

WHAT IS A DESIGNER?

“BRING IN THE CREATIVES!”

Let me tell you a beautiful story. You may be living it right now, you lucky dog. This story takes place in a beautiful far-away place with a deep blue sky, an ocean of green-screen possibilities, lollipop-trees dripping with inspiration, and the sensuous dance of exotic muses over the techno-thump of an ambient jungle soundtrack. Yum.

In this beautiful world there are no alarm clocks. After all, creativity demands sufficient sleep. You glide into work when you please, hopping and skipping past the insistent ogres that dare to schedule their beastly requirements meetings before 11 a.m. (there's no need to go to them after 11, either), and you slip into your Mirra chair, dismiss a few meeting requests on your 30" monitor, fire up iChat, and wait for inspiration to show itself.

By then it's time for lunch.

In this beautiful myth you are what is known as a “creative.” You are very lucky. Because while others are weighed down by requirements, metrics, testing, and other variations of math

and science, you are a child of magic (or magick, if you’re a goth). Knowledge of these base matters would only defile your creative process. Your designs come from inside you.

But, of course, a story isn’t really interesting until we introduce a little conflict. Shall we try a dragon? And let’s say that dragon is now standing at your desk. And he’s holding a printout of your comp, imported into PowerPoint and marked up with very specific changes, most of which you don’t agree with—all of them decided in a meeting you did not attend.

Magic won’t save you from this dragon. It’s time to stop being a creative and start becoming a designer. Grab your lunch. We’re clocking in.

WHY THIS MYTH IS DESTRUCTIVE

The myth of the magical creative is alive and well, and it’s powerful. It’s equally perpetuated by designers and those who work with them. And it’s destructive, reducing a designer’s job to pixel-pusher, prettifier, and someone who *feels* their way to success. A magical creative is expected to succeed based on instinct, rolling the dice every time, rather than on a methodical process that can be repeated time and time again.

Also, it makes you insufferable. Nobody likes a co-worker who operates outside the rules. And this will make it harder for you to work with your team.

It also makes life harder for other designers (like me) to do their jobs. I love my job. And I don’t like people who make it harder than necessary. But every time a client tells me to just “blue sky” something, or that they don’t want to “stifle my creativity,” I have to spend time undoing the myth of the magical creative. (Luckily, I look more like a Teamster than a magical being, but alas, you may have been cursed with attractiveness.)

A designer requires honest feedback and real criticism, and that’s not going to happen in a realm where colleagues or clients are worried about crushing the spirit of a magical being. The sparkly fog of affirmation gets in the way.

So what does a designer actually do? Let’s find out.

A DESIGNER SOLVES PROBLEMS WITHIN A SET OF CONSTRAINTS

Those constraints often come in the form of available materials (a lack of wood, a small printing press, or bandwidth), the audience for whom the solution is intended (kids, users who aren't very web-savvy, those who speak a variety of languages), and business requirements (style guides, vendor relationships in place, our logo is Satan).

What kind of problems? Well, that's what determines the kind of designer you are. If you're solving the problem of creating a chair that doesn't hurt your ass if you sit in it for eight hours, you're a furniture designer. If you're sixteen and holding an empty toilet paper roll in one hand and a piece of aluminum foil in the other, you're an industrial designer. Since you're holding one of these small brightly-colored books in your hand, let's assume you're some flavor of web designer, as I am. So for the remainder of this book when I pull out examples or go into specifics, they'll be from a web designer's perspective. If you're a different type of designer I'm sure you can still get something out of this, just abstract it up a level and apply it to your particular field.

A DESIGNER UNDERSTANDS GOALS

Whether you are helping to launch a new business from scratch, or making incremental changes to an existing product, or something in between, any design task you undertake must serve a goal. It's your job to find out what those goals are.

That's the first step to designing anything: ask "Why are we doing this?" If the answer isn't clear, or isn't clear to you, or just doesn't exist, you can't design anything. Stop working. Can you help set those goals? If so, do it. (Yes, it is part of your job. Anything that helps you do your job is part of your job.) How? Coming up.

A DESIGNER GATHERS INFORMATION

Who are we designing for? How will they use what we are designing? Do they need it? What backend technologies does the client have at their disposal? What new ones are they open to trying? Who else has tried this and how have they succeeded or failed?

Once you have design goals you need to gather as much information as possible to make sure you are designing a solution that will fulfill those goals. You simply cannot design without researching the landscape. Just like you can't build a house without surveying the land.

A DESIGNER IMPOSES ORDER

Eventually all of this information needs to be used to create something. Ideas and requirements become artifacts and systems. This is the part of the job most other people will recognize as “design” because it is visible and involves pictures. And you can do it while wearing your headphones.

A DESIGNER CREATES NOVEL FORMS

Also fun. Successful design balances convention—familiar forms, terms, and interactions—and novelty—new forms to engage and delight the users, in the hope they will stick around a bit longer and maybe buy their pants here instead of somewhere else. As long as you remember that those new forms must serve the goals of the business. Otherwise, they’re just novelty.

A DESIGNER TALKS TO CLIENTS AND STAKEHOLDERS

No matter how good the work is, if you can’t sell it you haven’t finished the job. I can’t stress how important this is. (I go on at length about this in a later chapter.) I’ve run into quite a few designers who left this job to someone else, be

it a client rep or an art director. I've also seen my share of studios where the designer wasn't given the opportunity to sell their own work, which is amazingly shortsighted. Selling your work directly to clients is extremely important. Not only should you be able to explain why you made the decisions you did, but you'll get first-hand feedback on where the work needs to go next.

How often has your work come back to you with changes you didn't understand or agree with? And all you had was a second-hand account of what was said, or worse yet, no explanation for why those changes were requested.

Once you are ready to take the responsibility for selling your work (and I am very purposefully using the word "selling," not "presenting") then you can begin to call yourself a designer. And get the credit for the good work you do.

A DESIGNER IS A GATEKEEPER

At some point in the next few days you will finish this book and I want you to immediately pick up Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World*, which I will bluntly summarize like so: you are responsible for the work you put into the world.

Carefully choose the projects you take on. Choose to leave the world better than you found it. Improve things for people. This doesn't mean just working on non-profit or purely mission-driven projects. A lot of commercial products and services improve life for people in large and small ways. Just make sure there is some meaning to what you are doing besides exploiting a niche. Be the advocate for the person who will ultimately buy, use, or experience what you are designing.

We have limited resources, whether natural, financial, or cognitive. Don't contribute to people wasting them on crap.

You have more power than you think. And you are part of a long lineage of designers who fought to be listened to and respected. Designers like Victor Papanek, Tibor Kalman, Ray and Charles Eames, William Caslon, Paula Scher, Zuzana Licko, and our own Jeffrey Zeldman. Not only can a designer change the world, a designer *should*. This is the best job in the world! Let's do it right.

IN SUMMARY

Your toolbox should contain tools for input (goals and research), activity (make things!), and output (sell those things!). A designer's work starts way before a single pixel gets placed and ends way after the last one is locked in place. You may not take the lead in every, or even any part of the process; throughout your career you'll work on small teams, big teams, and sometimes alone. But even when you don't own a particular process, make sure to (respectfully) insert yourself. The more you know, the better your work will be. And don't wait to be asked.