Inside Creative Minds: Workflows, Habits And Strategies

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About This Book

The key to successful projects and products are the people behind them. Have you ever found yourself wondering how these thinkers and creators of the Web actually work, and how they tackle their projects? Where do they seek inspiration, and what are the lessons they have learned in the course of their careers? With the help of this eBook, we want to focus on the people behind the names for a change. After all, what could be more insightful than giving them a chance to share their stories?

The authors of this eBook had the occasion to sit down with experienced influencers and successful designers for a row of interviews in which they provide first-hand insights into their very own workflows, habits and strategies. WordPress co-founders Matt Mullenweg and Mike Little are among them, JavaScript evangelist Doug Crockford, IDEO's Duane Bray, Meetup's vice president Andres Glusman, as well as many other creative minds from design, UX and startup branches. Their insights and stories are not only truly inspiring, but also contribute to giving this fast-moving, tech-driven Web industry a more familiar face.

— *Cosima Mielke, Smashing eBook Producer*

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How I Work: Doug Crockford On JavaScript

BY JACOB COOK ❧

Welcome to the first in a new series of interviews called "How I Work". These interviews revolve around how thinkers and creators in the Web world design, code, and create. The goal is not to get into the specific nuances of their craft (as that information already exists online), but rather step back and learn a bit about their habits, philosophies, and workflow for producing great work.

Meet Doug Crockford

First up is Douglas Crockford who believes JavaScript might just be the most elegant language ever. Learn why he thinks you should study the history of computer science, the value of reading your code in front of other people, and that jQuery really is a good thing.

Douglas Crockford is known as The JavaScript Guy. He's famous not only for his O'Reilly book *JavaScript: The Good Parts*[1] but even more so as the visionary behind the JSON[2] data format as well as the JSLint[3] tool. He was featured in the book *Coders at Work* for his contributions and philosophies on what JavaScript got right, and what it didn't.

As a native of Southern California, Doug has the build of a surfer; lean and tall with white hair and a beard. A veteran of Silicon Valley, he's worked at Atari Labs, founded and worked at numerous software start-ups, was head of technology at Lucas Films and now has the enviable job of being a JavaScript evangelist at Yahoo! [Editor's note: Shortly after this interview was published Doug Crockford took a new job at PayPal].

Self-taught (as many of the greats are), he says his goal is simply to get more people coding in JavaScript, or any language for that matter. While his day job may be as a JavaScript evangelist, speaking with Doug you get the sense he really is an evangelist for programming in general.

Below is a conversation that took place in Bozeman, Montana prior to a talk at Montana State University. Doug freely shared his thoughts

1. http://shop.oreilly.com/product/9780596517748.do
2. http://www.json.org/
3. http://www.jslint.com/

on great programmers, user empathy, and how JSON restored his faith in humanity.

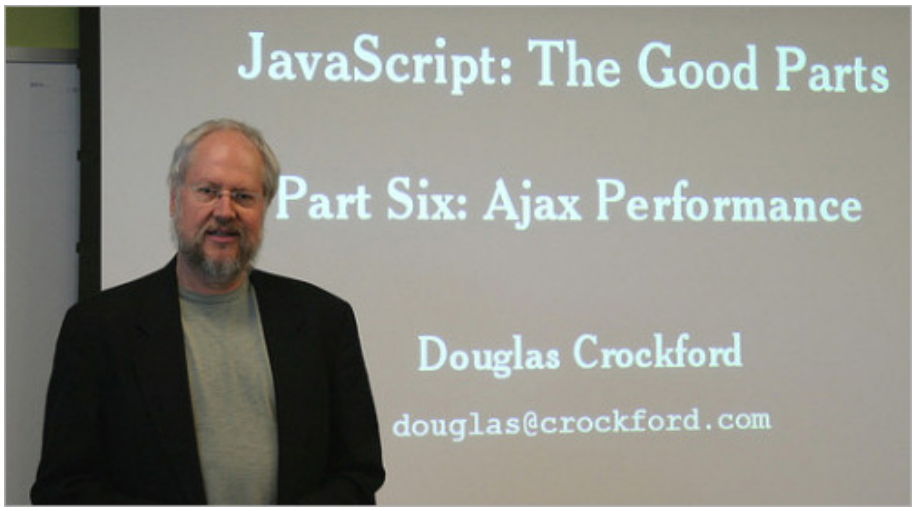


Image by Eric Miraglia[4].

Q: Why do you feel programmers should study the history of Computer Science?

Doug: Well, first semester of physics is a history class. You study Galileo and Newton and all their contributions to the field and that gives us the overall view of physics. It's a really nice place to start.

I wish CS would do that. It doesn't seem to have enough value in its history and it's a really amazing history that's completely neglected. It's rarely that the best idea won. So, we've taken different paths over the years and maybe haven't realized why.

Ironically, despite the rate of change in technology, we see in the story of software that it takes a generation to retire or die off before we have a critical mass of bright young minds to embrace new ideas.

I think if people were more aware of their history, they could see these patterns more easily.

Q: What were the traits of the weak programmers you've seen over your career?

Doug: That's an easy one — lack of curiosity. They were so satisfied with the work that they were doing was good enough (without an understanding of what 'good' was) that they didn't push themselves.

I'm much more impressed with people that are always learning. The brilliant programmers I've been around are always learning.

4. http://www.flickr.com/photos/equanimity/3117853012/

You see so many people get into one language and spend their entire career in that language, and as a result aren't that great as programmers.

Q: Do you feel that the pain a programmer goes through in learning a language contributes to this unhealthy attachment to using only one language?

Doug: My advice to programmers to avoid this trap is to learn lots of different languages. We're in sort of a language renaissance right now and there are a ton of brilliant languages to learn from.

To learn new languages takes nights and weekends outside of work, and that's a commitment. The great programmers are the people that are constantly picking a project and diving into it, learning a language that way.

Q: In Coders at Work[5], you stress the importance of doing code readings with teams. Why do you feel it's important to present your code in front of other people?

Doug: Well, over the years I noticed that there are some terrific programmers out there that are completely content to sit in their cave all day long writing brilliant code. But they don't interact much with their team, which means it's a lost opportunity for mentoring other members.

As you know, a lot of coders aren't the most socially adept animals either.

So, my idea with code reading sessions is to provide a forum where people can come together and read for each other to get them out of their caves. The masters read for the beginners, and vice versa, as a team-building exercise.

The trick for success is to set up rules ahead of time so that nobody is going to get spanked and everyone is respectful in their feedback. It has to be a good learning experience for everyone. You have to be careful with a dysfunctional team, because it can quickly tear apart the group. But I always call the game before it gets that far.

The rules are that it's about improving the quality of the code that we're all responsible for, improving the quality of our team, and improving our individual capabilities.

Some people see this as a terrible time sink. Yet, I've found by doing this exercise, bugs are caught way ahead of time and you can prevent a

5. http://www.codersatwork.com/

team member from going off the tracks. But again, that's not the goal, it's about team building.

Over time the masters help pull up the beginners and the overall output from the team gets better.

Q: Are programmers getting better at user empathy?

Doug: The best experience I had with empathy was working in marketing support. There were times I would go out into the field and hold hands with the customers and see the consequences firsthand of some of the crap we were delivering to them.

I was shocked when I moved into systems programming and how the programmers actually held the customer in contempt.

I think every programmer should work in customer support for the product they're delivering.

It's another case of over-specialization. "I just write the code," is the response you get and the programmers don't see it as a chance to improve peoples' lives.

Q: How much of a language do you need to know?

Doug: Virtually every programming language is too big. Language standards have difficulty removing unnecessary features but as users we can choose not to use it.

I would say you can do 100% with knowing 50% of the language.

The language that taught me that lesson the most was JavaScript, because it has more bad parts than good parts. It gave me a very strong motivation for figuring out what are the good parts and what are the bad parts, and what the criteria is for deciding what's in or out.

And the good parts are just so good. Be sure to watch Doug's Google Tech talk titled "JavaScript: The Good Parts[6]."

Q: What approaches would you say a master has versus a beginner?

Doug: When I was a journeyman, I was a maximilist. I tried to use the whole language. While I don't know if I would call myself a master now, I'm certainly a minimalist. I've tried to get good at using as little of the language as possible.

I place a lot of value in simplicity and minimalism.

6. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQVTIJBZook

Q: What are your thoughts on jQuery? Some JS enthusiasts feel like it's letting people off the hook from truly learning JS.

Doug: There is some really clever stuff in jQuery and I think John Resig did some very good work there.

I do have a problem with anybody doing anything without understanding what they're doing. I'm not going to fault jQuery for attracting those sorts of people.

But I do think there are some other AJAX libraries that maybe doing a better job that aren't quite as accessible. However, I think there is a place for all of these things.

Q: When you were developing JSON was it tough to pull back and not put too much into it?

Doug: My design criteria were three things: minimal, contextual, and a subset of JavaScript.

The last constraint was to keep us from going off the rails and inventing new stuff. We had to only use stuff that was in JavaScript, which meant that our unicode handling wasn't quite right because JS isn't quite right, which was disappointing. We don't have proper support for dates because JS didn't have it. But we can work around both of these.

But it also meant that when somebody proposed, "Hey we should do this crazy thing" we could be like "Nope". So, we had a really easy criteria for stopping extra features from being added.

One interesting story about leaving things out: as we got closer to releasing JSON I decided to take out the ability to do comments. When translating JSON into other languages, often times the commenting piece was the most complicated part. By taking the commenting out we reduced the complexity of the parsers by half — everything else was just too simple.

One of the best features of JSON is that it's stable. If your program works now, it will work forever, and that is an attractive thing.

I still get notes from people saying they've got great ideas for the next version. But there isn't going to be a next version. I always say you're free to invent a new standard and promote it as much as you like.

Q: How did JSON get adopted?

Doug: You know, the adoption of JSON sort of restored my faith in humanity because it was a good idea that won out, only because it was a good idea.

It was a case where there were no slick marketing campaigns. In 2001, I started working on it as a way to tie the browsers to the server. At the time, everyone thought XML had to be used or they'd say "that's a great idea but JSON isn't a standard". So, I bought json.org, made a logo, threw up a Web page and it sat out on the Web for three years.

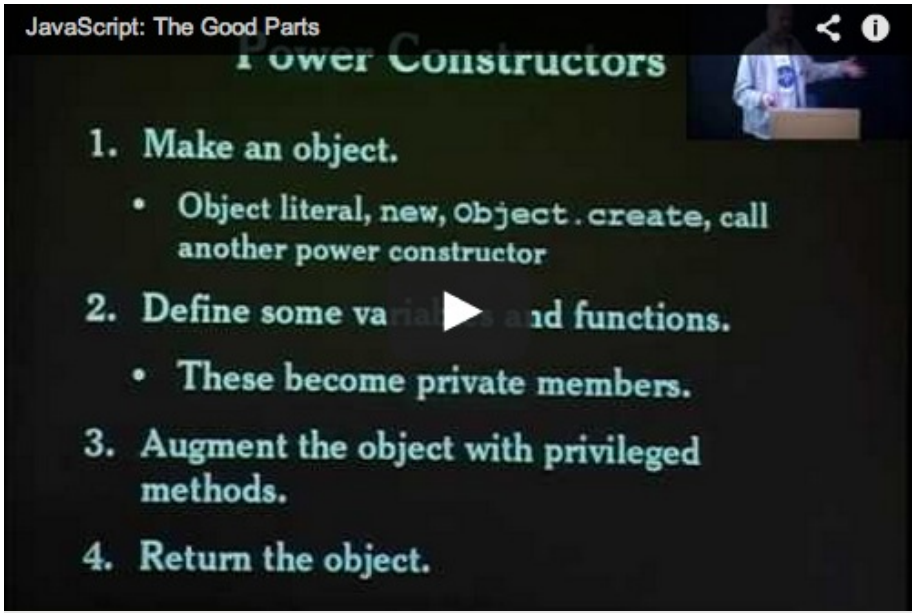
In the meantime, AJAX happened and when it became the way for writing applications JSON was there. There was counter promotion from the XML community, of course.

But when I arrived at Yahoo! some kids at the company started thinking it was okay to start shipping JSON API's through Web services. And developers found the apps got faster and were easier to write.

It sort of took off from there — no slick campaigns. So a good idea based on simplicity won out for once.

Watch Doug Crockford At Google Speaking On "JavaScript: The Good Parts"

In this presentation from Google Tech Talks, Doug goes over the ideas behind his landmark book, *JavaScript: The Good Parts*, and dives into the areas of what JavaScript got right and what it didn't. Learn about the history and common roadblocks programmers run into when developing with this language.

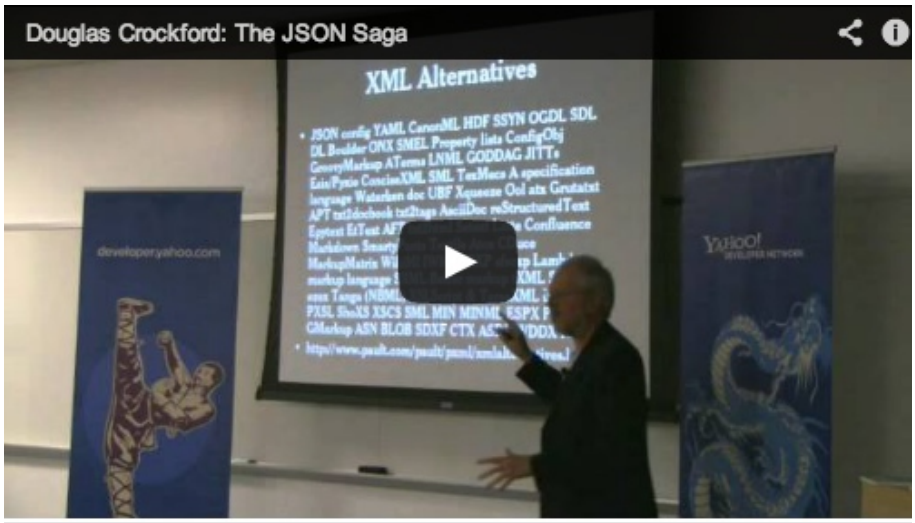


View on YouTube[7].

7. http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=hQVTIJBZook

Learn About The JSON Saga

In this video, Doug tells the interesting tale of how JSON was discovered, and sheds some light on how it became a major standard for describing data in an interesting turn of events.



View on YouTube[8].

❧

8. http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=-C-JoyNuQJs

How I Work: IDEO's Duane Bray On Creating Great Digital Experiences

BY JACOB COOK

Welcome to another interview in the series called "How I Work." Today we'll talk to Duane Bray from IDEO[9], a firm that is consistently listed as one of the world's most innovative companies due to its uncanny ability to constantly come up with great ideas for its clients. Duane Bray is a partner at IDEO and heads up the firm's digital business from its New York City office.

Duane Bray at IDEO's New York City office.

Like all IDEOers you meet, Duane Bray is unfailingly nice, with a soft, well-spoken voice. He reminds you of the kid in the back of algebra class doodling away during lecture and still acing the tests.

We recently sat down with Duane over a couple sessions to get his thoughts on Agile development, how you too can gather great user insights, tips for prototyping digital projects with clients and why he still sketches interfaces out on paper.

9. http://www.ideo.com

Q: What has you excited about digital work these days?

Duane: I'm particularly excited about the movement away from standards-based specifications towards real stuff. For us, we've been doing a lot more experimentation around Agile development processes and pairing up designers and developers side by side throughout the process from day one. The last thing you want to do is hire a designer who is really talented at conceptual thinking and say, "Okay, now you're going to spend six weeks documenting everything with InDesign for the thing you did."

What's funny though, is when you have a designer working with a developer on weekly builds, all that stuff still gets done. But from the designer's perspective, they are constantly making. We've found our teams to be super excited to be working in this way.

Certainly we're not the first to discover Agile, but it's made a big difference in our culture because we want people to get their ideas as real and tangible as soon as possible.

Q: How does IDEO go about getting big, breakthrough insights?

Duane: Well, for a lot of our clients, they come to us with these sort of vague questions, and they want us to help them figure that out. So, we want to start off by making sure we're a bit exploratory — and that involves going out and being inspired by behaviors.

For example, there might be a question around new forms of video consumption online. We want to go out and find people that are representative of some extreme form of behavior. This helps us get inspired and further shapes our strategy.

One woman we found has two computers at work. One is displaying her work and the other one is displaying reality television. She needs both streams to do her job. The interesting thing is you can almost hit pause and ask her what's going with the show and with her work and she can answer both.

So it starts to suggest, what are some of the interesting forms of literacy that are coming through our digital tools? And how might we design for this? Are there new mental models we haven't thought about before, rather than going with industry standards?

Q: IDEO is famous for "thinking with your hands" via prototypes — how do you transfer this over to digital?

Duane: For me I don't see any distinction in how IDEO designs digital products compared to our other products. We're still going to get out there and be inspired by what's going on in the world.

We always start our projects with some sort of investigation into what are people doing and how it impacts how they're going to engage. And we get tangible quickly — and it's not so very different from any other prototyping process. We do group sessions to generate ideas, we sketch together, we might have someone make a mock-up on a phone or tablet to test out a behavior. What's most important for a prototype is to choose the right fidelity for the question you're seeking to answer.

A brainstorming session at IDEO.

Q: What's this discovery process look like?

Duane: Sometimes we'll prototype something in the browser or on mobile to test some of these concepts out. We'll also play around with paper prototypes because it's an appropriate way to get client input.

But I like to find ways to disrupt the conversation when we're talking with consumers.

For example, if something is very polished, consumers will feel they have to say they like it because it's polished. So sometimes having hand-sketches, along with something on an iPad, we're able to get very nice conversations going.

Prototyping is about blending that low-fidelity and high-fidelity process and blending our thinking as we go along.

Q: How would you make a case to a Smashing Magazine reader for adopting a prototyping process with their clients?

Duane: Well, the client is going to be in a better position to make more informed decisions because they are seeing things that are real. I would

also argue that it isn't a massive investment anyway and there is a better payoff down the road because you're getting more real (tangible) early on — which means you're going to get better input from users.

Imagine not going through that process: doing a bunch of sketches, building out a spec document, a developer builds it, you test it and people hate it.

At that point there has been such a huge investment in producing that thing. So there is actually a lot of emotional attachment now and it's either going to be financially impossible to correct it or people will be too wedded to the idea and it's going to be impossible to change.

Q: How do you show these prototypes?

Duane: We do a lot of live work. We'll recruit a panel of end users. Particularly in the early stages when we're looking for inspiration, we'll want to be in their (the users') context. So instead of bringing them into a focus group, we might go into their homes or offices and observe them. We'll also put stuff up on the Web and blast out an SMS message and ask people to interact so we can get a more broad approach as well.

Sometimes we'll do a hybrid of both and have our developers do quick builds and mock-ups and then go back out into the field to get more insights with a select group.

We want to know less about what percentage of people clicked on this or dropped off and more about their process of going through and using that experience. What are the specific things that are barriers and why?

At some point, when we have a much more robust build, then we'll push it out to more people. So there is definitely an interim phase. We tend to start high touch and stay that way for a while. We're looking for finding the emotions around why people engage or why they don't. If we understand those, it becomes a lot more powerful in how we tune the tools.

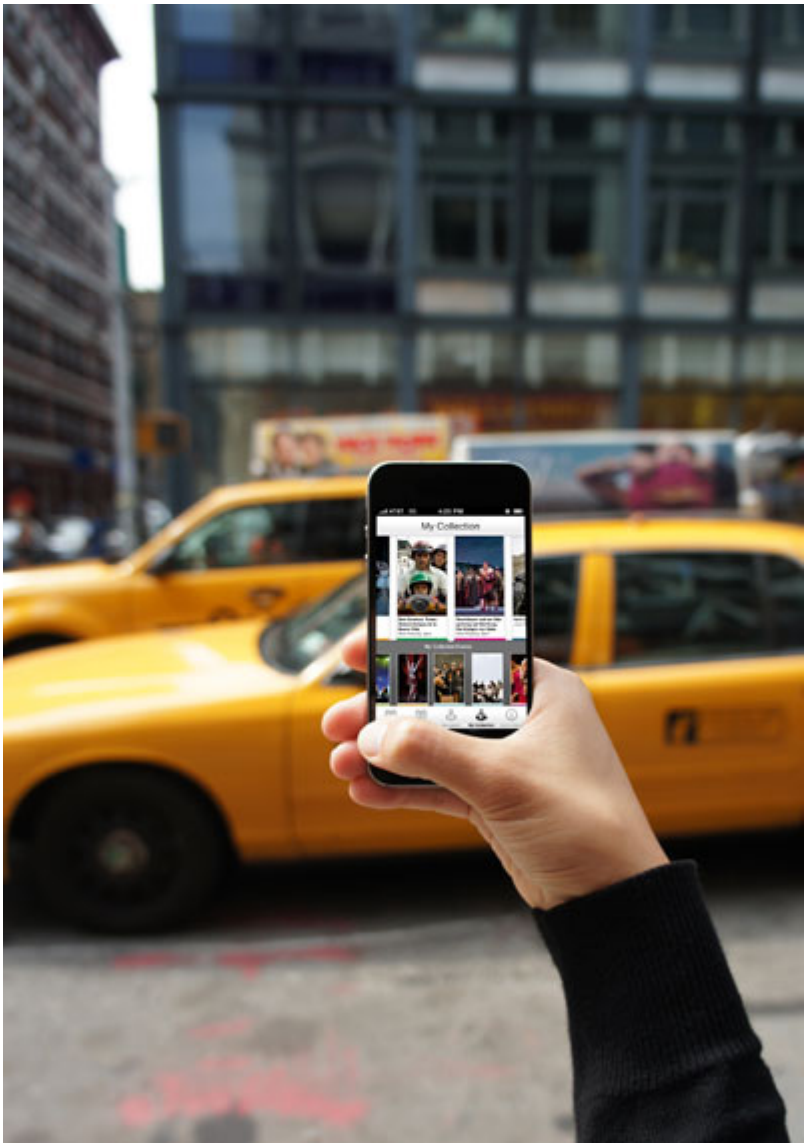
Q: What's your experience been with Agile Development processes?

Duane: One of the things we've found when we're working in an Agile process is that we can actually be incredibly fast.

To give you an example, we did a project here in New York for Lincoln Center, which was their first iPhone app, and we ran it as an Agile process. We went from kick-off to an app in the iTunes store in eight weeks. That's concept, design and build (and I wouldn't want to claim we can do every project on that timeline). But we had an amazing client

that was able to make decisions very quickly, so we had a fast turn-around time there.

But again, it was because we were getting very real, very fast.



An iPhone app that IDEO created for Lincoln Center.

Q: Can you give us a step-by-step breakdown for creating this app in only eight weeks using Agile?

Duane: Sure. First, we spent half a day with our designers and developers at Lincoln Center's campus, and in advance we created briefs about what an app could look like around different themes. We broke up into teams and every group had to go and interview people at Lincoln Center and talk to them about the theme and do a tour themselves.

We had clipboards of iPhone screen printouts, and they (the teams) had to sketch an experience and get feedback — all in four hours. It was a great way to get immersed: we talked to security guards, out-of-town

tourists, locals who would hang out there, people at the information desk and we got a ton of insights.

So, we had all these amazing stories to go back and work with for honing our hypothesis on what this experience should be and we started building it. We did a detailed sketch session, prioritized the feature set, mapped out the flow, did some wireframes and then did a planning session with our development team (from Pivotal Labs). The project was so fast; there were literally just screenshots on the iPhone to simulate the flow. We were sharing it with people quickly and got to the stage where there was a build a week.

Screenshots of the iPhone app that IDEO created for Lincoln Center.

But the reality about that process is that you couldn't do waterfall in eight weeks. I would say it's more efficient than an old-fashioned step process.

Agile has been around for 20+ years, and we're certainly not the first to discover it but now it's finally getting traction. Designers and developers want to spend time making stuff and getting it out there and this process is all about that.

Q: What habits or hang-ups do you see in great Web designers and developers?

Duane: Well, one of the things I think that is probably the most challenging for working in this more iterative, rapid-fire way is the ability to be more open and transparent with the work that you're doing. Sometimes as designers we want to spend some time crafting, hiding in a corner and sketching and then do the "ta-da!" But some of this new way of working requires us to move beyond that.

One of the things I've been thinking about is how do you encourage greater transparency of work that's in progress? We've been prototyping with tools like Flowdock that allows for conversation to sit around the workflow. That is particularly important, if we're talking about get-

ting stuff out there really early. These are the certain things that aren't to the nature to how a designer is trained.

There is also this thing about great developers having curiosity. Being curious about the end user you're designing for and involving the developers in that process for insights. Being able to imagine if they'll use the thing you're making.

Some folks are really natural at that, and in other cases it takes a lot of work. But I think that's where we're going — working off of blended teams with people of different skill sets.

Q: Any tips on how a small shop can get similar disruptive insights like IDEO does?

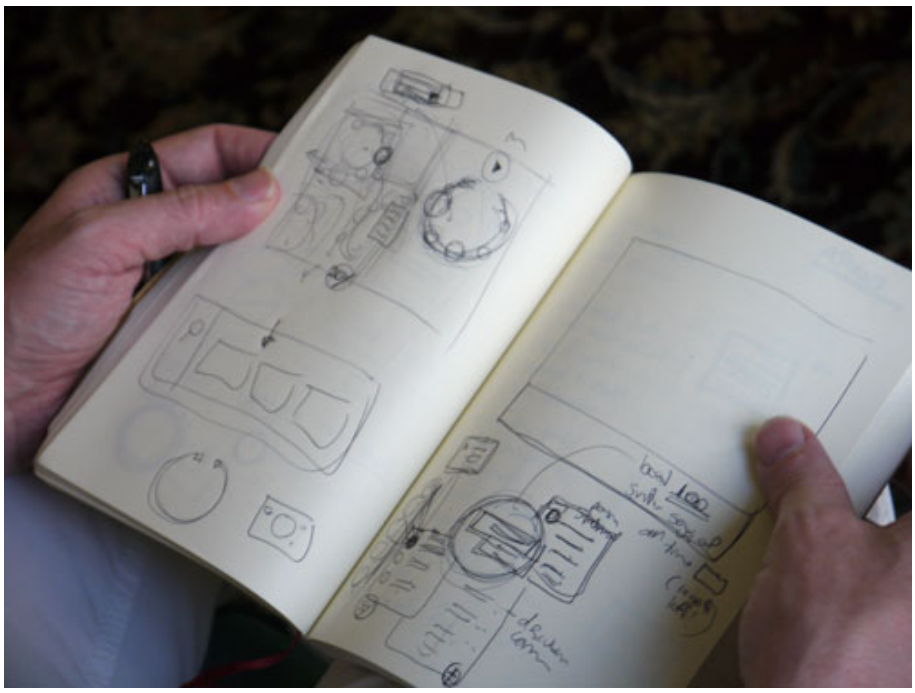
Duane: As designers it's easy to get blinders on because we know what we know and it's easy to get caught up in it. So, take some time to start over like you've never done this before. Sign up for some new tools and track your progress and behavior as an end user. There is something about just getting out to find inspiration. Look for stuff going on, whether it's a related conference or just inviting in some experts to talk over wine and cheese at your office.

Even a small shop can reach out to friends of friends and watch them interact with some early prototypes or simply have a conversation. Say you'll buy them drinks every other week and just show them stuff and see what you can learn from building that into your process.

One thing I do is have a screen on my phone that is just apps I would never normally download. So, we might be doing a project around, say, video, and I'll go try every app out there and use this as a great way to learn. Projects are often an opportunity to dive deeper into a subject area you're not necessarily interested in but you could be super-inspired by it.

Q: Now how do you capture those inspirations?

Duane: I usually have my notebook open as I'm using all these apps and I'm sketching out ideas and patterns. You start to get a feel for trends and think about different ways to accomplish the same task.



Sketchnotes in Duane Bray's notebook.

Q: Where and how do you do your best work and not get burned out?

Duane: I usually get away from my desk. I'll go sit up front on the couch with my laptop and my sketchbook. I force myself to move around. If you just sit at your desk you're inclined to get into bad habits because everything is sitting around you. Some people have the zero inbox but I have 35,000 messages, so I just use the search box in email.

I'm someone who runs on intuition and not organizational processes. I have a thousand sticky notes on my desk.

But I'm pretty rigid about taking weekends off. I wasn't always this way but I've learned that by being open to being inspired by stuff that has nothing to do with what I'm working on is really important.

Otherwise, you're not grounded enough to bring something original to the table. ❧

How I Work: Meetup's Andres Glusman On The Power Of UX And Lean Startup Methods

BY JACOB COOK

Welcome to another interview in the "How I Work" series. This time, we're speaking with Andres Glusman, of Meetup[10], a company that uses the efficiency of the Internet to conveniently connect people offline. Andres works as the VP of Strategy, Product and Community in Meetup's New York City office. In this piece, he shares with us how the company uses User Experience (UX), Lean Startup methods and innovative ways of organizing interdisciplinary teams to fuel the company's consistent growth.

Andres Glusman loves meeting users and hearing them say, "Meetup changed my life."

10. http://meetup.com

Q: How did you first get into the Web?

Andres: I got into the Web in the mid-'90s. I was in strategy at Boeing and got excited about the future of how people would find things online. I discovered this company called i-traffic. It was one of the world's first interactive agencies. I was inspired by its approach, so I packed up, moved cross-country and took an entry-level job. I worked my tail off and got the opportunity to eventually lead a division. A few years later, when i-traffic's CEO moved on to start Meetup, he called me up to invite me to be a cofounder. I had just gotten into Wharton, so I said "Thanks, but no thanks."

I did do a little consulting before heading back to school. In fact, I made our first $14 of revenue. After business school I got sucked back in and have been at Meetup for nine years now. I currently oversee three teams: Product, Strategy and Community.

The people who work here love the fact that they can get super-fast feedback from members. We do 400+ tests a year. So, folks on our team can get feedback often within an hour or two.

A sneak peek inside the Meetup headquarters.

Q: Because you manage product, strategy and community, how do you impart a user-first approach?

Andres: It's easy to be member-centric at a mission-driven organization. Meetups change lives in profound ways, and people who work here are passionate about the impact we can have on the world by sparking meetups everywhere. In that context, experience is everything.

It also helps that the way we work actively exposes us to how people actually use the stuff we build. That keeps us pretty centered. We start

with a vision and often make a simple prototype of the experience we want to foster. We run it through our in-house usability lab and iterate rapidly until we've got something we like. Then, we carve it up into experiments that we run on the live site.

Q: Can you walk us through how Meetup iterates on the product?

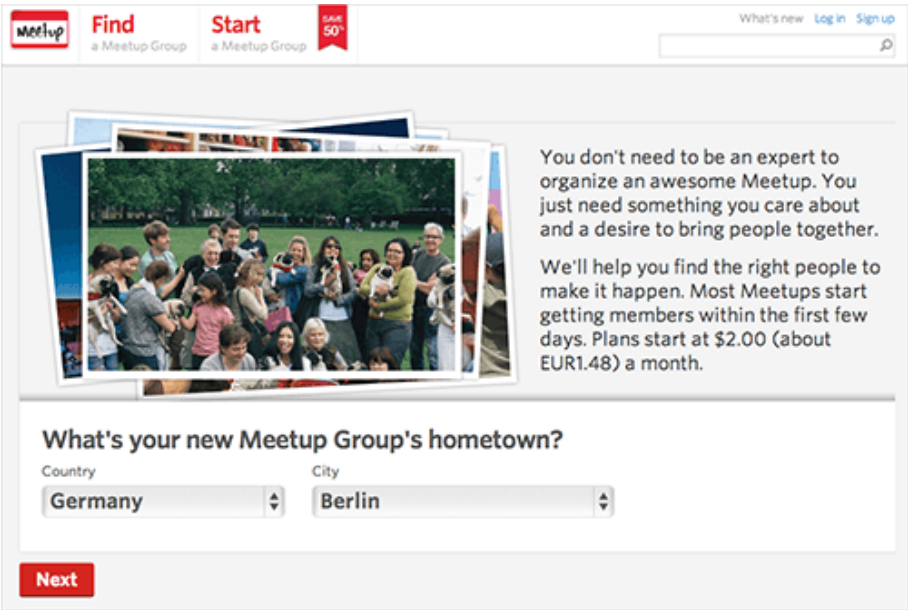
Andres: Sure. Why don't I tell you the story of how we revamped an important experience on Meetup, to illustrate how we work? We used to have a Meetup Group creation experience that had all the charm and excitement of a tax form. We looked at data to see where people fell off and did usability tests to understand how people experienced it and why they struggled.

One night, we had an informal brainstorm about what the experience could be like. The product designer involved went home, got inspired and came in the next day with a prototype of a radically different experience he'd hacked. It looked like this[11]. It was completely divorced from our code base, and it was really fun. We had someone coming in for usability an hour later. So, we dropped it into testing, watched from our desks and quickly learned two things. One, we heard things like "Oooh," "Ahhh" and "That's cool." So, we knew we were onto something.

But they were also thoroughly confused by the flow of the experience. So, we scrapped 90% of the prototype, kept the interaction piece and iterated on it daily for a week or so until we got to something that worked well. It looked like this[12]. We then carved it into a series of experiments, which we rolled out to the live site. In the process, we validated our assumptions, discovered which parts made a difference and, ultimately, saw a nice boost in results. The final product can be found online.

Not every project follows that workflow, but we've tried to replicate it as much as possible. That's why designers are such an important part of our team now. We've since grown to three product designers, and building out the design team is our top priority.

11. http://glusman.com/leanexample/start.html
12. http://specialsnowflake.com/mugstart/



After days of analysing user data and testing, Meetup.com finally got a fresh new look that folks out there found friendly and easy to use.

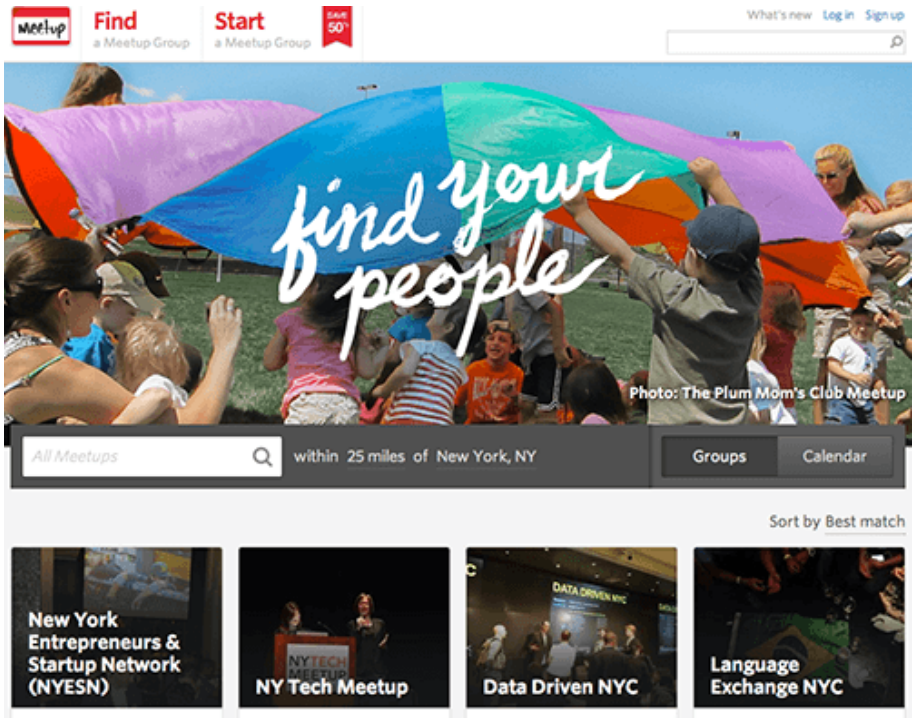
Q: How does Meetup organize teams and ship?

Andres: We organize ourselves into small cross-functional teams that each addresses a high-priority user experience. For example, there is a team for onboarding new members, called "First Five Minutes." They look at how the experience should unfold for new members. How do we set up new members to have a great experience? How do we make the experience feel fun and rewarding.

The teams consist of a product manager, front- and back-end developers, QA, and a community manager to represent what we're seeing in support. Designers play a key role as well, but they work across teams. Designers are super-involved up front in working with teams to shape a vision. They then stay involved to help teams nail the important details. This is having a profound impact on what we build. We've still got a lot we want to do, but you can get a glimpse of it in our discovery experience[13].

We have teams focused on lanes like "First Five Minutes," "Discovery," "Before/During/After the Meetup" and "Meetup Organizers." They craft a series of visions that they want to pursue. Then, they carve those visions up into these experiments and start working towards a vision of the product that they are all excited to work on. So, these teams essentially function as startups within the company.

13. http://meetup.com/find



Meetup lets you find "your" people, i.e. meeting people with common interests.

In terms of building, we're agile but not rigidly agile. We don't have the Scrum masters and the burn boxes thing going on, but we do work iteratively and push code multiple times a day. There are opportunities to iterate on things every day.

Q: Can employees switch teams?

Andres: Absolutely, and it doesn't have to be a permanent switch either. There are times when certain teams have more demand or slack, so people can bounce between teams. And there are times when someone's interests change. Our team is growing pretty quickly right now, so it's really not hard for someone to switch teams.

Q: As VP of Strategy (and other things), how do you define and set a strategy?

Andres: I like how Michael Porter defines it:

> *Strategy is what you don't do.*

There are so many things we want to work on and explore. Our challenge is to say "No" to most things, so that we can say "Yes" to the few that are most important. Right now, we're focused on building out a beautiful mobile experience and using that as inspiration to transform

the desktop experience. We've got a pretty ambitious list that we want to get done for the end of the year.

While that's all going on, I'm starting to think about what 2014 and 2015 will look like. We want to make sure we're planning ahead and hiring the right kind of people now to pursue these really big ideas next year.

Q: What's your take on network effects and user experience?

Andres: Network effects are one of the most powerful dynamics in our industry. You will generally find that, where network effects exist, the more people are using a platform, the more valuable it is to everyone. There are multiple kinds of networks. There are two-sided marketplaces, like a Craigslist or eBay, with buyers and sellers. There are one-sided networks, like a fax machine, where everyone can interact with everyone.

But the value of Craigslist is obviously the network. It's not the most elegant-looking platform, but it delivers you the person who wants to buy your couch in under 45 minutes better than anything else out there. Many people have created clones that are prettier, but without the network, they are nothing. Obviously, strong network effects and delivering a magical user experience win.

Q: Can you talk a bit about acquiring users in this context, as it relates to Meetup?

Andres: Meetup is a two-sided network. Meetups on the network attract members. Members on the network also attract organizers to start new meetups. That, in turn, attracts more members, which attract more meetups. And so on and so on. It's a virtuous cycle that we call the Meetup flywheel.

Q: And what have you observed firsthand as a result?

Andres: Well, what is interesting about us is that one of the biggest byproducts of our network effects is a phenomenon we call "spawning," whereby, as groups grow larger and larger, they then spawn similar but slightly different groups. For example, a motorcycle Meetup group will start in a city. They eventually might spawn a women's motorcycle rider Meetup. They then might spawn a women's motorcycle Meetup group for women who work in tech.

So, we've discovered that there's a massive long tail that arises in Meetup communities. If you look at the tech Meetup groups here in

New York[14], there is an unbelievable amount of diverse Meetups around different tech areas. This happens because we're a network.

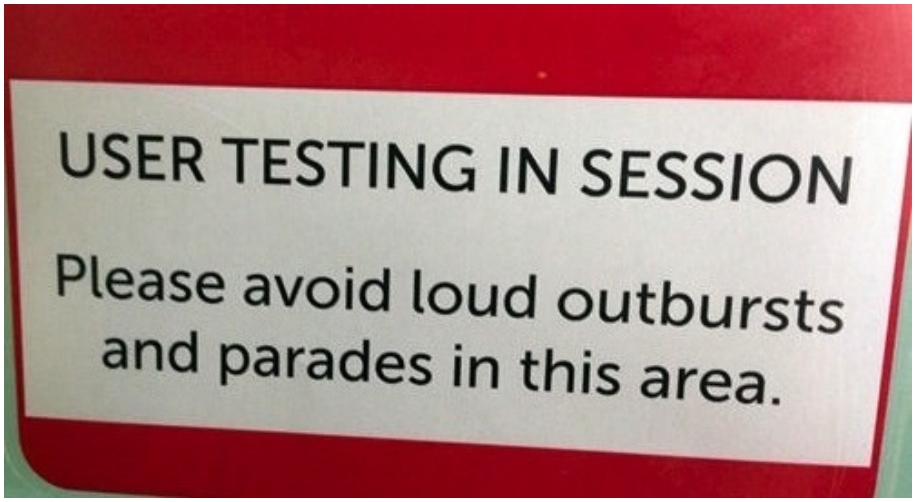
Q: How do you manage your day-to-day work?

Andres: My job is completely exhilarating because I get to tackle a huge variety of problems. However, the constant sudden shifts between different areas can be a little exhausting. In the morning, I put my daughter on the school bus, then spend 15 minutes outlining priorities for the day. I have an hour commute, so I'll dedicate that time to working on something very creative, when I tend to have a lot of energy.

Then, I come into work and try to be a sounding board or coach with the different teams (strategy, product and community). I usually don't hit my email till 5:00 at night. But every so often, I try to block a four-hour chunk of time and sneak off to a conference room somewhere and work on some heavy lifting for creative or analytical projects.

Q: What's the best part?

Andres: The two best parts are working with designers and watching usability tests. When I work with a designer, I catch a vision of Meetup's future. That's super-inspiring. On the flip side, when I watch a usability test, I get grounded in reality and am surprised by how humans actually behave (as opposed to how I wish they'd behave).



More than 400 usability tests are run through Meetup's in-house usability lab every year.

14. http://www.meetup.com/find/?categories=34&radius=25&userFreeform=New+York+City%2C+New+York%2C+USA&mcId=c10001&sort=default

Watching usability tests is just such a joy for me, and I don't get to do it as much as I would like anymore. But when I do get to watch usability testing and see somebody go through an experience, it causes me to look at our experience through fresh eyes. I love putting myself in the user's shoes and riffing on their experience. I find that so energizing.

Q: What excites you most about the Web today?

Andres: The biggest thing is that I don't feel like we have found the answer to the right way of doing things across this entire industry. Everything could be done better. However, I feel like we're hitting upon a pretty good way of working at Meetup, which is producing some good results. But in terms of how people come together and build a successful product for the Web or mobile, I think that's a pretty tough riddle and also a pretty exciting challenge.

Q: And what's been the best part of Meetup so far?

Andres: I love meeting our users and hearing them say, "Meetup changed my life." Every time I go to a conference, somebody will come up to me and say "Meetup changed my life." They say things like, "I got into iPhone development because I went to a Meetup," or something like that. So, the work itself is rewarding, and the problems we get to solve are pretty significant.

Scott (the founder) always says:

> *You haven't met all of the most important people in your life yet.*

Hopefully, we can help make that happen.

Thank you for sharing inspiring insights into your work with us, Andres! We sincerely appreciate it. Please feel free to check out a video of Andres discussing User Testing from Meetup's HQ on YouTube[15]. ❧

15. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QO-2olF9M4

Copying Others Is Not The Answer

BY ROBERT BOWEN ❧

Recently, we had the pleasure of sitting down to pick the brain of Nancy Dickenson, talented UX designer and the Executive in Residence for Bentley University's[16] HFID Graduate Program. With a bit of back and forth, we got some wonderful insight into the UX field from this long-time field participant and shaper, who looks back over her time in UX design.

We are very appreciative of Nancy taking the time to answer our questions and provide this glimpse into the evolution of the field of UX. We hope our readers enjoy the interview as much as we did collecting the information for you. Get ready for an engaging conversation.

Nancy Dickenson

Interview

Q: Nancy, where was your first job (in technology)?

Nancy: At Apple Computer.

Q: Wow, what's it been like watching Apple evolve over the years, having once been on the inside?

16. http://www.bentley.edu

Nancy: It was great to see how Steve Jobs' return brought focus to the many smart, talented people working at Apple. The jury is now out on whether they'll be able to self-organize without his strong POV leading the way.

Q: First user experience you designed (in whole or in part)?

Nancy: The American Sign Language Dictionary CD-ROM.

Q: Last app you used today?

Nancy: Yelp, TaskRabbit and Uber.

Q: How would you describe your style?

Nancy: Open, passionate about new ideas.

Q: Why are you a user experience designer? What was it that drew you to UX?

Nancy: UX is profession that we're defining as we do it. I like that. The need for easy-to-use, useful products that exceed users' expectations is as relevant today as it was when I started my career at Apple in the 1980s.

Q: Very good point! Do you find that most people understand UX or take it for granted? Has this changed over the years?

Nancy: UX is increasingly becoming an accepted part of successful product and service creation and delivery. Whether you're a product manager, developer or experience designer, everyone must engage in creative problem-solving and user-informed product strategy. Experience designers are no longer the only ones responsible for advocating for the user — the whole team is.

Q: What other less-related jobs have you worked in previous to design?

Nancy: I sang in a band in the 1970s. Leading a band was my first lesson in managing creative talent (especially engineers!).

Q: Cool! What was the name of the band?

Nancy: Nothing fancy: Nancy Dickenson Quartet. We played jazz at the Shadowbrook in Capitola and a lot of weddings.

Q: We'd love to learn more about your workflow and how you approach problem-solving. Could you tell us a bit about your personal process? How do you get started on a new project?

Nancy: I start by seeking user insights that overlap with opportunities in the market. I follow this research with rapid idea generation and experimental prototyping. I call my creative problem-solving approach "Think, Make, Show." "Think, Make, Show" is also a course that I taught for Bentley University's Certificate Program in 2011.

Q: Good process! Did you make many converts to your process? In other words, did you get a good response from your students? Anything they were resistant to?

Nancy: The phrase I repeat a great deal is, "Know the user, and know you're not the user." I didn't pen the phrase, but unfortunately can't remember who I got it from. Whoever it was, I thank them for it.

Q: When you work on a project, is there a particular element of UX design that you prefer to focus on, or would you just as soon work on any or all of it?

Nancy: I am usually involved most with strategic direction, leadership, training, and management of experience design teams.

Q: So, at the head head of the pack, just like your days in the band. What's the most important quality for a member of your team to possess?

Nancy: The most talented designer is not always the most successful designer. Great UX folks start with being excellent designers (or researchers or writers), but then they go further. They are experts at gathering up-to-date knowledge of UX trends and industry competitors, *and* they are practiced, skillful communicators. These three areas together make a star UX professional: UX craft, relevant expert knowledge and skillful communication. The most successful UX folks on my teams embrace this idea and build learning opportunities around it.

Q: Speaking of your process, what hardware, software and other tools do you use?

Nancy: Everything: Android and iOS mobile devices, Mac, PC, etc.

Q: What is your opinion of the fragmentation Android has created in the market? Do you see this as a positive or negative?

Nancy: I love operating system disruptions! The complexity makes our heads hurt and brings us into a vibrant and creative period. From software application design to website design to service design to ecosystem design across form factors, each has opened up new opportunities for user experience to provide an ever more strategic contribution that delights users and helps businesses succeed.

Q: What would you consider the most misunderstood aspect of UX design?

Nancy: Many companies confuse design thinking and design — design thinking is user-centered, strategic, creative problem-solving. That is a skill that all product roles should take part in. UX designers should be positioned to lead design thinking because they also bring their specific designer skills, knowledge and talent to both strategizing and executing great products.

Often, designers are not viewed as a strategic resource. As such, they are only invited into the product process during final execution, to "make the pages pretty." Apple's products have significantly changed users' expectations — the technology *and* the design must now succeed together. By doing this, Apple raised its market capitalization to become the most valuable company in the world. No technology product company today can afford to cut design out of the product strategy conversation, but 98% of all companies don't have a clue how to do it.

Q: You bring up a good point. What do you think we as an industry can do to correct this potentially costly error in judgment? How can we do a better job of making this point to businesses outside of our field?

Nancy: Too often, companies think that copying Apple is the answer. I've heard executives say, "Go hire me a bunch of Steve Jobs." That would be a disaster for 99% of companies. The answer is to focus on targeting the company challenges that UX is best suited to drive solutions for. For some companies, that might be giving UX authority to determine which new features will delight users and drive buzz (word of mouth), or which new features have the best chance of driving faster user-adoption rates and/or sustaining longer user-loyalty metrics.

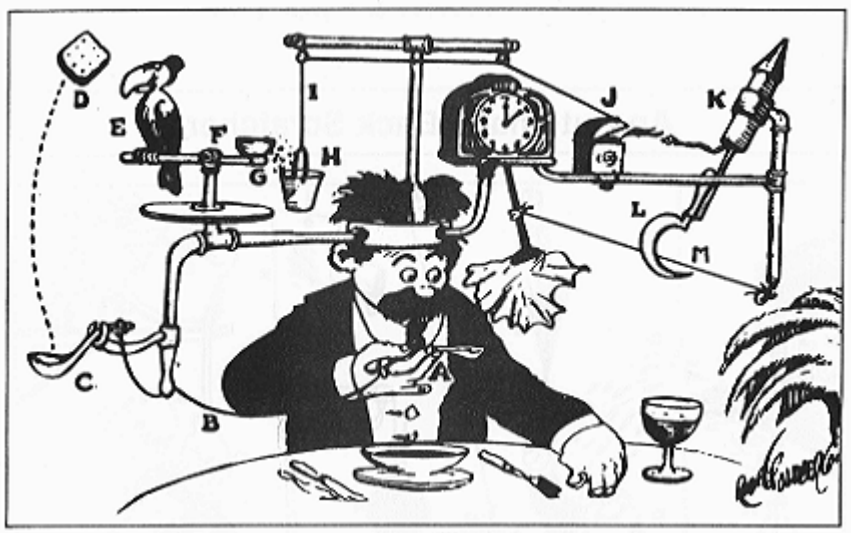


Illustration by Rube Goldberg[17].

Q: What are the main lessons you've learned throughout your work in UX?

Nancy: To be, as Bill Gribbons often says, "a student of humankind." It's a great way to work and to live.

Q: What were the most remarkable "A-ha!" moments in your career? What were the most decisive moments that changed the way you approach UX projects?

Nancy: Learning to be a facilitative leader of teams was a key turning point for me. In fast-paced organizations, nuanced delegation drives the right level of involvement, authority and motivation critical to creating successful, agile teams. These types of teams effectively balance the contributions of business, design and technology.

Q: Who would you say has had the biggest influence on you as a UX designer and why?

Nancy: I have been very lucky to have many mentors, but working at Apple in the 1980s was the seminal event in my career. Michael Tchao was my mentor. He was, and still is, a rock star.

Q: If you could choose it, what would your legacy in the industry be? What is it that you want to be remembered for?

17. http://www.rubegoldberg.com/

Nancy: I hope that my legacy lies in playing a part in inventing and growing UX design and research from a concept into a profession. Through this, I hope to increase the number of smart people who find gainful, satisfying work as UX professionals. ❧

“Be Careful: Trends Come And Go”

BY LEONA HU ❧

As one of the top designers on Dribbble[18], Jan Martin attracts many followers with his visual design skills. Unlike many designers, Jan is incredibly humble about what he has achieved. “Stop following what the visionary designers think,” he says. “There is no wrong or right way. We need to create our own things and always design with our heart.”

Jan grew up in the small city of Brandenburg, about 70 kilometers south of Berlin. After graduating from the Berlin Design Academy with a degree in Communication Design, he cofounded 6Wunderkinder[19] (literally, “6 wonder kids”) back in 2010. Since then, he has been the company’s lead designer, responsible for the visual design of the popular Wunderlist[20] and the company’s website, blog, social-network sites and branding.

6Wunderkinder’s current headquarters are located on the top floor of a “Berliner Hinterhof” (a Berlin courtyard), with extensive views of the city. The building is one of many coworking spaces that host an array of up-and-coming startups in the “Mitte.” Despite its German roots, 6Wunderkinder has a diverse team of employees coming from over 15 countries.

Q: So Jan, how was 6Wunderkinder brought to life?

Jan: The original three founders — Christian, Robert and I — have been good friends since we were in school. Prior to starting 6Wunderkinder, we founded a Web design agency called *Innovatics*. This is how we met the other founders, Charlette, Daniel and Sebastian. Christian is the CEO who runs the company. Charlette is our finance lady who takes care of all our salaries and operations. Robert was the marketing and PR guy. And Sebastian is the designer behind the entire first version of Wunderlist and Wunderkit.

18. http://dribbble.com/JanMartin
19. http://www.6wunderkinder.com/
20. https://www.wunderlist.com/en/

Jan on the patio of 6Wunderkinder's headquarters. (Image credit: Leona Hu)

Wunderlist is an idea we had long ago. We have always wanted to create something to aid people's productivity with a delightful interface. I still vividly remember the day when I received my diploma from Design Akademie Berlin[21]. It was the same day we founded 6Wunderkinder.

Q: How does the design team at 6Wunderkinder work?

Jan: Collaboration is the most important thing. We give each other feedback on a daily basis. All designers on the team constantly publish work and give critiques to each other. We are extremely honest when we give feedback. If a couple of pixels are not positioned correctly, we will point it out immediately. We even use a real magnifier to examine the design quality on device screens.

I work with a team of the best designers in the field, and every day they offer so much that I can learn from. For example, our product lead, Benedikt[22], oversees all of our marketing and product design. He writes often to give good advice. Recently, the flat UI style has become increasingly popular, and many designers have started to adopt this style. Ben encourages us not to follow these trends mindlessly. He thinks designers should focus on their own creation, rather than looking at what others do.

21. http://www.design-akademie-berlin.de/en/
22. http://benedikt-lehnert.de

The magnifying glass that the team at 6Wunderkinder uses. (Image credit: Leona Hu)

Sebastian Scheerer[23], Timothy Amchuba[24] and Julius Schäper[25] work closely with the engineers to deliver quality products for different platforms. Sebastian is in charge of the Android, desktop and Web apps; Tim works with the iOS team; Julius creates beautiful icons and images for all the products. We all work on different tasks but are interconnected at the same time. "Be a pixel perfectionist" is our slogan. We also have great relationships with the engineering teams and often get help from them. Tim was interested in coding HTML and CSS, and one of our Web developers taught him the skills.

At 6Wunderkinder, we are not only colleagues but also a big family. We stay up late at night in the office together for releases, and we take vacations together. We have a annual company retreat called "WunderCamp," where we go on a trip with everyone in the office.

Q: What is the design aesthetic at 6Wunderkinder?

Jan: At 6Wunderkinder, we pursue quintessential design and engineering. Each employee here is very attentive and diligent on things that we work on. Our CEO and company founder Christian Reber[26] comes from an engineering and business background, but he is always interested in participating in our design discussions. Christian and our product lead, Benedikt, often give the designers valuable input. We encourage every-

23. http://dribbble.com/sebastianscheerer
24. http://dribbble.com/iam_timm
25. http://dribbble.com/Julius
26. http://christianreber.com

one in the company to be involved in our design critiques. This interactivity allows us quickly realize what we need to improve.

6Wunderkinder's design team. From left to right: Jan Martin, Sebastian Scheerer, Timothy Achumba and Julius Schäper. (Image credit: Leona Hu)

Q: How important is the work space to your creativity?

Jan: The work space is indeed crucial for us. We all have our own individual spaces, but we are also grouped as teams in different rooms. In our office, we have a lounge that we use for communal activities, such as weekly reviews, celebrations and product releases. We have a relaxed environment, but everyone works hard.

The lounge in 6Wunderkinder's office. (Image credit: Leona Hu)

We stay on top of communication with each other, even when someone needs to work remotely. Soon, we will move to The Factory[27], a newly constructed campus where we'll get to share space with many other startups and tech companies, such as Zendesk, SoundCloud and Mozilla.

Q: What is your typical design process?

Jan: I always start with pen and paper. I use a brainstorming strategy that I call *The Simpsons* (yes, like the TV show). I call it *The Simpsons* because I try to produce strange ideas, just like the crazy cartoon does. Also, I never pick the first idea. For example, when the character Homer walks past a banana, most of the audience would think he will slip and fall. But the creators of *The Simpsons* always make him do something unexpected.

I sketch some of the developed ideas on paper, then scan these drawings to the computer. During my design process, I also look at many photography libraries for reference. Usually, I'll create multiple versions for one project. After collecting feedback from my colleagues, I'll keep refining the one that has gotten the best feedback until the final delivery.

In terms of digital tools, Photoshop is my favorite. I use Illustrator to draw complex shapes, too. And Keynote is the tool I use for constructing wireframes.

Q: What inspires you outside of work?

Jan: Berlin. The city is full of talented creatives. Because of the inexpensive cost of living, many young artists and designers can do what they love here without concern for money. During my free time, I like to explore the city. Berlin has so efficient an infrastructure that I can easily travel across the city. Currently, I live in the neighborhood Wedding. It is not as popular as Mitte or Kreuzberg because it is still under development. But that's why I like to discover new things happening here.

27. http://www.factoryberlin.com

The rooftop patio at 6Wunderkinder's office. (Image credit: Leona Hu)

I also watch many documentary films to get inspired. My favorite one is *Objectified* by Gary Hustwit. Recently, I watched a documentary called *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*. Chef Jiro Ono's wisdom about perfect sushi-making in the film particularly inspires me in design.

Q: What have been the most unique challenges that you've discovered in your work at 6Wunderkinder? What are the most interesting problems you've had to solve, and how did you solve them?

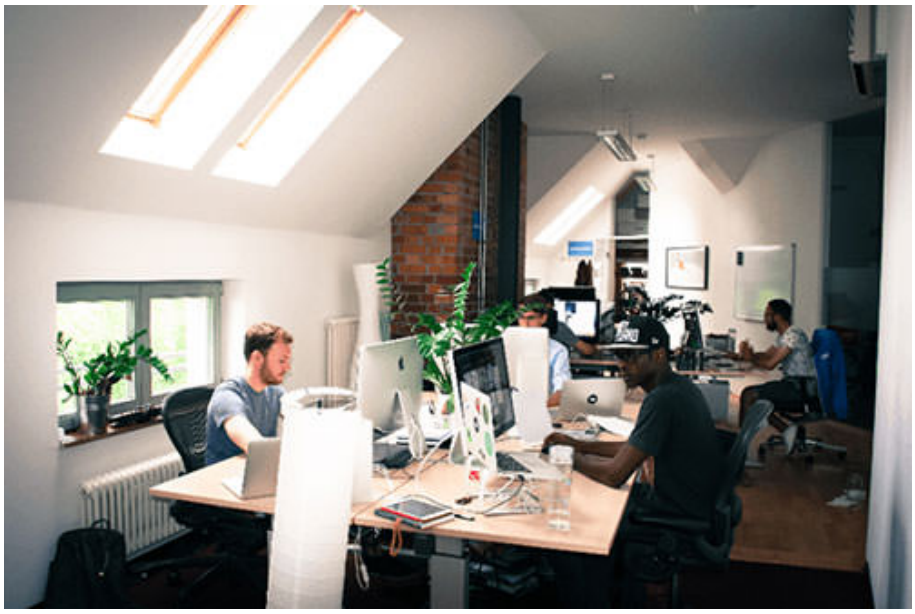
Jan: One big challenge was to start as rookies but provide a high-quality app that does what other big players already offer. Our numbers grew incredibly fast, and so did the demands of our users, which we had to grow with very quickly. Good is not good enough, even if your app is free.

Another challenge was how to handle press. Press buzz and hype can help you to develop a strong brand and gain attention in the beginning, but there is a big difference between publishers and readers. It's easy to get in touch with publishers, but it's hard to talk directly with your audience. Even if you are an early-stage startup, invest as soon as possible in an experienced head of press.

Sometimes it can be really seducing to get a bit more buzz. For most people, more users equals more money equals more success. But sometimes it doesn't. Take a step back and consider which news and which announcements are really helpful to you. Not only in design does "less is more" count.

Let me quote my good friend and CEO Christian Reber on the most important challenge: "Prepare to fail." If you want to read about in-

sights into failing and learning, you should read his startup lessons featured on The Next Web[28].



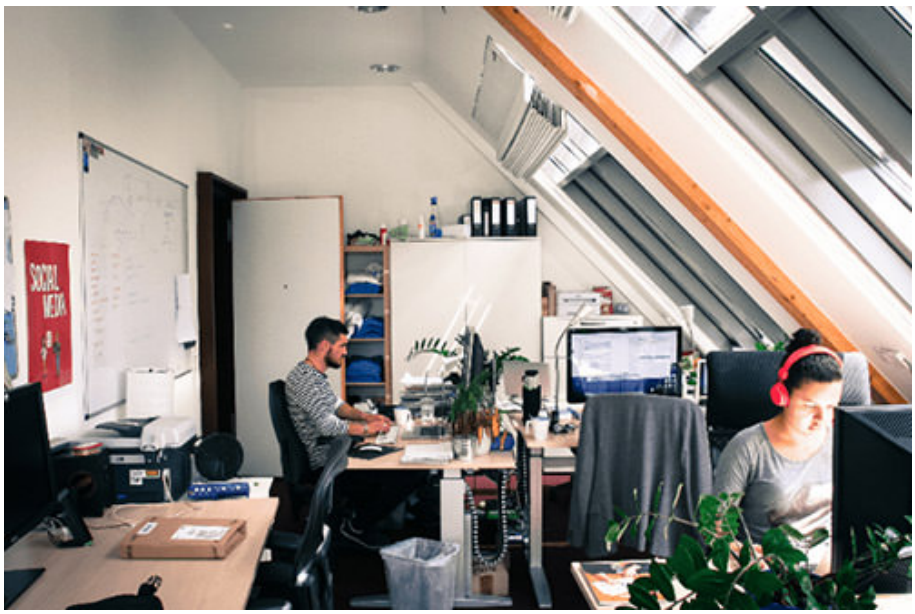
6Wunderkinder's design team. (Image credit: Leona Hu)

Q: How do you feel about growing a company in Berlin? Did conversations with people in Berlin (at meetups, etc.) inspire you to create your product? Do you seek inspiration in coffee shops or when walking, hiking, etc.? Have you had a chance to see what the community is like outside of Berlin, perhaps in other countries?

Jan: It was one of our best decisions to found and start our company in Berlin. The city is vibrant and filled with clever, creative and hardworking people from all over the globe. You have so many freedoms that you would not find in other cities. It's this mixture that makes the city so interesting, confident and unique. But creating a startup is just one small step.

I met some designers in June in San Diego at a design conference called Valio Con. Most of them were from San Francisco. Some of them worked in big and well-known startups. I think there is a difference between talking to people who have the same problems you are facing and talking to people people who *had* the same problems. Which means Berlin is not the right place right now to learn from other companies if you want to become more than a startup. There are not really many startups in Berlin that have made a profit or an IPO, and not many startups will.

28. http://thenextweb.com/entrepreneur/2013/07/15/15-steps-to-start-your-own-tech-business-part-1/



A corner of 6Wunderkinder's office. (Image credit: Leona Hu)

In general, I try to avoid startup meetups and parties. Instead, I sit with my colleagues and work on our product. We made a big promise to our users and investors, so why should we waste our time just talking to others on the scene?!

Q: Because Berlin is so big, do you find the city at times too competitive, with too many design agencies fighting for attention?

Jan: I can't tell you anything about the design agency scene, just about the startup scene. But in the case of startups, I don't think it's too competitive. There are enough users with many and varying needs out there. It could be competitive regarding investors; but since I've been on the scene, there hasn't been a startup with a good product that hasn't found an investor. If you don't find any investors, you should rethink your product.

Q: What lessons have you learned in your career? And how have they changed the way you approach design today?

Jan: One of my best learnings is to be careful with trends. Trends come and go. Some are good and will return, and some will leave you feeling embarrassed in the future. I'm trying to focus on the fundamentals, which will always work, allowing me to interpret current trends but not rely on them.

For instance, I've stopped using Dribbble. If you design for yourself or your own company, you should always strive for unique design and visual communication. But if you look like anyone else, you will lose an

important advantage. Don't implement anything you see on Dribbble into your work. It might work for that designer, but maybe not for your product. In the end, it will help you more if you find your own solutions. If you need inspiration, go to a museum; there is a reason why those works are in a museum.

Thank you for sharing inspiring insights into your work with us, Jan! Please feel free to follow Jan Martin[29] on Twitter and check out his portfolio[30]. ❧

29. https://twitter.com/jan_martin_
30. http://dribbble.com/JanMartin

"Be Humble, Be Honest, Don't Be Afraid To Fail"

BY LEONA HU

Influenced by his father, an architect, Benjamin Dauer had an early fascination with design, which came first from watching his father draw by hand and then connecting these drawings to physical space. When his father began using digital programs like AutoCAD, Benjamin became equally inspired, seeing it as a way for static design to achieve dimension.

Unlike many designers, Benjamin never formally trained at a design school. Instead, he learned his skills through observation, self-directed study and work experience. He currently is senior product designer at National Public Radio[31] (NPR). Prior to that, he was lead product designer at SoundCloud[32], a position that took him and his wife to Berlin, where he helped to shape the audio service across multiple platforms. Away from his desk, he is an experimental musician and composer.

Benjamin Dauer

31. http://www.npr.org/
32. https://soundcloud.com/

I met Benjamin in a Berlin bookstore and cafe called *Shakespeare & Sons*, during his transition from SoundCloud to NPR. He used to come here often to read, drink coffee and eat fresh bagels. *Shakespeare & Sons* is located in Prenzlauer Berg near Helmholtzplatz Park. The area is known for its young families. During our conversation, we paused many times for the adorable toddlers passing by. Benjamin spoke about his passion for music and how he enjoyed being involved in the design and music communities, sharing his creative skills for good causes. He was named a "SoundCloud Hero" for raising awareness of white nose syndrome and colony collapse disorder, two diseases that affect bat and bee populations in the US.

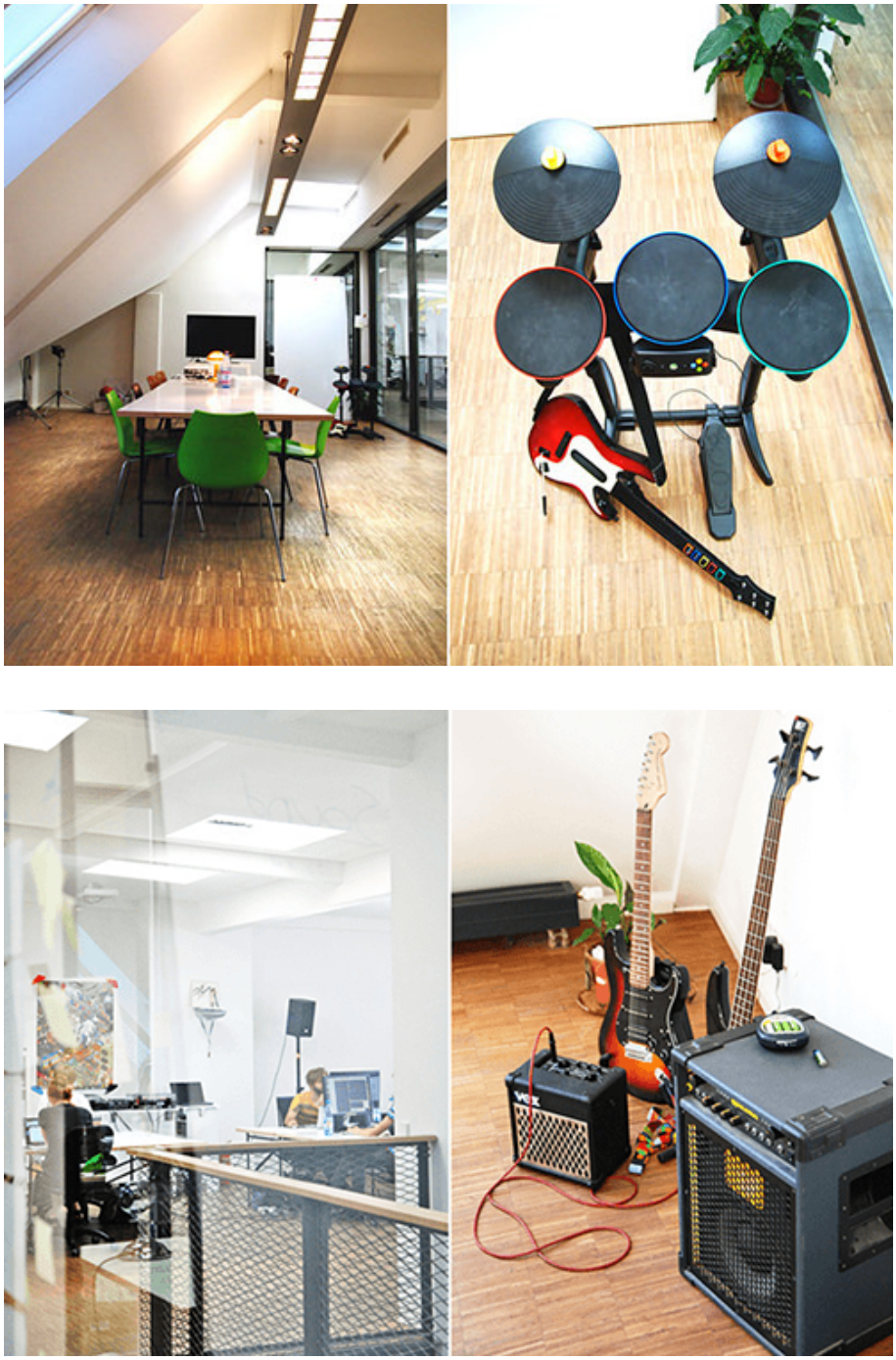
Benjamin's neighborhood, Prenzlauer Berg. (Image source: Benjamin Dauer)

Q: What had made you decide to move to Berlin and join SoundCloud?

Benjamin: When I discovered SoundCloud nearly six years ago, it became the perfect platform to share my music with many communities. Over time, I became actively involved in projects such as the Disquiet Junto. After a while, and after being named a SoundCloud Hero, I was approached by them about a design role here in Berlin. I decided that

working at SoundCloud would be the perfect marriage of design and music, and it involved living abroad, so I took the job.

And, of course, Berlin is such an exciting, youthful city. Moving here with my wife has definitely been a new adventure for us. Who knows what the future will bring. But for now, Berlin is our home. It was not easy for us to settle for the first few months. For instance, Germany has a very complicated rental process. But overall, we are having a great time here.



SoundCloud's current office. (Image: Wechsellook[33])

Q: How do the design teams work at SoundCloud and NPR?

Benjamin: The team at SoundCloud is a fairly small design team, but it is continually expanding. At the moment, about eight people are on the design team working here at the Berlin headquarters. The team consists of Web and mobile designers, prototypers, and researchers. We also closely collaborate with project managers, as well as with the engineering, insights, search, and brand communications teams.

I think that a design team should be compact and focused on specific projects and goals. Bigger teams can inhibit quick decision-making. I promote the agile methodology in my design process. We have daily stand-up meetings for better communication between colleagues. This transparency is also key to working collaboratively across teams. Every small change we make will impact tens of millions of users.

The team at NPR is very clear about its priorities. Its focus is on usability more than anything else. This philosophy also applies to the team here at SoundCloud. Going from a non-profit organization to a truly international startup was quite an insane transition for me. People working here stay highly engaged, and we all have crazy enthusiasm about our product.

Benjamin Dauer's design of the NPR Music app won the Communication Arts' Interactive Competition award[34].

33. http://www.flickr.com/photos/soundcloud/5166616544/
34. http://www.commarts.com/interactive/cai13/nprmusicipad.html

Designers are experience creators, and being a good listener is very important. As designers, we solve problems with our creative thinking. By asking the right qs, we can quickly address problems. We need to have specific reasons for every step moving forward — for example, why the drop shadow is necessary in a certain case, or why we use a particular color or typeface or interaction or animation. Many companies use data analysis to define design, to determine what the users want. I think designers should be willing to take risks and trust their intuitions.

Q: What is your reaction to the current trend of flat design?

Benjamin: The trends of visual design in the tech industry change rapidly. From skeuomorphic to flat design, what really matters is contextually applying the right design. Ultimately, these styles are just tools to enhance the user's experience. Usability of the app should be the focus.

Q: Where do you seek inspiration?

Benjamin: I am inspired by many things. This comes from my everyday observation of architecture, objects, street scenes and even small details like the shadows of the city. I also like to read. I encourage designers to read not only design-related books, magazines and articles, but also books from other genres. For example, I am very interested in philosophy. It is a great way to improve critical- and conceptual-thinking skills. Reading books on diverse topics helps designers to look at the world, including design, from a variety of angles.

Q: From your time living in Berlin, how do you see the design and development community in Germany? Was it what you expected? Berlin being so huge, did you have opportunities to network?

Benjamin: Berlin + design = legendary. I had high expectations and was not disappointed. Even the concert bills that get posted on every street corner, sometimes layered up to 12 inches thick, are all lovely, grid-based and typography-driven. Whether visiting a specialty design or zine bookshop, attending a startup mixer or SoundCloud-hosted masterclass, or overhearing a conversation at a coffee shop — it is clear that there is a real sense of camaraderie and support when it comes to design and development and no shortage of opportunities to network. Additionally, in the future, SoundCloud will have its headquarters in a new building dubbed simply "The Factory," which will play host to some of Berlin's technology startup darlings.

As an aside, while living in Berlin, I found it extremely comforting that I did not have to explain "what I do" as often. People just understood.

Q: What were the most unique challenges you faced in your work at SoundCloud? What were the most interesting problems you had to solve, and how did you solve them?

Benjamin: As you might expect, much of the work I was doing is considered confidential until it ships. More broadly speaking, I would say that one of the most unique challenges we faced at SoundCloud was how to transition a creator platform into a consumer brand and, thereby, a mature and stable business. By this, I mean, are these two audiences, the creators and consumers, mutually exclusive or can they share some or all of the same user experience? How can we craft products that speak directly to someone who uses our service to share field recordings of space as well as someone who is looking for the latest single by Kanye and a long-form listening experience?

By and large, when talking about how we solve problems, it involves asking a lot of "Why" qs, a lot of collaborative discussions, research, user testing and iteration.

Sorry to be so evasive, but let's just say we continue to attempt to answer these qs and cannot wait to share with everyone what we've been up to: all new iOS app, new embeddable widgets, partner tools and more.

The SoundCloud app by Benjamin Dauer's design team.

Q: What tools did you use in SoundCloud, and how did you coordinate tasks?

Benjamin: Post-Its. Neon-colored Post-Its. Lots of them. And bright orange pens. And whiteboards. Keep things visible!

But seriously, each department (engineering, discovery, marketing, etc.) has its own set of specific tools. Generally speaking, SoundCloud is a Google house when it comes to things like email, docs, spreadsheets and presentations. As for the design team, everyone is on Adobe Creative Cloud, and it supplements as necessary with other tools, such as Trello for task management, Dropbox for file syncing and storage, Pixelapse for versioning and comment-tracking, Photoshop with Skala Preview and Sketch with Sketch Mirror for mobile work, and many others — too many to list.

From an organizational standpoint, SoundCloud is becoming more agile, so much of the coordination of tasks gets handled naturally (with help from the project managers) through the product road map and each individual cycle and sprint.

Q: What lessons have you learned in your career? And how have they changed the way you approach design today?

Benjamin: Here are a few, in no particular order:

- *Be an active listener.*
  When asking qs, try to thoughtfully engage your audience. Don't just listen for what you want to hear.
- *Remove yourself from the equation.*
  More often than not, the work you are doing is not about you. It is about your audience.
- *Avoid the vacuum.*
  Whenever possible, don't work alone. Talk with people, whether they are your teammates or guerrilla testers in a cafe. Solicit input and feedback as often as possible, and remember your audience.
- *Be humble.*
  Know when you're right, and know when you're wrong.
- *Be honest.*
  Be honest with yourself, with your team and with your time.
- *Pay respect.*
  We're all in this together, and we all have people to thank.

- *Don't be afraid to fail.*
  Challenge yourself at all times, and learn from every experience — good and bad.

- *Learn to say no.*
  This can be the hardest lesson to learn, but also one of the most important.

- *Laugh.*
  We all want to live longer, right? Enjoy what you do.

Q: What is the weirdest design project you've worked on in your career?

Benjamin: This is a very interesting q. I think it all depends on how you define "weird." For me, in the context of design, weird simply means unusual or outside my "normal."

With that said, one project in particular comes to mind. While working at the National Science Foundation, I had the distinct pleasure of designing an exhibition brochure for American photographer and artist Jill Greenberg. The name of the show was "Monkey Portraits[35]." So, as you can imagine, this was indeed outside of my normal when it comes to design work.

As humans, we love to consider ourselves distant or, at the very least, different from our genetic cousins. While working with Jill's hyper-real photographs, I couldn't help but feel connected to these subjects. They appeared almost human — expressing emotions often associated with people.

From this "weird" design project, I was reminded of the importance of empathy — empathize with your subject, empathize with your audience. Your work will be better for it.

Q: Could you lead us through your design process?

Benjamin: For me, context is very important, so there will always be some variation in how I approach a particular design problem. Different contexts require different solutions. Overall, I think it would be safe to say that my process involves some or all of these elements:

- Frame the problem.
- Ask the right qs.

35. http://www.art.jillgreenberg.com/tagged/monkey-portraits

- Challenge assumptions.
- Research (markets, competition, patterns, etc.).
- Sketch and prototype with ink and paper.
- Design and prototype.
- Test and learn.
- Iterate, iterate, iterate.

The passion for design can take us on a fascinating journey — a journey that can start with the very first moment we see something take shape on paper and feel a hunger awakened in us to create. This creative force takes us to totally new places and environments. It pulls us to places where we need to be because there is inspiration, challenges and people waiting there for us. It could be Berlin, it could be anywhere else. Design asks us to step out of our cocoons and into the midst of people, so we can ask and listen, and eventually create great experiences for them.

Thank you for sharing inspiring insights into your work with us, Benjamin! Please feel free to follow Benjamin Dauer[36] and check out his portfolio[37]. ❧

36. https://twitter.com/benjamindauer
37. http://benjamindauer.is

WordPress: How It Came To Be And Where It's Heading

BY ALEX MOSS ❧

2013 was a busy year for me for conferences and travel. It was also the year I attended my first (and second) WordCamp. The first was WordCamp UK[38] in July, where I met Mike Little[39], one of the two co-founders of WordPress. Three months later, I was honored to meet the other co-founder, Matt Mullenweg[40], twice in three weeks: at WordCamp Europe[41] in Leiden, and at The Summit[42]. I was lucky enough to have both Matt and Mike participate in interviews for this chapter about WordPress, including its history, community and future.

Interview With Matt Mullenweg

Q: Matt, you've attended nearly every Summit since its inception and were the first speaker to be announced and the only person who has returned every year to attend. What is it about The Summit that brings you back to Dublin every year, and what can you share about The Summit with someone who has never attended?

Matt: I love Ireland and have visited several times before The Summit. Paddy [Cosgrave] and the team bring together a great group of people, and I always enjoy the activities and the folks I meet.

Q: Over the years, more code is becoming the standard practice on any website. Is WordPress making any plans to integrate features such as Schema or Facebook Open Graph tags into the core?

Matt: We're happy to adopt and support standards but generally don't integrate tags that are proprietary to a third party.

Q: Do you have any plans for a "from the ground up rebuild," or maybe to drop `deprecated.php` and make a cleaner, lighter version for 4.0?

38. http://2013.lancaster.wordcamp.org/
39. http://mikelittle.org/
40. http://ma.tt/
41. http://europe.wordcamp.org/
42. http://www.websummit.net/

Matt: We rewrite or refactor about 10 to 15% of WordPress in most releases, so that we can keep users getting updates and new features quickly, while doing the "ground up rebuild" incrementally in the background, fixing bugs and getting feedback as we go. Sometimes old functions hang out for a while, as you noted with `deprecated.php`. That's because we try to be good about backwards-compatibility, so that people can upgrade to the latest version without worry.

Matt Mullenweg at The Summit in Dublin, October 2013 (Image: Dan Taylor/Heisenberg Media[43])

Q: Some WordPress developers say that users and roles are generally quite limited in core and that not a lot of great plugins exist to enhance features that user roles could provide. Are there any plans to evolve this section of the core?

Matt: I'm not aware of anything that you can't do with the user and roles system. Usually I'll get the opposite complaint, that roles and capabilities are too complex.

Q: At WordCamp Europe, you briefly mentioned that you were going to be more hands-on with development of the core. Can you elaborate on that?

Matt: I was alluding to 3.8, the release I led that came out on December 12th[44].

43. http://www.flickr.com/photos/websummit/10707615933/in/set-72157637157375516
44. http://wordpress.org/news/2013/12/parker/

Q: If WordPress didn't exist today, what CMS would you be using right now?

Matt: I'd probably use something bespoke.

Q: Premium theme and plugin websites have increasingly grown outside of the official repository. Does WordPress.org have any plans to serve GPL-friendly premium plugins in a repository, similar to the themes offered on WordPress.com?

Matt: We have no plans to have paid products hosted or sold on WordPress.org.

Q: Do you have a particular non-Automattic plugin that you could share with users?

Matt: Sure, I like Dropbox Photo Sideloader[45], Email Post Changes[46] and... most everything else I love is covered by Jetpack[47].

Q: What one piece of advice would you give to anyone who is thinking about developing a theme or plugin?

Matt: Design and usability are more important than ever. Watch a friend or family member try to use your plugin from start to finish, and it'll give you a ton of ideas on how to make it better.

Q: Would you and/or your core team consider becoming more active in groups and/or forums? Facebook groups such as Advanced WP[48] are very active.

Matt: We have a hard enough time keeping up with the activity on WordPress.org, but we're happy when conversations about WordPress are happening anywhere, and I try to chip in where I can.

Q: What are the biggest challenges facing WordPress' growth, beyond powering "just" 20% of the Web?

Matt: I think mobile is very challenging because it's fundamentally on closed platforms.

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45. http://wordpress.org/plugins/dropbox-photo-sideloader/
46. http://wordpress.org/plugins/email-post-changes/
47. http://wordpress.org/plugins/jetpack/
48. https://www.facebook.com/groups/advancedwp/

Q: When we met in Leiden, we briefly spoke about Mike Little and how you still keep in touch. Have you considered a reunion?

Matt: That'd be great, I'm sure we will run into each other sometime in the near future.

Q: What can we see next from Automattic?

Matt: Stay tuned. :)

Interview With Mike Little

Q: How did you get into programming?

Mike: I actually wrote my first program a very long time ago, in 1978. I was in 6th form, and one day a week we went down to the local college, which had one of these computer things. And I started programming there. It was really old school; it was a teletype terminal, which means that it didn't have a screen—what you typed came out of the printer in the back. I saved my program onto punched tape. That was OK, but it didn't last long; our class got banned from the college computers because one of the guys got caught smoking, which was not good. [laughs]

Fast forward a couple of years, and I was working with a couple of bands, and one of the bands wanted to do something fancy with what were then home computers. I ended up borrowing a ZX Spectrum (so it would have been 1982) and managed to put a program together with it, which we completed. Although we never managed to put it live on stage, I really got the programming bug from that. I loved the problem-solving, taking it as far as I could and just making the machines dance to my code. That's how I got the bug, and I've just kept at it since then.

Mike Little accepts his award for Outstanding Contribution to Digital at SAScon 2013. (Image: Mike Little[49])

Q: It has been 10 years since WordPress launched. Did you realize how big it would become? And if not, did you have any thoughts on how big it might be?

Mike: No, not at all. I wasn't thinking at all in those terms. It was more about fixing the software that Matt, I and a few others were using. [Editorial note: Matt Mullenweg and Mike Little were working with the abandoned PHP-based blogging software b2/cafelog, by Michel Valdrighi, which eventually became WordPress.] The software had a few bugs in it, and our primary intention was to fix the bugs and make some tweaks to make it better.

Speaking for myself, I never really had any thoughts lined up in terms of marketshare or anything like that. I'm not really a business-oriented person, so for me it was just about fixing the code, making it better and seeing how it goes.

Q: How does it feel now, knowing that more websites are running on a system that you partially created than there are people living in the United Kingdom?

Mike: I'm astonished every day, looking at the number of things built on WordPress. I'm astonished by the size of the community, the number of plugins and themes, and all of the businesses that are making a living from WordPress. I'm humbled by the small part that I played at the start of all of this.

49. http://mikelittle.org/outstanding-contribution-award/

Q: It reminds of this funny anecdote at the dinner table, where someone says, "And what do you do?" "I founded this CMS." "Oh, what's it called?" "WordPress." "I use that!"

Mike: Yes, it's not really something that I talk about. I'll mention it in a WordPress-type situation, but it's not really something I want to brag about. I think — and I'm happy to say this — WordPress is as good as it is because of all the people who have worked on it after me.

Q: It's good to know that the community is so big. On the other hand, what do think are the biggest challenges facing the growth of WordPress?

Mike: Keeping it usable. In fact, making it even more usable. I know there are multiple strands of work in progress to achieve that and make it even easier for people starting out. I actually do WordPress training, including a beginners course, with people who have literally just had a quick dabble with WordPress.

I still find it amazing how hard it is to do the easy stuff. Generally, computers are not intuitive. A touchscreen is a little more intuitive than a keyboard and mouse. As soon as you learn the basics in WordPress, it's all really easy, but until you learn the basics, it's actually not. I know that a lot of effort is being put into making these first steps much easier, so that someone brand new can just press that "one-click install" button and be easily led through the next steps.

I think this is the biggest challenge, because as more and more people use WordPress, essentially you'll have more people who are less tech-savvy, and it's important to make it easy for them to come on board.

Q: I agree. Our clients mostly use WordPress. It looks ominous to them for about 10 seconds, but then you tell them to take a deep breath, and after 10 minutes it just clicks with them. You mentioned that you do training. Do you find that this is part of the evolution of WordPress? Do you think training services are more in demand now than custom WordPress builds, which is what we both do for a living?

Mike: I think it's a mixture of both. When you have to build a site with very specific features for a client, you can take away the development part and make it much easier for the client to use it. However, the training that I've been doing is for a more general purpose. The people who I train are looking to build and manage sites for themselves or the companies they work for. They need to know a reasonable amount about

WordPress (for example, how to build or configure a site with it). There is a lot of things that people can do with WordPress to make themselves a sophisticated site, but it isn't at all intuitive and it's where they need a bit of leading. But they can do it. Sometimes it's quite amazing how even seasoned users learn new things about it or things that came along after they went through that learning curve.

Q: I like to consider myself a seasoned user and admit that I still find new functions that I didn't know about, and it's good to know that it's the same for others. Do most clients just want to expand their general knowledge, or do they want their WordPress site to do A, B and C and leave the programming to you?

Mike: It's quite a mixture. At the moment, there is a fairly equal split between the classroom training that I do and the one-to-one training. I have just as many consultations on how to build a site as I get requests for development work for existing clients. On the one hand, I tend to be more interested in the development part — making WordPress jump through hoops and building complex sophisticated sites that stretch WordPress and match the client's needs in more interesting ways. On the other hand, I do training for absolute beginners. I teach them the difference between posts and pages, and how to insert images.

Q: In making WordPress jump through hoops, what has been the hardest hoop to jump through, and how did you do it?

Mike: Most of the hoops aren't actually that hard to jump through. This sounds a bit crazy, I know, but with the hooks, actions and filters, WordPress is such a capable system now. It's a fantastic framework to build whatever site or even Web app a person wants.

It's been a few years since I've had any real difficulties making WordPress do something. It was for one particular client with a very sophisticated site. Two of the things he wanted was the ability to register new users without an email address or, optionally, with an email address that might already be used by somebody else. WordPress really didn't like doing that at the time, so this was a very difficult problem to overcome. Actually, back then, I ended up hacking core code to do that. Since then, WordPress has caught up, and enough filters are in place now to get around it in legitimate ways.

For the things I need, finding the right hooks and library functions is usually enough. I might be learning stuff that I didn't know before, but WordPress is still capable of meeting the needs.

Q: Yes, we even build complex commerce sites with WordPress. You say that WordPress covers pretty much everything you want. However, if WordPress didn't exist right now, what CMS would you be using?

Mike: That is a really good question. I think last year when I was asked that question, I said Drupal. I don't think that's true anymore. I don't know what I would be using, to be honest. Without WordPress, I might still be using whatever the latest trend in Java is. I remember just about getting into all of the declarative frameworks, like Spring, that were very popular the last time I worked full time with Java. But yes, without WordPress, which did take me away from my old day job in Java development, I would probably still be using Java.

Q: So, what's changed since less than a year ago when you said Drupal?

Mike: Probably I've thought a bit more about the question. [laughs] I've looked at Drupal a number of times. I looked at it before I got to b2/cafelog and also after a particular project. I even started working with Drupal because at the time I wasn't sure that WordPress was good enough for what I wanted to do. I ended up giving up on Drupal because it was just too hard for what I wanted to do. And in the end I did use WordPress for that particular project, and it fit it very nicely, although we did hit some of the limitations of WordPress at the time.

The last time I used Drupal, it was probably version 4 or 5, and since then I haven't heard anything new that makes me think that it's what I would use for any large project. That's not to say that it's not capable; it's just that its learning curve is probably similar to the one I went through when I learned about all of the Java frameworks. It's a developers' tool, and it's been made to be beautifully architected, and that means there is an investment you have to make, and I'm just not sure that I'd want to continue working with Drupal when I'd probably pick up something that I have more experience with a lot more easily.

Q: You mentioned other frameworks. Have you ever worked with one in depth, such as Laravel, Zend or CakePHP?

Mike: Not really PHP. I used Zend in the early days when it was more a collection of useful libraries than a framework. I played about with CakePHP in the early days when it was kind of emulating the Ruby on Rails-type thing, where you use the command line to create the structure of your application. But I haven't seriously worked with any PHP frameworks for a long time.

Q: Do you use any software in particular for Web development?

Mike: I've been using a programmer's editor called Epsilon for more than 20 year now. I first used it back in the DOS days, pre-Windows, in the early '90s. It's my programming tool of choice, a text editor with a lot of bells and whistles. The only thing that I miss from my earliest days of programming is that it doesn't support debugging. I've actually been investigating one of the IDEs — PhpStorm — for doing some proper debugging, which I miss from my old days of C programming and assembler programming. Otherwise, I use Chrome's Inspector for Web-level front-facing stuff, and everything else I do in a plain text editor.

Q: Have you ever used a CSS preprocessor, such as LESS, SASS or Stylus, or do you plan to?

Mike: I haven't yet because I don't generally do much theme work. I'm more at the plugin level and tweaking themes, rather than creating anything. I'm not a designer by any stretch of the imagination. But funnily enough, just today I've scheduled a phone call with a client to talk about exactly that. We're probably going to use one of those tools because we have a very sophisticated WordPress app that has a main theme with a lot of functionality and half a dozen child themes. Managing the different color schemes across the child themes is becoming a bit of a burden, and that's exactly what the preprocessors are for. So, I will be looking into it very soon.

Q: What's the one programming language that you would like to learn the most?

Mike: I'm not too sure actually. At one point I tried learning Python, and I vaguely know it. Maybe Ruby — I don't even know it that well. The funny thing is that I've got so many programming languages under my belt that, at least for the procedural ones, they are all the same except for the syntax and library calls. A couple of years ago I felt that I needed to know Python because I was mentoring some kids who were learning to code. I think I spent one day going through a Python tutorial before I felt confident enough to help someone who had just started. Nothing that I've heard of recently makes me think, "Oh, I'd really like to learn that," because most of these languages have some kind of specialization, but at the end of the day it's mostly about syntax and good libraries.

Q: What advice would you give to someone who is thinking about starting out in WordPress as a theme or plugin developer?

Mike: In both instances, I would say you definitely do need to learn some coding. Even theme developers need to learn some WordPress coding at the PHP level. The key thing is to understand some aspects of the architecture of WordPress — in particular, the actions and filters. Without that understanding, you will struggle to know what you're doing, even if you can find stuff to copy and paste and fiddle with to make it do what you want. Without that fundamental understanding, people really do struggle and will end up limited, even if they do find some success. That's key for both roles: learn some coding, learn the fundamentals of the architecture of WordPress, and take it from there.

Q: WordPress.org has pages dedicated to developing themes[50] and plugins[51], with minimum requirements. Whenever I develop something, even if it's not going in the repository, I develop as though it will, so that I meet the guidelines.

Mike: That's right. It should be natural to run anything you develop through the automated theme tester, and also to follow the plugins guidelines. Unfortunately, plugin testing can't be as automated as the theme tester. But follow the guidelines and coding standards, and never stop learning.

Q: Do you have any favorite themes or theme developers?

Mike: I'm very fond of StudioPress and its Genesis framework. If I'm working on a project that isn't completely custom or the client doesn't have a preference, then I'm quite comfortable working with those themes, mainly because I like their flexibility. They have a lot of actions and filters, and you can do an awful lot just by adding and removing actions. Even changing the order of actions makes the theme do different things on the page. I quite like those.

Q: Do you have any favorite plugins? Are there any that go into every one of your installations?

Mike: There are some basic onces that I install, configure and forget: Limit Login Attempts, WP Super Cache, Yoast's Google Analytics, Yoast's SEO. If I'm not hosting the site myself, then a decent backup plugin, although I can't remember off the top of my head which one; if I host it myself, then the backup is independent of WordPress. If the site has a lot of pages, then I'll stick the CMS Tree Page View on there,

50. http://make.wordpress.org/themes/guidelines/
51. http://wordpress.org/plugins/about/guidelines/

which makes it much easier to manage a lot of pages. Everything else really depends on what the site needs to do.

Q: You're still quite involved in the WordPress community. What exactly do you do in terms of community contributions?

Mike: I run a monthly WordPress meetup in Manchester[52], which is thriving. I realized the other day that it's been going five years. That's huge. I think there are about 400 members of the meetup, and we generally have around 30 to 40 turn up on the third Wednesday of the month. I also do some of my training for MadLab, which hosts the meetups. It's a non-profit organization that provides meeting space for tech groups. So, I do some of my training to raise funds for it. I have also been involved in most of the WordCamps in the UK and a few other WordPress-related things in Scotland and various other places. I'm still on the old WP Hackers mailing list and make the odd contribution there, although it's been fairly dead for a while now. I just keep myself as involved as I can.

Q: So, that's "all" you do? [laughs]

Mike: Well, if I get the chance, I try to give back to WordPress itself. I managed to get some code into version 3.8 and 3.6. I haven't really had the time to get involved, which isn't a good excuse. Fingers crossed, this year I'll make more contributions. I certainly try to keep up with what's going on. I'm just looking for an opportunity to get more involved in the development side.

Q: Lastly, WordPress has been growing consistently over the years and shows no signs of slowing down. Why do you think WordPress is the most popular CMS? With all of the other options people have now to produce content (for example, Tumblr and Medium), what do you think it is about WordPress, both .com and .org, that keeps people interested?

Mike: I think WordPress is better for the end user than many of the others, although I know things like Tumblr are easier to use. An issue with the hosted ones — for me, anyway — is that you don't have control. Even though WordPress.com is hosted, you have a lot more freedom than with many of the others, like Tumblr and Blogger and hosted solu-

52. http://mwug.info/

tions like that. It still is easy to use, and I know a lot of the others are emulating the things that WordPress does.

But also there is a fantastic community around WordPress, a community that shares and is very helpful. So, once somebody learns how good and flexible WordPress is and how they can bend it to do exactly what they need, if anyone comes to them for advice, they're going to recommend WordPress first of all because they've had the experience with it and they've seen what it can do and it has provided solutions for them. And it grows like that. The community around it is very friendly, helpful and inclusive, first and foremost, and that comes across. Whenever someone is thinking about getting a website, if they ask enough people, several of them will recommend WordPress because they've had their own good experiences with it. It's self-perpetuating, which has got to be a good thing.

Thank You

I can't thank both Matt and Mike enough for taking the time to conduct these interviews. Their contributions to WordPress have enabled people like me to make a living from this community-based open-source platform. Mike concluded the interview by summing up what he and Matt (and I) want for the future of WordPress:

> *I remember Matt said at one point, "It would be fantastic if everybody used WordPress and nobody knew what it was, if it was just the thing you do if you do the Web." We've all got televisions in our front room, and we don't even think about how they work or how to operate them. We just use them, and they're just there. And yeah, every now and then you'll get a new one that's got some new controls, but you just use it, and it's a commodity. It would be fantastic if WordPress became like that. So, if somebody says, "I think I'll do something on the Web," what they end up doing is using WordPress, whether they know it or not.* ❧

The Art And Craft Of Arabic Type Design

BY IRIS LJEŠNJANIN ❧

The beauty of typography has no borders. While most of us work with the familiar Latin alphabet, international projects usually require quite extensive knowledge of less familiar writing systems from around the world. The aesthetics and structure of such designs can be strongly related to the shape and legibility of the letterforms, so learning about international writing systems will certainly help you to create more attractive and engaging Web designs.

Today we'll explore the art and craft of Arabic typography with Dr. Nadine Chahine, who lives in Bad Homburg, Germany. She is an Arabic Specialist at Monotype GmbH[53] and is an award-winning type designer who has created typefaces that are being sold worldwide.

Dr. Nadine Chahine. (Image: Linotype[54])

Q: Where does your love of typography come from?

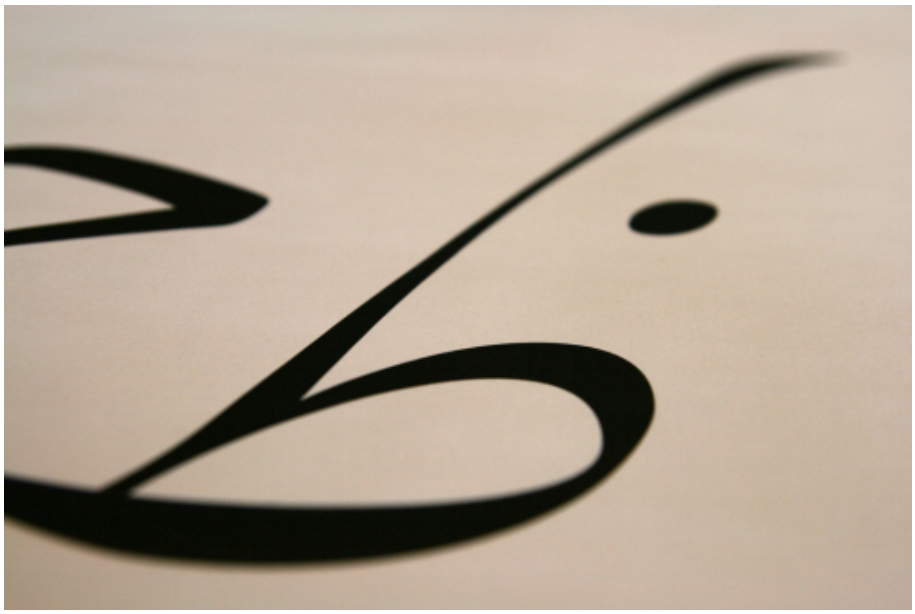
Nadine: It's something I discovered during my graphic design education. I was fascinated by the contrast of the black and white, and the tension between angles and curves. Type is a design ingredient of immense power and it feeds into our collective memory. Its expressive

53. http://www.monotype.com/
54. http://www.linotype.com/5282/nadinechahine.html

power, its ability to convey both mood and identity, and the many different forms that it can take lead to a very rich field to play in. It is one that is dangerously addictive. The more one learns about type, the more drawn in one is. Very willingly, of course!

Q: How did you come to design type?

Nadine: I started playing around with type in the second year of the graphic design course, and got into things in earnest in the final year. It was then that I decided that I want to pursue this as a career and joined the MA course at The University of Reading, UK. The course really put me on the right career track and provided the kind of educational setting that supported both practical and theoretical typographic explorations. It's been 15 years now since I drew my first letters, and I still wake up every day with the desire to draw some more.



Closeup of the early sketches of Zapfino Arabic.

Q: According to your blog, you joined Monotype in 2005 (known as "Linotype" at the time). Can you summarize your current role at the company?

Nadine: I am the Arabic Specialist for Monotype (as we have rebranded in March 2013). I am responsible for our Arabic projects, and that involves designing typefaces for the library and custom ones for our clients. I am also involved when externals design for us. Last year we collaborated with the MIT Age Lab on legibility research into the effect of typeface style on driver distraction, and I was part of the team. As it is exactly aligned with the PhD research that I completed in October,

I'm very happy that I am now involved in legibility research as well as in type design.

Q: What is the biggest challenge in designing an Arabic typeface?

Nadine: There are design challenges in drawing letterforms that, when put together, appear as one continuous pen stroke. There are also challenges that are more existential in nature, such as the face of modern Arabic typography and how closely tied it is to calligraphic references. We have so few well-designed typefaces that it is often the case that the typeface one is working on presents a design problem that has never been addressed to date. There is also a lot of freedom in that, so it's not too daunting.

Q: How do you design? What does your design process look like?

Nadine: It starts with a vague idea that I try to formulate on paper or, usually, on computer. It takes a while for what I draw to match what I want the typeface to do. That usually involves generating many versions of the font, testing it out in sample texts, making modifications, and repeating the process until the typeface becomes itself. I know that sounds a bit funny, but a typeface goes through adolescence and eventually grows into the best that it can possibly be.

Hermann Zapf's corrections to Zapfino Arabic.

Q: From the initial idea to the finished product, how long does it take for a new typeface to be born?

Nadine: Sometimes it takes years and sometimes it is a matter of weeks. Some designs are simply more complex and need a long time to mature. Others are straightforward, and if you've designed in that style before and the client is in a hurry, they can be finished quite quickly. It used to take much longer when I first started out. Every time I made a few changes, I'd need to test immediately, and then would agonize endlessly over which version is better. These days it is, of course, easier, and the ability to control a curve gets better with practice. There are still styles that are hard to design and require a lot of effort. The more complex and organic the curve, the more attention it requires.

Q: Frutiger Arabic, Neue Helvetica Arabic, Univers Next Arabic, Palatino and Palatino Sans Arabic, Koufiya, Janna, Badiya, or BigVesta Arabic. Do you have a personal favorite?

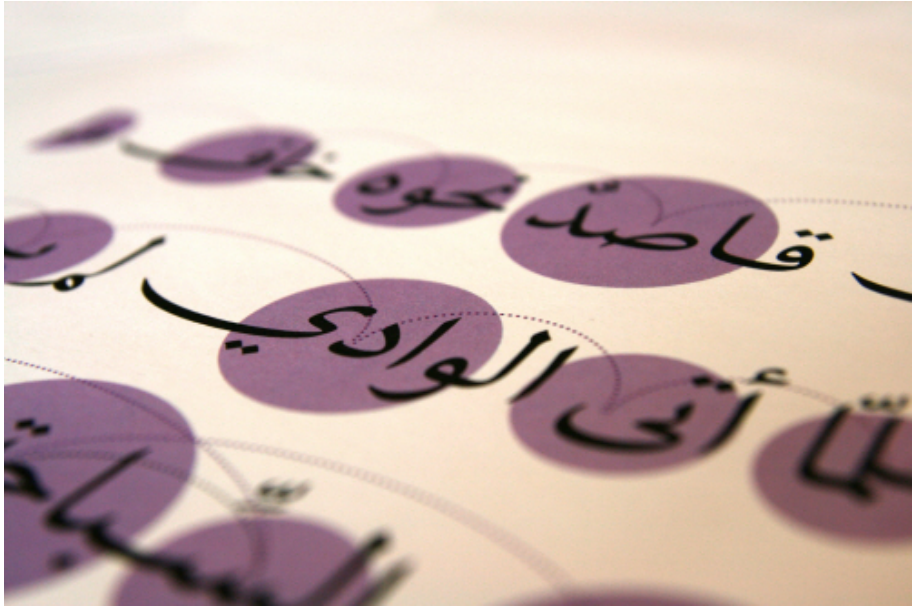
Nadine: Koufiya is special because I drew both the Latin and Arabic, and the concept is fully mine. Some of my typefaces I prefer to others, but I try not to tell. :-)

Q: Where do you get your inspiration from?

Nadine: It is always the streets of Beirut. Not the way my city is now, but how I wish it to be. When I studied graphic design in Beirut, I was always frustrated by the low quality of available Arabic fonts. It felt as if this is a reflection of a much larger state of being, of everything that is not OK in our part of the world. And that was a state of affairs that was intolerable, and so I set about trying to make my environment look better, one letter at a time.

Q: What is your favorite part about designing type? Do you also have a least favorite part?

Nadine: There is an "A-ha" moment, when all the pieces suddenly fit together. That is the most gratifying moment, when the vague idea suddenly becomes a reality. For the least favorite, it's designing the numerals. That is my punishment.



Simulation of how the eye moves across a line of text and the pattern of fixations.

Q: In your opinion, what makes a great typeface?

Nadine: A typeface has a function, and the greatness lies in the balance of achieving that function with the pure aesthetic value of the curves themselves. Adrian Frutiger wrote that a typeface is like a beautiful group of people, rather than a group of beautiful people. He has designed some of the greatest typefaces that we know, and very likely redefined what a sans-serif typeface is supposed to look like. When you see his work, the kind of designs that are meant to become part of our lives, the curves that he draws, the elegance of movement and interplay of black and white, you know that you are in the presence of greatness.

Q: What are you working on at the moment?

Nadine: Zapfino Arabic! It's the most challenging typeface that I have ever tackled. Both exciting and scary!

Q: What have been your biggest achievements so far?

Nadine: There are the design collaborations with Adrian Frutiger, Professor Hermann Zapf and Gerard Unger, and the design awards. The typefaces, of course, are my babies, but I am especially happy with my PhD. I did my research on the side of a very busy work schedule. It took five years of working six days a week and barely any holidays to get it done, and I still cannot believe that I managed it!

Specimens of Nadine's typefaces.

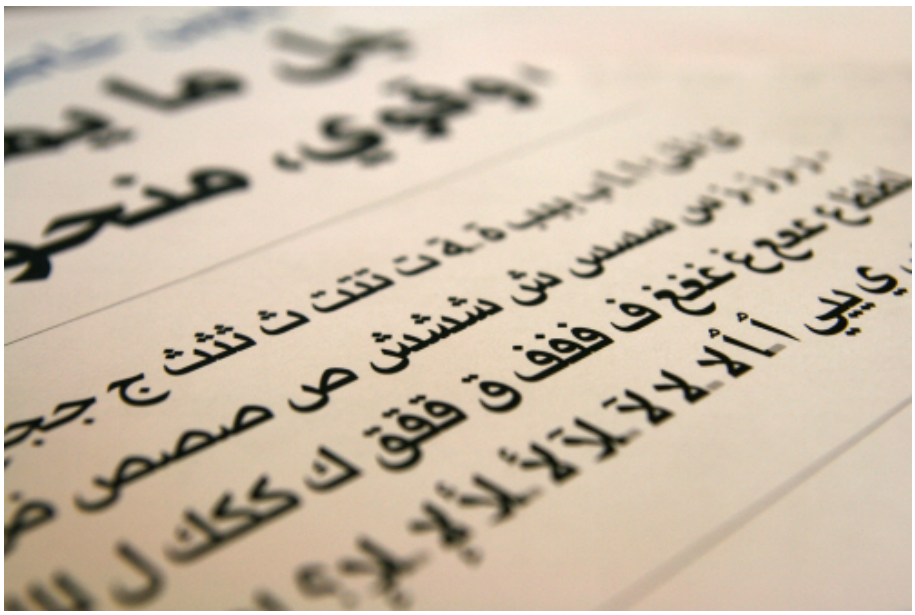
Q: Arabic Web fonts are still at a disadvantage because some typefaces do not display correctly in certain browsers and devices. Why is this the case? What needs to happen for this to change?

Nadine: Current desktop browser support has resolved this problem, but we still need the public to upgrade to the latest versions. The devices are a different story and still far from where we need them to be.

Q: We recently ran an article on Helvetica[55] on Smashing Magazine. As the creator of Neue Helvetica Arabic, what is your opinion on the issue?

Nadine: Helvetica is a divisive typeface and passions run high when discussing it, as you can see in the comments. The important thing to keep in mind is, Helvetica came to light in a set of circumstances that might never repeat. In other words, the stars were aligned and this propelled it to the place it is now. I'm not sure we will ever have a typeface that comes close to what Helvetica is. This has to do not with the design of the typeface, but with the role that this typeface played in our lives 50 years ago and has played till today.

55. http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2012/12/06/why-wont-helvetica-go-away/



Gebran2005, designed for An-Nahar newspaper in Lebanon.

Q: How do you see the type industry evolving in the next 10 years?

Nadine: There is a very big push today in the direction of non-Latin type design. I expect this to continue to grow, and I do hope that we evolve into a more global approach to the design of letterforms and visual communication.

Early sketches of Zapfino Arabic.

Q: What advice would you give to young readers out there who are interested in becoming type designers?

Nadine: Get into it! It is a very fulfilling design practice, and one that is highly addictive and enjoyable. My advice would be to attend one of the many type design conferences that take place regularly and to talk to other designers to see what the work is actually like. There are many resources online about type design, and starting there to get an overview is also helpful.

Q: How can readers find out what conferences you'll be speaking at or attending, and workshops you'll be organizing?

Nadine: I usually mention these on Twitter[56], and sometimes on Facebook and my blog[57].

Thank you for your time, Nadine! We sincerely appreciate it. ❧

56. https://twitter.com/arabictype
57. http://www.arabictype.com/blog/

Ask the Expert — A Chat About Art, Design, Computers And Education With Milton Glaser

BY JAD LIMCACO ❧

I had the opportunity to speak with Milton Glaser thanks to one of his assistants, Scarlett Rigby.

I was able to ask Milton Glaser some questions about a few different topics such as art, design, education and more. If you're not familiar with Milton Glaser, he is a world renowned graphic designer who is probably most famous for creating the *I Love New York* logo.

Go ahead and listen to the question and answer session[58]. The audio might be a little weird in the beginning but it definitely gets better after about 30 seconds. You can also read the entire interview and learn more about Milton Glaser by checking out the links at the end of this chapter.

Design and Art

Well, I've been thinking about this for a very long time. Let me tell you a summary of what I've come to in my life. Art has a very specific pur-

58. http://vimeo.com/13265437

pose or else it wouldn't have survived, and it's purpose is the survival of the species. Art is the mechanism to help survival. So one might ask, so how does art help survival? The issue is that it makes you more attentive. In the presence of art, you become attentive, and the story I always tell about is this.

Once I sat down in front of my mother when I was 17, and I decided that in the kitchen table, I would do a portrait of her. At that moment, I looked at her face, and you know how the mind shifts when you make a determination that you are going to draw something, I realized that I had not the faintest idea of what she looked like, and that it was only by deciding I would draw her that I became conscious of her appearance. Because through the years, I have become immune to it, and as we become immune to everything we experience, and particularly those things we experience most frequently.

So, my bit of extrapolation is that after I decided that the real purpose of art was to make us attentive so we could see what was in front of us and also to understand what was real, as opposed to the pre-conceptions we had about things. So art serves us by in a Buddhist sense, making you able to pay attention to what is in front of you, cause otherwise, you can't see anything or experience reality.

If that's my definition, then it suggests that you cannot tell art by virtue of medium, or function, or anything else except by the fact of its raising your consciousness to a degree that you are attentive. And so if something produces the state of attentiveness, whether it's a drawing, or a

guy making a cheese sandwich, we can call it art, at least by my description. I have no other criteria for judging what art is, and certainly not the lunacy and the perversion of the art world or the authorities of the subject, but if it makes me attentive and if my perception of reality is modified by something I've seen, in a way your perception of a landscape is modified after you see a Cezanne landscape, you realize Cezanne has enabled you to see an aspect of that you were not conscious of. He's made you more attentive to that which is contained within the landscape. So if it does that, if anything does that to me, I put it in the art category. If it's a big painting and it's in a museum and it doesn't do that to me, for me, it's not art.

Art is functional because it has a purpose. But a day often transcends its purpose. If design makes you attentive, then it's art. In the same way that if you look at a poster by Lautrec and a drawing by Lautrec, they both make you attentive, and so I would say, they are both art even though one would be easily categorized as design, and the other as art, because it's done with oil paint on canvas. But you can see in the presence of both of them, that either can make you attentive and then we must say, either the poster or the drawing by Lautrec is a work of art.

So it's not the category of experience or even whether it has a functional element of it in itself, but rather, whether it makes you attentive.

Designers and Computers

Well, that was sort of a semi-joke, but not entirely. The thing about the computer is that it's an extremely powerful instrument, and like all tools, it changes your perception of what is real, what is appropriate, what is pleasant, what is proportional. It has all these characteristics, in a same way that a pencil or watercolors or a crayon has, which is that they change the way you think about what you are doing. But the computer is so powerful and so dramatic in its effect on your perception of what is real and what is appropriate that you have to be very cautious that it doesn't dominate your sensibilities. And what you see around you of work done by using a computer is the domination of the tool over the aesthetic or the judgment of the user.

> *So I think you have to be very strong about your consciousness of form, of color, of shape, and of meaning before you start using the computer or else, it will run all over you.*

The Design Process

Well, It's a tough question, and I know it's often codified and done as a process, but it's harder than that. The issue is that all this stuff exists in your brain already and the question is how you access it and what you believe about your own process.

For instance, if you believe that it takes you two days to do a logo, and you have to do sketches, and studies, and look at it over and over again, and then stare at it, whatever the process is, if you believe that's the way you get there, that's fine. And that's your methodology, and that belief will sustain you. If you believe that you can do a logo in twenty minutes, because your mind already has the capacity to relate the information and the function quickly, then you'll do a logo in twenty minutes.

I depend on my unconscious to do most of my work by now because I've spent so many years working consciously to get my mind into shape so it can work unconsciously. So my process is very vague. Sometimes, I do something, I do it immediately and it's over. Sometimes, I take something and will work on it for weeks because it's not coming forth. And I also realize that you have to work this way independently of what you're getting paid, because if you're getting a lot of money, you think that you should spend more time on it. If you're getting little money, you think you can only spend little time. My feeling is very often that it's opposite. The jobs that have little money are very often

those that have the most creative potential, cause people who are paying you a lot, typically in corporate life, also want to control what it is you do more, and as a result you have to accomodate their needs more than your own needs or even the needs of the job. So my process is I would say at best, random, and that I depend on after 60 years of doing this stuff, the fact that there's a lot of stuff at the back of my mind and the job is to just bring it forward.

A Good Logo

Well, that's so boring, logos, you know why it's talked about, because that's where the money is. Doing a logo is one of the most boring activities of the design profession. There are so many more things more interesting.

Doing a logo, you want to be memorable, you want to be fresh, you want to be familiar enough so people will not reject you, you don't want to be too complex, you want to have an internal joke, you want to move the viewer in a perception so that when they first look at it, maybe they don't quite understand it, and then a fraction of a second later, they get the idea, because that act between seeing and understanding is critical, and a good logo, you look at it and there's a little jump before you understand it. That's the success of the "I LOVE NY" because you have to translate it from "I" which is a complete word to "heart" which is a symbol for feeling to "NY" which are initials for a place. You want to do a logo that's a little bit more than decorative, although sometimes, that's all you can do, something that looks good on the page, and one very often settles for that.

The Future

Oh, I don't know. I live day to day, all I do is come in everyday and hope that I can do something that I didn't already know before I came in, and that's about it. The future for me is just a question of the experiences of working with people I like and producing things that I think are interesting.

His Best Work

I have no such construct. I think my best work is the fact that I have been able to stay in it so long, and still be interested in doing it. That is an accomplishment. It's so easy to get bored and to get indifferent to what you do, and the fact that you can still have the sense of enthusiasm and expectation about a day's work is really my best accomplishment.

Advice for Designers

Oh, people always ask me that as it were answerable. The only advise I would give is that you have to have courage and the willingness to devote your life to it, and the enthusiasm to persist. Outside of that, there's nothing!

Deciding to be a Graphic Designer

I decided to be an artist when I was five years old. I made a conscious decision that making things was the thing that I wanted to spend my life doing. And it really was when I was five.

Importance of Education

I don't even know where to begin that. If you are a genius, then you don't need school but there are a very few geniuses in the universe. So everyone needs school as much for the opportunity to spend their time doing something to learn something as anything else. I mean, you have time to spend your life devoted to learning and not only when you're in school.

What I think is important for people is to continue the idea of learning after they get out of school so the idea of continued development becomes integrated into their brain. But I don't know any self taught geniuses in this field. I don't know a single one who said I didn't go to school, I just picked it up myself. I don't know anybody like that. There may be somebody like that. But its hard enough to become good by having a good education. I think it's virtually impossible to become good without that education. I can be wrong, but I haven't seen it.

More About Milton Glaser

This was just a look inside the mind of Milton Glaser. To read more about Mr. Glaser and to find out more about his ideas, thoughts and philosophies, check out the following resources and websites.

- Milton Glaser's Website[59]
- Ten Things I Have Learned[60]
- Milton Glaser Draws and Lectures (Video)[61]
- AIGA Milton Glaser Interview[62]
- Why We Love Milton Glaser [63] ❧

59. http://www.miltonglaser.com/
60. http://www.miltonglaser.com/pages/milton/mg_index.html
61. http://vimeo.com/6986303
62. http://www.aiga.org/artist-series-by-hillman-curtis-milton-glaser/
63. http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_20/b3984036.htm

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Juggling between at least three languages on a daily basis, Iris is known for her love for linguistics, arts, Web design and typography, as well as her goldmine of animated GIFs appropriate for every occasion. As senior editor at the one and only @SmashingMag[69], she spends most of her time tenderly sifting through articles in search of golden thoughts and ideas that will bring readers to think, wonder, enjoy and learn something new. Website: About Iris[70]. Twitter: @smash_it_on[71].

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64. http://peadig.com/
65. http://firecask.com/
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67. https://plus.google.com/+AlexMoss?rel=author
68. http://www.facebook.com/http://www.facebook.com/alexmoss1
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73. http://www.tadpull.com/
74. https://twitter.com/jacobmcook
75. http://ondigitalmarketing.com
76. http://www.jadlimcaco.com

Leona Hu

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77. https://twitter.com/designinformer
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81. http://www.facebook.com/leona.hu
82. http://webhostinggeeks.com/
83. http://topwebhosting.com/
84. https://twitter.com/rob_e_bowen

About Smashing Magazine

Smashing Magazine[85] is an online magazine dedicated to Web designers and developers worldwide. Its rigorous quality control and thorough editorial work has gathered a devoted community exceeding half a million subscribers, followers and fans. Each and every published article is carefully prepared, edited, reviewed and curated according to the high quality standards set in Smashing Magazine's own publishing policy[86].

Smashing Magazine publishes articles on a daily basis with topics ranging from business, visual design, typography, front-end as well as back-end development, all the way to usability and user experience design. The magazine is—and always has been—a professional and independent online publication neither controlled nor influenced by any third parties, delivering content in the best interest of its readers. These guidelines are continually revised and updated to assure that the quality of the published content is never compromised. Since its emergence back in 2006 Smashing Magazine has proven to be a trustworthy online source.

85. http://www.smashingmagazine.com
86. http://www.smashingmagazine.com/publishing-policy/