Seek It or Let It Come: How Designers Achieve Inspirations

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Abstract

Achieving design inspirations can be defined as the process that how designers are ignited with design ideas. It is crucial for designers since this ability partly determines the power of their design. The awareness of what its own design practice is in HCI community calls for more studies on the nature of interaction design, design practices and designers. In this paper, I present my study on designers' design processes and design philosophy, based on empirical work with ten designers from varied design fields about how they achieve inspirations. The study has provided a practical method for designers about how they can be more inspired, which can help interaction design practitioners to build a healthier way of design thinking.

Author Keywords

Interaction Design; Theory; Practice; Designer; Inspiration; Communication

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Design; Theory; Human Factors

Introduction

Achieving design inspirations can be defined as the process that how designers are ignited with design ideas and it is crucial for designers. Design is not only about solving problems, but also to create the "not-yet-exist" world, the "which-should-be" world in designers' mind [5]. The design concepts are not there so the design process is not a "finding out" one but synthesis of designers' interpretation of the information they get, along with the inspirations they obtain. One of the magic moments happening during design process is when designers develop innovative ways to improve the existing situations. This process seems to be in need of designers' gifts but actually it's a skill of the mindset. One important difference between designers who have strong competence and the ones who don't is how the former group can manipulate the skill to make themselves sensitive enough to get inspirations from the information they receive.

Design thinking forms who we are as designers, which is reflected in the design process and design philosophy. Studying designers about their design thinking can help us to get a better understanding about how the inspiration skill evolves and guides their design practices, what designers' methods are and the nature of design. In this way, we can inspire and educate junior designers to know better about how to catch design inspirations, strengthen their competence, and understand the nature of design and designers.

In this paper I show my study on ten designers on how they achieve inspirations. In addition to the statistic result, the findings about what exactly happens when information inspires designers, and how to facilitate this process are also worthy to look at.

Related Research

Issues related to design practitioners' design processes and design philosophy have been studied in HCI community to fill the gap between HCI academic world and interaction design industry world [2, 3].

Design needs reasoning [6]. But design process is far different than scientific induction and deduction [1, 5]. Design reasoning can be treated as improvisation, or "artistry" [3]. And as Nelson and Stolterman stated that design process needs imagination and communication [5]. Inspiration can be treated as the improvisation-moment when the information from the existing world knocks at the designers' mind and try to build up a communication and imagined world.

Works related to design inspiration have come up with practical tools for HCI designers to shape HCI's design practices, like HODI [10], TweetSpiration [4], Digital Scrapbook [12], etc. My work is more on the mindset level, looking into designers' thinking habits and mindset skills.

Design reasoning deals with the particular and is located "in action" [3]. Schön came up with the definitions of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action [7, 8, 9], which are ways for designers to look at and ponder upon how they actually conduct design practices. The research methods I utilized provided designers a chance to conduct *reflection-on-action* about their design processes, through which we can learn how they are inspired and where their imagination comes from.

Methods

The ten designers I studied on were recruited by word-of-mouth. Among the ten designers, one is web designer, one is industrial designer, one is architect, three are HCI design researchers and four are interaction designers. Five of them are American, four are Chinese and one is from Mexico. While five of them are female and five are male. The diversity of the subjects' backgrounds showcases broad and solid view of the nature of design.

Since inspiration happens on the mindset level, participant observation may disturb designers' natural processes and it is hard for researchers to tell how it starts. Helping designers to conduct *reflection-on-action* practices and looking into their reflections can provide direct answers and insights between lines. The methods I employed are: interviews and online surveys. The interviews help with getting a better idea of how their backgrounds affect their answers. The follow-up surveys help with a straightforward statistic result and gave the subjects enough time to do *reflection-on-action* through thinking about the multiple choice questions and their explanations.

Among all the semi-structured interviews, five were face-to-face, one was through phone call and the others were through emails. During the interviews I asked them questions like what their backgrounds are, how they define design and being a designer, what their design processes and design philosophy are and from where and how they get inspirations. Following the interviews, I conducted the online surveys on the same subjects. I asked them to choose between "In general, I seek for inspirations" and "In general, inspirations find me" as well as to choose from "In my

opinion, designers should actively seek for inspirations" and "In my opinion, designers should let inspirations come to them naturally". I also asked about their explanations about why they chose the specific answers.

Findings

For the online surveys, one out of the ten designers chose "In general, I seek for inspirations" while all the other nine chose "In general, inspirations find me". Interestingly, also one out of the ten designers chose "In my opinion, designers should let inspirations come to them naturally" while all the others chose "In my opinion, designers should actively seek for inspirations."

These results seem contradictory but with analyzing their explanations and the interview notes, I have structured discussions around three insights about the relationship between designers and design inspirations: 1) inspiration appears when outside information making sense to designers communicates and shows new possibilities; 2) designers are found by inspirations in many cases while they think they should be more active to seek for inspirations and 3) the more they seek for inspirations, the more possible they will be found by inspirations.

1) Inspiration appears when outside information making sense to designers communicates and shows new possibilities.
During the interviews, designers were asked to talk about the moments when they feel most inspired in their lives. The answers are varied, some of which are about the media where they actually get information from (e.g. design blogs) and some are about personal

experience and memories. For example, one subject, an interaction designer mentioned his habit of sport gave him the biggest inspiration when he built up a related mobile app. As a designer, his inner message receiver translates the information into different meanings with personal interpretations. The information can come from people he contacts with, media or memories. The inspired moment happens when particular pieces of information (e.g. the treasurable memories when he exercised) can relate to the design space (e.g. the sport app he designed) and show new possibilities.

2) Designers are found by inspirations in many cases while they think they should be more active to seek for inspirations.
"Designers are found by inspirations in many cases" is apparent from the online survey results that 9 out of 10 subjects chose "In general, inspirations find me." One subject, an interaction designer mentioned:" it tends to find me when I sometimes least expect it or when I wasn't even really looking at all, but just going about my day"; the architect said: "...everything has the ability to inspire us as designers", and "...designers have the ability to draw out and develop ideas from the littlest things given our intuition and imaginations."

The result and quotes show their reflections on what they do during design processes, however the result of the choice between "In my opinion, designers should actively seek for inspirations" and "In my opinion, designers should let inspirations come to them naturally" presents what these designers think they actually should do.

The result that nine out of ten subjects chose "designers should actively seek for inspiration" implies although designers are always found by inspirations, they don't think sitting there and waiting for inspiration is the right way. One interaction designer mentioned: "in order for inspiration to find you, you must also seek it out"; one HCI design researcher said: "I rarely have time to muse until an idea comes to me; it needs to be sought out", and "I'm not really going to say that it is wrong to let inspiration come naturally, but it seems to be a luxury not afforded to professionals"; moreover, another interaction designer said: "I seek inspiration primarily when I need specific references or hit a mental block."

From these, we can see as designers, they cannot rely on their intuition and the "designer's gift" to be found by valuable ideas; they also need to seek for inspirations and be active. This leads to the third insight, which is also a practical tip for junior designers and design students about how they can build their design sensitivity.

3) The more they seek for inspirations, the more possible they will be found by inspirations.
One interaction designer mentioned: "I would say that these two ideas are linked, you cannot really have one without the other", "...there are moments when I specifically seek an idea and I find it...more often than not however...I constantly look for inspiration around me and have learned how to look for it", and "...I would also say inspiration finds me more often, the more I communicate, socialize and share my own learning"; another interaction designer said: "... always be on the lookout for inspiration, and build a culture and community in which inspiration is commonplace"; the

architect said: "DVF once said, 'I don't get inspired, I am inspired', ...and I agree with it", and "it is our responsibility to dive in further and extract all that we can from the project/problem given to us."

Communication is a two-way action. Designers' inner information translators need to practice to be sensitive and flexible. Seeking for and letting it come are two important aspects of one whole design process, we can't separate them completely. We need design sensibility in this whole process but design sensibility is more a training result than a gift. The more you actively seek for inspirations from even the littlest thing around you and the deeper you think about information you receive, the better you can manipulate yourself to welcome the inspirations' coming.

Discussion

As demonstrated by the findings, this work has implications for design thinking, especially in the practical areas of: 1) actively contacting with outside information can help building up an easy-to-be-inspired design character; 2) intentionally providing information resources in the working space can increase the chance to achieve inspirations and 3) conducting *reflection-on-action* helps designers to know better about their design processes and design philosophy, which helps with a healthier way of design thinking.

1) Actively contacting with outside information can help building up an easy-to-be-inspired design character.
A mature design character [5] can help to build a strong design competence. Easily being inspired can contribute to a mature design character. Actively building up the communication channel for information from the outside world and the inside self can help

designers to capture more inspired moments. From this study we can see this cognitive and psychological process can be manipulated through an actively information-seeking method. And in this way, designers can intentionally establish their seeking-for-inspiration habits to practice the mindset skill. Turning this abstract process into a practical one, looking at it from a communication perspective and actively practicing seeking for inspiration can finally help with building a mature design character and strengthening the design competence.

2) Intentionally providing information resources in the working environment can increase the chance to achieve inspirations.
For design organizations including industry and education programs, this study shows a beneficial method about how to help designers to achieve inspirations, which can nourish the design culture and enhance the design quality. From this study the subjects mentioned different moments when they are found or seek for inspirations. Media that carries information is where designers can absorb ideas. Intentionally providing such media can increase the chance for designers to contact resources that can inspire them and in this way to help with a better communication between designers and information. Answers from the interviews about where they get inspirations from like design exemplars, collections, blogs, books, discussions, arts works, music and even the treasurable moments from the daily life can be referenced.

Education programs should pay attention to the training of students' mindset skills rather than only tool-set skills. The more students practice the easier they can

differentiate the meaningful information from all the inputs they have and in this way the easier they can be found by inspirations.

3) Conducting reflection-on-action helps designers to know better about their design processes and design philosophy, which helps with a healthier way of design thinking.
All levels of designers can look upon the moments when they try to inject imagination into the design works with data from the real world and see how inspiration works, where inspiration comes from and how a crucial role inspiration plays during the design process. Paying attention to the process can help to identify the "optimal path" designers have to communicate with outside information and to build up the design sensitivity.

Conclusion

This work aims at exploring the relationship between designers and design inspirations on the mindset level. I present my study on ten designers about their design processes and methods, which tells us inspiration is not that magic but a two-way communication with information, and being active seeking is one method to welcome more smart ideas. Especially for interaction designers, who design based on user studies, they need not only data analyzing skills but also imagination and innovative insights to come up with powerful design concepts.

For the future work, I will conduct noninterference studies beyond questionnaires and interviews on more designers to take a deeper look into the process of design inspirations.

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