HTTP://NETDIVER.NET

we feed your eyes daily so you can do beautiful
Carole Guevin: Designer, imagineer and web pioneer from before the world wide web

Carole Guevin is a Canadian born designer, web pioneer of the design community with a list of credentials longer than her Twitter feed including AIGA, the Adobe Design Achievement Awards, the Art Directors Club, OFFF, SXSW, guest lecturer at London’s Royal College of Arts to name but a few but what we all know her best for is probably the design inspiration portal, ‘Netdiver Magazine’, which she founded together with programmer Jean-Francois Simard way back in 1995.

So Carole, speaking on behalf of the more mature designer that would remember what the online design community was like in 1995 opposed to just being born in that year, we can safely say that Netdiver was one of the top go to websites alongside ‘K10K’, ‘Shift’, ‘Surfstation’ and ‘Design Is Kinky’ for quality inspiration. However, it seems that where the latter have been snubbed by the new web designer generation for the likes of ‘QBN’, ‘FWA’ and the myriad of Best CSS Showcases, Netdiver remained a valued website in terms of true website inspiration, as proven by Smashing Magazine’s chief editor listing Netdiver as one of the top 40 Design and Tech Magazines to read and Julius Wiedemann (Taschen) including Netdiver in their ‘100 Websites You Should Know and Use’ list during his TED talk. Not to mention the fact that Netdiver’s BOTY - (Best of the year) section is ranking 2/11 positions according to Google over a staggering 3,640,000,000 results.

Now upon the turn of 2011 you made quite a surprising announcement that Netdiver would cease to exist in it’s original form and would be replaced by what is, now known as the Netdiver Vintage edition, an archive of what the most inspirational web sites used to look like from 1998 onwards. It’s a very original and enjoyable concept...
although I have to admit, a little embarrassing that I even recognized some of the sites listed.

**Have you considered publishing or is there already a Netdiver Vintage edition book in the pipeline that would commemorate a historic working progress of web design and evolution over the last fifteen years?**

**CG:** How about that? You’re hinting towards something I had not even considered. What to do with the 200x115 thumbnails for visuals? Would make for a really yucky 300dpi experience. That being said – best leave it to (future?) web historians to sort it out. Although I am still an active observer and an indirect actor having seen up close the evolution of pre-www to current state – I don’t consider having the expertise – nor the inclination – to produce such an exposé.

First and foremost, and little known to anyone except a close to the vest inner circle, Netdiver was my research diving-board. I could easily be perceived as a mad scientist aka network theorist – on the lookout to understand and test ideas for their viability. Either prove them... or canned them. Through the years, I gained a wide scope of possibilities – saw more predictions become reality and yet – was always on the look-out for ‘it’.

‘Vintage’ and ‘Retro’ have become quite a fashion over the last couple of years. Was that the, or one of the most influential reasons behind your idea to transform Netdiver? If not, what originally lead to your decision?

**CG:** Well I am really neither a follower or inclined to follow trends, which in my opinion are often just a spike on the larger horizon of the design industry. They come and go and then, start all over again.

There were numerous reasons for my publishing a vintage version of Netdiver. Since it was administratively impossible (and quite frustrating) to maintain (and weed out) ‘live’ links from ‘dead’ ones and personally hating landing on a parked domain - geez I can only imagine what the audience was experiencing. In the end – there were close to 12,000 links.

Projects go live – projects go off(line) in a blink. I often fantasize the www to be a cosmic like proportion canvas with little led lights flickering constantly. No one can keep track – no one is capable of really grasping what is still relevant, or not. Sometimes in a matter of months – are engulfed in a virtual black hole – hundred thousands of man hours. To this day, I don’t know of any other media that is so short lived... leaving no remnant of what was once. As if, in fact, it never happened.
It is utterly baffling being a witness of so many come and go... most disappearing overnight – without apparent reasons. The evanescence of the www is heart sickening, and for someone who loves history and the value of artifacts that can provide a world-view... what kind of vision do we – or can we have of the www now? How about in 15 – 50 – 100 years?

Netdiver is now a sub-atomic non-official museum of what was new in design (on the web). So far there are over 2,000 ex-projects showing in the x_pired directory. A number to increase – as I revisit the news archive.

There are other reasons... such as the brand defeating Netd-r-iver which is now completely associated with Netdiver (just Google it). To even begin to tell you how irked about this I was is not worthy of wasting space.

I always felt that if Jeffery Zedman (Jeffrey Zeldman) or Jeshua Davies (Joshua Davis) would be so called – they would NOT think the typo funny. It’s insulting when somebody doesn’t get or write your name correctly. Lastly, the name Netdiver has been copied the world over.

The name was really cool in ’95. We came up with it in opposition to ‘net surfer’ – you know - ‘net diver’ – going deep to fetch the pearls. But in 2011, the name is no longer relevant as a current in the know design mag for the new-new kids on the block to run to. The coolness factor has evaporated. BUT, as a what was new in design, it still has some bangs to a byte.
Instead of fully disappearing it was reinvented with exciting content (re)published. Have you seen the first index banner... yikes! Read some of the interviews with web stars? You may want to watch out for the tangible collectibles to be offered in our online store sometime later this year.

So in conclusion, in a market ‘sense’, the brand did not have the value required to build my next-next new project.

“Never was a fan of (Jakob) Nielsen...”

What are your thoughts about how sites were back then and are now? Are you pleased with the evolution and how things have developed from HTML to Flash, Javascript, CSS and now HTML5. Do you think websites today are as original and as inspirational as they were ten or fifteen years ago considering the technology available?

CG: Right on the spot of one of my pet peeves. One that is constantly fuelled by what I see. My gosh – the state of the web and all the fuss about how today – it is portrayed as infinitely better and more evolved - is, in my opinion, another variation on the new-newness syndrome. In the field of technology and its derivatives – today is always better than yesterday and not even close to tomorrow.

I don’t believe this for a minute. Ok right – I started publishing on a 386 with 2mb of RAM on a 7,2 kbs connection. Dang even with current mobile devices – which are probably equivalent in crunching power – everyone I know working the field – is still scrambling to keep up daily. We’re not talking about semi-annual revisions or updates – we’re talking about daily changes that will affect how you design – program.

That’s pretty insane. As I’ve said times and times again: “technology ain’t my God”. Don’t worship it. It’s only a tool that is increasingly more costly and sluggish.

I could very well tell ugly stories. Oh yes, CSS separation of presentation from content. Well today there are email newsletters that have up to 100 nested tables or use a full size plain image – because Outlook and other mail clients don’t support CSS well enough. So there are very knowledgeable programmers that need to pull what is left of their hair – to make these circa 1995-98 all over again happen for the sake of clients – and proof of our lack, thereof, of influence over the makers of technology.
Another one? The hype around Javascript and HTML5 – which now leads to having up to 90 nested DIVs so a website delivers all the ‘new-new’ bells and whistles clients want (and are sold to). On too many levels, it’s very much about appearance and being better than the next door Joneses... and not about ‘content’ delivery.

Never was a fan of (Jakob) Nielsen but respect that he knows about usability (and really nothing about design) but he does have a point in ref with building nimble websites – if you keep in mind all the SPAM received in ref with SEO offers and the over shadowing threat of being cut off by behemoth over the internet ruling Google... this prevents a good portion of what the www can afford as content distribution. We still have a long way to go - to come close to being what it could be.

While I was revisiting the archives and integrating the x_pired content – I was increasingly upset – sometimes even angry – because a lot of the way back interface designs are really no different from what is today – and some were even better. But because there are no comparisons left to go to, to validate the concepts – everyone is reinventing the same wheel – oops – the same rectangular grid.

“I was increasingly upset – sometimes even angry...”

It’s been a number of years since I have lost interest in web design but not the www as a medium. The only thing I am really interested in is finding talent...
and supporting them any way I can. That’s my passion! Embarking in my new ventures – my goal is to fill a void I have identified. Maybe the proposition is ambitious. Perhaps my detractors will rejoice in having ample time to prepare their hate-mail attacks – if I don’t deliver upon my words.

Time will tell. But I’m betting my bank on it.

Netdiver was known for it’s variety and categorized choice of inspirational websites that were truly original and weren’t simply sites on the latest trend bandwagon that are largely found on today’s CSS showcase websites. How did you find the countless number of websites to list, I don’t recall a submission form on the website so did you hunt them down yourself and what was the particularity that made you select them for inclusion?

CG: CSS showcase – you are kidding me right? Are you actually visiting these? I’ve given up a long time ago. I still do now and then when I discover or hear of a new one – to see what I’ve been missing and since I’m determined to get an as accurate as possible sample to rest my opinion on – I usually visit over 20-25 pages of times x

“my detractors will rejoice in having ample time to prepare their hate-mail attacks...”
“no nudity – no violence – no sexploitation...”

thumbnails to come to conclusion: not buying it.

In my opinion, the ratio is still about 2-3 / 100 except I published the 2-3 while they publish the 100.

I am always left perplexed – frustrated and oh gosh – is this really getting traffic from a trusting and interested audience? To me it’s like a huge virtual shopping mall. Got a client, with the usual limited budget (because he has no clue as of yet on how to use the web), of course he wants it yesterday... best to find some already existing ‘designs’ so you can mark-it up quick and clear just enough leftover money to pay your next rent.

Curation is a very demanding activity. It requires discipline and deep-rooted values that you are willing to defend / fight for any given day. If content published is ‘submissions’ based only – then one can quickly fall prey to whatever your perceived value is, as an editor.

There has always been a submit form on Netdiver – with strict guidelines – (no nudity – no violence – no sexploitation – no foul language). In later years – we made a form that limited characters in the content field – to stop receiving press releases of non-related projects or boring ones with a budget to hire a PR firm. It has always surprised me how these guidelines were mostly ignored or not read – because the volume was there – but the quality was not.

On 100 websites visited, no more than 2-3 would be featured. So yes, most of what was reviewed was the effort put into finding the pearls. Intensive, time wise. No regrets – I love to do research and who can boast having visited over 150k websites from top to bottom? That affords me a unique point of view – a vast library of visual references – which will directly affect my performance in the upcoming projects I’m pursuing.

With the evolution of CSS design, universal access to free or affordable web templates and ‘themes’ that are ready, even for non design professionals, to plug into free web based content management systems such as Wordpress, Drupal etc., when you look at the web today do you find that most websites all look the same?

CG: Though I’d like to blame plug and play templates for the flattening of the web to near sameness with some variations to a theme, it would be a really lazy, easy excuse. I think the ‘sameness’ comes from lack
of real design exploration, time constraints to deliver, ignorance of clients and overall a boring interface and it’s inherited limitations. Who would like to design brochures over and over for clients on a strict 8.5 x 11 (or A1) landscape format? Don’t know about you – but this would probably be enough to persuade me to clone templates... or even leave the profession altogether.

“Honey, we’re the originals – they are the copy.”

Was the new look Netdiver and the current substituting Caroleguevin.com website based around a theme or do you think that the use of themes is killing creativity and originality around the web?

CG: Duh. Netdiver and now featured by Carole Guevin are based on an original interface design we did back in 2000 - which was prior the existence of blogs and themes and templates and... Talk about having nailed a really usable interface and because ‘so many others’ use similar grids – we’re perceived as template users. Honey, we’re the originals – they are the copy.
I am an ardent defender of ‘if it ain’t broke – don’t fix it’. Since I have always been on the content is King side – it matters immensely that if I am to show a myriad of different colour palette projects – resized in thumbnails – using a lot of negative space and loads of white with black accents is the only route to go - following after the models of what I call awesome magazines who use loads and loads of negative (white) space. It leaves breathing space instead of cluttering things in big pile of perceived value. Key is not to be in competition with the content – the interface serves as a nice presenting space – whereas your eyes focus on what matters most... the projects presented.

Also the decision to keep same – for Caroleguevin.com was to port and insinuate that the same kind of ‘design culture news’ were going to be found there. We spinned the turnover in 3.5 weeks... though the idea had been percolating for a while. If you look at fye.cc there is a similarity in grid and an intended one, at that.

Call it ‘branding’ the presentation – so it shows it’s from the same ‘family’ of websites.
What do you think of all the CSS showcasing websites that have sprung up like wild mushrooms all over the web during the last couple of years, are they really functional to designers to get their websites noticed or are they just seeking to generate traffic and profit from ads?

CG: Well the springing like mushrooms is not surprising considering that when we started there were something like 35k websites on the www and now there are how many? 2.5 billions? I like the mushroom analogy because it is a fungus – some kind of parasite and parasites usually feed on their host. I Won’t go further on the analogy.

I’m not saying CSS can’t bring good design, maybe

“I like the mushroom analogy because it is a fungus –”

the problem is that few real designers are reluctant to learn it and use it well as much as there are programmers who proclaim themselves designers.

I think that with the disenfranchise of publishing and content circulation – what we see today was bound to happen for the better and the worst. Everyone knows that if you want serious news you go to the New York Times that coexists with The (infamous) Inquirer. You get the idea – spanning in-between those two extremes is a full spectrum of the good, bad and ugly - now multiply this by countries the world over. There has always been mediocrity wildfries raging around oasis of intellectually sound havens. While the fire burns – hiding behind huge smoke screens, lay the worthier but somewhat hidden content hubs.
I can honestly say that I don’t remember ever seeing blatant advertising on Netdiver, was that a policy option of yours and if so how did you finance the website?

**CG:** Through advertisers! We always favoured an advertorial approach – shunning the blink-blink click-me way too obvious ads. Our audience represents our quintessential asset and right off, our commitment was to only offer high quality low noise content – something I’m proud to say we’ve never compromised.

At some point in time, Google was writing sequentially to get us to use their ads. Ad networks contacted us to be part of theirs... and we turned them down. Needless to say I have turned down more than I have accepted – but to me it was a matter of better eat peanut butter with jelly and make my audience happy than eat a month worth of champagne with caviar toasts... and burn my audience away.

In fact, in respect to delivering click-through, we have delivered one of the highest in the industry. How?

Certainly not because we had Yahoo like gazillion pageviews – nothing of the sort. We were always small – sizable but small – with a hard core loyal audience – just that.

Remember when browsers started affording ‘ad blocker’ add-ons - well for having worked with some of the biggest companies (such as Adobe and Microsoft) we know for having being privy to what ‘media buyers / planners were selling: ad stocks based on pageviews - alas without knowledge to their clients – the ad blockers were doing their job just fine – and most of the $$$ spent in acquiring these bulging at the waist ‘big’ names and ‘high’ traffic sites which had ‘experienced’ users with their ‘ad blockers’ set at on... the click-through rate was... uh... miserable at best.

I figured out a way to defeat the ‘ad blockers’ (secret recipe to this day) and eureka! We delivered one of the highest click-through coming from a quality, hypertargeted audience that was genuinely interested in their products.

My vision is about the long-term effect – not the short one. It’s about reputation – worthy more than $$$$.

If not so – I would never have kept at what I do for so long, there is life apart from the Internet. Oh wait up – is there?
How much time did you dedicate to it daily, weekly or monthly on average?

**CG:** You really want to know? How about 14-16 hours a day / 7 days a week for 12 years. Now, I have one day off and limit working days to only 12 hours.

In the early years, we did client work. But all in all always amounting to the same old same old and decided that was not the avenue to pursue. The most rewarding and craziest adventure ever was doing the Adobe Design Achievement Awards 2008 website and media outreach. But that’s probably worthy of yet another never to be published book.

In fact, Netdiver became the main ‘client’ all the while investigating – brainstorming – researching new projects that would either be complimentary – or why not a new paradigm?

What advice would you give to web designers and artists who want to make an impression and get their work noticed?

**CG:** Long answer short: be different – you are different! And it needs to ‘show’ instantly. You’ve got 5 secs and less to make that first impression to information overloaded visitors.

Capitalize on this. ONLY display very good projects and visuals. As Josh Davis once said: “Show only what you want to redo”. Good work – is hard work.

“— it was a matter of better eat peanut butter with jelly and make my audience happy...”

Which CMS do you use or recommend and why?

**CG:** I’m not the backend geeky-girl. JF is. We have only recently moved the content to a CMS really and opted for Wordpress because Expression Engine defaulted on their promised new management interface version. So yes, Netdiver was lovingly hand coded for 10 years and the Vintage version, is too. And, all our websites are mobile friendly.
TALENT – real talent – is your uber asset and secret weapon. Average talent doesn’t get noticed, look at what kind of quality makes it into museums. As I said before – curation is a very demanding task, ask ‘others’ to edit your portfolio and that’s neither your Mom, girlfriend / boyfriend or BFF. Ask someone you admire who owes you nothing – but perhaps the best advice – will be a good kick in your ego.

Overall forget about being extreme, if not extremely good at what you do.

For the record, I don’t really care what a creative person uses as a tool on the web – as long as they make it a top priority to have an online portfolio. How else can I find you?

In design circles, you are considered a web and new media pioneer with fifteen official years of experience working on the internet however we know that you were even using the internet a further fifteen years before that when mere mortals didn’t even know that the world wide web existed. Can you tell us about your experience with the UdM scientific group or is it top secret?

CG: LOL. Oh you are so right about the world wide web not existing because it wasn’t. WWW started in 1993. In fact, the www is the graphical layer – the interface over the dazzling ether called the Internet which is really just a bunch of servers / computers hooked-up together via different protocols (such as Gopher, WAiS) that permit the exchange of files (content) by the use of links.

My experience of building a database from a 760 baud terminal hooked-up to the university mainframe seven month pregnant and working from home – is in hindsight, a true Star Trek like experience that has shaped how, why and what I do to this day.

One of my early theories about the www, which I called the prime directive, is summarized in this: network economy = communication + exchange + collaboration. In fact, only a few way-way back fans may recall the Network Economy newsletter published for a couple of years in email format. Tapscott and I could argue who came up with first naming and nailing ‘network economy’.
“Currently in severe teenancy — the web has still yet to come.”

Another early prediction was ‘all devices to (be connected to) the network’ which sure enough is proven amply today.

Another one was that ‘freelancing’ was to be the most prevalent economic model to get hired by.

What has been my most enduring theory – that is yet to be proven although there’s a sort of pouting debut – is that the putting in common of problems generates exponential results. Social media is buzzing with promises that has yet to deliver. We’re currently in this in-between fuss about being liked and not or followed and not. But I believe something meaningful will emerge.

Currently in severe teenancy – the web has still yet to come. It’s not so much about more technological evolution, my gosh – please let’s all have a deep breath here - who needs more? But rather how using the tools at hand – do we collectively change the world (before we auto-extinct)?

I have read that teenagers are incapacitated in their reasoning abilities because of the hormones soup that is bursting from the brain thus, I find it quite interesting how similar it is to what is happening online now.

I am still very much in awe every day when I connect to the Internet – to the whole wide world. I think the Internet is the greatest gift ever awarded humanity. What we do with it will show how dear and precious we consider the privilege to be born now, instead of in the Middle-Ages.

What did you do before you got into design or did you always know that you were going to be in the design world?

CG: Before I was in design I was dreaming of being in design. I have dreamed many many many dreams and to different levels - seen them realized. But the best is really yet to come. Forward is way more interesting than the past, don’t you think?
“I have ditched the comfort zone of the CTRL+Z universe...”

Such as working on releasing two music albums. A commemorative one that will be free to individuals and families who are going through the agony of accompanying a dying loved one – in memory of my little brother Michel who I lost over a year ago. The other one, the beginning of our inverted musical odyssey. JF and I had a band 20 years ago and worked for 7 years, just when we were ready to cut a first album came the www opportunity and we invested everything in our new fledgling adventure.

Through the years we always continued composing songs and 2 years ago we reinvested in new instruments and a top of the line home studio. The workstation is almost ready and JF is harvesting tutorials upon tutorials to learn Cubase which is about 100 times more complex than Notator that was running on our Atari... Priceless: we still have it.

In the past 5 years I have ditched the comfort zone of the CTRL+Z universe and started painting large abstract canvas where – if and when you mess up – you need to come up with a pretty clever replacement – or start all over again.
All my life, colours have held a mysterious pull. I love colours and yet even if it’s been over 40 years since I began playing with them, they still defy and challenge me. Also painting is a discipline that fuels risk taking.

What is next for Carole Guevin? Now that Netdiver is on hiatus are there any new projects being developed that you would like to tell us about? Do you think that they will have the same lasting impact and longevity as Netdiver did?

CG: First step was to reclaim my own voice under the guise of the featured by CaroleGuevin.com. No longer under the gun of producing / finding web wonders – I am free to distantiate myself from web design mostly content – embracing all design disciplines in my coverage which in fact, truly reflect my interests.

I have had a deep hunger to learn all my life and a curious mind that frets being taken hostage into a single one topic / subject / industry. Anyway I find that one track mind people to be short-fused in ref with being creative. Multi-interests / disciplines is a prerequisite today – so that makes me just ‘normal’ which is refreshing after years of being the refusenik per excellence.

In fact I can say that I’ve embarked in producing what I consider my long awaited for life project – it has been over 10 years in preparation – years in research – and now is in forward mode. Very exciting! There is no firm due date since after waiting so long – I’m not about to rush it because I would feel the pressure to deliver in order to prove something (or myself) to the ether. Anything worthwhile takes time and lots of time to grow. Ask me in a year’s time, in a new interview, Anthony, and I will give you an exclusive scoop.

Where do you see yourself in the next fifteen years?

CG: Imagineering my next-next new dream. Still very much in love with JF. Approaching the full realization of my vision.