

We're Good at Guessing, But For You We Don't Guess

Why great products are built, not debuted — and why structured arguments beat magical thinking in creative work.

All ideas begin as guesses in the mind, and creatives are particularly good at guessing. They have good intuition about whether something should look a certain way, or sound a certain way, or feel this way or that. Guessing is how everything begins.

Another Way of Saying Guess is Theory

If you're making a guess, then you have a theory about why or how something should work a certain way. You arrive at your theory by rearranging, combining, altering, and adding to existing ideas with the intention of improving upon them. This is called embracing constraints.

A theory is another way of saying 'explanation'. Being creative only means your guess is incorrect less frequently. That is: Your intuitive explanations are less wrong.

Explanations Get Better by Criticism

In art as with science, explanations are how we build knowledge. Criticism of our explanations is what allows us to create a better explanation. Guess leads to better guess leads to better guess.

This is the value of design reviews, where the creative director asks: Tell me how and why you made this decision — show me your work. And the value of editing, where the editor asks: What was your intention here? And why Hemingway's advice will always stand the test of time: Write drunk, edit sober.

But There's a Wrong Type of Guess

There's a wrong type of guess, and it's the guess that expects to get to the right answer without ever asking the right questions. This guess is the romantic idea of creative intuition. It's the guess that 'just knows.' It's the guess that's the product of magical thinking rather than the result of practiced labor.

You Can't Build a Creative Agency on Guessing

When creating client work, we either need to guess incredibly correct, or we need to have a structured argument as to why a design should be the way we propose. The problem with guessing incredibly correct is that process is unpredictable and can't be repeated.

But if we create a structured argument as to why a design or solution should be the way we propose, we bring the client into the creative process. The rationale for the decision becomes an explanation that we all share. We have a saying for this: Great products are built, not debuted.