

**“Come
Doused in mud
Soaked in bleach
As I want you to be
As a trend
As a friend
As an old memory.”**

—Nirvana

If there is indeed “nothing new under the sun” (as the author of *Ecclesiastes* repeatedly asserts), one way to come up with a “fresh” style is to go back in time a few decades, cut what you find, and paste it into the present. In the ’60s and early ’70s, digital printing was commercially unknown. The psychedelic Haight-Ashbury concert posters of Peter Max, the pop-art soup cans of Andy Warhol, and the loose pen-and-ink illustrations of Ralph Steadman were all created nondigitally and printed on offset presses. The more grassroots the art movement, the less precise the printing quality. This resulted in posters with color bleeding, smudges, and irregularities. In other words, a lot of low-fidelity printwork was floating around popular culture at the time.

Of course, in the ’60s and early ’70s, this nondigital print look was not “retro.” It would not have even been considered “nondigital,” because there was no digital printing with which to compare it. It was simply the way a lot of graphic design looked at the time.

Fast-forward to the early ’90s. Iconoclastic graphic designer David Carson is turning heads everywhere with the unorthodox look of his new underground magazine, *Raygun*. Amidst a design culture hip-deep in the orderly, grid-based layouts that a new wave of desktop publishing software has made possible, Carson opts instead for a looser, dirtier, grungier style. His font sizes vary widely within the same layout. His line leading is intentionally off, causing his lines to blur into each other, overlapping and intersecting, the text itself becoming a kind of abstract art. Carson uses mostly distressed “grunge” fonts—fonts that bleed around the edges, fonts that aren’t crisp and clean, fonts that look an awful lot like the predigital underground poster fonts of the late ’60s. Imagine that.

In the early ’90s, at a time when design is supposed to be “seen and not heard,” serving the content it presents without drawing attention to itself, Carson forges a highly visible (some would say obtrusive) design style. His attitude and philosophy will have a major impact on the Lo-Fi Grunge Style of web design, so a brief exposure to some of his thoughts on graphic design seems appropriate here:

- **On the purpose of “hard to read” design:**

“[In every issue of *Raygun*], there is almost always one [article] that’s more difficult to read than some of the others, but... the starting point is not ‘Well, let’s muck this one up.’ The starting point is to try to interpret the article, and doing that, some of them get harder to read, OK? I don’t have a problem with that, and I really think it makes it more interesting to the reader, especially our reader, where you’re competing with all these other things [like music video and computers].”

- **On the weakness of unobtrusive design:**

“I believe now, if the type is invisible, so is your article, and it’s probably not going to get read, because—at least with this audience, and I think it’s spreading out more—they’re seeing better TV, they’re watching video screens. You give somebody a solid page of grey type and say, ‘Read this brilliant story,’ and a lot of people, they’re going to go, ‘Doesn’t look very interesting. Let’s try and find something more interesting.’ I think if it’s invisible, it’s just done a horrible disservice to what’s potentially a really good article.”

Fast-forward yet again, this time to the latter half of the '90s. Location: Helsinki, Finland. Teenage design savant Miika Saksi is devouring issues of *Elle* and other fashion magazines, studying, absorbing, learning Photoshop, tweaking, experimenting, honing his style. Although Carson is not Saksi's strongest direct influence, the international fashion magazines that Saksi is reading are laid out by designers who are only too conversant with Carson's work.

When Saksi finally takes his work to the web in 1997, he dramatically impacts the underground online design community. Up to this point, design on the web has been largely grid-based, boxy, controlled, digital, and clean. Saksi manages to combine the irregular printing idiosyncrasies of the late '60s with Carson's loose, antigrid layouts—webifying both without losing any of their analog charm, and adding a dash of his own Euro-fashion design influence to the mix for good measure. The Lo-Fi Grunge Style of web design is born.

As Close to Print as the Web Should Get

Most of the “craft” of lo-fi grunge design is accomplished in Photoshop—experimenting with brushes, compounding layers, applying filters to selected images, and overtly incorporating some form of distressed text into the overall collage. This Photoshop “design” is then sliced into parts, saved as gifs or jpegs, and pieced back together into a web page. So I'm not offering these sites as examples of information architecture or even sensible navigation.

Because so much of lo-fi grunge relies on Photoshop rather than HTML for its distinctiveness, it runs the risk of being labeled print-centric. Indeed, many of these design collages would be better represented at 300 dpi, gracing the pages of some glossy print magazine. So if the point of this book is to break away from mere repurposed print design, why am I offering up lo-fi grunge as a fresh web design style? Primarily because on the web, where everything is so clean and partitioned, lo-fi grunge does stand out as fresh. And because it is derived from a nonstandard, dirty, experimental print style, I'm willing to overlook its print origins and admit it as a web-specific design style.

Rather than spend a lot of time talking about Photoshop techniques (there are already a few books on the subject), I explain some of the fundamental design and coding hacks that make lo-fi grunge “work” on the web, taking advantage of the web's unique strengths and working around some of its nonprint peculiarities. But before tackling the techniques, check out some of the following lo-fi grunge sites.

Case Studies

Initially, lo-fi grunge was used to make slick online magazines about fashion, skateboarding, snowboarding, fashion, and fashion. These e-zines were really just excuses for design showcasing (as evidenced by the fact that several “issues” of Saksi’s *Silbato* e-zine have no content whatsoever). The Lo-Fi Grunge Style has since been used to make a very navigable site for a bicycle tire company and a groovy snowboard retail site. Lo-fi grunge’s commercial applications are broader than teen recreation and fashion, but those are its initial points of departure. Any product marketed to the “extreme sports” sector is ripe for lo-fi grunge design. This includes all-terrain automobiles, cross-training athletic shoes, sports drinks, soft drinks, jet skis, and Taco Bell.

Saksi’s Personal Sites: Faux-Functional Finnish Fashion Fodder

Miika Saksi maintains a cryptic labyrinth of interlinked URLs. *Smallprint* is his online fashion/culture magazine with little content but lots of different covers and “coming soon” pages. *Silbato* is an online fashion/culture magazine, and *Sueellen* is an offline fashion/culture magazine that has an online presence. After its seventh issue, *Silbato* was subsumed into *Sueellen*—the eighth issue of *Silbato* became the first online issue of *Sueellen*. Simple, isn’t it? Except for the fact that, once again, only one issue of *Silbato* actually has any content. The rest of its issues are just excuses for design. As such, surfing this nexus of sites can be very disorienting, especially if you don’t speak Finnish. So I’m not offering these sites as examples of information architecture or even sensible navigation. Simply consider how they look.

One noticeable feature of Saksi’s sites is that his pages don’t resize to fill the browser window. Instead, his layouts are frozen, often starting in the top-left of the browser window and flowing downward to the right until they dissipate gradually into negative space (**Figure 04.01**). Although this type of layout ignores certain strengths of the web as a design medium, it still manages to look “unscrunched.” If you visit **smallprint.net** with your browser window at 1000 pixels wide, the layout is still unobjectionable, despite the fact that it occupies only 640 pixels of horizontal window space. How is this accomplished?

Figure 04.01

smallprint.net

First, the design elements in the top-left corner seem to originate somewhere outside of the browser window itself. This is Saksi's way of saying, "I know I'm cramped up in the corner here. I did it on purpose." His loose design spills down into the page, finally taking a more structured form in the green boxes. There is no learnable formula for this particular design solution. The point is that Saksi is intentionally designing for a browser window, not for a printed page.

This layout doesn't look bad in a large window because its background is white, and there is no strong demarcating right border to tell you where the 640 pixel-wide design ends. As such, the negative space below and to the right of the collage is "invited" to become part of the intentional design.

Another way Saksi manages to make negative space seem like part of his collage is by using Photoshop brushes. Brushes are simply patterns that irregularly filter what would otherwise be straightforward lines or marks. Brushes create that smudgy, inconsistent, analog printing press look. By making brush marks at the edge of his collage and causing them to seemingly bleed over into the negative space, Saksi forms a continuity between his image and the negative space.

At other times, Saksi overcomes the unknown dimensions of the browser window by intentionally limiting his design to very small areas (**Figure 04.02**). It's as if he's saying, "I give up trying to fill this whole screen, because I can't figure out how big it is. I'm just going to make this one part of the



Figure 04.02

smallprint.net

screen look really good in and of itself and then cause you to focus on it.”

Although there have been new liquid layout design advancements since the heyday of lo-fi grunge in 1998, Saksi’s narrow strips of information still have a refreshing, relaxing visual quality. Most people these days try to jam-pack their pages with as much information as possible. In contrast, a site that has only a thin column of design and text doesn’t overload its visitor with input. Consequently, said visitor can focus his undepleted attentions all the more intently on the strip of information he is given. One objection to these thin strips of information is that they force the visitor to scroll more. And the spirit of David Carson would say,

“Wonderful. A bit of intentional scrolling challenges the visitor and gets him involved.”

You’ve noted the smudges. You’ve noted the misaligned grunge fonts. You’ve noted the frozen screen layouts. You’ve noted the TV-esque scanlines. What? You say you haven’t noted the TV-esque scanlines? OK. Note the TV-esque scanlines (**Figure 04.03**). These scanlines, like the smudges, are meant to give the web page a more analog look. Whereas the smudges simulate “analog” printing, the scanlines simulate analog television, subtly acknowledging the fact that web surfers are actually looking at a screen. I talk more about scanlines and brushes in the “Techniques” section.

Figure 04.03

smallprint.net

Finally, let's not overlook the use of fashion models as design elements. If you're designing a site that doesn't exactly warrant the blatant parading of fashion models across the page (and yes, there are those rare instances when fashion models simply won't do), any human body will suffice. Just make sure the body you use is free-floating on the background of your design, with its outlines visible. A torso inside a square photograph won't have the same effect, because it won't be reckoned in the context of the overall design.

An interesting result of this designerly use of human bodies (models or otherwise) has to do with scale. By interjecting human figures into your design, you can make your other design elements seem huge or miniscule by comparison (**Figure 04.04**). Since everyone naturally identifies with the scale of their own bodies, using human bodies as design elements is a way to interject an objective scalar benchmark into your work, allowing you to then tweak and manipulate that baseline proportional scale to suit your own reality-distorting purposes.

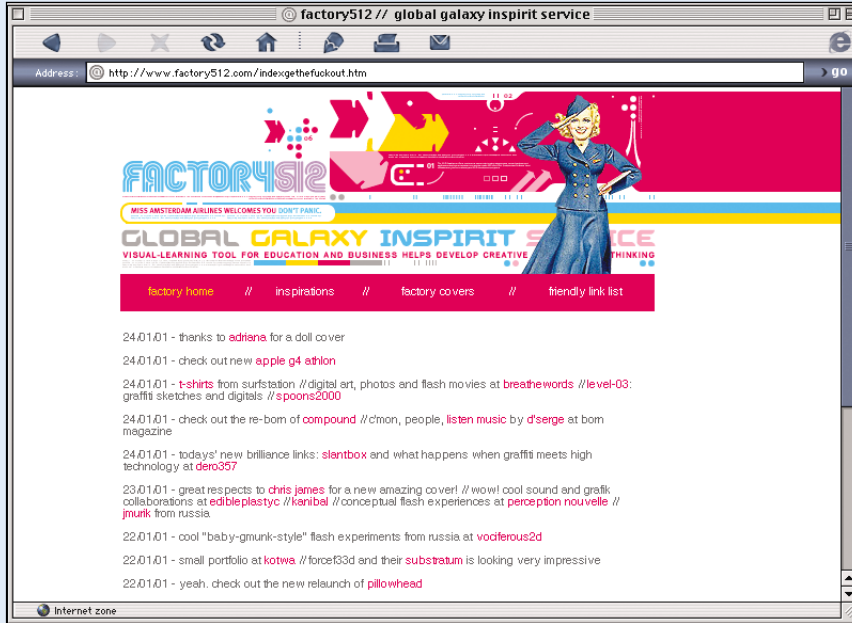


Figure 04.04

factory512.com

Grungy Commerce: Nokian Tyres

Lest you're thinking there could be no commercial application whatsoever for lo-fi grunge, consider the Nokian Tyres site (**Figure 04.05**), again designed by Saksi. There are still the narrow columns, the scanlines, and the brushes, but here Saksi abandons the gridless layout for a more partitioned look. Note that his border of choice is simply tiny dashes (on other sites he uses tiny dots). Dashes work surprisingly well as borders in web pages, especially considering their ease of implementation.

Saksi uses a solid-color block at the top of the page and then repeats that color in the nav bar to indicate hierarchical location, as

any good usability expert would suggest. The site is clean, navigable, and readable, yet still "cutting-edge" enough to appeal to your average quasi-daring, thirty-something mountain biker.

The Nokian Tyres site is a perfect example of how such a seemingly design-centric style can be employed to serve a commercial purpose. Miika even sneaks in a grungy typewriter font to list the tire specifications. The typewriter font works well in this context, because the entire web page is set up to resemble a printed product specification sheet that a reseller might receive from a manufacturer.

Figure 04.05
nokiantyres.fi



Techniques

The lion's share of lo-fi grunge design work is done in Photoshop, but it still pays to keep the peculiarities of the web in mind. Lo-fi grunge sites are not just huge Photoshop collages saved as jpegs and called into an HTML page. Some pre-web planning and manipulation are required.

Background/Foreground Gif Pairing

Although most lo-fi grunge layouts don't resize, there is a way to fill the entire screen by cleverly pairing foreground transparent gifs with tiling background gifs (**Figure 04.06**). How can Saksi make the horizontal stripe fill the entire browser

window without knowing how large the window is? He could simply make the foreground image huge (1800×1200) so that it would safely fill most monitors. But an 1800×1200-pixel image takes a long time to load, even if 75 percent of it is only solid areas of color.



Figure 04.06
sueellen.org



Figure 04.07

Foreground gif (the checkered area is transparent)



Figure 04.08

Tiling background gif

Here is a foreground gif from the previous Sueellen page (**Figure 04.07**), and here is the page's tiling background gif (**Figure 04.08**). None of the page's foreground images extend beyond 600 pixels wide. Only the tiling background continues sideways. But because the background stripe is incorporated into the foreground design, it seems like one seamless, full-screen picture.

This technique is relatively simple to implement:

1. Design your layout in Photoshop, making sure to include a repeating horizontal element that you'd like to extend to the end of the browser window.
2. Isolate that repeating "stripe" element as a separate image. This will be your background image. Make it at least 20 pixels wide and 1500 pixels high so that your horizontal "stripe" doesn't unceremoniously reappear at the bottom of someone's gigantic monitor. Save this 20×1500-pixel image, and call it into your HTML via `<body background="yourimage.gif">`.
3. Save the rest of your foreground design, slicing it into chunks so that it loads faster. Save as transparent gifs any chunks of your foreground design that need to let the background show through.
4. Position these foreground design chunks over your tiling background (preferably using CSS layer positioning, although here Saksi uses tables).

That's it. You now have what appears to be a huge full-screen image, without the technical drawbacks of actually having a huge full-screen image.

This same tiling background hack can also be used to make vertically tiling stripes. Follow the same steps, except this time use a vertical stripe in your design, and then make your background gif 1800 pixels wide and at least 20 pixels high. Now your background image tiles down instead of sideways, causing full-screen vertical stripes.

Pairing foreground elements with tiling background elements is just one more way to get the browser to work for you instead of your always working against it, trying in vain to make it act like a printed page.

Scanlines

There are several ways to achieve the TV scanline effect. The most straightforward way is to alternate two lines, each 1 pixel high, of similar but slightly varying color values (for example, ff6666 and ff3333). Then just place this alternating two-line pattern in the background of your design as desired. To fill a large area with a small repeating pattern, first select the pattern you want to use and choose **Edit, Define Pattern**. Next, select the area you want to fill, and choose **Edit, Fill**. In the dialog box that appears, choose **Pattern** from the pull-down menu and click **OK**.

Another technique is to create your scanline pattern using the method just described, save it to its own Photoshop layer, and then place that scanline layer above the other layers in your collage that you want to affect. Next, simply decrease the opacity of the scanline layer until grooviness occurs. Flatten your Photoshop image, slice it into manageable pieces, and save those pieces as gifs or jpegs to be called into your web page.

A third, more drastic technique (for Mac users only) is to use Deep Devices' "RetroScan" Photoshop filter (freely downloadable from <http://shareware.cnet.com/shareware/1,10269,0-16170-501-0-1-3,00.html?qt=retroscan&ca=16170>). According to its creators, "RetroScan is a professional quality Photoshop Plug-In that simulates the effect of rescanning a noisy TV signal. It provides an easy way to achieve the fashionable 'cyber punk' effect for print, multimedia, and video." I couldn't have said it better myself. It really is a groovy piece of software, allowing you to customize scanline size, scanline intensity, image ghosting, and even the amount of TV "snow." Use it sparingly. A little goes a long way.

Brushes for Smudges

Custom brushes are essential for achieving that smudged, misprinted look. You can download some nice premade brushes from <http://www.surfstation.lu/13.html>. To load these new brushes into your Photoshop brushes palette, go to your brushes window (choose **Window, Show Brushes**) and click on the arrow in the top-right corner of the window. From the options menu that appears, select **Load Brushes**. Then simply locate your newly downloaded brushes file and click on it. Your new brush patterns appear at the bottom of your brushes palette. (You might need to scroll down to find them.)

To create your own custom brushes, start with a 30×30-pixel document. Next, create a pattern in that document. You can use noise filters, draw lines yourself, or use any combination thereof. Once you get a pattern you think you like (you won't really know until you use it), open your brushes window and click on the arrow in the top-right corner. From the options menu that appears, choose **Define Brush**. Your newly created brush pattern now appears at the bottom of your brushes palette. Experiment with creating brushes until you get some that you like.

After you've selected the desired brush from your brushes palette by clicking on it, it's time to paint. Click on the pencil tool, and select a foreground color. For lo-fi grunge purposes, merely dab the brush; don't actually paint with it. You're trying to create a corrosive effect, not draw a line. You can create either an ink smudge or a misprint.

To create an ink smudge, match your pencil color to the color of the text you want to smudge. Next, create a new layer for your smudges, making sure your smudge layer is above your text layer. Next, click your pencil near the edges of your text. This might take some trial and error, but when you do it correctly, it appears as if a printing press has smeared some extra ink while printing your text. This is one way to begin "eroding" the sterile digitality of computer-based design.

To create a misprint effect, match your pencil color to the background color of your page. Next, create a layer for your misprint effects, and place your misprint layer above the other layers of your design that you want to effect. Then, click your pencil on an area that you want to seem misprinted. It should look as if the page's background is showing through your design, as if the "printing" in that particular area got worn off or didn't quite take.

These brush techniques are subtle, and they might not seem to make much difference. But God is in the details. Your visitors won't notice exactly what you've done, but they will notice that your site looks different—less digital and more physical.

Motion Within a Collage

Finally, to bring these “print” collages to life on the web, incorporate an animated gif into the layout of your collage. Don’t add an animated gif out to the side of your collage. Instead, pick an element that’s already in your collage, and then animate it.

First, design your layout to include an element that would look good animated. At mesoa.com, for example, they chose to animate the screen of a television set (**Figure 04.09**). The television set is collaged in Photoshop along with the rest of the layout.

After you complete the collage, select the area you want to animate. In this case, the area is not the entire television, but just the screen. Animate that square area in a gif animation program, using whatever series of frames you like, and then save it as a gif. Next, cut up your original collage into squares, saving each square as a gif or jpeg.

There are two ways to call this collage into your web page. The old-school way is to use tables. This gets tricky, because your tiny animation square has to fit in with the rest of the collage, so you have to mind your splicing to make sure it does. A better solution is to use CSS layers. Put the entire collage, including the unanimated TV screen section, on one layer. Then put the animated gif on a top layer, positioning it absolutely so that it fits properly in the overall design.

The final effect brings an otherwise static image to life. Again, use this sparingly. The degree to which your visitor’s attention is drawn to the animation is also the degree to which his attention is drawn away from the rest of the page.



Figure 04.09

mesoa.com

The Lo-Fi Grunge Style of web design requires guesswork, experimentation, and a willingness to spend some time in Photoshop. Lo-fi grunge sites might seem loose and fun, but they are by no means haphazardly created. Knowing about brushes, scanlines, and tiling backgrounds can start you on your way to lo-fi grunge greatness. And if you're already skilled at this type of Caronesque distressed print work, taking your talent to the web is simply a matter of course.

Sites Mentioned in This Chapter

<http://www.smallprint.net>

<http://www.sueellen.org>

<http://www.factory512.com>

<http://www.nokiantyres.fi>

**[http://shareware.cnet.com/
shareware/1,10269,0-16170-501-
0-1-3,00.html?qt=retroscan&ca
=16170](http://shareware.cnet.com/shareware/1,10269,0-16170-501-0-1-3,00.html?qt=retroscan&ca=16170)**

<http://www.surfstation.lu/13.html>

<http://www.mesoa.com>