

Variations of a brand logo

Google's doodles

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Abstract

Provisional changes of the well-known Google logo have been a recurring phenomenon on the front page of the search engine since 1998. Google calls them "doodles". The doodles are variations of the Google logo that celebrate famous individuals or cultural events, but the doodles also point to the iconic status of the Google logo as a locus of creativity and reinterpretation. The article explores the iconic status of the Google logo as expressed in the doodles. On the basis of a multimodal typographic analysis of a sample of Google's doodles from 1998 to 2013, the article identifies different types of relations between the well-known Google letters and the new graphic features. The article examines how these relations produce and communicate brand iconicity, and how this iconicity has developed from a typographic perspective.

Keywords: doodle, Google, logo, typography, visual identity

Introduction

A drawing of a stick man behind the logo on Google's start page on August 30, 1998, marks the beginning of a remarkable semiotic

phenomenon related to the Google logo, the so-called “doodles”. The stick man refers to Google founders Larry Page’s and Sergey Brin’s attendance in the Burning Man festival (Google 2014a). From 2000, webmaster Dennis Hwang begins to create doodles more frequently, and today the creation of doodles is dedicated to a full-time team of graphic designers, animators and engineers (Google 2014b). Google describes doodles as “the fun, surprising and sometimes spontaneous changes that are made to the Google logo to celebrate holidays, anniversaries and the lives of famous artists, pioneers and scientists” (Google 2014a). However, the doodles also seem to celebrate the Google logo itself. This article explores the iconic status of the Google logo by an analysis of typographic variations in doodles. The aim of the article is to understand how doodles construct and communicate brand iconicity.

Google and the doodles

Following Danesi’s categorisation of logos, Google’s logo is a “letter logo”: “a visual iconic rendering of the brand name that stylizes the letters (or one of the letters) of that name in some distinctive way” (Danesi 2013, 469). The first version of the present Google logo was designed by Ruth Kedar in 1999 using Catull typeface (Zjawinski 2008a). Compared to its original shaded typography, the logo has developed towards a more flattened typography due to design changes in 2010 and 2013, but the logo still appears in the same (but slightly modified) colours.¹ Thus, the logo has maintained an overall recognisable visual identity throughout the years, visually suggesting “continuity” (Floch 2001, 33). In semiotic terms, the logo is a visual sign “standing for the brand in some way” (Danesi 2013, 468), and at the same time differentiating the brand from other brands (Floch 2001, 33). According to the designer of the logo, the “old style” serif typeface is intended to create a link to searching as a “look into the past” (Zjawinski 2008a). Moreover, the different colourings of the letters connect Google to ideas of playfulness and innovation. The use of primary colours (blue, red, yellow) and the insertion of a green letter instead of another yellow letter in the sequence of letters point to meaning potentials connected to the mixing of new colours (cf. blue and yellow make green). Likewise, changing the order of colours from blue, red and yellow to blue, green (not red, nor yellow) and red (not yellow) in-

dicates a brand that is full of surprises and inventive of new ways. As explained by Kedar: “We ended up with the primary colors, but instead of having the pattern go in order, we put a secondary color on the L, which brought back the idea that Google doesn’t follow the rules” (Zjawinski 2008b).²

Google’s “Doodle Archive” – comprising around 2,000 published doodles from 1998 and onwards – bears witness to the design of doodles as an important branding activity within the company.³ However, being provisional logos that replace and alter the Google logo in different ways, the doodles represent a somewhat peculiar branding phenomenon. On the one hand, the doodles distract attention from the Google logo as they refer to individuals or cultural events (mostly) not related to Google. Moreover, the doodles function as clickable search entries to what is celebrated (usually, the Google logo is not clickable). On the other hand, the doodles seem to point to the power of the Google logo inherent in its ‘capacity’ to refer to something else. Yet, this power also relates to the function of the doodles as clickable search entries which demonstrate the use of the search engine. Accordingly, the doodles demonstrate the nature of Google searching.

Method

On the basis of an empirical study, the article will now explore the Google logo’s iconic status as expressed in the doodles. The study involves a multimodal typographic analysis of a large sample of doodles. The sampling is based on Google’s archive (<https://www.google.com/doodles>), which presumably comprises the most complete and readily accessible collection of doodles on the web, compared with captured doodles in wide-ranging web archives such as the Internet Archive.⁴ Google’s archive is organised in reverse chronological order and, as a minimum, it provides information about the celebrated event, date of publication and the geographical reach of each doodle. Due to the researcher’s geographical location, the study will focus on doodles published in Denmark. However, this ‘centralised’, ‘small country’ starting point turned out to be an appropriate strategy for identifying typographic variations even in a global perspective, as most doodles displayed in Denmark were displayed in other countries as well.

Since Google's archive does not allow for country based browsing, nor provide effective searching by country, the registration of doodles was 'made by hand' by systematically browsing the archive from 1998 to 2013. At the outset, the unique URLs of all doodles showed in Denmark were listed, and the events celebrated by the doodles were registered. To document the global reach of the sampling procedure, other regions displaying the doodles were also registered. Next, the collected material was subjected to several selective reviews. First, all registered doodles were reviewed in a chronological order, focusing on typographic variations of the logo. This procedure included tentative descriptions of every new variation appearing in the doodles regardless of what was represented. More specifically, it was described how the logo was altered by means of, for example, 'overlapping graphic elements', 'letter replaced by picture' or 'logo in new colours'. Next, the described variations were analysed in more detail in order to enable the identification and grouping of more general types of typographic variations appearing in the sample.

The aim of this explorative approach is to identify variations in the sample, not to calculate on statistical significance. Furthermore, the study will not take into account the reasons for particular events being celebrated in specific geographical areas, or the reasons why particular events are represented in particular ways. The study is inspired by research on typography as multimodal sign-making (Stöckl 2005; van Leeuwen 2005). In particular, the study will draw on Stöckl's framework proposing "microtypography", "mesotypography", "macrotypography" and "paratypography" as levels of description (Stöckl 2005). Compared with studies related to specific typographic elements, for example, the effects of animation (Malik, Aitken, and Waalen, 2009), typeface (Grohmann, Giese, and Parkman, 2013), or the use of visual elements in logos (Cian, Krishna, and Elder, 2014), this study will concentrate on the doodles' various typographic features and their interplay.

The sample

The sample comprises 439 doodles registered from 1998 to 2013. As illustrated in Table 1, only six doodles in the sample were showed exclusively in Denmark. Most doodles showed in Denmark were showed in other parts of the world as well.

Regional reach of doodles in the sample (N=439)	Number
Denmark only	6
Denmark and other European countries	432
Denmark and North America	413
Denmark and Latin America	408
Denmark and Africa	403
Denmark and Middle East	393
Denmark and Asia Pacific	421

Table 1: Regional reach of the doodles in the sample.

The doodles in the sample generally celebrate a wide range of events, including the celebration of holidays (Valentine’s Day, Christmas, New Year, Halloween), global sport events (the Olympic Games), and the celebration of scientists, artists and writers. Emphasising the playfulness related to the doodle phenomenon (and to the Google logo), the doodles often celebrate ‘surprising’ anniversaries, for example “Claude Monet’s 161st Birthday” (2001) or “Niels Bohr’s 127th Birthday” (2012). Most doodles appear as ‘single’ doodles, but the sample also includes ‘serial’ doodles, for example doodles designed in the same style (during the Olympic Games, for instance) or doodles forming a narrative.

Typographic variations

The sample provides the basis for identifying different types of relations between the Google letters and the new typographic features represented in the doodles. Thus, the analysis does not aim at describing different *types* of doodles, but typographic *variations* in the doodles. This means that one doodle may include one or more of the described features. In the following, the identified typographic variations in the sample will be presented.

Letters together with illustrations. As exemplified by the first doodle from 1998 (the “Burning Man Festival”), typographic variation appears as the use of the well-known Google letters together with graphic illustrations. This variation is related to “macrotypography”, which in the present context refers to the overall graphic organisation of the logo, including constellations of letters and images

(cf. Stöckl 2005, 209). The Google logo is accompanied by one or more illustrations signifying the celebrated event. The illustrations appear to be distinct from the logo, either clearly separated from the logo (beside, beneath or above), behind the logo or overlapping the logo. While the overlapping illustrations sometimes represent the Google letters partly covered, for example ‘dressed’ in clothing or hats, the logo remains intact and easy to distinguish from the image elements (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: “Happy New Year 2000”. Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

Letter(s) replaced by illustration(s). Another ‘macrotypographic’ variation registered very early in the sample (from 2000) is the replacement of one or more of the Google letters by graphic illustrations. The inserted illustrations should primarily refer to the celebrated events. But, at the same time, they hint at the replaced letters by means of colours or shapes, for instance. In a doodle celebrating Valentine’s Day (2000), the two ‘o’s are replaced by two hearts (referring to Valentine’s Day), but the colours and ‘roundness’ of the hearts also refer to the letters they replace. Likewise, in Figure 2, the first ‘o’ is replaced by a drawing of the celebrated person (Ray Charles), suggesting the shape of the missing letter.



Figure 2: “Ray Charles’ 74th Birthday” (2004). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

More radical variants of this type of typographic change are registered in the sample from 2006. In a doodle celebrating Louis Braille, the Latin letters are replaced by Braille letters in Google colours (“Louis Braille’s 107th Birthday”). However, the sample also represents doodles in which all the letters are replaced by illustrations without colour references. As exemplified in Figures 3 and 4, the

shapes and numbers of letters are only vaguely suggested. The most radical example is the replacement of the Google letters with a black barcode (see Figure 5).



Figure 3: “Constantin Brancusi’s 135th Birthday” (2011). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.



Figure 4: “226th Birthday of John James Audubon” (2011). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.



Figure 5: “Invention of the Bar Code” (2009). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

Letters in new colours, textures and typefaces. Variations connected to the individual letters in the logo relate to “microtypography” (Stöckl 2005, 209). In the sample, ‘microtypographic’ variations are registered from the year 2000 in a series of doodles referring to the Olympic Games in Sydney. These doodles represent the Google letters in the original typeface, but in the colours of the Olympic rings. The sample also includes ornamented or patterned letters, as illustrated in the Mondrian-style letters in Figure 6, as well as letters with new types of lightings and shades. Moreover, ‘microtypographic’ variations are registered as imitations of texture considered as “an illustration of tangibility, by shifts in focus and colour and by patterns of lines and shapes” (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2011, 541). These variations represent the letters in a Google-like typeface which imitate – or remediate – other types of material substances, for example painted letters (see Figure 7), drawn letters (see Figure 8) or letters made of marble (see Figure 9).

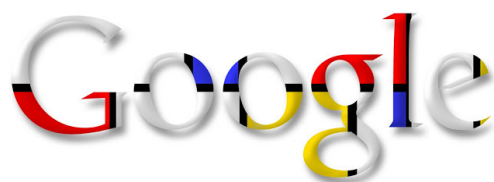


Figure 6: "Piet Mondrian's 130th Birthday" (2002). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.



Figure 7: "Claude Monet's 161st Birthday" (2001). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

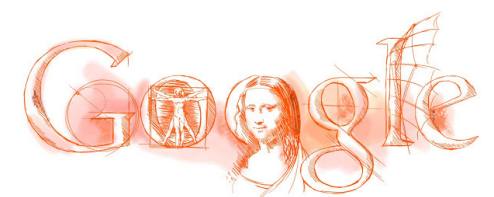


Figure 8: "Leonardo da Vinci's 553rd Birthday" (2005). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.



Figure 9: "Michelangelo's 528th Birthday" (2003). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

Typographic variations on the typeface level are closely connected to the imitation of textures and the replacement of letters by illustrations (cf. above). As illustrated in Figure 7, the porous contours of the painted letters even point to the disintegration of the typeface. Yet, perhaps more remarkably, the replacement of letters with letter-like illustrations exemplifies the complete disappearance of the typeface (see Figure 10).

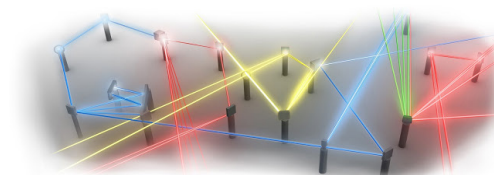


Figure 10: "Invention of the First Laser" (2008). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.



Figure 11: “Anniversary of the Ice Cream Sundae” (2011). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

Replacements of the original Google typeface with other ‘real’ typefaces are registered relatively late in the sample. In a doodle from 2010 celebrating the anniversary of Pac Man, the Google logo is represented in a Pac-Man style typeface. The replacement of Google’s typeface with more conventional typefaces is illustrated in Figure 11.

Reorganised letters. Logo variations in which the Google letters are reorganised or seem to ‘break out’ from their usual position in the logo are registered early in the sample (from 2000). These ‘mesotypographic’ variations are related to “the configuration of typographic signs in lines and text blocks” (Stöckl 2005, 209) and appear in different shapes. In Figure 12, the enlarged space between two o’s redefines the letters as illustrations of gymnastic rings. In a doodle celebrating Valentine’s Day (2003), a slanted font adds human-like qualities to the letters (the ‘l’ and the ‘e’ are ‘attracted to each other’), and Figure 13 shows an example of letters expressing acceleration by means of reduced spacing and reshaped letters.



Figure 12: “2000 Summer Olympic Games in Sydney – Gymnastics”. Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

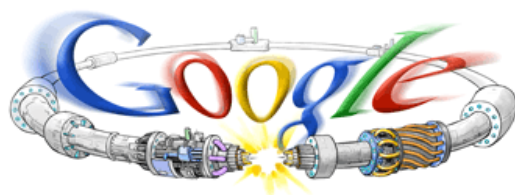


Figure 13: “Large Hadron Collider” (2008). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

Letters in sceneries. Inclusion of the Google letters in different types of sceneries shows early in the sample, for example in a doodle from 1999 in which partly overlapping white shapes and snow-

flakes make up a snow-covered landscape (“Happy Holidays from Google”). Later on, more detailed sceneries are registered. The sceneries now represent illusions of depth, and the letters appear as more ‘integrated’ elements in the sceneries (see Figures 14 and 15). Unlike the non-framed Google logo, the sceneries also involve distinct framings (see Figure 15).



Figure 14: “Halloween 2003”.
Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.



Figure 15: “Halloween 2007”.
Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

As is the case for the development characterising letters replaced by illustrations, the inclusion of letters in sceneries involves the blurring or total concealment of the letters (see Figures 16 and 17). The Google letters become objects to search *for*, thus inverting or playfully hinting at Google as a tool to search *with*.



Figure 16: “40th Anniversary of Moon Landing” (2009). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

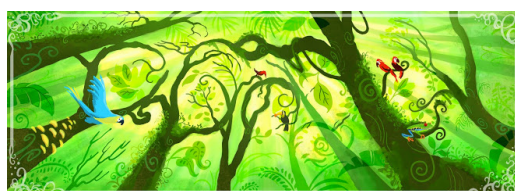


Figure 17: “Earth Day 2010”.
Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

From 2010, animated and interactive doodles are registered in the sample, and from 2011, doodles including moving images are registered. While these doodles represent one or more of the aforementioned typographic variations of the Google logo, they also implicate 'paratypographic' variations connected to "materials, instruments and techniques of graphic sign-making" (Stöckl 2005, 210). Compared with the imitation of material substance in terms of texture (cf. above), these doodles involve 'new' technologies and modes for typographic sign-making, including graphic animations, moving pictures (film), sound and user input. In the following, the "paratypographic" variations of the Google logo will be outlined in relation to movement and transformation.

Movement. The first animated doodle registered in the sample represents the original Google logo with an apple (and its branch) replacing the first 'o' ("Sir Isaac Newton's 367th Birthday", 2010). In the doodle, movement – an apple falling down – is connected to the illustration that replaces the letter. Likewise, in interactive doodles (which allow for different types of user input), movement is registered in combination with animated graphic elements surrounding the logo. In a Pac-Man style game setting formed by the Google logo and accompanied by electronic sounds, the Pac-Man doodle (see Figure 18) represents various moving game objects to be 'eaten' by the yellow circle. At the same time, the doodle exemplifies movement initiated by user interaction. As in a computer game, the user is able to control the course of the yellow Pac-Man by using the keyboard.

In the Pac-Man doodle, the user is performing movement *around* the logo letters. In other interactive doodles, the user's performance of movement implies other types of relations to the brand name, for example detached from, in front of, or beside the logo letters (cf. interactive doodles for the Olympics Games in London 2012, in which the user can 'compete' in disciplines such as "hurdles", "basketball" and "soccer"). User initiated movement is also registered as the disclosure of an otherwise absent Google logo by opening 'doors' (see Figure 19).

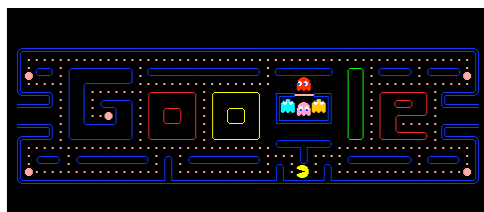


Figure 18: “30th Anniversary of PAC-MAN” (2010). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

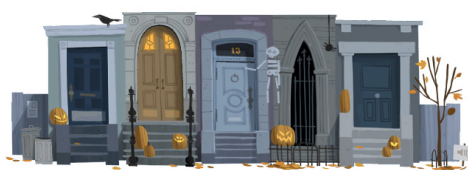


Figure 19: “Halloween 2012”. Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

In filmic doodles, movement is connected to objects surrounding or carrying the logo in the film. In a silent film celebrating Charlie Chaplin (2011), the brand name appears in different typefaces as a heading in a newspaper, as ‘letter sculptures’ on a carriage, and in a drawing. The brand name is fully integrated in the filmic setting (*on* and *as* requisites – as a type of ‘logo placement’), thus taking part in a narrative. In an animated doodle celebrating Saul Bass (2013), the brand name appears in a rhythmic arrangement. An animated sequence accompanied by music playfully represents the brand name in at least seven different typefaces and colours. In this doodle, movement serves to focus on the Google logo as a subject of continuous remaking.

The various types of movements connected to the logo (or altered versions of the logo) mentioned above differ from that which Brownie describes as “temporal” or “fluid” typography in which “letterforms transform to become other letters, pictures or objects, hence altering their fundamental identity” (Brownie 2013a, 168). In the present context, this type of typographic variation will be identified as multimodal processes of transformation in which ‘something’ turns into or emerges as ‘something else’.

Transformation. In the sample, two transformation variants are registered. The first variant is related to sequential representations such as animations. In a doodle celebrating John Lennon (2010), animated drawings of flowers, leaves and butterflies accompanied by music combine to form the brand name. This doodle represents transformation as a multimodal process, including changes from

lines to pictures to letters. A similar photographic variant of transformation is illustrated in a doodle referring to Earth Day (2012). This doodle involves of a ‘fast-moving’ photo sequence of the brand name represented by flowers bursting into bloom.

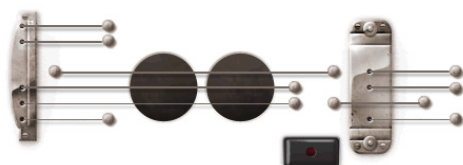


Figure 20: “Les Paul’s 96th Birthday” (2011). Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google Inc., used with permission.

The second variant of transformation registered in the sample is related to interactive doodles. In a doodle celebrating Les Paul, the Google letters are replaced by graphic illustrations forming a guitar (see Figure 20). When the user ‘touches’ the grey strings, the strings turn into Google colours and sound emerges. The user thus becomes an initiator of multimodal transformations in which colours change into other colours, and graphic elements (also) emerge as sound elements. Hence, the doodle involves play with the logo as well as the guitar.

Summing up, the doodles in the sample include typographic variations of the Google logo at several levels (see Table 2). As the identified variations refer to features, each doodle may include one or more of the described features, and these features may be related to one (or a number of) letter(s), or to the entire logo. In addition, some of the described features may overlap, for example no clear line exists between ‘letter-like’ images (cf. *Letter(s) replaced by illustration(s)*) and letters with ‘image-like’ qualities (cf. *Reorganised letters*). Likewise, doodles in which all the letters are replaced by illustrations may resemble sceneries.

Microtypographic variations	Mesotypographic variations	Macrotypographic variations	Paratypographic variations
<i>Letters in new colours, textures and typefaces</i>	<i>Reorganised letters</i>	<i>Letters and illustrations</i> <i>Letter(s) replaced by illustration(s)</i> <i>Letters in sceneries</i>	<i>Movement Transformation</i>

Table 2: Overview of typographic variations of the Google logo.

As already mentioned, the analytical procedure does not allow for generalisations related to the distributions of different types of logo variations over the years. However, the analysis has identified the *different ways* in which the Google logo is altered. The 'paratypographic' variations appear as clearly different from the 'still' variations as they involve variations related to the material substance of the doodles, including animation, moving images and user interaction. Perhaps most notably, 'paratypographic' variations include logos to play with and listen to. Yet, also in relation to the 'micro-', 'meso-' and 'macrotypographic' levels of variation, clear tendencies are identified. In particular, the degree to which the Google logo appears distinct seems important. While the distinct logo is characteristic of the doodles from the very start, blurring and concealment of the logo are features of the doodles that are introduced later.

Communicating brand iconicity

What do the variations of the logo communicate about Google as brand? As described in the analysis, the doodles represent the Google logo's distinctiveness in many ways, also in altered forms, but it appears that typeface plays an important role in 'maintaining' the logo, especially in early doodles. However, during the years, the Google logo has taken on into new distinctive shapes in which the brand name has been represented in many different typefaces. This extensive typographic repertoire related to the creation of (a new type of) distinctiveness seems to point to the iconic status of the logo. Likewise, the blurring and concealment of the logo registered later in the sample seem to emphasise the iconic status of the logo. Promptings to 'disclose' or 'search for' the logo presuppose knowledge of what to look for. Thus, familiarity with the logo is implied or taken for granted (for a similar point in an analysis of television idents, see Brownie 2013b). The iconic status of the Google logo can therefore be explained by the 'multimodal work' inherent in or required by the doodles. Users are prompted to translate or 'transcribe' (cf. Stöckl 2009, 7) from one mode to another, while keeping the Google logo in mind. Probably, this is possible because the doodles appear as provisional changes to a very stable and 'continuous' (everyday) logo which has undergone only minor design changes so far. However, due to the (somewhat surprising) recur-

rence of doodles, even the variations in the Google logo constitute 'continuity'. As described by Floch: "Continuity cannot be seen (...) as mere repetition but rather as a kind of 'becoming' with its own logic and directional sequence" (Floch 2001, 33).

In the analysis, the 'elasticity' of the brand logo as a locus of creativity and reinterpretation is demonstrated from a typographic perspective. More generally, the variations of the Google logo advertise the 'varieties' related to searching by Google. This means that the doodle phenomenon is closely connected to Google being a search engine. Compared to the fact that (in principle), 'anything' can be the subject of a (Google) search, the doodles represent *common* search entries or reference points. Accordingly, the variations of the logo function as features in 'community building' by which Google users are 'gathered around' global and national events by means of specific search entries. While some of these events (such as the Olympic Games, holidays etc.) are widely known and recognised as ongoing events, many of the celebrated events are, as mentioned, referring to 'surprising' anniversaries. Consequently, the typographic variations represented in the doodles also create and communicate brand iconicity by proposing and constructing shared reference points.

Conclusion

In the analysis of doodles, typographic developments are outlined as different types of relations to the well-known letter logo. The iconic status of the logo involves playing with the logo in several ways. Most notably, the doodles are playing with the distinctiveness of the letters in the logo, on the one hand resulting in letter logos in new typefaces and colours and on the other, involving hidden logos. Thus, the doodles become logos to play with, sometimes also in more tactile ways as interactive logos. At the same time, the playful constructions of common search entries refer to the Google brand as a gathering point.

Notes

- 1 Illustrations of the design changes (and the logos preceding the version made by Kedar) are available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google_logo (accessed August 15, 2014). The most recent flattened logo used on Google's start page is

- not, however, used on all Google's sites, see for example an earlier version of the logo at: <http://scholar.google.dk/> (accessed August 15, 2014).
- 2 The brand name 'Google' is resulting from a similar exchange. In Google's company presentation, the brand name is explained as "a play on the word "googol," the mathematical term for a 1 followed by 100 zeros" (<https://www.google.dk/intl/eng/about/company/>).
 - 3 Doodles are also used to initiate dialogue with users. For example, users are encouraged to email suggestions for future doodles, and Google organises national "Doodle 4 Google" competitions where school children are invited to (co-) create doodles.
 - 4 Cf. Internet Archive Wayback Machine: <https://archive.org/web/>

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