish and Game Commission. The fish were very pleased. He can be reached at web@shalat.com.

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