

This Is For You: Thoughts on Design as an Act of Service

A graduate thesis in graphic design by Gabriel Drozdov

There are a few things all of us in this room have in common. We are all graphic designers. Many, if not all, of us have gone through a graduate graphic design program. And, we are all teachers in some shape or form.

I think it's remarkable that we've ended up in this space, in this same room, even if for a short period of time. It reminds me of when I was applying to RISD three years ago, right at the height of COVID. I didn't think I was going to get in. One of the confusing upsides to COVID was an increased visibility into otherwise opaque institutions, like RISD. I remember joining a Zoom info session. I think I remember hearing the statistic that around two hundred people apply to this program. That would make for an acceptance rate of 7%. Even worse, I distinctly remember an online info session at Yale that revealed the school would accept only two applicants total because of deferrals. That's two shots out of potentially two hundred to get into a room like this.

I think we can all agree that to be in this space is an immense privilege. This weighs heavy on me. So today, with this as context, I'd like to talk to you about what a RISD thesis means, and how I'm thinking about mine.

I make websites. Here is a list of almost every website I've created since joining RISD. Seeing this, I don't think it would surprise you to hear that I absolutely love websites.

When I think about why I love websites, I think of one in particular — sometimesredsometimesblue.com. I first saw this website over fifteen years ago. As a kid, I remember thinking there was a sort of magic to it. Most of the art I had experienced was faraway, or had to be possessed to be experienced. A website, on the other hand, was special. It was something navigated to, and yet intensely immediate. I could bookmark it, but I could never really own it. And while I could read books, watch movies, and listen to songs, my experience with websites was more like a negotiation. In the case of sometimesredsometimesblue.com, that negotiation took the form of a page refresh.

Sometimes, when you refreshed, the site was red. And sometimes, it was blue.

In that moment, fifteen years ago, I began to love websites. While a book, a movie, or a song could really only be one thing, a website could be two.

At RISD, there is the requirement that a thesis is a book. And as someone who loves websites, I've begun to wonder how a book can be more than one thing.

I can remember three times a book was more than one thing for me. The first time was when I was studying theater in undergrad. In theater, a book is not just a book, but a script.

And when someone acts or speaks a script, it changes.

The second time was when I was applying to RISD. I stumbled on the online thesis archive, which houses years of graduate work. To me, these theses were not books. They were portals into what happened at RISD, like conversations with past students.

The third time was last year, when Ben Denzer presented his thesis as an artist talk. Speaking to Ben recently, I learned that his goal was to make the thesis have purpose beyond this room, and subsequently beyond this program. His solution was to turn it into something like a script.

So, I'm not sure a book can be more than one thing on its own. That's probably a controversial thing to say in this room. As designers, our primary jobs are to communicate through typography and graphics. But I'm uncomfortable with that task as it stands. In fact, I don't enjoy reading. I find the act of reading even the most well-designed book to be a passive act. And as both a designer and a teacher, that personality trait is a little devastating.

But I love stories. I love performances. And I love websites — things with a little push-and-pull.

Here's what I'm trying. I'm writing my thesis not as a book, but as a series of conversations. The talk you're currently listening to is the start of one of those conversations. Each conversation is a story, and each story is an idea. Together, those ideas paint a picture of what it means, to me, to be a designer, a developer, and an educator. To that effect, I'm thinking of my thesis as its own project, sometimes about my work, but distinctively separate from my work. And while I have two projects to show you today, those projects are not for my thesis. Instead, they're for you.

I come to you today as a fellow educator. I taught for the first time last fall in the Web Programming Workshop. I remember preparing for maybe a month beforehand, even going as far as a developing a course website decked out with code demos. And I also remember, on the first day, around one hour in, having a panic attack. It turns out teaching is really hard, and teaching code is even harder.

What I discovered is that the pedagogy of a computer science program does not translate to an arts program. Designers, for the most part, don't want to become developers. Instead, they want to use code to create design. And so, when I presented my students with hundreds of lines of code across dozens of demos, my students communicated very clearly, without words, that taking such a technical approach would not work.

I think many of us in this room can relate to that experience. Unless I'm mistaken, I don't know of a single good resource to send students or peers to when they're interested in

learning code. That's not to say there aren't dozens of fantastic websites to learn code on. It's just that, those websites assume you'll become a developer, not a designer. And as tools like ChatGPT become more popular, I'm also discovering that the code around me is becoming worse. Instead of actually problem-solving, I've watched people fail to analyze a single line of code, and instead resort to basically yelling at a machine until it outputs what they want.

My first project today is a response to that problem. I call it test-project-1.html, named after the first file I create when I teach code.

test-project-1 is a few things. First, it's a curriculum, or rather a trajectory. While teaching code, I learned that students gravitated to one of my resources in particular. This resource was just a series of links to online documentation for different HTML, CSS, and JavaScript features. But what students found helpful was that these links were in order. test-project-1 builds on that discovery and presents a linear trajectory for learning how to code websites.

Second, test-project-1 is series of projects. I've designed the website based on the principle that no matter your skill level, you can always produce meaningful artistic output. So, I've grouped skillsets into projects that let you exercise those skills while creating real designs. One way I've tested this is by having my students draw self-portraits on paper on the first day of the class. Then, they're tasked with coding digital recreations of those drawings. Here's an example. I should note this task was heavily inspired by a similar prompt by Laurel Schwulst.

Third, test-project-1 is a tool in itself. The site features a built-in code editor that lets students and teachers work with code without leaving the browser. When I had my panic attack, what I was actually doing was going from one student to another, trying to install code editors on their computers. And even when they were installed, we ran into issues with multilingual keyboards, punctuation marks no one had ever seen before, and erratic file management issues. test-project-1 allows me, as a teacher, to offset these challenges for a day when students feel comfortable enough with the basics. And once that day comes, I have yet another website dedicated entirely to setting up a local coding environment and launching your first website. I call that project Baby Steps.

I'll invite you later to try out test-project-1 for yourselves. As it stands, the website is fully functional, but the content is very much a work-in-progress. I'm hoping this winter, while I teach a web design course, to flesh out the projects and lessons into a full curriculum.

My second project is a type foundry. I call it Too Much Type, named after this feeling I have that we've basically achieved the full gamut of possibilities with traditional type design. Instead, Too Much Type focuses on innovating type technology through the medium of websites and code.

The site itself is a playground featuring all of the typefaces I've created since coming to RISD. I'm really honored and humbled by the teachers and mentors I've had for typography here. I have to thank Cyrus Highsmith, Marie Otsuka, Richard Lipton, Doug Scott, Lucy Hitchcock, Nancy Skolos, Ryan Waller, Christopher and Kathleen Sleboda, and many more for the output I've managed in this program. And while the typefaces I've created are all over the place, they're united in their common goal to try out new ideas and see if they work.

These experiments manifest in the form of digital type specimens. Each type specimen starts with an idea or inquiry. An example of an inquiry might be, "Can a series of videos be used as a font?" The short answer is, yes. What you're seeing here is my typeface, Sylvania, which utilizes recordings of a CRT screen. Through code, I was able to create an interface that lets the user type out these videos.

But then the question becomes, so what? I've actually fielded this question many times while teaching the Variable Fonts Workshop last spring. I would encourage students to create radically conceptual typefaces, which resulted in an inspiring output of work. But I consistently had students asking, what do I do with my font? It's a good question.

The answer is that the tools to make use of said fonts don't really exist. So, it falls on us to create those tools. And the primary tool to create tools is code. Specifically, web code.

It follows that Too Much Type is not just a showcase of my work. Instead, it's platform for distributing code for novel type use cases. This transparency is fundamental to the site's design, which features a built-in code editor. Someone could go to Too Much Type, see one of my specimens, like the idea, access my code, and apply it to their own project.

While the site's design is a work-in-progress, I'm really excited to say I've already had success with the platform. One of my peers, Elliot Romano, was able to take the aforementioned specimen for Sylvania and use it for his own typeface, seen here.

At this point, I've likely been talking for around ten minutes. That feels like a good time to stop talking. My thesis is called "This Is For You: Thoughts on Design as an Act of Service". What I have set up for you is a website that houses links to every web project I've created since coming to RISD. I encourage you specifically to look at test-project-1 and Too Much Type, but you're also free to check out the breadth of my work. And in lieu of a handout, what I have for you is the full transcript of this presentation, which includes everything I've said up until this very last word.

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