

A System Within Systems – Hacking as Design Strategy

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Written Master Thesis / 103,076 characters

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July 2025

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Basel, 24.07.25

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Abstract

This thesis explores the potential of hacking – not as a technical act, but as a critical and playful mindset – for rethinking graphic design practice. Driven by a personal frustration with the rigid roles and expectations that designers often face, the project proposes an alternative approach that embraces curiosity, doubt, experimentation and resistance. Through a series of self-initiated design experiments, the thesis investigates what happens when hacking is used as a method to interrogate and reconfigure the technical, aesthetic, institutional and personal systems that shape design work. Drawing on early hacker culture, the thesis redefines hacking as a means of engaging with systems, involving an understanding of their structures, the identification of defaults, and the creative bending or misuse of these structures. The thesis proposes that everything – from tools and workflows to authorship and identity – can be viewed as a system and thus as something that can be hacked. Each chapter follows a recursive process of theoretical reflection and hands-on experimentation, moving from external systems (grids, software, protocols) to internal ones (habits, ego and authorship). Rather than offering solutions, the experiments act as probes – methods for making visible the often unseen assumptions embedded in design culture.

Ultimately, this work argues for a designer who is an active negotiator of systems, not merely a producer of outcomes. By adopting a hacker mindset, designers can reclaim agency, reimagine their practice and create opportunities for new types of work – work that is not only beautiful or efficient, but also critical, contextualised and open to change.

0. Prologue – The First Manifesto

To do the Graphic Design philosophy right, you have to be loyal to excellence. You have to believe that graphic design is a craft worth all the intelligence, creativity, and passion you can muster. (...) Graphic design and implementation should be a joyous art, a kind of high-level play. If this attitude seems preposterous or vaguely embarrassing to you, stop and think; ask yourself what you've forgotten. Why do you design graphic instead of doing something else to make money or pass the time? You must have thought graphic design was worthy of your passion once... To do the graphic design philosophy right, you need to have (or recover) that attitude. You need to care. You need to play. You need to be willing to explore.¹

The Designer Attitude

1. The World Is Full of Fascinating Problems Waiting to be Solved

Being a graphic designer is lots of fun, but it's a kind of fun that takes lots of effort. The effort takes motivation. Successful athletes get their motivation from a kind of physical delight in making their bodies perform, in pushing themselves past their own physical limits. Similarly, to be a graphic designer you have to get a basic thrill from solving problems, sharpening your skills, and exercising your intelligence. If you aren't the kind of person that feels this way naturally, you'll need to become one in order to make it as a graphic designer. Otherwise you'll find your energy is sapped by distractions like sex, money, and social approval. (You also have to develop a kind of faith in your own learning capacity – a belief that even though you may not know all of what you need to solve a problem, if you tackle just a piece of it and learn from that, you'll learn enough to solve the next piece – and so on, until you're done.)

¹ Adapted from Raymond, E. S. (2003). The art of Unix programming.
<http://www.catb.org/esr/writings/taoup/html/ch01s09.html>

2. No Problem Should Ever Have to be Solved Twice

Creative brains are a valuable, limited resource. They shouldn't be wasted on re-inventing the wheel when there are so many fascinating new problems waiting out there. To behave like a graphic designer, you have to believe that the thinking time of other graphic designers is precious – so much so that it's almost a moral duty for you to share information, solve problems and then give the solutions away just so other graphic designers can solve new problems instead of having to perpetually re-address old ones. Note, however, that “No problem should ever have to be solved twice.” does not imply that you have to consider all existing solutions sacred, or that there is only one right solution to any given problem. Often, we learn a lot about the problem that we didn't know before by studying the first cut at a solution. It's OK, and often necessary, to decide that we can do better. What is not OK is artificial technical, legal, or institutional barriers (like closed-source code) that prevent a good solution from being re-used and force people to re-invent wheels. (You don't have to believe that you're obligated to give all your creative product away, though the graphic designers that do are the ones that get most respect from other graphic designers. (...)

3. Boredom and Drudgery are Evil

Graphic designers (and creative people in general) should never be bored or have to drudge at stupid repetitive work, because when this happens it means they aren't doing what only they can do – solve new problems. This wastefulness hurts everybody. Therefore boredom and drudgery are not just unpleasant but actually evil. To behave like a graphic designer, you have to believe this enough to want to automate away the boring bits as much as possible, not just for yourself but for everybody else (especially other graphic designers). (There is one apparent exception to this. Graphic designers will sometimes do things that may seem repetitive or boring to an observer as a mind-clearing exercise, or in order to acquire a skill or have some particular kind of experience you can't have otherwise. But this is by choice – nobody who can think should ever be forced into a situation that bores them.)

4. Freedom is Good

Graphic designers are naturally anti-authoritarian. Anyone who can give you orders can stop you from solving whatever problem you're being fascinated by – and, given the way authoritarian minds work, will generally find some appallingly stupid reason to do so. So the authoritarian attitude has to be fought wherever you find it, lest it smother you and other graphic designers. (...)

5. Attitude is no Substitute for Competence

To be a graphic designer, you have to develop some of these attitudes. But copping an attitude alone won't make you a graphic designer, any more than it will make you a champion athlete or a rock star. Becoming a graphic designer will take intelligence, practice, dedication, and hard work. Therefore, you have to learn to distrust attitude and respect competence of every kind. Graphic designers won't let posers waste their time, but they worship competence – especially competence at designing, but competence at anything is valued. Competence at demanding skills that few can master is especially good, and competence at demanding skills that involve mental acuteness, craft, and concentration is best. If you revere competence, you'll enjoy developing it in yourself – the hard work and dedication will become a kind of intense play rather than drudgery. That attitude is vital to becoming a graphic designer.²

² Adapted from Raymond, E. S. (2001). How to become a hacker, section "The Hacker Attitude"
http://www.catb.org/esr/faqs/hacker-howto.html#what_is

1. Introduction

What you have just read is the first experiment, or “hack”, in a series that I conducted for this Master's thesis. This one emerged spontaneously out of a moment of play while I was researching the theoretical part of the project. I took two key texts from hacker culture, written by Eric S. Raymond, a prominent figure in the early hacker scene, and replaced every instance of the word “hacker” with “graphic designer”. It was a simple intervention, almost lazy: two lines of code in the browser console. However, this small act led to several realisations. Firstly, it confirmed my initial intuition when selecting hacking as the subject of my final project, namely that there are parallels between the mindsets of hackers and (to me, ideal) graphic designers. Secondly, it revealed the instability of authorship and how meaning can be radically shifted through minimal interventions. Finally, it positioned text not as fixed content, but as a structured yet hackable system. I'll elaborate on why this matters shortly.

1.1 What am I looking for?

But first, how did I even get here?

The process that finally led to this thesis began with a feeling of frustration. Frustration with the roles that graphic designers are expected to fulfil. We are often offered fixed identities such as service provider, author, researcher or storyteller. While these labels may help to define our function within certain contexts, none of them ever fully captured what I believed design could be. I felt that graphic design had more potential than simply executing briefs, producing outcomes or explaining things. I started to look for a different perspective – a different way of relating to design. One that's less about fitting into predefined frameworks and more about questioning, re-thinking and opening them up.

At the same time, I was (and still am) overwhelmed. I wonder if it is ignorant or selfish of me to want to create things that are “just” beautiful. Shouldn't design do more than create aesthetics? I want to experiment with new tools, methods and ways of working. But I can't code. Does that make me a bad designer? Can I still be technically literate without building my own tools? Can I be a researcher? How? And why am I so afraid of failing? Why do I feel under pressure to stay productive and

work efficiently in order to justify my existence as a designer through constant, polished output? Who decided what “productivity” or “efficiency” even mean? The agencies I have worked with? The schools that taught me? Why do I work the way I do? Are these habits just routines, or are they shaped by larger workflows and institutional expectations? How much space is there to question or break these patterns? And why is there such an obsession with authorship? Is it really about individual expression, or is it something else? What is a designer, anyway? Who decides?

I am looking for a practice that allows space for such questions. I am looking for a practice that embraces doubt, beauty, experimentation and critical thinking. One that treats systems – whether tools, workflows, educational structures or personal habits – as provisional rather than fixed. I want a practice that is playful and curious, but serious enough to believe that design can help shape the world around us. Ultimately, I want to rethink what a designer can be today, not just a service provider or producer of outcomes, but someone who is willing to question, reconfigure and sometimes “hack” the profession’s default settings. That’s why I turned to hacking: as a mindset and method, it treats aesthetic, technical, institutional and personal systems as structures that can be understood, questioned and creatively reconfigured.

1.2 Hacking as Philosophy and Method

In this sense, the question posed by this thesis is what happens when hacking is used as a method and mindset to critically engage with the systems – technical, aesthetic, institutional and personal – that shape graphic design practice. Not hacking in the narrow sense of cybercrime or even just coding, but in a broader, cultural sense: as it was shaped in the MIT hacker scene of the 1960s and 70s. In that context, hacking is not just technical skill—it’s a playful, curious, and subversive way of engaging with systems. It’s about understanding how things work, so you can make them work differently. This attitude could offer a new framework, one that feels both more honest and more expansive. It resonates with the kind of relationship I personally want to have with graphic design—not just as a producer of outcomes, but as someone who can question, reconfigure, and resist systems that are taken for granted.

1.3 What is a System?

Having used the word “system” so many times by now, it’s worth pausing to ask: what exactly do I mean by “system” in the context of this thesis? I will return to the first experiment. By replacing the word “hacker” with “graphic designer”, I treated the text as a structure with internal logic, dependencies and rules, rather than fixed content. In other words, it became a system. This small intervention served as a kind of seed for the entire project. The central methodological assumption of this thesis is this: Everything is a system. This broad definition includes not only texts, but also tools and software, workflows, routines, habits, professional norms, institutional structures and even less tangible concepts such as identity, authorship and ego. In short, it is any structured set of roles, rules, habits or relationships. If it has a pattern, it can be understood. If it can be understood, it can be reconfigured; it can be hacked. This perspective allows hacking to become a design method that treats existing conditions not as fixed constraints, but as materials to be investigated, questioned, or subverted.

1.3 Hacking as Framework

Before we delve any deeper, it is important to clarify that this thesis is not about hacking per se. It is about the practice of graphic design. Hacking serves here as a conceptual framework, a method – one that could offer designers a tool for thinking critically and working experimentally within their practice. It is the lens through which I investigate graphic design practice, and the method I use to conduct that investigation.

The thesis itself is structured as a series of experiments, each examining a different system with which I interact as a designer (Fig. 12). Following a natural progression that emerged during the process, I began my experiments with what I summarise as “systems outside of me”. These are the elements that I, like most designers, encounter first, such as type, grids and images. I then moved on to systems that I am inside of, such as tools, workflows and institutions, and finally, I arrived at systems that I am, such as ego, authorship and identity. The method I use is intentionally self-reflective and iterative. Each experiment begins with a theoretical idea, leading to a practical intervention. The outcomes of that experiment are then analysed and reflected upon, often raising new questions. These questions lead back to theory, which

informs the next experiment. In this way, the process forms a series of loops rather than a straight, linear path. This also provides the overall structure of the work, including the written part. A crucial part of my investigation was the constant interplay between thinking and making, theory and practice. I aim to reflect this interplay within the thesis itself. For this reason, there is no clear distinction between a 'theoretical' and a 'practical' section. Instead, I connect hacking theory directly to design practice and then describe the experiments that emerged from that connection. Even this structure is an experiment – an attempt to challenge the habits, conventions and institutional expectations with which I am familiar.

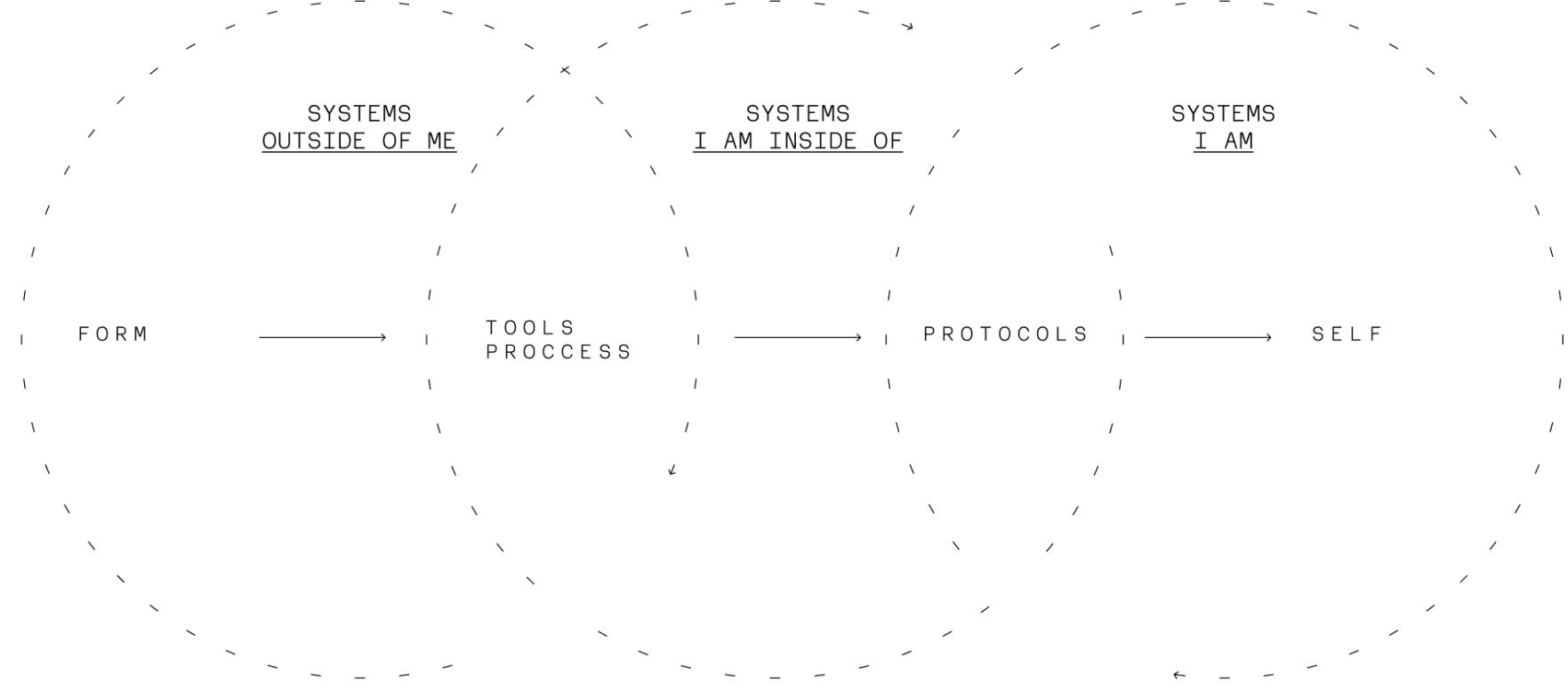


Fig. 12: Framework of experiments

2. The Ethics of Hacking

2.1 What is hacking?

The term hacker is highly context-dependent and often misunderstood. Popular clichés, shaped by politically charged campaigns in the 1980s, portray hackers mainly as criminals breaking into computer systems. The Cambridge Dictionary reflects this narrow view, defining a hacker as “someone who gets into other people's computer systems without permission in order to find out information or to do something illegal.”³ However, this thesis draws on a different understanding, rooted in Steven Levy's *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution* (1984)⁴. Levy traces hacking's origins to playful, creative experimentation by MIT's Tech Model Railroad Club in the late 1950s and early 1960s, where members sought innovative ways to enhance model train systems using government-funded computers. This ethos – reimagining functions and exploring alternative uses – is central to the hacker mindset. One of the most influential figures in this context is Richard Stallman, founder of the Free Software Movement. In his essay *On Hacking*, Stallman reflects on the nature of hacking and writes: “It is hard to write a simple definition of something as varied as hacking, but I think what these activities have in common is playfulness, cleverness, and exploration. Thus, hacking means exploring the limits of what is possible, in a spirit of playful cleverness.”⁵ hacking is not limited to code – it's a form of expression. He even considers John Cage's musical piece 4'33”⁶ as hacking. It challenges conventional expectations of what music is, in a way that is both clever and thought-provoking. As Stallman puts it, “Playfully doing something difficult, whether useful or not – that is hacking.”⁷

³ Hacker. (n.d.). In Cambridge Dictionary. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hacker>

⁴ Levy, S. (1984). “Hackers: Heroes of the computer revolution”. Anchor Press/Doubleday.

⁵ Stallman, R. (n.d.). On hacking. Retrieved April 25, 2025, from <https://stallman.org/articles/on-hacking.html>

⁶ 4'33” is a 1952 composition by John Cage in which the performer remains silent for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The piece redefines music by focusing on ambient environmental sounds and the concept of silence as part of the musical experience

⁷ Stallman, R. (n.d.). On hacking. Retrieved April 25, 2025, from <https://stallman.org/articles/on-hacking.html>

2.2 The Systemic Approach

Hacking is always about systems. It requires entering something that already exists, deconstructing it, and making it do something else. John Draper, better known as “Captain Crunch”, and a pioneer of so-called phreaking (hacking telephone networks), puts it plainly: “I’m learning about a system. The phone company is a system. A computer is a system, do you understand? If I do what I do, it is only to explore a system. Computers, systems – that’s my bag. The phone company is nothing but a computer.”⁸ This systemic perspective is my key. Whether we’re talking about telephony, software, publishing platforms, or design workflows, hacking means critical engagement with structure. It is less about producing finished outcomes and more about asking: How does this work? What else could this be?

2.3 The Hacker Attitude

Ultimately, hacking is a meritocracy. Rather than being based on formal titles, academic credentials, or institutional affiliations, it rewards individuals based on demonstrated skill, intellectual rigour, and creative execution. In hacker culture, respect is earned through contribution – through elegant code, ingenious problem solving, and the ability to make systems perform functions they were never originally designed for⁹. Hacking is undoubtedly hard work, but it is also a pursuit driven by curiosity, fascination, and joy. This merging of labour and play is central to the hacker ethos. It transforms effort into discovery and turns technical challenges into opportunities for creative intervention. Returning to the prologue, these values and motivations reflect Eric S. Raymond’s concept of the “Hacker Attitude” – a set of mindsets and ethical principles that extend beyond technical proficiency. Raymond emphasises that hackers view the world as something that can be understood, deconstructed, and improved. A key tenet of this attitude is the belief that ‘boredom and drudgery are evil’ – that is, inefficiency, stagnation and blind adherence to tradition are issues that need to be addressed, not accepted. Hackers do not merely use tools

⁸ Rosenbaum, R. (1971, October). Secrets of the little blue box. Esquire Magazine.

⁹ Levy, S. (1984). “Hackers: Heroes of the computer revolution” (p. 31). Anchor Press/Doubleday.

passively; they seek to understand them deeply and repurpose them creatively. This mindset resists complacency and embraces constant evolution.

But this attitude is not purely about skill or aesthetics, it also has a deeply political and ethical dimension. Hackers are naturally anti-authoritarian. They are skeptical of institutions that rely on control, censorship or secrecy. This doesn't mean hackers reject all forms of authority, but they resist any structure that seeks unquestioning obedience, especially when it interferes with curiosity or the free flow of information. As Raymond writes, "Anyone who can give you orders can stop you from solving whatever problem you're being fascinated by,"¹⁰ and authoritarians often do so for appallingly shortsighted reasons. This resistance to authoritarianism is not just personal – it's systemic. It involves a principled hostility to censorship, to the use of force or deception, and to closed systems that prioritise control over collaboration. Transparency, openness, and voluntary cooperation are fundamental to hacker culture. Hackers thrive in environments where knowledge is shared freely, where code is open and remixable, and where systems are built to be understood and improved – not obscured behind proprietary walls or bureaucratic gatekeeping.

In the context of this project, The Hacker Attitude offers a valuable conceptual framework for thinking about hacking not just as a technical activity, but as a broader design methodology – a form of systemic engagement with the world. It encourages us to see design as an act of intervention: of reimagining existing structures, subverting dominant norms, and creating new possibilities from the already existing. Hacking in this expanded sense becomes a curious and often subversive method of working with complex systems, whether digital, social, or material. It is a form of critical play, improvisational and often joyful. Importantly, Raymond's formulation of the hacker attitude also emphasises character traits that are essential to this practice: curiosity, resilience, openness, a tolerance for ambiguity, and an intrinsic love for challenge. These are not just helpful attributes, they are foundational. The hacker's mindset thrives on the thrill of the unknown and the satisfaction of making things work in unexpected ways. It's about being persistent in the face of difficulty, generous in the

¹⁰ Raymond, E. S. (2001). How to become a hacker, section "The Hacker Attitude" Retrieved from http://www.catb.org/esr/faqs/hacker-howto.html#what_is

sharing of knowledge, and bold enough to question why things are the way they are, and how they might be better.

2.3 Experimental Framework and Setup

The exploration and familiarisation around the term “hacking” laid the foundation for the practical part of this project: the experiments. The first step was to build a documentation system. Derived from hacker ethics, this meant committing to radical transparency, a principle deeply embedded in hacker culture. Documentation is not an afterthought here; it is central. Every experiment, every mistake is recorded and made publicly accessible. To enable this, I created a website hosted via GitHub Pages, which functions as a GitHub repository. A repository is an openly accessible directory of files – typically source code – used by developers (and hackers) to collaborate, share, and iterate on projects. One of GitHub’s core features is version control, meaning every change is tracked. Most importantly, the code is visible: anyone can view it, copy it, and build upon it¹¹. The website itself consists of basic HTML files, intentionally kept minimal to remain accessible and easily modifiable. The main content is the documentation of the experiments. Each experiment includes: A short description, a step-by-step protocol, detailing every action taken and every source referenced and the resulting output, which may include scripts, PDFs, or other downloadable artifacts (Fig. 1). The idea is that every experiment should be replicable and forkable – in the same spirit as open-source projects. Anyone can repeat the process, remix it, or take it in a new direction.

As a starting point, I set three values that each experiment must fulfill. These are drawn from Eric S. Raymond’s already introduced text *The Hacker Attitude* and function as a kind of framework:

- **Playfulness** – A sense of joy and curiosity is central. Hackers are intrinsically motivated; they follow intuition, embrace humor, and aren’t afraid to break things – in fact, they often break things on purpose to see what’s possible. This mindset encourages risk, surprise, and unplanned directions.
- **Learning** – Each experiment should generate insight. Whether technical, conceptual, or process-related, every hack is an opportunity to understand something new.

¹¹ <https://janice-beck.github.io/hacking/>

- **Transparency** – Nothing is hidden. Every step, source, decision, and failure is documented and made accessible. The process is at least as important as the outcome.

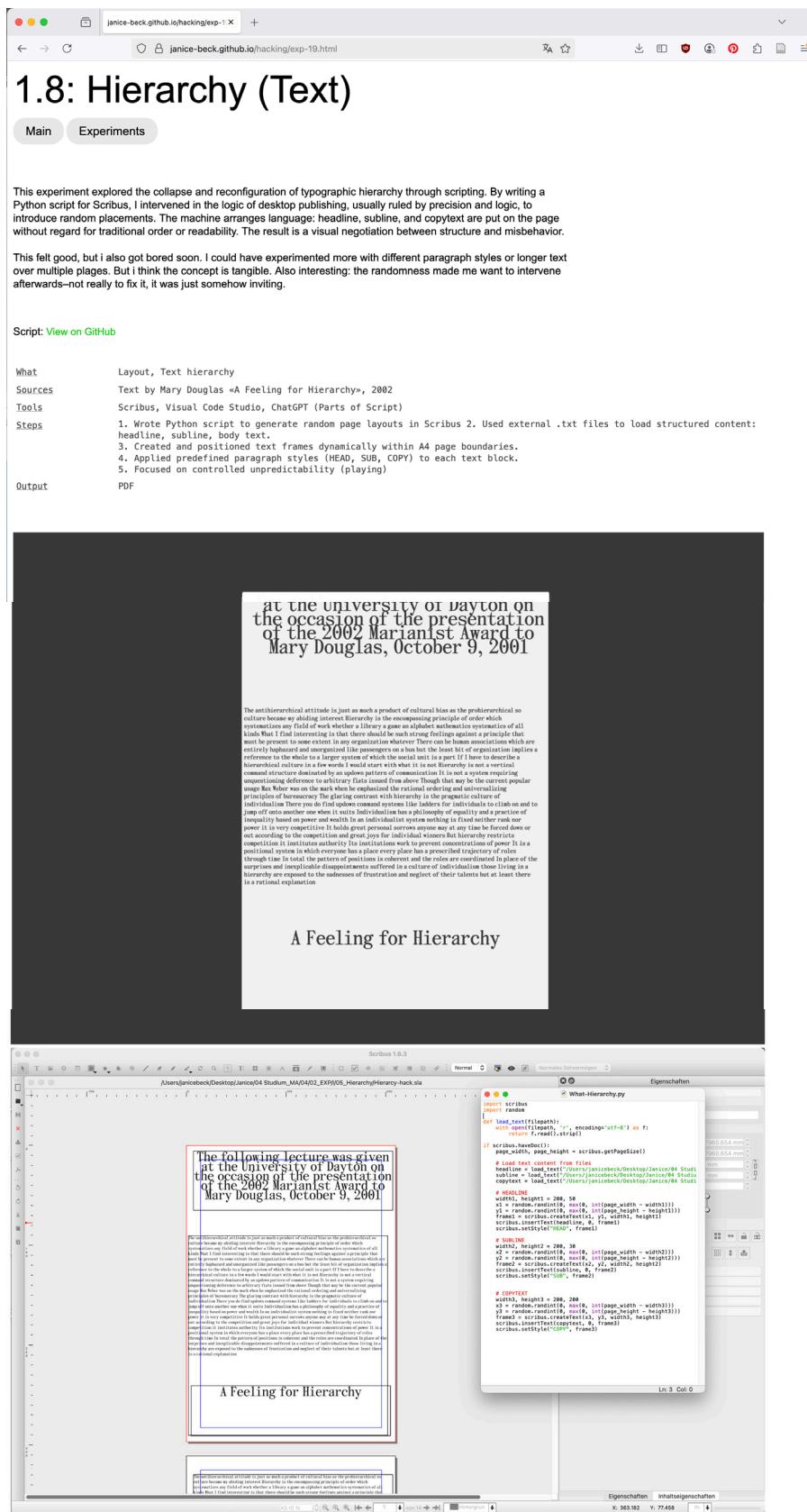


Fig. 1: Screenshot of the documentation website showing an example of the experiment documentation.

3. How Hackers Work

In the previous chapter, I explored hacking’s values and ethics as historically and culturally developed principles, relating them to my project’s concept. This chapter sharpens that understanding by focusing on hacking as a way of working, examining how hackers operate in practice and where their modes of work might overlap with or challenge those of designers.

3.1 Hacking as Ecology

A key influence here is Pekka Himanen’s “The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age”. Himanen moves beyond the common technical image of hacking, framing it as an alternative work ethic that challenges traditional ideas of labor, productivity, and value. Himanen contrasts this hacker ethic with Max Weber’s Protestant work ethic, which emphasises discipline, duty, and delayed gratification. In contrast, hackers are driven by passion rather than obligation. As Himanen writes, “For hackers, passion describes the general tenor of their activity”¹². This intrinsic motivation is central: hackers work not because they must, but because they want to. Their actions are motivated by joy, excitement, and intellectual curiosity. Himanen also identifies a “money ethic” in hacker culture: social recognition and peer respect within a passionate community outweigh financial motives. Recognition is earned through contribution, skill, and sharing knowledge, making hacking a profoundly social and meritocratic practice¹³.

Anja Groten’s “Hacking & Designing: Paradoxes of Collaborative Practice.”¹⁴ Groten, co-founder of Hackers & Designers, shares many of Himanen’s perspectives but offers a more critical lens on designers who adopt hacking methods superficially. Through a fictional dialogue between a stereotypical hacker and a designer, she reveals tensions within hacker culture. The hacker insists that hacking is not “a method

¹² Himanen, P. (2001). *The hacker ethic and the spirit of the information age* (p. 18). Random House.

¹³ Himanen, P. (2001). *The hacker ethic and the spirit of the information age* (p. 51). Random House.

¹⁴ Groten, A. (2020.). *Hacking/designing: Paradoxes of collaborative practice*. Hackers & Designers. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://hackersanddesigners.nl/hacking-designing-paradoxes-of-collaborative-practice-by-anja-groten>

you can first learn and then apply.”¹⁵ Rather, it is a practice grounded in technical literacy, constant failure, and social collaboration. As the hacker puts it, “You cannot learn hacking like you would learn a skill, a subject, or a method. Hacking derives from and contributes to an ecology.”¹⁶ Groten also highlights the essential role of frustration in hacking. Hackers develop “a tremendous tolerance to frustration,”¹⁷ given their frequent encounters with broken code, obscure bugs, and uncertain solutions. Yet this struggle is not hidden – on the contrary, hacking culture values openness, transparency, and collective troubleshooting. Mistakes and bugs are documented, not concealed, ensuring that the process remains accountable within a socially dynamic and constantly negotiated environment.

Together, these perspectives paint hacking not as a neat, transferable “method,” but as an embedded and evolving practice shaped by a dense ecology of social, technical, and cultural systems. Groten cautions designers against romanticising hacking as a convenient toolkit. Instead, they might learn from hacking’s emphasis on openness, experimentation, and continuous renegotiation. In this view, hacking invites graphic designers to reconsider their own field – not as a linear process aimed at polished outcomes, but as a complex, systemic, and socially entangled practice. Like hackers, designers navigate and intervene within layered systems – technical, aesthetic, and institutional – embracing imperfection, friction, and collective scrutiny.

3.2 Hacking practices

To further unpack hacking as mode of working, it is helpful to look at the specific practices that define how hackers engage with tools, problems, and collaboration. These are not rigid methods, but tendencies rooted in shared values: openness, curiosity, playfulness, and a willingness to break and rebuild.

Copying and remixing are foundational practices in hacker culture¹⁸. Rather than being seen as plagiarism, they represent a productive and generous way of working – building on existing code, tools, or ideas to suit new needs. Learning happens

¹⁵ Groten, A. (2020.). Hacking/designing: Paradoxes of collaborative practice. Hackers & Designers. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://hackersanddesigners.nl/hacking-designing-paradoxes-of-collaborative-practice-by-anja-groten>

¹⁶ Groten, A. (2020.). Hacking/designing: Paradoxes of collaborative practice. Hackers & Designers. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://hackersanddesigners.nl/hacking-designing-paradoxes-of-collaborative-practice-by-anja-groten>

¹⁷ Groten, A. (2020.). Hacking/designing: Paradoxes of collaborative practice. Hackers & Designers. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://hackersanddesigners.nl/hacking-designing-paradoxes-of-collaborative-practice-by-anja-groten>

¹⁸ Kelty, C. M. (2008). Two bits: The cultural significance of free software (p. 102). Duke University Press.

through doing, and through the recognition that all work is interdependent and collaborative. Closely related is reverse engineering¹⁹: the practice of taking systems apart to understand how they function, often without access to official documentation. This act is both technically and politically charged – a means of reclaiming access to closed or proprietary systems, and of demystifying the tools that shape our world. This connects with a broader “debugging mindset,”²⁰ where trial and error are not just tolerated but embraced. Bugs and errors are expected, and hackers often spend hours exploring potential solutions, guided by curiosity rather than certainty. As Groten suggests, mastering the emotional and technical balance between failure and pleasure becomes a form of expertise in itself. Transparency is crucial to all of this. Hacking is a profoundly social practice, built on the principle of making processes, code, and mistakes visible to others. Platforms like GitHub depend on this openness, allowing peers to learn from, critique, and contribute to each other’s work. This culture of sharing also means giving up control – code may be forked, remixed, or adapted in ways the original author didn’t anticipate. Many hacker projects also rely on decentralised, peer-to-peer collaboration. Rather than functioning through top-down hierarchies, they operate through loosely connected communities or distributed teams, where people contribute out of interest or shared purpose rather than formal obligation.

Taken together, these practices describe a working culture that is messy, adaptive, and highly social. Hacking relies on trust, experimentation, and a belief that knowledge grows through sharing. It is not about perfect outcomes, but about staying engaged with systems, solving problems collectively, and remaining open to where the process may lead – even when it breaks. Ultimately, hacking could offer designers a compelling model of practice: one that values process over perfection, openness over polish, and friction over smoothness. It challenges designers to expose their work – including its flaws – to communal insight, and to view design itself as a form of critical, systemic engagement. In this light, both hacking and designing become

¹⁹ Kelty, C. M. (2008). Two bits: The cultural significance of free software (p. 234). Duke University Press.

²⁰ Kelty, C. M. (2008). Two bits: The cultural significance of free software (p. 224). Duke University Press.

ways of thinking, making, and collaborating that resist closed systems, encourage collective learning, and seek to transform the environments they inhabit.

4. Experiments Phase I: Systems outside of me

This section documents and reflects on my first set of design experiments – the ones I later grouped under the category systems outside of me. I started here intentionally. I have no formal background in coding or programming, only minimal technical skills. Instead, I come from a fairly typical design trajectory: Western design education, a bachelor’s degree, followed by agency work and commercial projects that prioritise efficiency, polish, and professionalism. For someone like me, the idea of “hacking” – even after reframing it in a broader, more open sense – can feel intimidating. But, in the spirit of hacking’s hands-on imperative, I chose to begin from where I was: with the systems I know best. These are the foundational building blocks of graphic design – elements like type, grids, and images.

These systems are usually treated as fixed and given. They come with built-in rules, functions, and visual expectations. In applied practice, we use them – we lay them out, arrange them, polish them – but rarely question them beyond their aesthetic dimension. That’s precisely what I wanted to challenge in this first phase. My aim was to use them differently, make them behave strangely, even “wrong.” I wanted to break them open, interfere with their logic, and in doing so, expose their hidden structures.

4.1 Typeface

As an example; in one of the early experiments i worked with type. A typeface isn’t just a set of letters – it’s a system that enforces structure, clarity, and consistency. Behind every typeface is a tightly organised network of rules and relationships between glyphs, carefully designed to ensure readability and aesthetics. Type is also a particular domain within graphic design. Type design is highly specialised – almost like a closed-off subculture. It’s full of conventions, insider knowledge, hierarchies. There are “good” and “bad” fonts, designers often define their taste and status through their font choices. So, messing with a perfectly designed, well-kerned, beloved, usable font felt... wrong. Like crossing some unspoken boundary. When I dragged a font file into my editor, it almost felt like as if I were breaking a moral

code. This discomfort revealed another layer to the experiments – beyond the technical, they also touched on cultural and emotional dimensions. These aspects became increasingly present and will be explored more deeply in later stages of the work. From a technical perspective, I focused not only on altering existing glyphs but also and mainly on experimenting with OpenType features. These features can be embedded directly into a font file by code and are typically used for things like ligatures or alternate characters. I used them to rewrite how the typeface behaved: Letters changed depending on what was typed, where, and how. The font began to react, to misbehave – it responded to its own context. It stopped functioning as a neutral tool and began to act like an agent – bending the very rules it was designed to uphold. It no longer just delivered content, it performed and broke its own logic (Fig. 2).

4.2 Grid, Margin

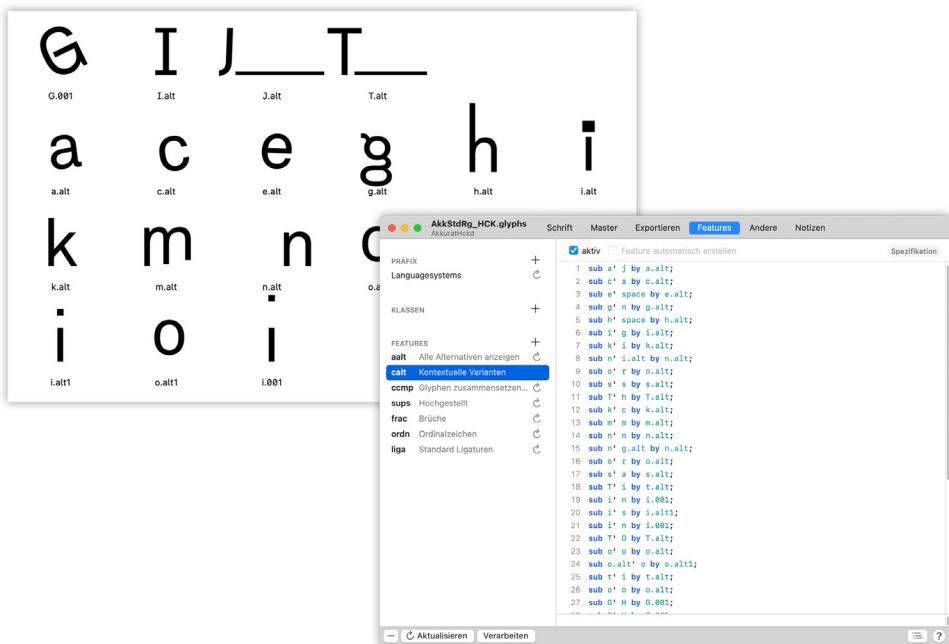
In another experiment i looked at grids. Especially within the Swiss design tradition, the grid holds a near-symbolic status. It is considered the fundamental basis, the very first thing you often do when setting up a design is defining a grid. It stands for order, structure, and organisation. In this experiment, I took a contrarian approach by drawing layout grids by hand, analog. For me, this was a counter-practice: very simple, yet unfamiliar. Unfamiliar because I didn't measure anything, working imprecisely and in a way that ran counter to my normal habits. Usually, I work mainly in tools like InDesign, where grids are set up precisely, often tied to strict mathematical ratios. Here, I worked quickly, measurements were intuitive, and I even drew diagonal and uneven lines – something basically impossible in InDesign, which is not made for that kind of freedom (Fig. 3). The outcome was interesting: a completely new structure of grids emerged, one I would never have designed digitally. Yet what I noticed was that even though the grid's aesthetic had radically changed, it still retained its function: even if the layout appeared off or surprising, the grid still organised. That observation left me with a question: wouldn't real subversion mean disabling the grid in its very function? Instead of producing order, could it actually create instability?

To explore this question further, I wrote a script using basil.js library that randomised the margins in InDesign, so that each newly added page had an entirely different layout logic. The grid – normally a symbol of precision and order – became an unpredictable element (Fig. 4). This experiment also marked a shift in approach – it

was the first time I slipped behind a tool's intended use through code. It felt like I was gaining a new sense of autonomy and broader possibilities. That said, my coding skills alone wouldn't have been enough; tools like ChatGPT played a crucial role in supporting this process. I was still dependent – but in that dependence, something opened up.

4.3 Conclusion

These early experiments led to – and reinforced – several important realisations. Even the most fundamental building blocks of my practice are far from neutral. They carry hidden suppositions, not just about aesthetics, but about functionality and how they are meant to be used. I became aware of my own habits, shaped by my design education and commercial practice, which taught me to approach and apply these elements in a specific way. What these experiments also revealed is that adopting a hacking mentality does not have to begin with advanced skills or entirely new tools. It can start on familiar ground, by gently disrupting, creating friction, or rethinking things so close to us, we barely notice them anymore. In that sense, even the most rigid, external systems in graphic design are never fully closed. The assumptions they carry can be bent, misused, or reimagined. This understanding raised a further question: what about the systems I don't even see? The ones I don't actively choose, but inherit – by opening a program, by repeating a workflow, by simply being a designer?



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Fig. 2: Typeface Experiment

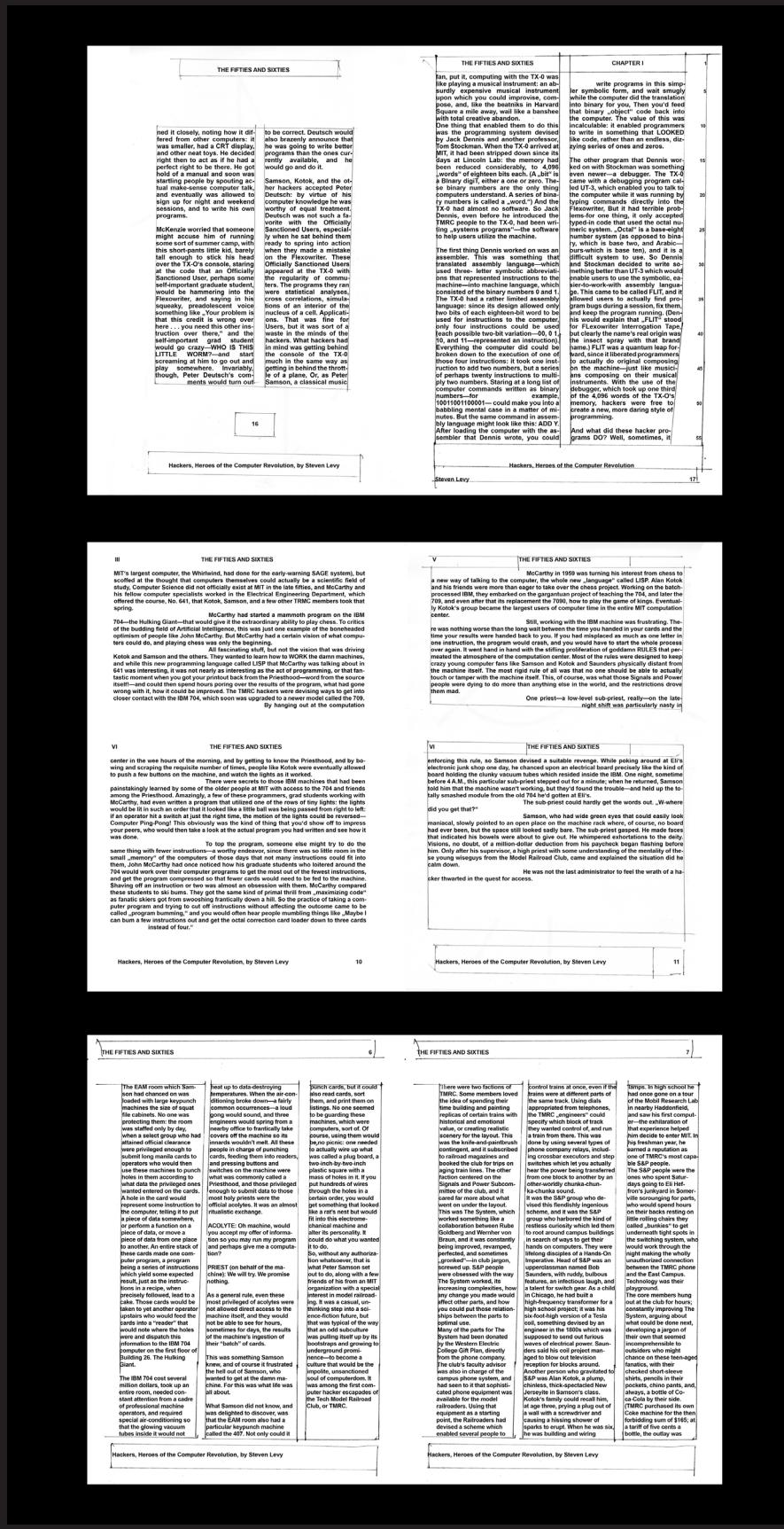


Fig. 3: Hand-drawn grids

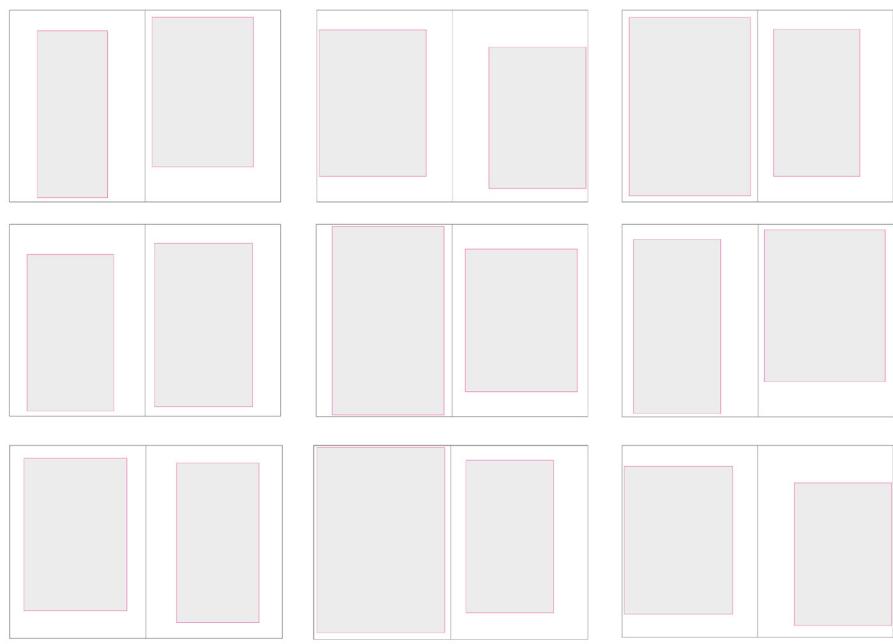


Fig. 4: Randomized Margins with basil.js

5. The Politics of Tools

5.1 Tools shape Practice

In graphic design, tools have never been mere neutral instruments; rather, they fundamentally shape what can be made, how it is made, and even what designers imagine as possible. Historically, entire design paradigms have been determined by the constraints and affordances of available tools, from the precision and repeatability of the printing press to the experimental flexibility offered by phototypesetting and later digital page layout systems. In his book “Software Takes Command” media theorist Lev Manovich argues, contemporary software does not simply execute design but actively embodies values, standards, and cultural assumptions that guide creative practice. Adobe Creative Suite, for example, has become almost synonymous with graphic design itself, its functions and interfaces deeply embedded in design education, professional workflows, and aesthetic conventions. Manovich situates these tools within a broader conception of medium as a cultural-technical system that frames what designers can even think to do. As he observes, “mediums as they are implemented in software are part of distinct cultural histories that go back for hundreds and often thousands of years”²¹ which continue to shape how we understand and use them today. Thus, a medium is far more than a set of technical materials or tools; it constitutes what Manovich calls an “imaginary database” of expressive, compositional, and communicative possibilities actualised through a particular combination of materials and techniques²².

This shaping does not end at the level of software tools themselves. The workflows designers develop – their habits, shortcuts, and routinised practices – also function as systems. These workflows, which can be seen as a kind of “invisible system”, embed cultural norms about speed, productivity, and optimisation. In many professional contexts, design work is pressured to conform to tight deadlines and standardised expectations, encouraging a logic of efficiency over experimentation. Such “optimisation culture” may undermine more playful, critical, or exploratory modes of

²¹ Manovich, L. (2013). *Software takes command* (p. 226). Bloomsbury Academic..

²² Manovich, L. (2013). *Software takes command* (p. 226). Bloomsbury Academic.

practice. In this sense, workflows mirror the biases of the tools they are shaped by, reinforcing an idea of design as predictable, fast, and frictionless.

5.2 Countermovements

In response to the constraints imposed by mainstream design software, parts of the graphic design community have explored alternative approaches such as open-source tools, creative coding, and self-built workflows. These practices resonate strongly with a hacker ethos, seeking to reclaim autonomy by developing tools rather than merely consuming them. Learning to code – even at a basic scripting level – can empower designers to modify or extend their environments, fostering a sense of agency otherwise denied by closed systems²³.

Initiatives such as Luuse asbl, a collectif based in Brussels, illustrate this post-digital turn, positioning design practice within a political framework of openness, self-determination, and critical awareness. Luuse explicitly strives to develop “alternative methods of editing and publishing,”²⁴ advancing a thoughtful, curious, and conscious relationship between production tools, designers, and users. By operating through pedagogy, research, and commissioned work, Luuse supports a culture of shared knowledge and the co-creation of commons, challenging proprietary systems with a vision of free culture and open systems. One of their projects – the design for the Book “Artificial Gut Feeling” by Anna Zett²⁵ – embodies this ethos in a particularly compelling way. Rather than relying on conventional proprietary layout software, Luuse used paged.js, a web-to-print JavaScript library, along with a custom implementation of Typeset – Bram Stein’s²⁶ JavaScript adaptation of TeX’s line-breaking algorithm. The book was produced for Brussels-based Divided Publishing, itself a small press committed to experimental and critical practices.

This mode of working comes close to what might be described as a hacking approach – not in the narrow sense of breaking systems, but in the broader sense of creatively repurposing technologies, circumventing limitations, collaboration and

²³ Conrad, D., & van Leijsen, R. (Eds.). (2021). Graphic design in the post-digital age: A survey of practices fuelled by creative coding (Onomatopee 215). Onomatopee & HEAD – Genève (HES-SO).

²⁴ Luuse. (n.d.). Luuse. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://luuse.io/>

²⁵ Luuse. (n.d.). Artificial Gut Feeling. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://luuse.io/projects/artificial-gut-feeling/>

²⁶ Bram Stein is a typographer and developer. He created a large collection of open source libraries for improving type and typography on the web, find a selection of his work here: <https://www.bramstein.com/working/>

openness, and building alternatives. What makes it powerful is how applied it is: the outcomes are not speculative prototypes but fully realised publications.

5.3 Open-Source

This commitment to openness is deeply connected to a broader open-source movement, which represents a crucial pillar of hacker culture and embodies ideals of transparency, collaboration, and community-driven development. Far from being merely “free as in gratis,” open-source tools, inspired by the GNU philosophy and articulated by figures such as Richard Stallman²⁷, emphasise the freedom to study, modify, and share code. This enables designers to break free from proprietary black boxes and engage actively with the tools they use. In doing so, open-source software fosters a culture of collective experimentation, knowledge-sharing, and mutual aid – values long associated with hacker movements. The existence of alternatives like GIMP, Scribus, or FontForge demonstrates that nearly every proprietary tool has a community-built counterpart, challenging the dominance of closed systems and expanding the range of possible practices. Moreover, open-source communities frequently cultivate rich peer-learning environments where designers support one another in developing skills, adapting tools, and experimenting with new workflows.

However, these strategies are not without their own contradictions. Learning to code does not automatically lead to more critical or radical practices, as coding itself is shaped by communities, conventions, and ideological assumptions. Likewise, open-source tools can reproduce similar logics of standardisation and control as their proprietary counterparts, and not every designer has the time, resources, or interest to invest in complex technical skills. In the end, neither proprietary nor open-source tools, neither coding nor abstaining from code, guarantees true creative autonomy.

²⁷ Stallman, R. M. (1983, September 27). Initial announcement of the GNU Project. Usenet. GNU. Retrieved July 7, 2025, from <https://www.gnu.org/gnu/thegnuproject.de.html>

5.4 Artificial Intelligence

Recent developments in artificial intelligence further complicate the relationship between designers and their tools. As Lev Manovich (2018) argues in *AI Aesthetics*, AI systems have become key agents in cultural production: not only do they recommend what we should see, listen to, or consume²⁸, but they also guide aesthetic choices in media-making processes. In design specifically, AI-driven tools are increasingly integrated into professional workflows, automating tasks such as generating layouts, suggesting color palettes, or curating type combinations. Companies like Monotype, for instance, have released entire suites of AI-powered design tools that exemplify this shift²⁹. While these technologies can undoubtedly expand creative possibilities, they also risk reinforcing dominant aesthetic norms and data-driven patterns³⁰, subtly narrowing the scope of what designers might otherwise imagine or explore. Crucially, Manovich contends that AI is not merely a technical development but a powerful cultural agent – one that reshapes our imagination and behaviour³¹. Like earlier generations of design software, today’s AI systems encode specific assumptions, values, and conventions, which can both support and constrain a designer’s agency.

The intersection of AI and design tools is an expansive and multifaceted topic – far too broad to fully address here. My intention was to focus on a narrow aspect of it in order to develop an argument relevant to this project, though I’m aware that this exploration only scratches the surface. Still, this limited inquiry resonates with the conclusion drawn earlier: that what ultimately matters is not the tool itself, but the relationship we cultivate with it.

The designer must not become a passive operator of intelligent systems but should instead engage with them actively and reflectively. As AI tools increasingly mediate the design process – suggesting layouts, aesthetics, and even conceptual directions – they risk reducing the designer’s role to that of a fine-tuner or validator of machine-generated outcomes. In this light, AI reveals something crucial about the designer’s position today: the importance of resisting over-specialisation, cultivating autonomy through curiosity, and remaining open to subversive or experimental practices.

²⁸ Manovich, L. (2018). *AI Aesthetics* (p. 1). Strelka Press

²⁹ Monotype Labs. (2023, March 6). Putting AI to work: The magic of typeface pairing. Medium. Retrieved July 9, 2025, from <https://medium.com/@monotype.labs/putting-ai-to-work-the-magic-of-typeface-pairing-ffb3e964127c>

³⁰ Manovich, L. (2018). *AI Aesthetics* (p. 5). Strelka Press

³¹ Manovich, L. (2018). *AI Aesthetics* (p. 2). Strelka Press

Over-specialisation, while often seen as a path to professional expertise, can lead to a narrowing of perspective – especially when tools become so intelligent and prescriptive that they start to define the boundaries of creative thinking. Cultivating autonomy, then, means maintaining a capacity for exploration beyond the parameters set by AI systems. It requires curiosity – not just about how tools work, but about how they shape cultural values and visual languages.

Subversive tactics such as hacking, misuse, and engagement with open-source alternatives offer ways to intervene in these systems rather than simply accept them. These forms of critical engagement allow designers to reassert agency and to question the assumptions embedded in AI-driven processes. They help keep open a space for deviation, experimentation, and dissent – essential ingredients for preserving creative autonomy in an era where design risks becoming increasingly standardised and systematised.

But there is another dimension to this. Tools like ChatGPT – AI systems with natural language interfaces – are not only reshaping creative processes, but also lowering technical barriers to access. Speaking from my own experience in this project and in design practice more generally, tools like these make formerly specialised skills – like coding and scripting – more approachable. The ability to describe what one wants in natural language and have the machine return usable code or design logic transforms the way we interact with tools. The boundary between designer and developer, user and system, becomes thinner. This is exciting: it creates new opportunities for autonomy, for designers to understand and shape their tools through scripting or code, without needing deep technical backgrounds. As I noted in the experiments section, this shift can foster a greater sense of agency – precisely because designers can now intervene more directly in the systems they work with. And yet, this new form of autonomy is paradoxically dependent – at least at first – on the very tools it seeks to master. We gain agency by relying on AI; we reclaim authorship through collaboration with systems we do not fully control. This, too, brings us back to the core question: how do we position ourselves in relation to the tools we use? Not just technically, but politically, culturally, and critically.

6. Experiments Phase II: Systems

I am Inside of – Tools and Workflows

The questions that concluded my first set of experiments – what about the systems I don’t even see? – led directly into this next phase. These experiments shifted my attention from the systems I use (outside of me) to the ones I inherit (i am inside of). On the one hand side, these are systems embedded in the tools themselves: the software defaults, the workflows I repeat almost automatically. This tool dimension has preoccupied me for some time: how tools shape practice, how they become naturalised, how they subtly discipline the designer’s thinking. What assumptions do I unknowingly adopt each time I launch a program? What do I accept as “neutral” when it is in fact a highly coded structure?³²

6.1 Default Settings, Perfectionism, Hyperfocus, Reversibility, Preview

The very first experiment emerged directly out of the previous phase – from working with randomised margins – and made me question other assumptions embedded in a program like InDesign. I turned my attention to its default settings. These defaults, like Minion Pro 12 pt, 12.7 mm margins, and standard page dimensions, are not neutral. They encode implicit values about hierarchy, legibility, and aesthetic normality. To surface these hidden frameworks, I wrote a script that changes these default settings every time a new document is created. Page size, margins, fonts, font sizes, and swatches all randomise with each new file. In this way, the experiment made these usually invisible defaults visible, critiquing them through their exposure.

³² A short loop back: I had already explored this line of thinking in part during a project last year. I experimented with fictional design briefs, but forced myself to work by deliberately misusing tools – going against their intended purpose. For example, I designed a book entirely in Photoshop, a poster using only Glyphs, or an entire campaign through Illustrator’s path view. This approach was immensely interesting: of course there was a visual dimension, with new and unexpected outcomes, but what fascinated me even more were the shifts in workflow, the new questions that emerged, and the alternative ways of thinking that opened up. Deliberately misusing a tool is incredibly powerful – it makes you sharply aware of your own habits and blind spots. I would recommend trying it.

From there, I attacked my own workflow more directly. I noticed my habits of perfectionism – endless fine-tuning and polishing. So I built a script (in AppleScript) that exports a PDF and then clears the entire InDesign document every 15 –30 minutes. This intervention sets a hard cutoff, blocking me from endless adjustment and encouraging me to accept the current state as enough – and to move on. I went further: sometimes my design work absorbs me completely, to the point of forgetting time and surroundings. So I introduced another small program, which interrupts me roughly every 30 minutes with a reflective prompt (Fig. 5). The goal was not just to pause the work, but to interrupt the flow of optimisation. Some interventions were very small, but still revealing. I disabled Cmd+Z in GIMP – no shortcut to undo. Weirdly, this felt like a restriction, but it shifted my entire mode of working: I became more deliberate, paying closer attention to each step.

Finally, I turned to the visual dimension itself: In Figma, I experimented by turning the opacity of my canvas to 0%, removing all visual feedback while still using the familiar tools and interface. The canvas was there, the tools were there – but no preview. It was a radical gesture of trust, or perhaps mistrust, toward my own sense of seeing. In that moment, design no longer relied on constant visual checking (Fig. 6).

6.2 Conclusion

All these experiments challenged my habits and made me confront how deeply tools structure design practice: from smoothing interaction, to embedding hidden ideas about what is normal or valuable. They do not simply execute my thinking – they actively co-shape it, disciplining how I see, act, and make decisions as a designer. What mattered was not which tool I used – whether it was code, Photoshop, or GIMP – but recognising that every tool carries its own assumptions and moral frameworks. Another Thing: along the way, I picked up more coding skills, driven by curiosity rather than obligation, which felt close to hacking's spirit: exploring, questioning, and learning by doing. In the end, these programs and scripts i wrote were not the answer, but more like provocations or jokes – playful ways of thinking about design, and about how to reimagine my attitude towards it.

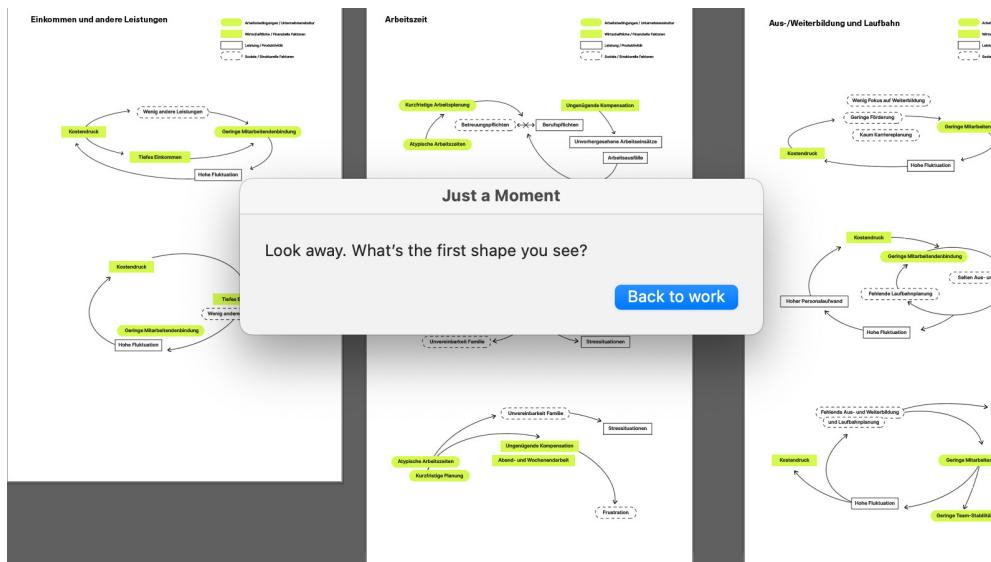


Fig. 5: A reflective prompt

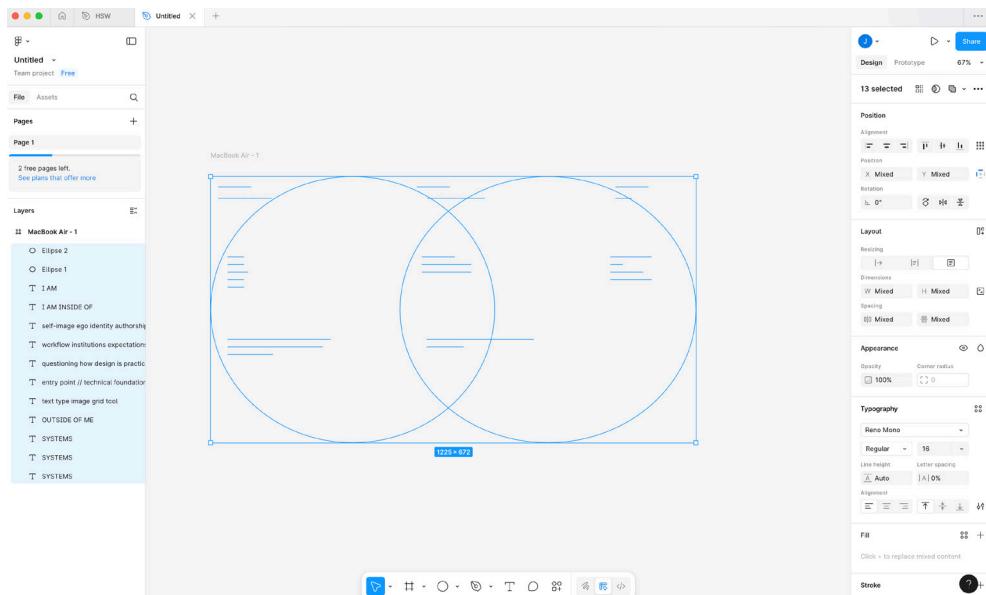


Fig. 6: Designing blindly

7. Hacking as Intervention: Political and Artistic activism

Until now, I have explored what hacking might mean beyond its purely technical framing, asking how hackers work, what values they embody, and how those values relate to graphic design tools and practices. Much of the current discourse around hacking in graphic design – such as that seen in collectives like Hackers & Designers or Luuse – often foregrounds the technical dimension: open-source tools, collaborative coding, and experimental infrastructures. While these aspects are vital and often inherently critical (e.g., rejecting monopolistic software, advocating for transparency), they can also feel alienating to classically trained or applied designers, for whom coding and critical making are not primary practices.

Yet there is more to hacking than technological or aesthetic gestures. Its ethical stance, its potential for resistance, and its capacity for cultural and institutional critique are equally significant. That is why, in this section, I want to zoom out – tracing how hacking’s values have extended into activist and artistic practices that use intervention not merely as a technical tactic, but as a political gesture. These approaches frame hacking as a mode of critique that confronts systems of power, authorship, and control. The book “Hacking als künstlerische Strategie”³³ was a key entry point for my engagement with hacking – it shaped my understanding of hacking not just as a technical skill, but as an attitude and method. What resonated deeply was the idea that hacking is less about using a tool and more about questioning its underlying rules: “Hier geht es nicht mehr darum, ein Programm zu nutzen, sondern darum, die Spielregeln zu untersuchen.”³⁴ Hacking becomes a way to destabilise meaning (“Zone der Destabilisierung von Sinn”³⁵) and to creatively rewire closed systems from the inside out. The hacker operates within constraints, reclaims agency by exposing weak points, copying, adapting, and recontextualising code and systems. In that sense, hacking feels deeply aligned with artistic, but potentially also design practice: it seeks out cracks in dominant structures and reroutes their energy toward open, unexpected outcomes.

³³ Landwehr, D. (Ed.). (2014). *Hacking* (Edition Digital Culture 2). Migros-Kulturprozent.

³⁴ Landwehr, D. (Ed.). (2014). *Hacking* (Edition Digital Culture 2) (p. 7). Migros-Kulturprozent.

³⁵ Landwehr, D. (Ed.). (2014). *Hacking* (Edition Digital Culture 2) (p. 13). Migros-Kulturprozent.

By shifting the focus away from tool fetishism and toward systemic questioning, these practices offer models for how designers might adopt hacking strategies that are both critical and accessible – strategies that don't require full technical immersion, but still challenge dominant norms and institutional frameworks.

7.1 Tactical Media

A useful starting point is the tradition of tactical media, which emerged in the 1990s at the intersection of media activism, art, and hacker culture. Closely linked to the ethos of hacking, tactical media embraces strategies of creative misuse, repurposing, and intervention. Tactical media can be understood as a form of temporary, strategic intervention, working with and around new media. It interrupts existing power structures by repurposing them, offering fresh ways of seeing, understanding, and interacting with the infrastructures that govern their lives.

One of my favorite examples is the activist duo The Yes Men, who became known for staging elaborate hoaxes at international business and political events. Disguised as officials from major corporations or institutions they wanted to criticise, they gave fake presentations that exposed unethical practices – often by taking the logic of those organisations to absurd extremes or pretending the companies had suddenly adopted radically ethical positions.³⁶ One of their most striking actions was their Bhopal news hijacking: in 2004, posing as a Dow Chemical spokesperson, they appeared live on BBC World and announced that Dow would finally accept full responsibility for the 1984 Bhopal disaster – a gas leak that killed thousands in India – and pay 12 billion dollars in compensation to victims. The BBC, taking this at face value, broadcast the announcement globally, sending Dow's stock price into free fall before the hoax was revealed. In a single stroke, the Yes Men forced the world to confront Dow's ongoing refusal to make reparations, exposing the company's inaction through a carefully constructed fiction³⁷. As Fluter magazine describes, the Yes Men “created an alternative way of thinking. With their work, they show us that the reality around us is not fixed – it can be changed, if we act.”³⁸ For me, this is crucial: tactical media uses humor, fiction, and provocation as hacks, disturbing dominant

³⁶ Wikipedia. (2025). *The Yes Men*. In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved July 20, 2025, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Yes_Men

³⁷ Graff, V. (2004, December 14). *Meet the Yes Men who hoax the world*. The Guardian. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2004/dec/13/mondaymediasection5>

³⁸ Fischer, M. (2011, September 20). Von der Kunst, anderen auf den Sack zu gehen. *Fluter*, (40). Retrieved July 2, 2025, from https://www.fluter.de/sites/default/files/von_der_kunst_anderen_auf_den_sack_zu_gehen.pdf

narratives and showing that systems are malleable. There are many more compelling definitions and interpretations of tactical media – Geert Lovink’s ABC of Tactical Media³⁹, in particular, is a rich resource for those who want to delve deeper.

What is also crucial for this thesis, however, is how tactical media resists rigid definitions altogether – refusing to fix identities, roles, or disciplines. Artists, scientists, technicians, activists, and designers can all inhabit tactical practices simultaneously. As the Critical Art Ensemble argues, “In either case, such role designations are too restrictive in that the role boundaries exclude access to social and knowledge systems that are the materials for their work.”⁴⁰ Tactical media challenges these boundaries not by erasing them, but by refusing to let them dictate participation. It privileges access over expertise, encouraging collective and adaptive forms of practice.

Could stepping outside fixed roles allow designers to operate more tactically – moving between institutions, tools, and communities as needed, rather than being bound to a single disciplinary identity? These are the kinds of questions that emerge when design is approached not as a profession with stable boundaries, but as a practice always in flux, shaped by its entanglements with technology, politics, and culture.

7.2 Poetic hacks

Another fascinating reference point is !Mediengruppe Bitnik, an artist collective from Switzerland whose works can be read as poetic hacks that reveal and critique systems from within. Rather than simply breaking or bypassing systems, they slip inside them, subverting expectations from the inside out. A well-known example is their Delivery for Mr. Assange project: in 2013, they sent a parcel containing a hidden live-streaming camera to Julian Assange inside the Ecuadorian Embassy in London⁴¹. Over the course of its postal journey, the camera broadcast its own progress in real time. What is crucial here is that !Mediengruppe Bitnik recognised the postal system as a system in its own right: a network of rules, procedures, and flows that could be appropriated, exploited, and reimagined. They leveraged the system’s

³⁹ Lovink, G. (1997, May 16). The ABC of tactical media. Nettyme. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9705/msg00096.html>

⁴⁰ Critical Art Ensemble. (2001). Digital resistance: Explorations in tactical media (p. 4). Autonomedia. https://monoskop.org/images/3/3a/Critical_Art_Ensemble_Digital_Resistance_Explorations_in_Tactical_Media.pdf

⁴¹ !Mediengruppe Bitnik. (n.d.). Delivery for Mr. Assange. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://bitnik.org/delivery>

predictability and trust to create a moment of radical visibility, exposing how infrastructures can be made to serve unintended functions.

Their work exemplifies how hacking-inspired interventions can probe infrastructures not merely by attacking or dismantling them, but by inhabiting them creatively. They open up hidden layers of systems – in this case, postal tracking, international security, and diplomatic asylum – to public reflection. What resonates with me is how !Mediengruppe Bitnik expand hacking beyond technical exploits. They transform hacking into a poetic but still and foremost critical practice, using the unexpected to produce ruptures in everyday systems of control. In this sense, they invite designers to think of hacking not just as a means to modify tools, but as a broader cultural attitude of revealing, questioning, and shifting the parameters of what is assumed to be stable.

7.3 Metahaven

Metahaven is a research and design studio founded by Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden, based in Amsterdam. Their work – both commissioned and self-initiated – moves fluidly between design, film, writing, and theory, often reflecting on political and social conditions through collaboratively produced graphic and media objects⁴². A key example is their 2010 book *Uncorporate Identity*⁴³, a hybrid of theory, visual essay, and speculative branding. Unlike traditional design monographs, it takes the form of a nonlinear research publication – one that explores the aesthetics and geopolitics of identity in a post-national, post-branding world. What makes *Uncorporate Identity* especially relevant here is its repositioning of design as a method of inquiry rather than a neutral service. It asks: how does design participate in systems of power? And how might it visualise, disrupt, or reconfigure those systems?

Working with case studies such as Sealand, Metahaven appropriate the language of branding not to sell, but to expose and destabilise. In that sense, *Uncorporate Identity* can be read as a tactical media project in itself. It doesn't "represent" resistance – it performs it, both visually and structurally. Like hacking, it intervenes in existing systems (branding, national identity, network infrastructure), using their logics against themselves.

⁴² Dutch Art Institute. (n.d.). *Metahaven*. Retrieved July 10, 2025, from <https://dutchartinstitute.eu/page/6417/metahaven>

⁴³ Metahaven. (2010). *Uncorporate identity*. Lars Müller Publishers.

In their 2008 manifesto White Night, Metahaven articulate a desire to rethink the role of the designer – not as a stylist working in service of capitalism’s visual “surface,” but as a critical agent operating within and against complex systems. The manifesto critiques the defaults embedded in tools and visual culture – “default faces, default writing, default desktops”⁴⁴ – and describes software as something that softens the relationship between humans and production. Instead of embracing these smoothing mechanisms, White Night advocates for a messier, more subversive form of practice: one that embraces “pursues mistakes, nights without sleep, uncool work, messy desktops, and laughter”⁴⁵.

Both of these projects resonate with the key concerns of this thesis: the search for new roles within design, the tension between research and aesthetic output, and the complex negotiation of autonomy and authorship. Metahaven, in this sense, does not just act as designer but becomes an author – of visual languages, political narratives, and new forms of critical practice. Also, their refusal of design as a closed profession aligns with hacker values: openness, disobedience, experimentation. They move through roles – researchers, designers, theorists – not by mastering each domain, but by remaining curious and deliberately unspecialised. For this thesis, Metahaven serve as an important example of how graphic design can operate critically without reducing itself to either aesthetic commentary or technical specialisation. Their work exemplifies a mode of practice that is research-based, politically engaged, and deeply aware of the infrastructures it inhabits.

⁴⁴ Metahaven. (2008). White night before a manifesto (p. 6). Retrieved July 10, 2025, from https://readings.design/PDF/metahaven_whitenight.pdf

⁴⁵ Metahaven. (2008). White night before a manifesto (p. 15). Retrieved July 10, 2025, from https://readings.design/PDF/metahaven_whitenight.pdf

8. Experiments Phase III: Systems I am Inside of – Protocols

After exploring tools and workflows, I found myself wanting a broader frame – one where I could test what hacking might look like beyond the technical or aesthetic. The idea of protocols gave me that. By protocols, I mean the soft and hard norms that shape how we move through institutions, infrastructures and also the profession itself: the unwritten rules, what we are used to in being educated as a designer, in what we call ourselves a designer.

In this section, I tried to treat these structures like systems – the scale remained small, personal, and situated, the aim was not to break, but to bend formats that are usually taken for granted and fixed. The goal wasn't to critique from the outside, but to operate within existing protocols. They weren't about proving a point. Instead, they became small rehearsals in reclaiming authorship over the conditions in which design happens. Attempts to rewire familiar systems – not for destruction, but to surface the assumptions they carry, and imagine how things could be otherwise.

8.1 The Zine

The first experiment in this new phase emerged from a kind of blur: an in-between gesture, moving from disrupting habits in tools toward questioning the frameworks that structure design at a deeper level. Still curious about visibility, defaults, and assumptions, I wanted to design a zine without relying on conventional layout software. Inspired by Luuse's “designing without seeing” approach and by broader hacker practices, I decided to work only with a code editor and browser. I was not confident coding for print – or even coding a zine at all – but hacking, I had learned, often begins with copying. So, I started with a file I didn't write: a public-domain book downloaded as raw HTML from Project Gutenberg, an online archive of digitised literature. I treated the HTML structure as scaffolding, inserting my own content and editing only the inline CSS. My preview tool was the browser's native print dialog. No layout grid, no canvas, no InDesign or Scribus. Just: insert my content → tweak code → save file → check print preview → repeat. Pagination, margins, page size – all of it was controlled through the browser's print settings. I leaned into what

the system offered by default. The experiment wasn't only about making a zine in an unconventional way – it became a moment of stepping outside WYSIWYG, outside the smoothing logic of layout software, and into a mindset that feels closer to scripting, copying, and gently misusing what's already there. I printed everything directly from the browser, for paper, I used samples from Fischer Papier – a large supplier for our school. You can order up to ten free A4 samples per paper type, so I pieced the whole zine together from these fragments. The final prints came from our school's free (and slightly terrible) laser printer. This low-budget, patchwork setup felt fitting: an experiment not just in designing differently, but in hacking the entire pipeline— also questioning what's “enough” to make a designed object, and where design truly happens (Fig 7).

8.2 Midterm

Next, I shifted focus more directly towards the institutional protocols. One experiment in this direction was my midterm presentation. Normally, we're expected to be physically present, to show up and speak live. I wasn't. Instead, I made a video and asked a friend (thank you, Kate) to secretly swap slots with me on the schedule. People expected her to present – but instead, she played my video. It was a small surprise, a switch, a performance. This might not sound radical, but for me it was an experiment in multiple ways. Not only did I subvert the standard presence protocol, but I also deliberately broke with the visual language we're taught to use for presenting. I started with conventional slides – clean, beautiful, expected – and then exited the presentation mode altogether. I opened the text editor and started typing live what I was also saying partially aloud. I recorded my screen googling definitions, opening tabs, using my process documentation website instead of polished Keynote slides (Fig. 8–9). I also handed over control: Kate had the video, the MS Teams link, everything. I didn't even attend the whole session – just dropped into the feedback via call (a part where I stayed conventional, admittedly). That small act of letting go, of not overseeing every detail, was part of the experiment too.

8.3 The Written Part

Something I already hinted at in the introduction – is that the written part itself is an experiment. There's no strict separation between theory and practice; the two are

entangled, feeding into each other throughout. Of course, this isn't radical or forbidden, but it does go against how I was trained to think about academic writing. My method follows a loop: theory informs experiment, experiment shifts perspective, and reflection loops back into theory. This creates a non-linear structure, where ideas emerge through doing, and documentation becomes part of the work rather than a record of it.

A key part of this is also how I write: publicly, live, and transparently. Instead of working in isolation and only revealing a final, polished result, I'm drafting in a shared Google Doc – visible in real time to anyone with the link. Writing becomes traceable, open to interruption, and stripped of its usual authority. Even more structurally, I finished the practical part of my thesis before writing the theoretical one. Again, that's not forbidden, but it's not typical in design education. In most design institutions I know, it's the other way around – first you write, then you produce. The written part usually comes first to frame, justify, or theorise the practice that follows. But for me, that order didn't make sense, I didn't want theory to predefine or narrow down my experiments too early. Letting the work lead meant I could stay open, avoid fixing my direction too soon, and allow ideas and areas of interest to emerge through the act of making.

And on a more general level, I see this project as a kind of mirror, or meta-reflection, of the master's programme itself. Many of the things one could critique about this thesis – a lack of clear focus, doing a bit of everything, not always knowing what the concrete goal is – are the same things people might say about the programme. It touches on a little research, coding, a bit of aesthetic exploration, some critical theory, some practice. From the outside, it might seem scattered or superficial. But to me, this thesis is the logical consequence of this study programme. It's shaped by its openness, its ambiguity, its refusal to fix what design should be. Whether you see that as a strength or a weakness is a matter of perspective, personally, I loved this programme. It confused me, stretched me, gave me space to get lost – and that's exactly what I needed. This thesis is both a product of that space and a reflection on it.

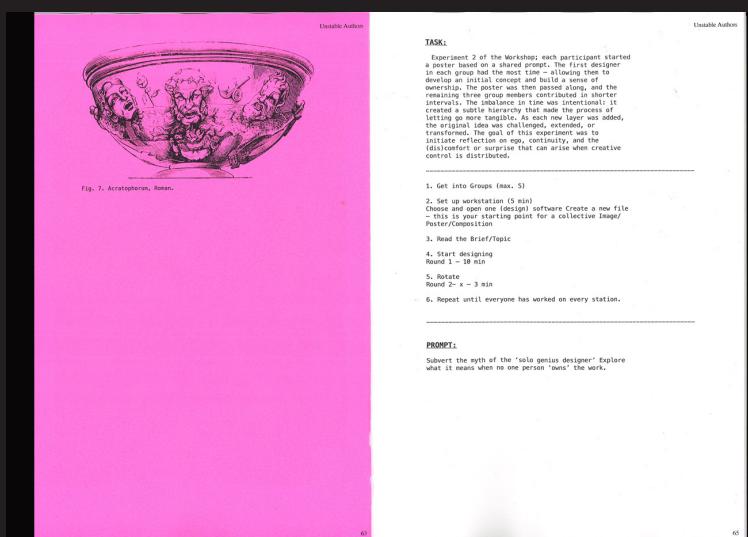
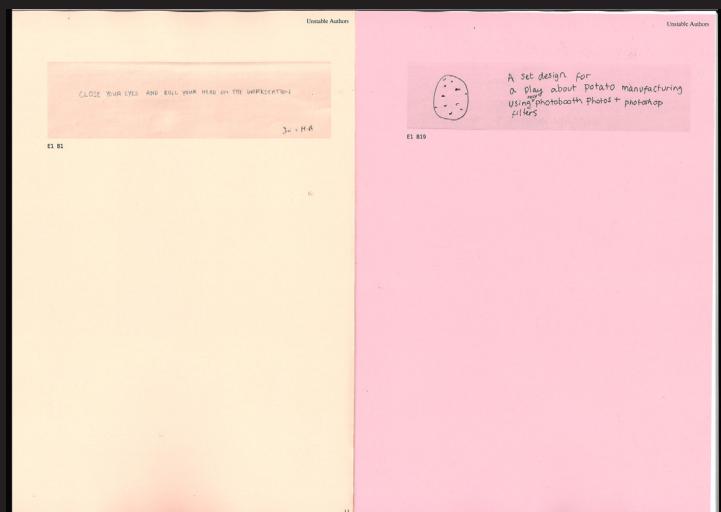
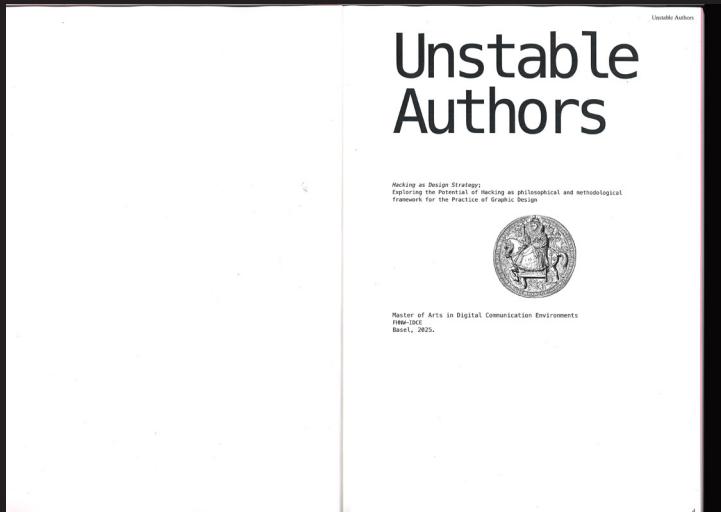


Fig. 7: Scans of the Browser-Zine

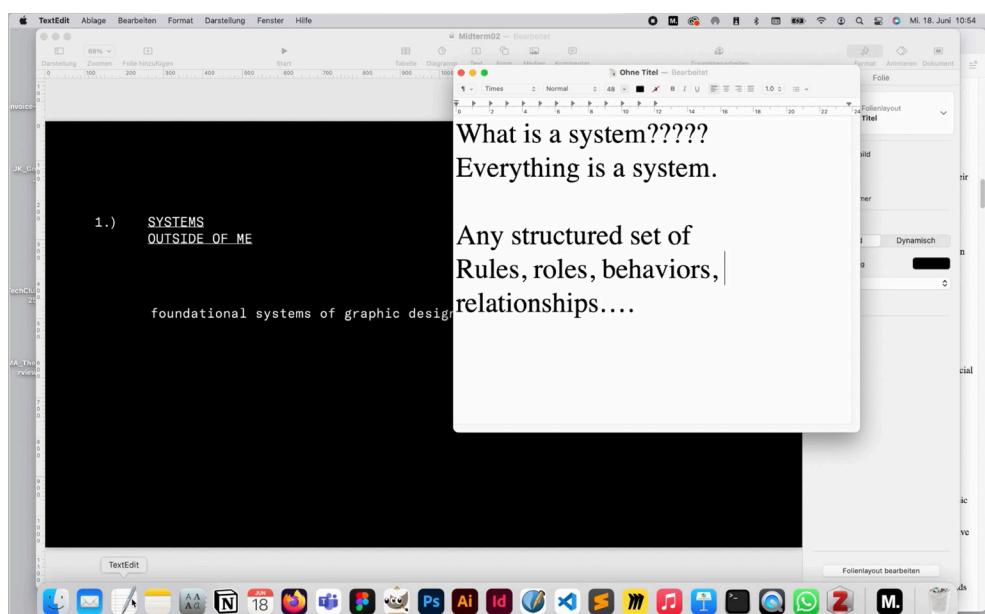
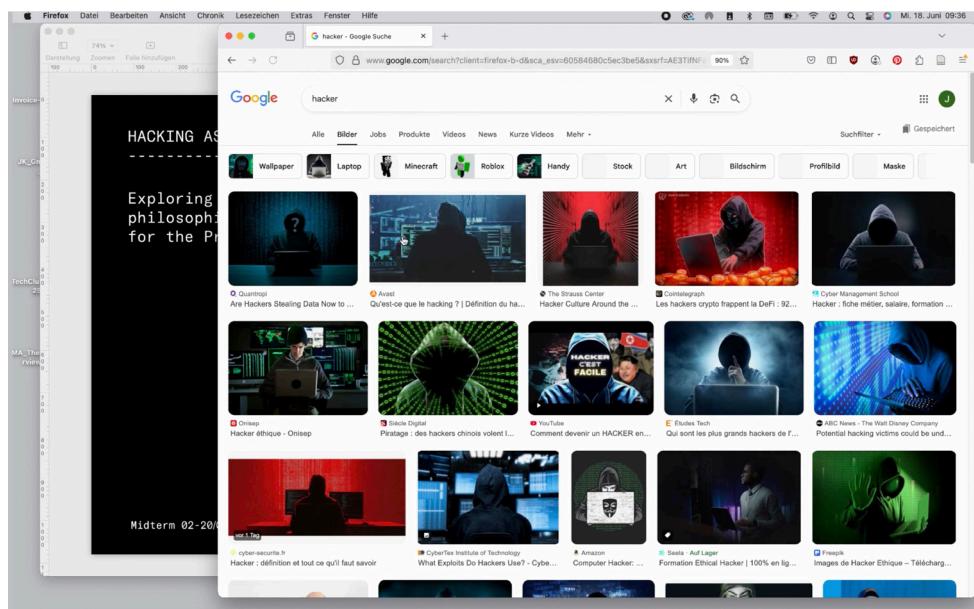


Fig. 8–9: Excerpts of the midterm presentation video

8.4 Emotions

Then, another dimension of these experiments began to unfold – this time not around tools or institutions, but around the practice itself: feelings. From a certain point on, I started including a small section after each experiment where I described how I felt while doing it – what excited me, what frustrated me, what I liked, and what I didn’t. It sounds simple, but for me it was a shift. Designers often have a complicated relationship with emotion. There’s a lot beneath the surface – not just insecurity or self-doubt, but also pride, exhilaration, and sometimes even manic energy. These feelings are part of the process, yet we rarely speak about them. We’re trained to be critical, precise, professional – but not necessarily personal. So for me, writing about my emotional state became a kind of counter-practice: a gesture of openness.

Seen together, these experiments marked a shift – from rethinking tools and habits to questioning the deeper structures that shape how we work, learn, and show up as designers. Whether through reshaping workflows, quietly bending institutional norms, or bringing emotion into the foreground, each one became a way to test what hacking might mean beyond the technical. A way of working with what’s already there – protocols, expectations, materials – and nudging them into something more open, personal, or strange.

8.5 Conclusion

Through these experiments, I began to understand hacking not as disruption for its own sake, but as a method of gentle subversion – of working with existing systems while subtly shifting their boundaries. For designers, the takeaway is not about abandoning tools or breaking rules, but about becoming more attuned to the invisible frameworks – protocols – that shape our work. Whether questioning default tools, bending institutional norms, or embracing emotion in creative practice, each gesture became a way to reclaim agency within design. It’s a reminder that design doesn’t just happen on the screen or the page – it happens in the choices we make about process, presentation, authorship, and feeling. Designers can approach their work not only as problem-solvers or stylists, but as quiet system-tinkerers – able to expose assumptions, rewire habits, and imagine other ways of doing and being. The most powerful changes don’t always require new software or radical breaks. Sometimes, they begin with small acts of refusal, care, or curiosity – within the very systems we think are fixed.

9. Experiments Phase IV: I am a System & The Designer as Myth: Ego, Genius, and the Culture of Authorship

I started out by experimenting with outside of me – the fundamental building blocks of design. Then I moved on to systems that I am inside of, such as tools, workflows and design processes. There, I explored themes such as autonomy and technical literacy. Eventually, I arrived at institutions, questioning their protocols, templates and expectations. Throughout this process, I tried to expose or shift the norms and habits that we designers are trained into, often without noticing. In that logic, it makes sense to arrive at the self, at how we see ourselves as designers. Still, this chapter wasn't planned. It emerged from the process. I didn't initially think of "the self" as something to hack. But the more I experimented, the more I noticed how much my own ego was shaping what I did – and how I felt about it. Expectations around originality, authorship, or recognition weren't just influencing the work – they were influencing me. Eventually, it became clear: this too is part of a system.

9.1 The Shame of the Copy

The shift began with a series of experiments in which I attempted to replicate hacker strategies such as copying, remixing, reusing and reverse engineering. As we now by now, these are typical learning methods in hacker culture – breaking something down to understand it and then putting it back together in a new way. I applied this concept to graphic design, for example by dissecting existing posters, studying their structures and recombining their elements. My goal was not simply to imitate, but to treat design as something modular – something that could be broken down and re-configured – rather than a static artefact. I wanted to view design as a system that was free from a "creative owner".

In one of the first experiments, I took four posters designed by others and combined them into a new composition. There was no original content. Just recombined pieces – nothing "mine". Setting aside the aesthetic aspect, when I looked at the result, I

felt an immediate discomfort. It seemed wrong – lazy, even shameful – and I didn't want to show it. I had experienced that reaction before, but given my current state of mind, it surprised me. I began to ask myself why I felt this way.

Was it because I hadn't designed every part of it? Because it didn't match my "style"? Because it looked unrefined – and I hadn't "earned" it through effort?

9.2 Questions of Identity

This small act of remixing something instead of creating it from scratch disrupted more than just aesthetic expectations. It challenged my understanding of my own identity as a designer. I had internalised certain beliefs about what constitutes "good" design: originality, authorship, refinement and control. I even believed that suffering was part of the process. That unease exposed an internalised system I hadn't fully acknowledged:

That design must be authored.

That authorship must be visible.

That value comes from originality and ownership.

This hack was psychological: letting go of control, of authorship, of recognition. Letting go of the need to be proud of the result. This surfaced again in a later experiment: I took a short interview text and laid it out using only default settings across several design programs (Fig. 10). I made no custom choices: the typefaces, margins and colours were all left untouched. The idea was simple: What would happen if I removed myself from the process and let the software decide? I had assumed this would reveal something about software defaults and how they shape what we produce, and it did. But it also revealed something about me.

How deeply I tie my self-worth to the quality of the outcome.

How uncomfortable I am with producing something that feels "empty".

This wasn't just about defaults. It was about pride. Ego. The need to feel in control. That kind of reflection can seem self-indulgent at first – but I've had many conversations with other designers to know this isn't just personal, it's a pattern, it's part of a system. Many of us feel it: the shame of making something "bad", the fear, but also the need – of being seen. The pressure to impress, to be original, to constantly produce.

Where does that come from?

It's not just about individual insecurity. It's part of a larger myth – the idea of the solitary genius, the auteur designer, the original creator who must suffer for their

Default Systems in Graphic Design

1. 2003
2. Interview
3. Emigre

When writer/designer Rob Giampietro approached me a few months back with the idea to write an article about graphic design in the '90s, he brought up an unrelated topic during our conversation that I found intriguing: he mentioned the term "Default Systems Design." He said it was the topic for another article he had been working on for the past few months. It's curious how certain ideas reach critical mass. In Emigre 64 a number of contributors independently from each other, each made note of the emergence of a new kind of graphic design that seems to rely heavily on the use of systems and defaults. Just when you think graphic design is in a coma, something's taking root. Reprinted here is how we arrived at the topic, as well as edited segments of the rest of the dialogue. —Rudy VanderLans, editor, Emigre

Rudy: And that's what you think has happened? Designers have become more conservative again, more in line with the status quo? Which is not surprising, of course. In times of economic and political uncertainty, when the future looks bleak, there seems to be a tendency to look back, to choose safe solutions. Within graphic design we've seen an upswing in retro themes, nostalgia, and the return of the Swiss International Style.

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Rudy: The look of graphic design today is evidence of the pendulum-swing back to more conservative and fiscal-minded times. It is a counter-revolution of sorts, and its assumptions are troubling, and real, and on MTV, and in Emigre itself.

Rob: Because this kind of work self-consciously positions design as stupid and trivial and says that documents of importance needn't rely on design to shape them. Default Systems are machines for design creation, and they represent design publicly as an "automatic" art form, offering a release from the breathless pace at which design now runs, as clients ask for more, quicker, now. Default Systems are a number of trends present in current graphic design that exploit computer power in an industry-wide fashion. They are a quasi-simplistic rule-set, often cribbing elements from the International Style in a kind of glossy pastiche, a cult of sameness driven by the laziness and comfort of the technology that enabled Emigre's rise, the Macintosh.

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Fig. 10: Layouts only using default settings

work and defend their vision. It's a legacy that runs through modernism, through design education, through studio culture. We may work in teams or under brands today, but the traces of that ideal still shape how we see ourselves and what we expect of our work.

9.3 The Myth of the Genius

So, again: where does this come from – this idea of the solitary designer-genius, working in silence, producing perfect, original outcomes, untouched by criticism or collaboration? Why is it still so seductive? Its roots go back to Romanticism and the cult of the individual.⁴⁶ Emerging in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Romanticism celebrated the figure of the inspired, tortured artist – someone whose creativity came not from training or context, but from innate genius. Genius, in this sense, wasn't just talent. It was almost divine. The Romantic genius was imagined as a kind of prophet, a channel for truth or beauty – above ordinary life, misunderstood by it. This figure became a model not only for artists and poets, but also for how we began to imagine “creative” professions more broadly. This narrative didn’t disappear. It carried over into modernism, where the designer – now framed as an author, rather than a craftsperson – was again seen as a visionary. Formal innovation, stylistic signature, and authorship were increasingly associated with value. The myth evolved, but it didn’t dissolve. It remained tied to a powerful idea: that the designer should be original, autonomous, and, ideally, a little difficult to understand.

Monika Parrinder, in her essay The Myth of Genius (2000)⁴⁷, explores how this logic plays out specifically in design. Referencing Foucault, she reminds us that the author does not “precede” the work – that ideas, references, and meanings are already present, circulating in culture.⁴⁸ The designer’s job is not to invent from nothing, but to select, filter, remix. That insight aligns closely with my own experiments, but it also undermines the very premise of the “genius”: if nothing is ever fully original, then what is being authored? Parrinder also points to how genius is constructed – and how absurd these constructions can be. She offers a “genius checklist” that includes:

⁴⁶ Cotterill, T. (2013, March 10). Romanticism's claim on individuality. Retrieved July 6, 2025, from <https://thomascotterill.ca/2013/03/10/romanticisms-claim-on-individuality/>

⁴⁷ Parrinder, M. (2000) The myth of genius. Eye Magazine. Retrieved July 10, 2025, from <https://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/the-myth-of-genius>

⁴⁸ Parrinder, M. (2000) The myth of genius. Eye Magazine. Retrieved July 10, 2025, from <https://www.eyemagazine.com/feature/article/the-myth-of-genius>

1. The creator – who rises above ordinary life, once seen as a messenger for God
2. The individual – solitary, non-conformist, a rule-breaker
3. The madman – genius and madness are deeply linked in cultural imagination
4. The intuitive – whose work is natural, unlearned, and thus beyond critique
5. The pioneer – ahead of their time, misunderstood, suffering

It's almost comical when listed like this – and yet, these are exactly the roles we still subtly assign in design culture. We continue to admire the “mad genius”, the self-taught outsider, the person with a “signature style”, the misunderstood innovator. These figures become aspirational, even when they don't reflect how design actually happens.

9.4 Joe and the Big Orange Book

The way graphic design history is narrated still centers around big names – often white, male “geniuses” presented as lone inventors of style or meaning. As Michael Rock points out, this myth of mysterious aesthetic inspiration is only possible if we strip design of its cultural context and flatten its complexity⁴⁹. Jarrett Fuller similarly notes that design history is “littered with names” we're told to memorise – shaping a culture where originality, authorship, and personal branding are rewarded, especially in education and the market⁵⁰. Meanwhile, Rick Poynor critiques the idea that designers lack agency because of client involvement – as if collaboration were an obstacle rather than part of the work⁵¹. This contradiction – between the myth of the genius and the reality of anonymous studio labor – reveals how design still struggles to tell its own story in a more collective, honest way.

Designers are already finding ways to break apart the myth of individual authorship and the cult of originality. Movements like queer typography – such as the work of Paul Soulellis⁵² – actively question the ideals of authorship, control, and neutrality in design. A particularly striking example appears in the book *Interdisciplinary Design*, edited by Anja Kaiser. In her text, “Once Upon a Time”, Sara Kamann retells

⁴⁹ Rock, M. (2006). The problem of provenance. *Design Observer*. Retrieved July 10, 2025, from <https://designobserver.com/feature/the-problem-of-provenance/5657/>

⁵⁰ Fuller, J. (2020, August 18). The end of the designer-genius. *Jarrett Fuller Blog*. Retrieved July 10, 2025 from <https://www.jarrettfuller.blog/2020/08/designer-hero/>

⁵¹ Poynor, R. (1998). *Design without boundaries: Visual communication in transition* (p. 115). Booth-Clibborn Editions.

⁵² Soulellis, P. (2021.). Queer typography. Retrieved July 14, 2025, from <https://soulellis.com/entries/qt.html>

the history of design not as a linear, heroic tale, but as a strange and playful narrative. For Example: she gives Josef Müller-Brockmann the absurd nickname “Joe” and describes how he wrote a big orange book about grids (which every designer knows) (Fig. 11). She treats the grid itself like a mythical object: “The grid was an arrangement of lines and measurements drawn onto a sheet or digital sheet; the grid was a saviour and a safety net; it lent security and efficiency to things.”⁵³ Her tone, which is somewhere between deadpan and surreal, subtly exposes just how fixed and mythologised design history has become. Suddenly, alternatives feel imaginable.

9.5 Authorship as System

The topic of authorship, originality, and ego is vast and deeply entangled with the history of design – too complex to fully unpack within a chapter of this thesis. That’s why I’ll focus more specifically on the collective and situated dimension of this discussion, not only because it offers a concrete counterpoint to the solitary genius myth, but also because it aligns closely with hacking as a method and mindset. In this context, hacking isn’t just about technical subversion – it’s about modifying systems, working iteratively, and rethinking ownership. It invites us to see design not as the output of a singular author, but as something built through shared structures, inherited tools, and collaborative friction. This perspective helps loosen the grip of ego – not by erasing the designer, but by repositioning them within a network of influences, dialogues, and mutual dependencies.

Hackers often work collectively, iteratively and in tension – not to erase merit, but to make contribution visible and structural. In the previously cited fictional dialogue, Anja Groten reflects on the frictions at the heart of hacker communities: “Instead of idealising a hacker archetype, designers could learn more from the dilemmas of this maker culture… If we stop clutching so tightly to the paradigm of making ‘convincing work’, and instead embrace the limits of our practices, designers could create our own ecology of frictions.”⁵⁴ Groten’s call for “an ecology of frictions” points toward a design culture that embraces vulnerability, messiness, and shared authorship. While this ethos is often explored in newer or more explicitly critical scenes like hacker or queer design communities, it also resonates in more established, applied

⁵³ Kaiser, A., & Stephany, R. (Eds.). (2024). Glossary of undisciplined design (2nd ed., p. 23).

⁵⁴ Groten, A. (2020). Hacking/designing: Paradoxes of collaborative practice. Hackers & Designers. Retrieved July 2, 2025, from <https://hackersanddesigners.nl/hacking-designing-paradoxes-of-collaborative-practice-by-anja-groten>

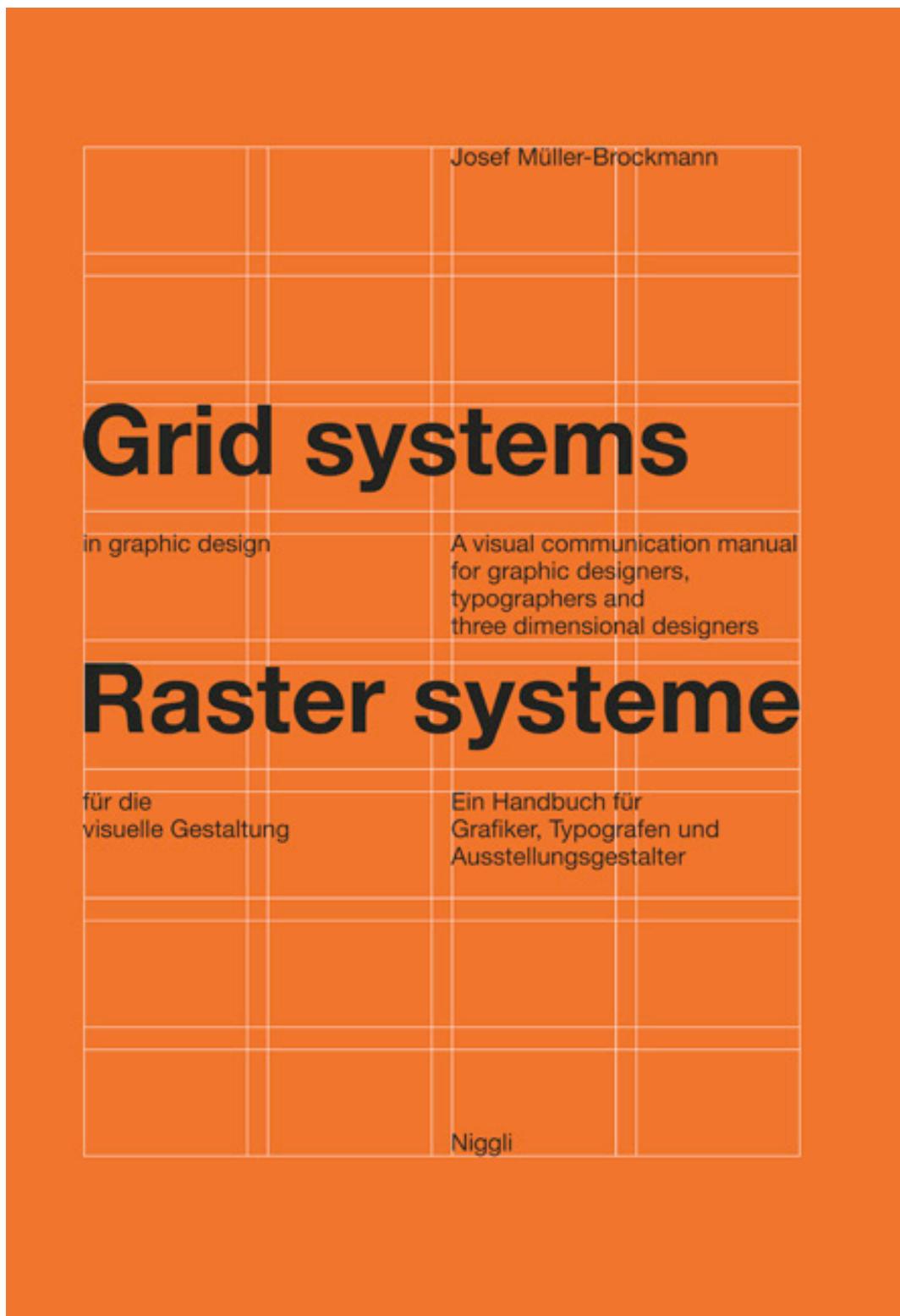


Fig. 11: Joe's big orange book

practices – such as that of Experimental Jetset. The Amsterdam-based studio, operating since 1997, is striking not only for its graphic work but for its self-presentation: always as a collective. There's no single spokesperson or star figure. Their interviews and essays often reference the band-like dynamic of their studio, suggesting a model of design that is less about individual expression and more about a shared worldview. Crucially, they are transparent about their influences⁵⁵. Rather than posturing as originators of entirely new styles, they openly situate their work in relation to music, counterculture, modernist design history, and theory. For them, design is always cultural – always narrated, always embedded. In that sense, their practice quietly undermines the genius myth not with theory, but through consistency: a long-term collaboration grounded in dialogue, influence, and mutual authorship.

A good example of this ethos is Experimental Jetset's book *Statement and Counter-Statement* (2015)⁵⁶. Rather than presenting a polished portfolio or a narrative of individual genius, the book reads more like a curated dialogue – between their own work, their many influences, and the cultural and political contexts that surround both. Even the title signals this approach: every design “statement” implicitly invites a counter – a disagreement, a recontextualisation, or an extension. What's striking is how deliberately the studio avoids the language of originality or invention. Instead, they frame their work as part of a lineage – drawing from punk, modernism, underground publishing, pop music, and theory. Their authorship is not erased, but consciously situated.

And yet, this doesn't mean that the ego simply disappears. Letting go of authorship-as-ownership doesn't mean designers stop caring – if anything, it asks us to care differently. Many of us remain deeply attached to our work, our choices, and our outcomes – and perhaps rightfully so. But what hacking, and collectivity more broadly, invite us to do is to relocate the ego: from individual genius to collaborative contribution, from final outcome to process. This shift doesn't reject identity or ambition, but softens their edges. It asks: What happens when we start to value contribution over authorship?

This way of working – acknowledging influence, embedding oneself in a system, allowing for contradiction – shares something important with hacking: the idea that

⁵⁵ Design Indaba. (2014, March 13). Experimental Jetset on scavenging the ruins of Modernism [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klzgqg7zl4M>

⁵⁶ Experimental Jetset. (2015). *Statement and counter-statement: Notes on experimental jetset*. Roma Publications.

knowledge grows through modification, reuse, and dialogue rather than isolated invention.

Ellen Lupton offers a compelling frame towards that direction: the “designer as producer.”⁵⁷ Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s⁵⁸ writing, she argues for a model in which designers seize control of the means of production, not to elevate themselves, but to redistribute agency – inviting readers and audiences to become collaborators. “Authorship,” she writes, “hinges... on a nostalgic ideal of the writer or artist as a singular point of origin.”⁵⁹ By contrast, the designer as producer is entrepreneurial, embedded, and relational. This vision doesn’t eliminate ego or authorship, but it reframes them as tools for shared meaning-making – distributed, situated, and flexible. Building on these perspectives, Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “author as producer” helps shift the focus from isolated creativity to the designer’s active engagement with the material, social, and technological conditions of production. Benjamin argued that artists must go beyond simply crafting form to questioning how their work is manufactured, disseminated, and consumed. This model challenges designers to move from passive roles toward mastering the means of production, thus expanding the political and cultural power of design. It aligns closely with hacking and collaborative design cultures, where audience participation and collective creation become central.

Together, these viewpoints refine the central claim of this chapter: authorship in design should not be abandoned but reimagined. Rather than perpetuating the figure of the designer as an isolated genius, we can understand authorship as a relational practice – rooted in context, shaped by others, and always part of a broader system. This is not a call to strip designers of agency or ambition, but to reposition those qualities within networks of mutual influence, shared production, and collaborative tension. In doing so, we begin to dissolve the ego not into absence, but into relation.

⁵⁷ Lupton, E. (2010, October 25). The designer as producer. Retrieved July 22, 2025, from <http://elupton.com/2010/10/the-designer-as-producer/>

⁵⁸ Benjamin, W. (1934/2025). Der Autor als Produzent. Ansprache im Institut zum Studium des Faschismus in Paris am 27. April 1934. Retrieved July 13, 2025, from <https://www.textlog.de/benjamin/essays/reden/der-autor-als-produzent>

⁵⁹ Lupton, E. (2010, October 25). The designer as producer. Retrieved July 22, 2025, from <http://elupton.com/2010/10/the-designer-as-producer/>

10. Conclusion

10.1 Theoretical Frame

This thesis began with a feeling: personal frustration at the current state of graphic design practice. There was a sense of being boxed into predefined roles and of being expected to constantly adapt to new tools and workflows. There was a feeling of always producing and never pausing. This felt rigid and unsustainable. I didn't start this project looking for a new method or grand theory; I wanted to change my own approach to design. I wanted a more open, critical and curious approach to the field that would allow for reflection, experimentation and resistance. Hacking became the lens through which I explored this possibility. Not in the narrow, technical sense, but in a broader sense – as a philosophy and a method.

As we saw in Chapter 2, the ethics of hacking are less about breaking into systems and more about understanding and rethinking them. Hacking asks: How does this work? What else could it be? It values curiosity, transparency, playfulness, and a deep desire to learn. Rather than being passive users of tools or systems, hackers want to take things apart, reconfigure them, and often share the results. There is an anti-authoritarian spirit here: a rejection of gatekeeping, and a firm belief in sharing knowledge and collaborating socially.

Chapter 3 builds on this by examining the working methods of hackers. Their working methods differ from traditional labour models. Rather than being driven by external obligations or economic rewards, they are motivated by joy, challenge and experimentation. Failure and frustration are not signs of weakness, but central parts of the process. Hackers learn by doing: by breaking things, testing limits and sharing their results, bugs and all. This open and iterative approach mirrors many aspects of creative work, and I found it deeply resonant with the way I (and many other designers) wish to work.

As I state in Chapter 5, tools are not neutral. They shape our ways of working, our aesthetics and even our sense of agency. While tools matter – especially in today's ever-changing technological landscape – what matters more is how we relate to them. Whether the tool is open-source software, generative AI or design systems, the key question is: are we using it passively or actively interrogating and reshaping it?

Chapter 7 continued this discussion by examining how hacking is used in activist and artistic contexts. Here, hacking is not just about using tools creatively, but also about questioning the rules that underpin them, exposing and subverting systems from the inside and reimagining them. Examples show that graphic design can also be critical, engaged and systemic without reducing itself to pure aesthetics or technical skill alone. Their work demonstrates the broader scope of what design can encompass: not merely output, but also intervention.

Finally, Chapter 9 addressed the question of authorship and the designer's ego. This chapter was not originally planned, but it became clear that any attempt to rethink design practice must engage with how we perceive ourselves as designers. Our field still clings to the myth of the genius designer as the sole creator of an iconic outcome. This image is not only historically constructed, but also deeply limiting. I argue that, instead of being erased, authorship in design should be reimagined as relational and situated – embedded in systems, tools, and communities. Hacking offers a helpful model here: hackers rarely claim individual ownership, operating instead within networks of contribution, influence, and mutual dependence. Through the work of Experimental Jetset and Ellen Lupton's concept of the “designer as producer”, this chapter proposes shifting from solitary to shared authorship. This is not to diminish the role of the designer, but to reposition it within a broader ecology.

In all of these chapters, hacking served as a means of thinking differently about design – of loosening fixed roles, questioning inherited tools and reimagining authorship. It revealed that, like hacking, design is not just about making things; it's about engaging with systems, asking critical questions and shaping the conditions of production. While this thesis does not offer a final answer or a universal method, it suggests that a hacking mindset and approach can open new ways of thinking about design. This is not a linear process or a solo performance, but an ongoing negotiation with tools, systems and others.

10.2 The Experiments

The experimental method was central to this thesis. Rather than starting with predefined questions or objectives, I worked through action and iteration, allowing the process of experimentation to teach me things I hadn't known to ask. This mode of enquiry was slow, often ambiguous and occasionally frustrating, but it allowed space

for emergence. It helped me identify patterns, constraints and tensions that might have been overlooked in a purely analytical approach. The experiment became a way of thinking, not just a means of producing examples. In this way, it echoed the spirit of hacking: making sense of systems by engaging with them directly from within.

The first phase focused on the fundamental building blocks of graphic design: typefaces, grids and images. I had long taken these elements for granted, both in their presence and in how I used them. However, by treating them as systems rather than merely aesthetic tools, I began to recognise the deeply held assumptions they convey. Disrupting these elements revealed their ideological weight. More importantly, this showed that even these seemingly rigid structures could be bent, questioned and reimagined from within.

The second phase moved from elements to tools and then to workflow. As I shifted between GIMP, Photoshop and code editors, I saw how each platform came with embedded values in their interfaces, defaults and the decisions they encouraged or discouraged. These weren't just functional tools; they shaped my thinking and working methods as a designer. This insight led me to examine my own workflows more closely. I began to view these as systems too, shaped by professional expectations, tool logic and internalised ideas of speed or efficiency. By writing small scripts that slowed me down or disrupted familiar patterns, I was able to recognise how deeply I had internalised certain norms and how these could be challenged. It became clear that things don't have to be this way.

The third phase turned toward protocols and contexts. These experiments weren't about breaking rules for the sake of it, but about soft subversions – finding the small points of leverage within bigger systems. The idea of the “protocol” became especially useful here: it allowed me to think about the frameworks that guide not only what designers make, but how we present, collaborate, and position our work.

Throughout the process, the experiments served less as solutions and more as probes – a means of bringing invisible conditions and internalised beliefs to light. They helped me to confront the fact that my behaviour as a designer had been shaped not only by education and software, but also by deeper scripts surrounding productivity, authorship and value. Why does 'default' feel like 'failure'? Why is polish equated with professionalism? These weren't rhetorical questions – they were emotional ones.

One of the most important insights to emerge from this process was the realisation that everything – from typefaces to workflows to institutions – can be understood as a system. Once you see something as a system, you realise that you can intervene in it. You don't even have to break or master it; simply knowing that defaults can be changed shifts your relationship with them. A single typeface setting or minor interface quirk becomes an invitation, not a constraint. This idea can be applied more widely: if you can reconfigure a tool, you can also reconfigure a norm. If you can bend the rules of a layout, perhaps you can also bend the rules of professional expectations or social structures. It's the same skill, just applied differently.

In this way, the experiments led back to the one of core questions of the thesis – not only how we design, but how we relate to, how we feel about designing. They reframed my understanding of the designer not as a genius, nor merely a technician, but as someone embedded in systems – someone who can engage those systems critically, playfully, and reflectively. The designer as hacker, in this view, is not necessarily loud or disruptive, but attentive – curious enough to trace where assumptions come from, brave enough to bend them, and open enough to let the process lead somewhere unexpected.

Above all, the experiments revealed that meaningful shifts in design practice don't always require radical tools or entirely new methodologies. Sometimes, they begin with the smallest possible tweak: a different font, an awkward script or an intentional error. In those moments, the system becomes visible. And with that visibility comes the possibility of something new.

10.3 What else could this be?

What has emerged through this work is not a new method, but a shift in posture – a reorientation of what it could mean to design. Hacking, as explored throughout this thesis, doesn't offer fixed answers or a blueprint to follow. Instead, it invites us to engage differently: to stay with complexity, to poke at systems, to recognise design not as a set of outcomes but as a space of ongoing negotiation. It's a way to reclaim curiosity in a field increasingly driven by clarity, speed, and optimisation. Hacking encourages us to step out of passive roles and into more conscious, more caring, and more critical ways of working – not to discard design's tools or traditions, but to

repurpose them with intention. And in that sense, this thesis isn't a closed loop, but an opening. Each chapter, each experiment, was just a beginning – a prototype for another iteration. Like any good hack, it's meant to be forked, reversed, misused, and built upon. The invitation now is open: to take what's here, and do something else with it.

Appendix

Image references

Fig. 1: Screenshot of the documentation website showing an example of experiment documentation.

Fig. 2: Typeface Experiment.

Fig. 3: Hand-drawn grids.

Fig. 4: Randomized Margins with basil.js.

Fig. 5: A reflective prompt.

Fig. 6: Designing blindly.

Fig. 7: Scans of the Browser-Zine

Fig. 8–9: Excerpts of the midterm presentation video.

Fig. 10: Layouts only using default settings

Figures 1–10 were created by the author.

Fig. 11: Joe's big orange book. From Grid systems in graphic design, by Josef Müller-Brockmann, retrieved July 20, 2025, from
<https://www.niggli.ch/produkt/grid-systems-in-graphic-design/>

Fig. 12: Framework of the experiments. (Created by the author).

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