The Space of Rules

Text-Based Rules and Text–Image Communication in *The Twenty-Fifth Room*

The project and its enquiry

The Twenty-Fifth Room is an illustrated book project about a daughter who, following her father's death, returns to the old building where she grew up. She visits every room in search of a missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle he left behind. The building is due to be demolished. Through conversations with its residents and by looking through the objects left there, she comes to understand anew the father she had always thought of as silent. Inspired by Georges Perec's *Life A User's Manual* (Perec, 2018), the project uses rules to organise the novel's chapters and allocate materials, providing a basis for developing the plot and illustrations. My research question is: how do these text-based creative rules affect the book's visual content and page layout (typography), and what advantages and limitations do writing and images each have in visual communication when working with a prescribed set of elements?

The project developed in two stages, with the writing assignment in Δ 2 marking the transition. Initially, in Δ 1, my research focused primarily on reproducing the rules of *Life A User's Manual*. By studying Perec's complex tables for allocating elements, I applied the same logic to produce the text and illustrations for ten chapters under prescribed conditions. Although the plot was subject to specific constraints, the images remained entirely independent of its development. At this stage, it was less a matter of making graphic design choices according to my subjective preferences than of not yet having identified specific text-based rules for designing images. As the writing assignment progressed, I gradually stepped back to consider how textual rules influence visual creation. Using the conditions already assigned to each chapter through the allocation table, I established four groups for comparison: chapter elements, illustration alone, prose alone, and a one-sentence plot summary with illustration. These experiments examine differences between text and images in visual communication under prescribed conditions.

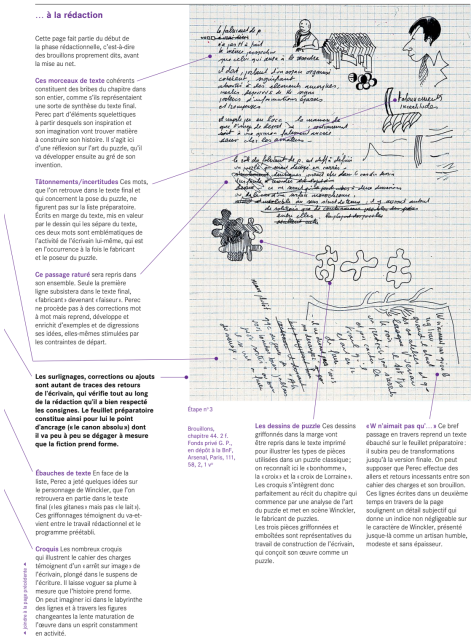
The decisions that literary rules leave open

In *Life A User's Manual*, Perec imagines a vertical section through an entire apartment building as a ten-by-ten chessboard. The chapters progress neither through a conventional linear chronology nor through a door-to-door sequence. Instead, they move across the board strictly according to the knight's move in chess: two squares in one direction, followed by one square perpendicular to it. Each chapter corresponds to a square, and each square to a room, allowing the rooms' individual stories to unfold in sequence (Bibliothèque nationale de France, no date).

To determine the events, characters, colours and even literary quotations that should appear in each room, Perec also uses a complex mathematical tool: a pair of orthogonal Latin squares of order ten. He lists forty-two categories, including clothing, colours, historical centuries, furniture, literary works, food and geographical locations, with ten different elements in each. Through the permutations of the mathematical matrix, each chapter must incorporate the forty-two elements assigned to it when the

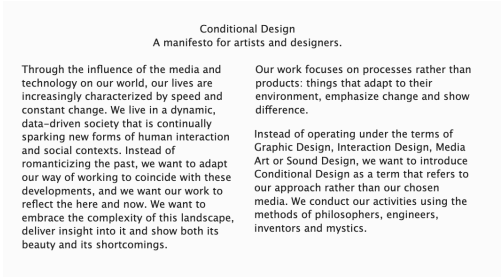
knight reaches its square (Bibliothèque nationale de France, no date). For example, a chapter might be required to include red, the eighteenth century, embroidery, sauerkraut and South America. Like someone solving a difficult crossword, Perec integrates these unrelated elements into a story.

Conventional thinking associates literary creation with inspiration and unrestricted freedom. Oulipo, the avant-garde literary group to which Perec belonged, takes the opposite position: unlimited freedom often produces clichés, while extreme constraints force the mind beyond habitual patterns and stimulate imagination in its purest form. In practice, the constraints in *Life A User's Manual* do not extinguish the author's imagination; they inspire boundless creativity. Starting from impersonal mathematical formulae and logical rules, Perec ultimately creates a tapestry of stories filled with human joys and sorrows, loneliness, death and absurdity (Perec, 2018).



The Bibliothèque nationale de France's presentation of the manuscript for Chapter 44 of *Life A User's Manual* is particularly revealing. It places the novel's prescribed materials alongside additions and revisions. The annotations explain that expressions absent from the preparatory list also entered the writing (Bibliothèque nationale de France, no date). The allocation of materials therefore establishes conditions for making while leaving some decisions to the writing process itself. This led me to consider the distinction between 'setting conditions' and 'creating within those conditions': a list can require an object to appear, but it cannot determine that object's meaning. Here, my enquiry began to move beyond simply reproducing rules. Perec offers a system for generating textual materials, but transferring it to an illustrated book leaves the mode of narration, the presentation of images and the layout of content as questions that the maker must continue to consider and organise.

How Conditional Design changed my judgement


Conditional Design
A manifesto for artists and designers.

Through the influence of the media and technology on our world, our lives are increasingly characterized by speed and constant change. We live in a dynamic, data-driven society that is continually sparking new forms of human interaction and social contexts. Instead of romanticizing the past, we want to adapt our way of working to coincide with these developments, and we want our work to reflect the here and now. We want to embrace the complexity of this landscape, deliver insight into it and show both its beauty and its shortcomings.

Our work focuses on processes rather than products: things that adapt to their environment, emphasize change and show difference.

Instead of operating under the terms of Graphic Design, Interaction Design, Media Art or Sound Design, we want to introduce Conditional Design as a term that refers to our approach rather than our chosen media. We conduct our activities using the methods of philosophers, engineers, inventors and mystics.

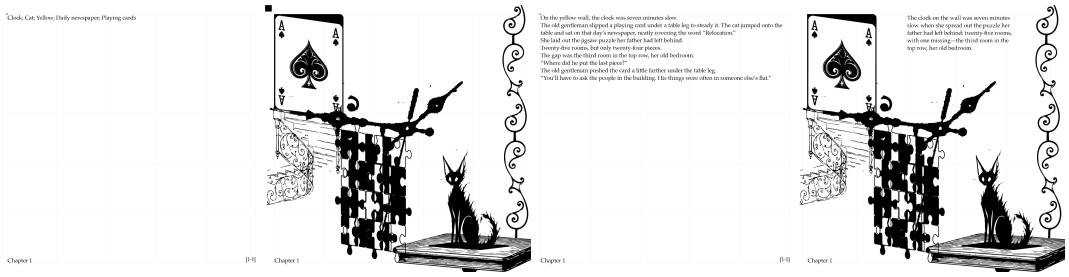
Conditional Design is a manifesto and working method developed by Luna Maurer, Edo Paulus, Jonathan Puckey and Roel Wouters. It defines practice through its approach rather than its chosen medium, placing time, relationships and change at the centre of making and advocating conditions established through understandable rules (Maurer et al., no date). The *Conditional Design Workbook* translates this position into drawing exercises that readers can participate in. It traces the development of workshops step by step and invites readers to carry out the exercises or use them to organise their own workshops (Moniker, no date). Readers can therefore engage with how the work is generated and take part through their own actions.

This prompted me to reconsider my use of Perec's method. I had focused on how elements could be allocated accurately and then transformed into stories and graphics. Yet a complete allocation system cannot explain how images establish relationships or how words give objects meaning. Conditional Design's emphasis on process makes the choices that arise while following rules a subject for analysis. I therefore stopped judging the work solely by its adherence to the list and began to ask: when the same conditions are realised in different forms, which relationships are made explicit, and which remain open?

This is not simply an opposition between simple and complex rules. Perec's complex system still leaves scope for the maker's interpretation, while the Conditional Design manifesto acknowledges that apparently objective processes originate in subjective intentions (Maurer et al., no date). The tension lies in the focus of the enquiry: the workbook emphasises how results emerge through the enactment of rules, whereas my illustrated book must also consider how those results communicate characters, events and their relationships. Defining practice through method rather than medium does not mean that differences between media can be overlooked. Applying a shared method across different forms is precisely what makes those differences the subject of my enquiry.

From making through rules to comparing text and images

This judgement changed the way *The Twenty-Fifth Room* is presented. I reduced the building's spatial framework to a five-by-five grid and used a knight's route to organise the chapters. From Perec's lists, I selected five categories of material: objects, animals, colours, reading materials, and games and toys. I then presented each of the book's twenty-five chapters in four forms: chapter elements, illustration alone, prose alone, and a one-sentence plot summary with illustration. The work thus comprises twenty-five sets of chapter comparisons, each starting from the conditions prescribed for that chapter. The comparison no longer centres solely on whether a page contains the required objects, but on differences in how text and images communicate under the same conditions.



The chapter-elements group presents the starting point for making, allowing the choices in the other three forms to be traced back to it. The prose-alone group allows characters' actions, memories and causal relationships to unfold gradually. The illustration-alone group temporarily removes written narration, giving the positions, scales and forms of objects the task of communicating. The fourth group reintroduces language through a one-sentence summary, examining how words identify, supplement or narrow the connections within an image. I therefore examine illustration as an independent form of communication while also treating text as an interpretation of the image. This shifts the enquiry from 'how to create graphics according to textual rules' to 'what text and images each establish, and how they alter one another's expression'.

These four forms contain different amounts of narrative information, so they cannot simply establish whether words or images are more effective. The value of the comparison lies in identifying particular trade-offs: how images convey meaning when narration is omitted, and which previously uncertain meanings are selected when language is added.

Narrative choices in the mirror and the puzzle

The mirror and the jigsaw puzzle at the end of the story make these trade-offs concrete. The rules assign both objects to the same chapter, but I make the missing puzzle piece a mirror. As the daughter completes the puzzle left by her father, she sees her own face and realises that the puzzle resembles his life: she herself is the missing piece. The list does not require the mirror to become a puzzle piece or to connect the daughter with her father. These are narrative decisions I bring to the materials. Placing two objects in the same image is a different creative decision from making one complete the other. An image can directly present the spatial relationships between the puzzle, the gap and the reflection. Prose can explain why the daughter is searching for the piece and develop a coherent narrative by establishing relationships between the elements. A one-sentence summary can reinforce the chapter's focus concisely.

Writing and illustration both involve the same process of translation. 'Setting conditions' can be organised rationally, but 'creating within those conditions' remains individual, varied and full of invention, whether in developing a plot or drawing an illustration. I also began to ask whether the prose supplies connections that the image does not communicate, or whether it determines the direction of interpretation too early. Illustrations in an illustrated book usually support an understanding of the plot, but could text instead serve to explain the illustration itself? This is the purpose of the fourth experiment, which combines a summary with an image. Next, I will invite different readers to read the four forms of *The Twenty-Fifth Room*, document how they read and record their interpretations of the illustrations alone. This will allow me to observe differences between readers' and the author's narratives and use the readers' perspectives to connect the elements into a new story.

Conclusion

Text-based rules therefore provide shared materials and boundaries for writing and images, while meaning continues to emerge through the ways each organises them. Words can make time, motivation and causality explicit, but may also narrow the scope for interpretation. Images can juxtapose objects and present visual connections, although some narrative situations require additional information. Combining text and images does not simply add their respective strengths together, because one form of expression may alter the space left by the other. Conditional Design prompted me to include these choices in my analysis of the work, while the twenty-five sets of chapter comparisons allow different choices made under the same conditions to be discussed together. I retain rules as a starting point for making, while shifting my judgement towards what they leave open in different media. The work thus not only tells the story of a daughter coming to understand her father anew; it also makes the ways text and images jointly construct that story available for examination.