Myth of the Design Process

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During our college days at a small, boho-prep institution tucked away in a sleepy corner of New England, my Bulgarian friend Iskra studied philosophy while I spent my time running between the arts building and the computer labs doing "that design and computer thing"—back then, none of my classmates knew exactly what to call my field of study. It had been at least a decade since I had last seen Iskra, whose name means "sparkle." In the years after graduation, Iskra and I had lost touch as our paths twisted around the globe through our respective careers, only to be reunited just a few months ago—first through Facebook, and then in person, sitting at her dining room table enjoying Sunday brunch in front of a vast picture window framing a swathe of the Arizona landscape.

As a resident of Seattle, I find the Southwest to be about as opposite a terrain of the Pacific Northwest as possible—although the two are equally matched in beauty and splendor in their own unique ways. I had recently finished teaching my first course, a graduate seminar in design, as a visiting lecturer at the University of Washington. To reward myself, I decided to go on a road trip during spring break. I have long held a personal goal of visiting all 50 states, and the end of the academic term afforded me the opportunity—well, provided me the excuse—to pursue number 38, New Mexico. I flew into Arizona, the starting point of my week-long journey, and ventured into the neighboring Land of Enchantment. This way, I could visit Iskra and another friend of mine, who had retired from Microsoft to go live in the sun.

Aside from reminiscing about our salad days, Iskra and I discussed all the usual things longtime friends catch up about: families, friends, adventures, careers. Iskra talked about her journey through law school, and I followed with my experience as a designer. In trying to relate my work to hers, I mentioned all design is political; design centers on transformation by which the designer triggers a behavior, in a way enforcing a policy, and thereby being political. This statement sparked a vigorous conversation about ethics and aesthetics—but I digress. I am recounting my visit with Iskra not because of the topic of ethics and aesthetics; we ended my visit talking about homemade Bulgarian yogurt, the *petite madeleine* of this discussion.

During brunch, which Iskra had meticulously prepared, I savored a bowl of *kiselo mljako*, a yogurt cultured from a strain of *Lactobacillus delbrueckii subsp. bulgaricus*. I intimated that I wanted to start making my own. Iskra happily gave me some yogurt as a starter, and outlined the methods by which to make the rich fermentation—both the strain and the process had been in her family for (what I imagine) time immemorial. The technique is quite straightforward: Boil the milk until small bubbles form; cool the milk for a couple of hours, until you can comfortably stick your small finger in the liquid for 10 seconds (based on what Iskra referred to as a Bulgarian standard of body temperature); distribute the milk into jars and add a few tablespoons of starter mixed with warm milk into each jar; stir once; close the jars and wrap them in towels for 10 to 12 hours; refrigerate; serve.

Since I received the starter, making yogurt has become part of my weekly routine. Upon my first attempt, Iskra's directions were not clear to me. In a follow-up email exchange, I questioned some of the logic behind the numerous steps. In her reply, she referenced a scene from Jacob Bronowski's documentary "The Ascent of Man." Bronowski suggests that when people do not have precise technical measurements, they use ritual to set the procedure for doing or making something. His example was sword making in ancient Japan—how it was all about the ritual, but in fact the ritual was designed to get technical measurements exactly right. Iskra immediately thought of yogurt making and how ritualistic it is in Bulgaria. For some reason, she performs the ritual just as her mother did—without variation—even

though she is sure there are more efficient ways to make the stuff.

For instance, her husband once watched her prepare a batch and asked a very good question: "Why don't you stir the yogurt into the pot of milk and *then* distribute it into the containers?" She admitted to not having a good answer. While certain that doing so would save a few steps, she maintains the same ritual just in case there is some scientific merit embedded deep in the arcane process. Befitting her name, Iskra's observation sparked how this framework applies to a perennial task many design teams often face: documenting the design process.

The request for documenting the design process has made its way to every team at every company where I have ever worked. Maybe this phenomenon is one that is particular to my own experience, but in checking with other designers across various sectors and industries, this practice seems virtually ubiquitous. The pervasiveness and frequency of this task leads me to a conclusion about the design process: It is, in fact, a myth.

Photographs by Eugene Kim

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary offers the following definition of "myth": "a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something, especially one embodying the ideals of a segment of society." I am not arguing that the design process is a false or unfounded notion; rather, that the Sisyphean nature of articulating the design process has come about because the ambiguity behind the terms "design" and "process" allow for a misinterpretation of what it truly is. The challenge with the word "design" arises from its ambiguity—it encompasses the notion of design thinking as well as the technical skills and craft of design doing. In recent discussions, this distinction has also been called big-D and little-d design, in which big-D design is the creative act that all humans share, and little-d design is the result of years of training and practice. In both cases, there lies a trend toward democratization: The former by its very nature should be encouraged, while barriers to the latter are steadily being lowered through advancements in technology. As for "process," again according to Merriam-Webster, it can be a series of actions or operations conducive to an end, or a natural phenomenon marked by gradual changes that lead to a particular result. In other words, one suggests a serial procession, while the other allows for organic and iterative progression. Many often choose a misguided combination of

meanings because, as the definition of "myth" suggests, the result embodies the ideals of the segment of society in which it takes place, usually the corporate milieu.

In 2007, during an international design conference, I sat in the audience at the Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco listening to a fascinating plenary speaker comparing design thinking and business thinking. The speaker was Roger Martin, the dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. Martin talked about the misunderstandings that often arise between designers and people in more traditional business roles. The misapprehension between the two finds its roots in conflicting intent. In short, design tends to aim for change and transformation, while other areas of business tend to focus on reliability through the exacting reproduction of results. The greater the fidelity in repeating a process, the lower its risk to the business. Given this principle, it is not difficult to see why the uninitiated, who perceive design as arbitrary and haphazard, would want to mitigate business risk by reducing it to a reliable and utterly reproducible process.

The mid-to-late 1990s saw a surge in the popularity of design consultancies among more traditional business circles. One could argue that many of the leading organizations followed two principles: First, they marketed their services not to layers of middle management, but to the C-level decision makers among their clientele, and second, many proclaimed proprietary design processes as the core of their efficacy and their competitive differentiation. The design community itself helps to perpetuate the design-process myth. In fact, in a recent article on the *Fast Company* website entitled "Why Design Still Has Such Limited Corporate Impact—and What to Do About It," Mark Dzierk, a vice president of design at one of the world's largest design and branding firms, suggests that: "Designers would do well to focus on a few things they do well, such as creating design that endures and devising repeatable process models for developing product offerings." In 2001, renowned graphic designer Milton Glaser stated in a talk in London: "[W]hen you are doing something in a recurring way to diminish risk or doing it in the same way as you have done it before, it is clear why professionalism is not enough. After all, what is required in our field, more than anything else, is the continuous transgression. Professionalism does not allow for that because transgression has to encompass the possibility of failure, and if you are professional, your instinct is not to fail, it is to repeat success. So professionalism as a lifetime aspiration is a limited goal."

As design now evolves from little-d to big-D design, the role of the designer has expanded from craftsperson to design facilitator—a leader who guides teams drawn from multiple disciplines toward a common end. Since that journey is not a neat, linear procession, designers would do well to recast the myth of the design process—to shift from little-p to big-P process—and show the value of design and the designer through the articulation of the principles and methods upon which he or she relies to guide others through the journey of design. In his essay "Confusion and Chaos," Paul Rand recalls the words of Alfred North Whitehead in *Science in the Modern World:* "'There are two principles inherent in the very nature of things, recurring in some particular embodiments whatever field we explore—the spirit of change, and the spirit of conservation. There can be nothing real without both. Mere change without conservation is a passage from nothing to nothing.... Mere conservation without change cannot conserve. For after all, there is a flux of circumstance, and the freshness of being evaporates under mere repetition.' Elsewhere, he says, 'Mere change before the attainment of adequacy of achievement, either in quality or output, is destructive of greatness.'"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

August de los Reyes is the principal design director for Microsoft Surface, whose team is dedicated to pioneering intuitive ways to interact with technology. De los Reyes is a member of the Advanced Studies Program at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design where he received an MDesS with distinction. He was a visiting associate at the University of Oxford Internet Institute, and is a member of the affiliate design faculty at the University of Washington. He is working on his next book entitled *The Poetics of Everyday Objects*.

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