

A6: Reflective Essay

Over the past semester I interned as a User Experience Design intern at *Intrepid Travel*, be the world's largest adventure travel company and a certified B corporation (Intrepid Travel, n.d.-a). Undertaking this internship was a valuable learning opportunity that allowed me to grow both professionally and personally. In this essay I share the work I engaged in during my internship and reflect on how the experience has influenced my development as a UX designer.

1. About Intrepid Travel and my Role

As a B-Corp, Intrepid is committed to responsible and sustainable tourism, which is central not only to their brand identity but also to how they structure design decisions across all its services as they take corporate social responsibility seriously. While they have competitors such as Contiki and G-adventures, Intrepid's unique value proposition lies in their commitment to ethical partnerships and unique travel experiences (Intrepid Travel, n.d.-b)

During my internship, my position in the organization was within the product team, working under the guidance of my supervisor, Anna Lapsley, who was a UX designer and my primary point of contact. I worked approximately 6.6 hours a week and was primarily remote, except for Mondays when I went into the office. While I had limited opportunities to collaborate directly with the wider team on major projects, I believe I was able to contribute meaningfully to several ongoing projects. That said, my tasks often functioned as add-ons to existing projects, and while I had the freedom to experiment and explore my ideas independently, at times I felt as though my contributions lacked any real impact.

2. Key Projects

Throughout my internship I worked on three key projects. The first was a heuristic and qualitative evaluation of the site's information architecture, through methods such as card and tree sorting (Tankala, 2024), to identify usability issues which I then compiled into a report and presented to my supervisor. This project taught me how to be more resourceful and use more hands-on methods as I did not have access to any industry standard user-testing software, such as *optimal workshop*, which is often used to conduct user research.

My main project during this internship, was designing and prototyping a new landing page for the "Intrepid Books" webpage, as Intrepid had been preparing to launch a series of guidebooks for the first time. I explored various design directions, conducted research on competitors and case studies, thanks to Intrepid providing access to Baymard Institute case studies (Baymard Institute, n.d.). I also conducted usability

testing and iterated on my visuals, after which I presented my findings and designs to stakeholders. This was nerve-wracking but also a valuable experience in improving my professional communication.

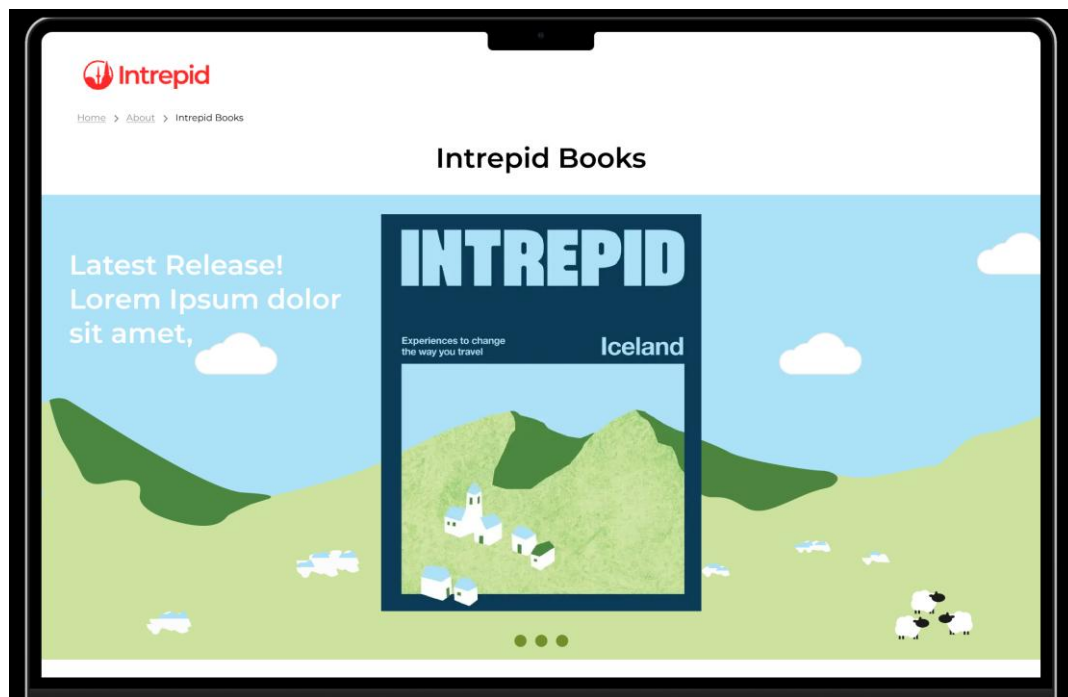


Figure 1 Screenshot of my Books by Intrepid Figma Prototype

The third project was based on a prompt my supervisor gave me: ‘Come up with an idea to increase user engagement.’ In response to this I created a concept for a user-profile. I used a mobile first approach and created a user profile that let users easily manage their bookings, keep track of upcoming trips, gain benefits through loyalty tiers, and look back on their past trips; all of which are part of the concept. By gamifying the process, through creating a progress map that tracks trip progress and awards benefits to users based on the number of trips they have gone on, I hoped to increase user engagement. I wanted to create a feature that would provide users with a sense of connection to Intrepid beyond just being a booking platform. I was given the chance to present my project during a weekly design stand-up and the project was received quite favourably with many team members liking the idea of gamifying part of the user journey. In addition to that I received a lot of feedback which I then developed my design upon, highlighting the importance of regular design critiques for professional growth. This was also one of the few times I felt like an active member of the team.

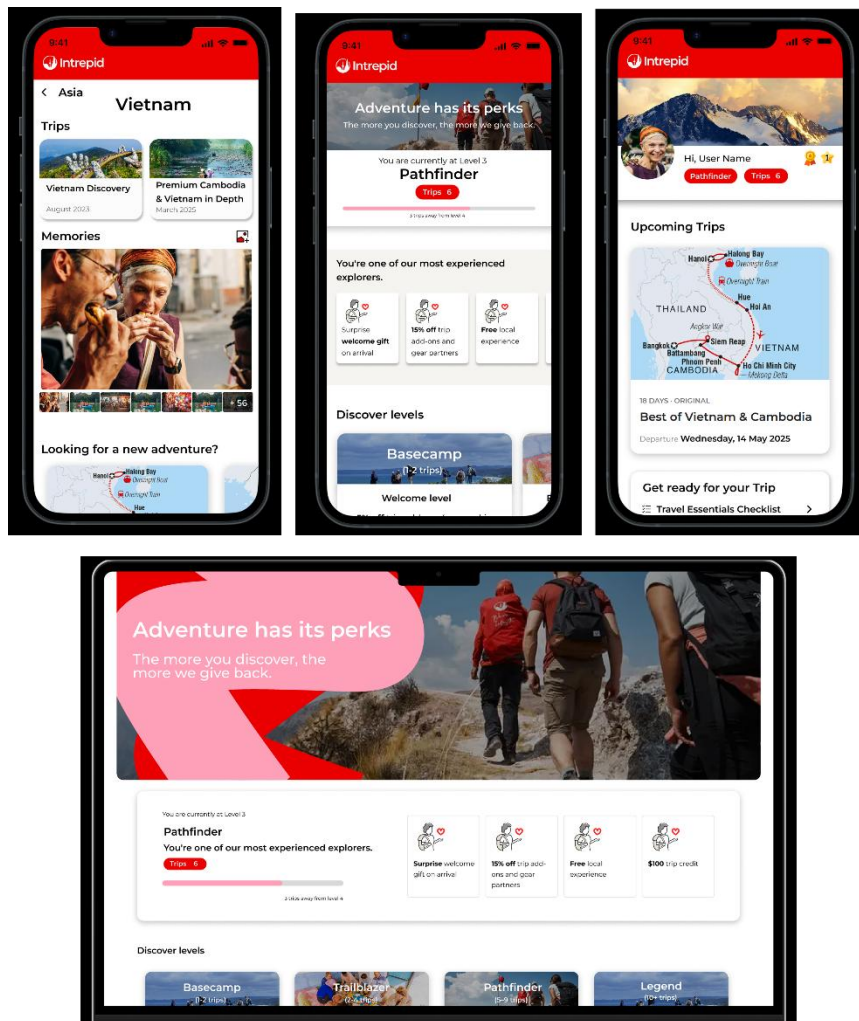


Figure 2 Screenshots of my Profile Concept Figma Prototype

Early in my Internship I aimed to improve my presentation skills and confidence in professional settings, and this opportunity helped me progress towards this goal. I still feel anxious, but I realise that overcoming this will be crucial as I move forward in my career. My supervisor recommended that I try out toastmaster, which I found helpful in overcoming my fear of public speaking.

3. Team Dynamics

Intrepid operates with a multidisciplinary structure where multiple teams, such as product and marketing, work together in tandem. During my internship I was able to observe the complexity of design processes and how various teams balance their responsibilities while collaborating. Communication is primarily through Microsoft Teams, with additional collaboration taking place on Miro and Figma. It was more intricate than what I had been imagining before gaining work experience, I hadn't realized how much coordination was required to execute design work effectively in larger teams.

One particularly eye-opening moment was when my supervisor showed me a real-world example of how design intentions can get lost during the development process. She had created a user-friendly, well-researched design for a site update on Figma, which was then altered in the implementation phase by the development team. They had used different font sizing, spacing and made layout changes that reduced the overall useability and visual appeal of the site. This example made clear to me the challenges of cross-functional collaboration and highlighted the importance of not only clear but constant communication between the design and development teams.

4. Challenges and Reflection

I primarily worked remotely, which while convenient, came with its own frustrations as I felt quite disconnected from the rest of the team. I was meant to go into the office every Monday, but due to various reasons I was only able to go a handful of times. Although I did make brief introductions and connect with team members on LinkedIn, I feel I lacked the opportunity to develop a meaningful network within the company. I had hoped to immerse myself in the office environment, experience the culture and develop professional relationships more organically. However, during my final week, I was invited for a team dinner which gave me the chance to connect with them in person, though I wish I had similar chances earlier in the internship.

However, the isolation also prompted me to reflect on my own professional identity and the kind of work environment I would like to be in in the future. I realized the importance of being proactive in seeking feedback, even in remote settings.

Despite my limited in-person engagement, I came to appreciate the importance of professional networks and industry connections. During the internship I had the chance to conduct interviews with my supervisor and a senior service designer, Greer. Greer's interview was very insightful, a quote from her that stuck with me was "*we can create meaningful change when we design with people instead of just for people.*" Additionally, I was also able to interview the lead UX researcher on the product team as well. His insights into user experience were very thought provoking, particularly around the importance of rapport and body language. While I knew they were important factors to consider when conducting research, his emphasis on the role they played in user research and communication broadened my understanding of design research practices. Through these interactions I gained a deeper understanding into how varied the roles within the design and tech ecosystems in corporate settings are.

Moreover, an important lesson my supervisor emphasized upon was to maintain a healthy work-life balance, which was a valuable takeaway for me. She consistently encouraged me to maintain boundaries between work and personal life, reminding me not to take work home. This was something I struggled with as I was used to spending late nights on assignments and blurring the boundaries between work and personal

time. This shift in mindset helped me recognise how some of my work habits are unsustainable in a professional setting and that maintaining balance is also a crucial skill.

Throughout my internship, I believe I experienced considerable professional growth. I became more comfortable communicating my ideas, more confident in using design terminology and conducting user interviews for research. I also developed better organizational habits, learning to manage my time and set clear priorities in the absence of structured guidance. The method that seemed to work best for me was time blocking (Todoist, 2024).

5. Conclusion and Future plans

Looking back on this internship I found it to be quite eye-opening. It gave me a realistic sense of how the professional world functions and helped me understand the complexities of UX work within a corporate environment. If I were to undertake this internship again, I would make more of an effort to establish connection with the team. I would be more proactive in asking to be included in more meetings, seek to engage in departments outside of the product team and attempt to schedule more check-ins with my supervisor. I would also try to visit the office more often and attempt to ask for opportunities to gain more hands-on exposure to team culture.

Additionally, I would ask to set clear goals for my role early on. While the freedom to explore and design on my own was beneficial in many ways, a more defined framework would have allowed me to focus my efforts and better understand how my work would have fit into the team better.

My internship at Intrepid helped me create a meaningful connection between academic learning and professional practice. Going forward, I feel better equipped to enter the industry as I'm now more aware of both my strengths and areas that need improvement. While the experience was not without its limitations, it contributed to my growth in ways I hadn't expected. I have a clearer sense of what kind of design work interests me and have greater clarity of what steps I need to take to create a fulfilling career in design, such as improving my portfolio, developing my presentation skills and actively attending networking and industry events. I leave this internship feeling even more committed to pursuing these goals moving forward.

Word count: 1674 (without citation, fig captions and references)

References

Baymard Institute . (n.d.). *Researching the best ways to improve the online user experience*. Baymard Institute. <https://baymard.com/>

Intrepid Travel. (n.d.-a). *B Corp | Intrepid Travel*. [Www.intrepidtravel.com. https://www.intrepidtravel.com/au/purpose/b-corp](https://www.intrepidtravel.com/au/purpose/b-corp)

Intrepid Travel. (n.d.-b). *Six reasons to travel with Intrepid | Intrepid Travel*. [Www.intrepidtravel.com. https://www.intrepidtravel.com/au/about/why-intrepid](https://www.intrepidtravel.com/au/about/why-intrepid)

Tankala, S. (2024, February 23). *Card Sorting vs. Tree Testing*. Nielsen Norman Group. <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/card-sorting-tree-testing-differences/>

Todoist. (2024). *Time Blocking — Your Complete Guide to More Focused Work*. Todoist. <https://www.todoist.com/productivity-methods/time-blocking>