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What I Learned at the X Games by Steven Skov Holt

In late June and early July of 1999, the X Games made their first appearance in San Francisco. The games—"X" connoting "extreme," "experimental" and "Generation X" all at once—occupied a several-pier area along the downtown Embarcadero. Located just a few blocks from the frogdesign office, the X Games afforded me the opportunity to experience an aspect of youth culture that I normally don't get to see either at work or during my teaching duties at school. It is a part of our culture that is mutating, with grace and optimism no less, under the constant strain of commercial pressure and the need for self-expression.

Simply witnessing the host of wanna-be-your-friend companies displaying the marketing ineptitude of the mega-corporations made the X Games worthwhile. But throw in the opportunity to indulge my secret pleasure in watching the athlete-entertainers bonk and go boom, and it put the X Games over the top.

As I watched, it became clear that there was much for me to learn from what was taking place. What I saw was a new generation—the generation whose peers are represented in this edition of the Graphis New Talent Design Annual—literally and figuratively stretching and flexing its muscles.

Winning mattered, but even more important was the idea of staying true to yourself, your style and whatever it was that you represent. What an easy thing to forget, I thought, in the day-to-day process of making the business case for design and in trying to sell creativity to those who would just as soon delete it as a line item in a budget! Even in the most commercial aspects of the X Games, there was a kind of purity that I admired. It came through in the athletes, but also in the large part of the crowd that avidly participated. They believed.

Perhaps the pinnacle moment of the X Games occurred one evening when skateboard legend Tony Hawk pulled off a maneuver known as a "900," a never-before-achieved trick involving multiple 360° rotations. This guy, the Michael Jordan of his genre, tried time after time to nail the trick. Urged on by the crowd, he finally did it. I came away with immense respect for his accomplishment, and for everyone who is out there trying to raise the level of their craft. It was also clear that we should watch what Hawk's saying, wearing, using (and earning) in the next few years. If attitude was prevalent, so was authenticity. How you looked doing whatever it was you did mattered. Having endorsements and being good enough to get paid to play mattered. Not trying too hard mattered, unless you took it to Hawk's extreme level of simultaneous alienation and immersion, and tried so hard that the whole audience winced with you when you bailed. The pure linguistic creativity used to describe the ,

tricks was impressive. I may be jumbling them together, but I heard phrases like "a giant extension off a super man with a seat grab," "a huge 360 tail whip followed

by a back flip with a one-foot X-up," and "an alley-oop with vert-style air" that moved into "a front-side grind then to a 180 blunt."

That spirit of inventiveness was further evident in the slew of customized products, home-grown and self-invented technologies,

and twentysomethings who not only skated, boarded or biked but also owned their own companies. It was awesome. I think a lot of people think of the X gamers as children or misguided youth, but these "kids" aren't settling for anybody else's American Dream. They're building their own, and it's impressive. I dug the boards and helmets of all different types that were transformed into individual product expressions through graffiti, carefully chosen decals, and the repetition of particular signature moves that have the effect of wearing away certain parts of the product while leaving other areas intact. As a designer, I felt that these customizations pointed out something interesting: too often designers try to create something that is perfect when people really want something that is individualized or even unique.

In summary, the X Games represented a moment—the sometimes-seamless, sometimes-contradictory taste trends of the ascendant youth generation were on proud, passionate and profound display. The opportunity to mix with a diverse audience—kids, families, international tourists, wheel and board groupies—was worth any dozen "focus groups," and (for the time being at least), the X Games are free for any and all who want to go.

In such a milieu, I felt it was appropriate both to be humble and inspired. To watch, listen and learn. I loved the X Games for what they were, but also for what they represented: the freedom to go, and to go big. I got to spend time with a rare species of human, one that believes implicitly in what it does. Whether you believe in it from a spiritual or secular point of view, that sort of thing is just good for you. It connected me to something essential. X Gamers, just like the students in this book, reminded me again that there is no need to make a distinction between our life and our art.

program at California College of Arts and Crafts. Holt co-curated the first-ever National Design Triennale opening this spring at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum.



(opposite)
Illustrating the sponsor frenzy:
Media in space and sky at the

X Games, July 1999, San
Francisco, California. Photo-
graph by Steven Skov Holt.

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