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## **Early Stages of Web Design in Latvia**

The thesis analyses the principles of creation and information technology interaction in the early stages of web design in Latvia. Main focus of this research identifies the application of various methods, such as: studies of literature and online archives sources, and case studies of a number of webpages, as well as interviews with media experts and web designers. Reflections on the author's own professional experience which has been gained by working as web page designer since the 1997 helps to investigate this topic from the viewpoint of formal design analysis.

The beginnings of Internet use in Latvia, including email, date back to 1990, but the first constant web connection, from IMCS UL (the Institute of Mathematics and Computer Science, University of Latvia) to Tallinn, was established on October 2, 1992. This is considered the birth date of Internet in Latvia.

“The Internet gained global popularity with the invention of graphic WWW browsers. The first *Mosaic*<sup>1</sup> versions appeared at the beginning of 1994 – and later that summer the first WWW servers were already available in Latvia.”<sup>2</sup> And, with access to servers, websites could be launched and browsed online that very same year.

The growth of several websites in Latvia was also furthered by the infinite number of unique domains available.

When talking about the first examples of web design in Latvia, one should mention the oldest and the most well conserved website, which can be found on archive.org – Latvia online! [www.vernet.lv](http://www.vernet.lv) (1996).<sup>3</sup> It fully embodies the tendencies characteristic of the period when both the design of the website and its code were developed by IT specialists known as “web masters”. These sites were characterized by a simple, unpretentious text layout which filled its

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<sup>1</sup> A global web browser developed at the University of Illinois, USA. *Mosaic* ensures access to web resources via graphic user interface. With the help of a mouse, it offers a quick and easy way to browse hypertext documents. (From the terminology data base of the LZA TK ITTEA)

<sup>2</sup> From an interview with Guntis Bārzdīņš.

<sup>3</sup> (<http://web.archive.org/web/19961227135515/http://vernet.lv/>) (viewed 11.01.2015)

allotted space from end to end and was structured with the help of tables. Small images or “icons”, whose size was determined by the limited speed of data transmission, were used to emphasize headings.

Various businesses in Latvia and elsewhere in the world saw the growing potential of websites – in order to convince the public of their usefulness, they sought the help of professional designers. As early as 1997 Guntis Bārzdiņš, then young researcher with Internet user experience<sup>4</sup>, invited designer Agris Dzilna to IMCS UL<sup>5</sup>, which was one of the first institutions in Latvia to develop websites. Dzilna became the first professional designer in Latvia to work with the new medium which demanded a radically different approach to that of graphic design in print.

1997 was also the year when Ieva Rietuma founded a private company – *Media Parks*. As stated on their website, “*Media Parks* is a new (web – A. DZ) media project that aims to provide strategic and detailed information about Latvia by using the latest information and communication technologies and providing a democratic and interactive platform for discussion.”<sup>6</sup> This structure (as the company was called by one of its first directors, Reinis Zitmanis) began developing websites, and as early as 1998 it had generated enough income to cover its initial costs.<sup>7</sup> In 1999 photographer Oļegs Zernovs and Inga Jurjāne, then a student at the Art Academy of Latvia, began working as designers at *Media Parks*, which was further proof of the enduring tendency to hire professionals to work in web design.

So what is it that intrigued designers about the new medium in the early stages of web design in Latvia?

First, it was the global aspect of the web, which ensured that content placed on a server could be accessed from all over the world.

Second, the interactivity of the design, which allowed to influence the very process of web browsing.

Third, the possibility to use animation to make the content of a website more attractive.

Designers working on information visualization were challenged by this new environment with its unfamiliar technical limitations, which were often creatively turned into distinctive

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<sup>4</sup> Barzdins had recently returned from U.S. where he held a Postdoctoral Research Associate position at the Department of Computer Science, New Mexico State University.

<sup>5</sup> The Institute of Mathematics and Computer Science, University of Latvia

<sup>6</sup> (<http://web.archive.org/web/19970710164339/http://www.mediaparks.lv/parmums.htm> (viewed 04.02. 2015))

<sup>7</sup> From an interview with Reinis Zitmanis

means of expression. Designers had to change their way of thinking and accept that the end product was just that – what they saw on the screen.

The initial period of web design in Latvia is not unique in a broader context – like everywhere else, early web design was the product of the designers' relations to their local culture and its various manifestations. It is safe to say that web design in Latvia went through the same stages that characterize the global development of the Internet.