23 March 2016

THE VEIL OF IGNORANCE

Imagine

You are in your mid-twenties and your vision is 20/20 or better. You are not color blind and all the devices you own have a 'retina' screen. You are standing in a major city and your internet is fast.

Imagine

Your vision isn't 20/20 anymore, just like 65% of the population, it's worse than that. Like 4.25% of people on the planet you are color blind. You are now 1 in 10. You are dyslexic. Your phone is 3 years old. You can't afford a new one. Your data plan caps out at 3g and 1 gigabyte a month. The internet connection where you spend most of your time is not what you'd like it to be.

Imagine

You can't see at all. You use a computer with a screen reader. A mouse is mostly useless to you. You use your keyboard to navigate around interfaces and sites.

If you woke up tomorrow without knowing what your life would be like - and you needed to build a new internet for everyone. What would you think about? What would your priorities be? What problems would you try to solve?

American philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) had a lot of mind-crushing ideas, but perhaps the most significant was his concept of "the veil of ignorance." It best applies to the creation of social contracts. At risk of oversimplification, Rawls's scenario was basically this: Let's pretend you were instantly able to re-create American society in totality, and you could do it in whatever way you wanted. You could make (or eliminate) whatever laws you desired, and you could implement whatever financial and judicial structures you believed would work best. However, you must do this under a magical "veil of ignorance." The moment after you create this system, you'll no longer be yourself (and you don't have any idea what your new role in this society shall be). You might be a rough facsimile of your current self, or you might be someone entirely new. Your gender might be different, or your race. It's possible you will be extremely destitute and appallingly ugly. You'll have a different level of intelligence and a different work ethic. You might suddenly be disabled, or super athletic, or homosexual, or criminally insane. As such, you will (probably) want to create a society that is as fair and complete as possible, since you have no idea what station you'll inherit within your own new, self-constructed boundaries. You need to think outside of your current self, because tomorrow you'll be someone else entirely.

Chuck Klosterman - 'I Wear the Black Hat'

John Rawls mostly philosophized about theories of justice but I think he would have been a

pretty great designer.

Imagine

You drive to a job interview. Before you get out you look in the mirror and straighten your tie. Both of your legs work so you open the door and climb out. Earlier that day you ran 6 miles and did 20 minutes of stretching afterwards. Your legs feel great! You walk across the parking lot and bound up a set of stairs. You don't think twice about it.

Imagine

You don't have two working legs. You arrive at a building for a job interview. You exit your automobile and roll across the parking lot. There is no ramp. Your wheelchair can't climb stairs. You don't know what to do.

Thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act this doesn't happen as much as it used to. Most people don’t view a set of stairs as a barrier to a building. We don't observe whether or not there is a ramp. We don't notice if a doorway is wide enough for a wheelchair. Or if a hallway is wide enough to make a 180 degree turn. We most likely don't think about this because our life doesn't necessitate it.

When we build things - we must think of the things our life doesn't necessitate. Because someones life does.

Imagine the frustration of people who use things designed by people who don't take their basic needs into consideration. I think it is dehumanizing.

"The ADA is one of America's most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination and guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to participate in the mainstream of American life -- to enjoy employment opportunities, to purchase goods and services, and to participate in State and local government programs and services."

Think about the current state of the website/application/digital product you were working on. Can everyone use it with the same opportunity to participate in 'mainstream American life?' Statistically speaking, probably not. But you are providing a service.

Facts

- At 20 years old, your retina receives 100% of the light that hits the eye.
- At 40 years old, only 50% of the available light enters the retina.
- For an 80 year old, 25% of the available light passes through the retina.

When people say "My old tired eyes can't read this" It is because they can't.

I've often hear two complaints when designing for accessibility.

- Accessible color combinations limit my choices as a designer.
- Big type looks clumsy.

First lets talk about color contrast.

There are 140,737,479,966,720 combinations of hexcodes. Obviously not all of them are accessible. If only 1% of all color combinations are accessible than there are still almost 141 million combinations to choose from. This seems more than adequate to paint any bikeshed you will come across for the rest of your career.

Typography

"If it is too small people can hit command + and make the type bigger"

This is a fact that can't be disregarded. But I offer a counter: If the type is so big that it offends your user they can hit command - and make the type smaller. I have never observed anyone do this. Often times, I watch people bump up the font-size of the page they are viewing. This seems backwards.

Typography, like color, and music is all about how values relate to each other. If large type looks clumsy it is most likely due to an ineffective type scale that doesn't relate to the proportions within your design system. Type scales are all about relativity.

The thing about large type, is that everyone can read it. Not everyone can read small type. This is a fact. No one complains that typefaces set at 20px are too big to read. In all of the user testing I have ever done that has never been said. But people have complained about the readability of type set to the equivalent of 10 and 12px.

Consider the consequences of building a ramp instead of a staircase. Anyone can get up a ramp. But not everyone can get up a set of stairs. As a design community I think we should be building more ramps.

The Morality of Designing

I'm a designer. I am not here to focus on making things pretty. I'm here to make things work.

I am a designer because I want to solve problems. I want people to be less frustrated when they use technology. I want to make their lives easier. I don't want to make anyones life more difficult. These two sentiments sound the same, but they are not. I find both are important to consider.

When I sit down to design things I try to put on the veil of ignorance. I imagine a world where I am not who I am right now. And I think about all the things that could possibly frustrate me. Then I think some more.

I try to design for that reality. I don't design for myself and my perfect eyesight, my retina screens, and my fast internet connection.

I design for everyone I can think of. Which is a growing list of people with a growing list of concerns that possess a growing number of devices made up of a wide variety of screen sizes.

If everyone can use your product I think it's good for your business. But even if it wasn't, I think it would be the right thing to do. Which makes it worth doing.

So I'd do it anyway.

Further Reading

- Mathematical web typography
- Relative Readability
- Section 508
- tota11y

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