

Choosing a Color Palette

by Chris & Trish Meyer, Crish Design (formerly known as CyberMotion)

Sources of inspiration when choosing a color palette.

In the previous article we discussed basic color theory, including how to use the artist's color wheel to help determine which colors may work well together. The next step is picking a specific set of colors for the job you are currently working on to use for a logo, text, or other graphics.

Start With the Client

Quite often, a client will have a set of colors that are part of their corporate branding: IBM blue, Xerox red, the feathers in the NBC peacock, and so on. Ask if they have a "style guide" which goes over which colors they prefer, and what you can or cannot do with them – for example, the Xerox "X" cannot be a color other than their own red. This may give you your starting point; you can then use what you learned about analogous, complementary, warm, and cool colors in the previous article to choose additional supporting or contrasting colors (more on that later).

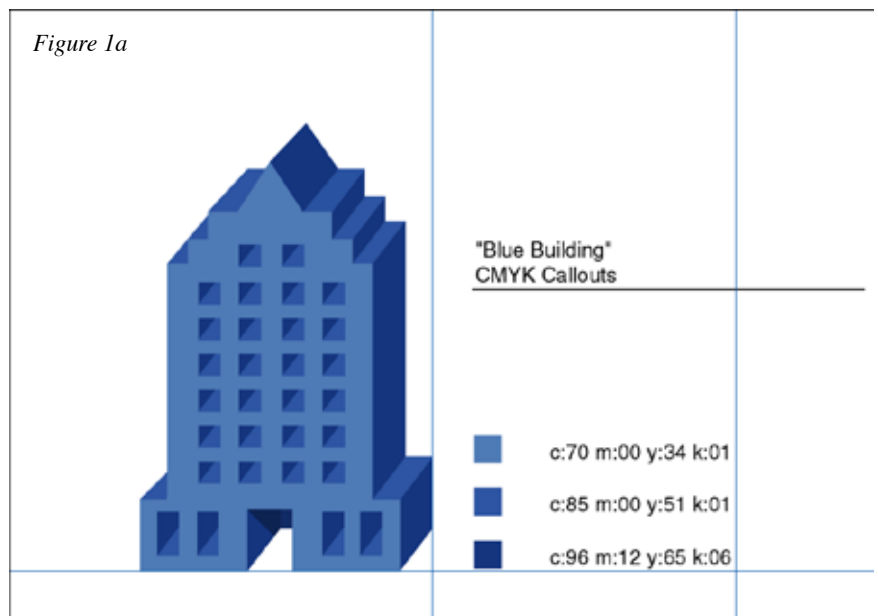


Figure 1: When possible, we start with a client's style guide for colors (a) and use that as a starting point when choosing colors for type, graphics, or even 3D worlds (b). Here we started with the CMYK blue specified for this building (which was part of the print campaign), converted it to RGB, and then used a family of analogous colors for the other buildings. Icon design: Ridgley Curry.

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Note that a client – especially one used to creating a lot of printed material – will often define their colors using the Pantone color swatch system, or the more generic CMYK (cyan magenta yellow black) printing system. These specify colors which will reflect light – such as a printed brochure – and don't have exact equivalents in the web or video worlds where RGB (red green blue) color is projected, not reflected. It's a good idea to gently inform your client ahead of time that video will not be able to exactly reproduce their corporate print colors – especially with virtually every computer monitor or television set looking different – but you'll get as close as you can.

If given CMYK or Pantone colors, ask them if they have preferred RGB equivalents. Failing that, get a sample file of their artwork and convert the Pantone or CMYK colors to the RGB color space using a program such as Adobe Photoshop. (To convert a Pantone color in Photoshop, open its Color Picker, click on the Color Libraries button, find the Pantone color in the list, then click the Picker button to return to the regular Color Picker. The Pantone color will be converted to the closest possible color values in HSB, RGB, LAB, and CMYK.)

Inspired by Footage

If you don't have the benefit of having a color handed to you, a good alternative is to look at the footage you are using to provide inspiration. If there is a particular iconic shot that really stands out (or better yet, which the client really likes), you can use a color eyedropper to select your favorite color or colors from this image. If there is no clip available that will work, choose another image you find inspiring. For example, our friend Dan Warvi likes to use photos of paintings by renowned artists for color palette inspiration.

Figure 2: Grab a representative video frame from your project (a). If you are using Final Cut Pro or Motion, apply their Stylize > Crystallize effect and crank up the Size to get larger, easier-to-use cells of color (b). Disable the Smooth option to get a more vivid set of colors (c). Spend a few moments trying different frames to get an appealing assortment of colors; for example, we scrubbed around until we saw that contrasting bright cell appear. The result here is a classic Southwestern palette. Footage: Clip NPW125 from the Artbeats National Parks West collection.



Figure 2a



Figure 2b



Figure 2c

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It can be hard to pick a precise color from a busy piece of video, so many users grab a representative frame and then process it to come up with a simpler image to pick colors from. Apply an effect such as Mosaic (After Effects) or Crystallize (Final Cut Pro or Motion) to break it up into a series of cells. (Note: Don't use Posterize; it often yields colors not prominent in the original.) These effects tend to have a sharp/smooth switch: The smooth setting averages together the colors inside a cell, which often results in more muted colors as pixels get blended together; the sharp setting picks the color of the underlying pixel in the middle of the cell, which often results in more vivid colors.



Figure 3a



Figure 3b

Experiment a little with different frames and mosaic or crystal cell size until you get a frame with an assortment of colors you really like; if you are using the sharp setting in your Mosaic or Crystallize effect, you can also try applying a small amount of blur before this effect to smooth over any noise or compression artifacts.

Capture or save off a still image of this frame and import it back into your project so you can pull it up quickly and eyedropper its colors while you work. If you find the full-frame image to be too large or unwieldy, open it in Photoshop, select File > Save for Web & Device, choose PNG-8 as the file format, set the number of colors to somewhere between 8 and 32, and look at the resulting Color Table below. Do a screen capture of this table (using a program such as SnapZ on the Mac or SnagIt on Windows), and keep this smaller set of swatches around for your color reference.

You don't need to use the resulting colors literally for your graphics; indeed, in many cases you don't want to, as they may disappear when used over footage with the same source colors. You can choose complementary colors to make them contrast with your footage, pump up the brightness or contrast to make them pop, or at the very least surround them with a drop shadow, glow, or stroke to help isolate them from similar colors in the footage underneath.



Figure 3c

Figure 3: An alternative to using footage from your current job is to pick any image that has colors you particularly like (a). If you are using After Effects, apply its Stylize > Mosaic effect (b). The default averages together colors inside a cell yielding muted results; enable the Sharp Colors option to pick purer colors (c). Footage: Clip FWR110H1 from the Artbeats Faces of the World 1 HD collection.

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Adobe Kuler

For those who really get into colors and color palettes, the most impressive tool out there right now is Adobe's Kuler (kuler.adobe.com). This website offers hundreds of color palettes created by other users that you may browse for inspiration or use as a starting point. There is also a "create" section that allows you to pick any color (such as your client's logo color) and have Kuler generate a palette based on the artistic rules we mentioned in the previous article, or to upload a still image and have Kuler identify a color palette based on that. If you create an account (an existing Adobe user account will do), you can save your palettes and participate in online forums.

There is a downloadable desktop application which taps into Kuler's web database, plus the ability to export color swatch sets for use inside Photoshop, Illustrator, InDesign, Fireworks, and Flash...but not After Effects, Premiere, or (of course) Apple's or Avid's pro video applications. In the meantime, it's still a fun place to visit if you find yourself in need of inspiration – or if you just like color.

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Figure 5: Adobe's Kuler allows you to browse and edit color palettes created by others (a), create your own using a base color and using a variety of color rules (b), or by having Kuler extract different palettes from a still image you upload (c). Footage: Clip GRW212 from the Artbeats Grow! 2 HD collection.

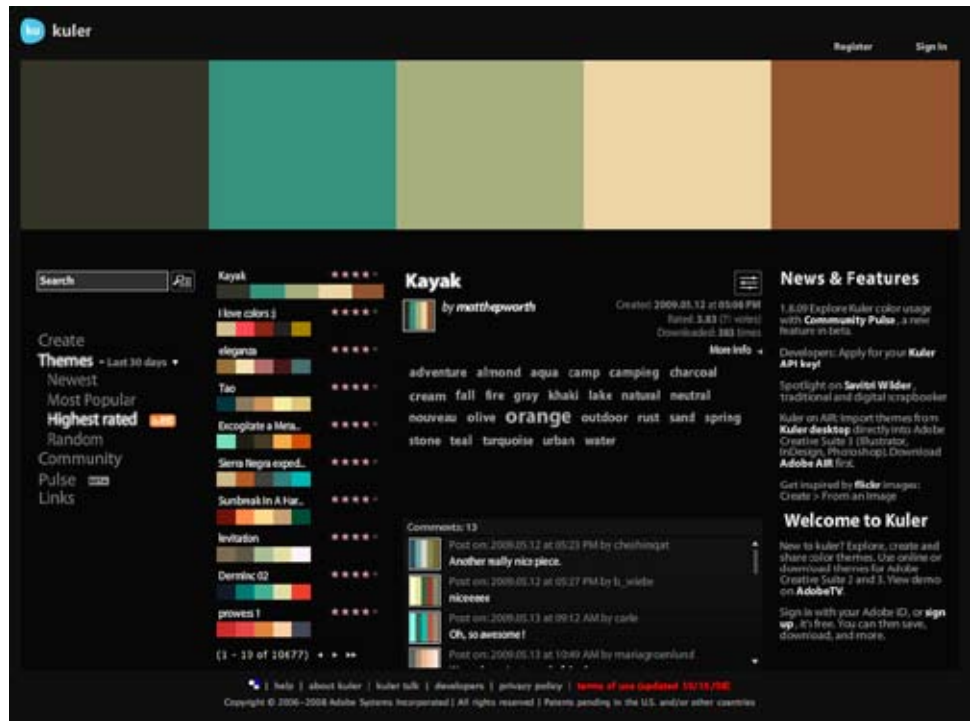


Figure 5a

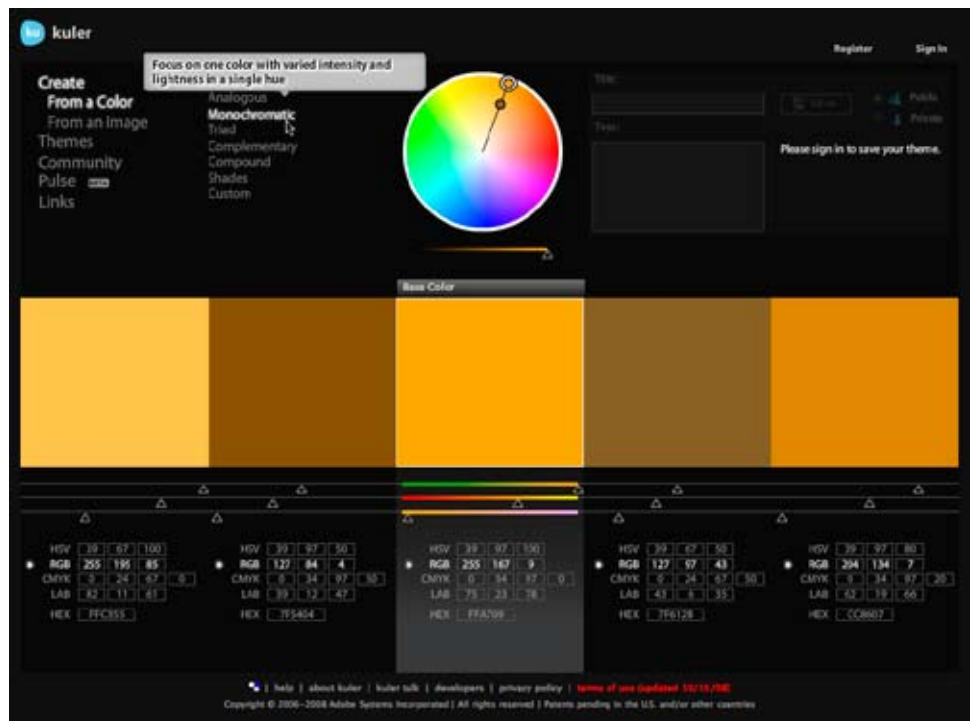


Figure 5b

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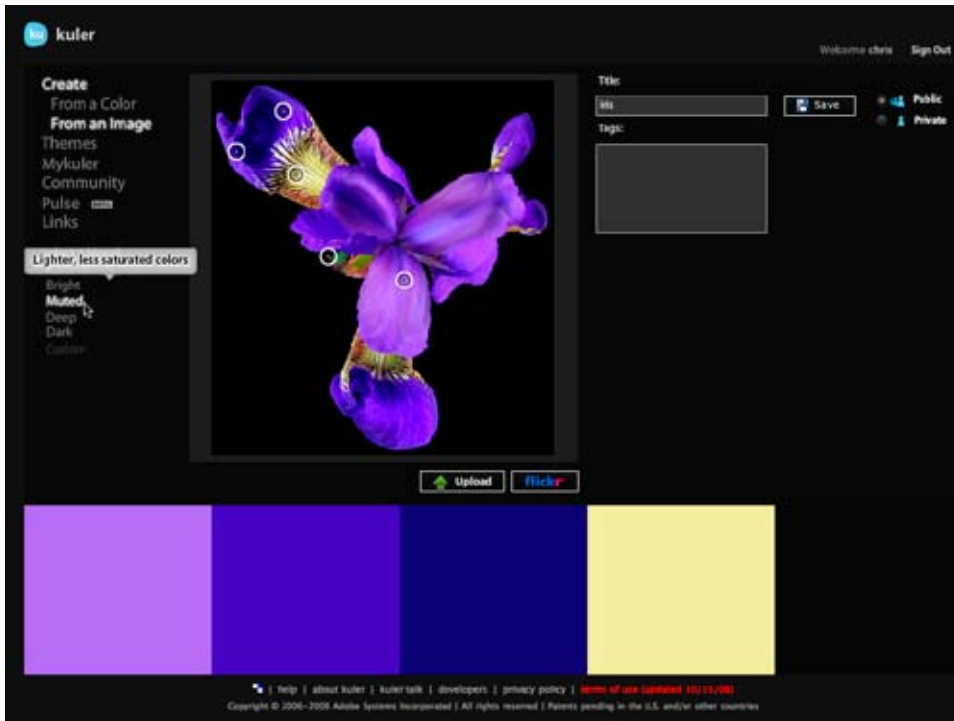


Figure 5c

Zooming Out

Even though you can't export Kuler's palettes into a form you can use directly inside video production applications, there are still a number of tricks you can employ to make it easier to apply the same colors over and over again inside one of these apps. These tricks will be the subject of the next article in this series.

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*Chris and Trish Meyer are the founders and owners of Crish Design, an award-winning motion graphics studio that has created a wide variety of work for film, broadcast, corporate events, and special venues. They are one of the original development sites for After Effects, and have two books currently in print: *Creating Motion Graphics* and *After Effects Apprentice*.*