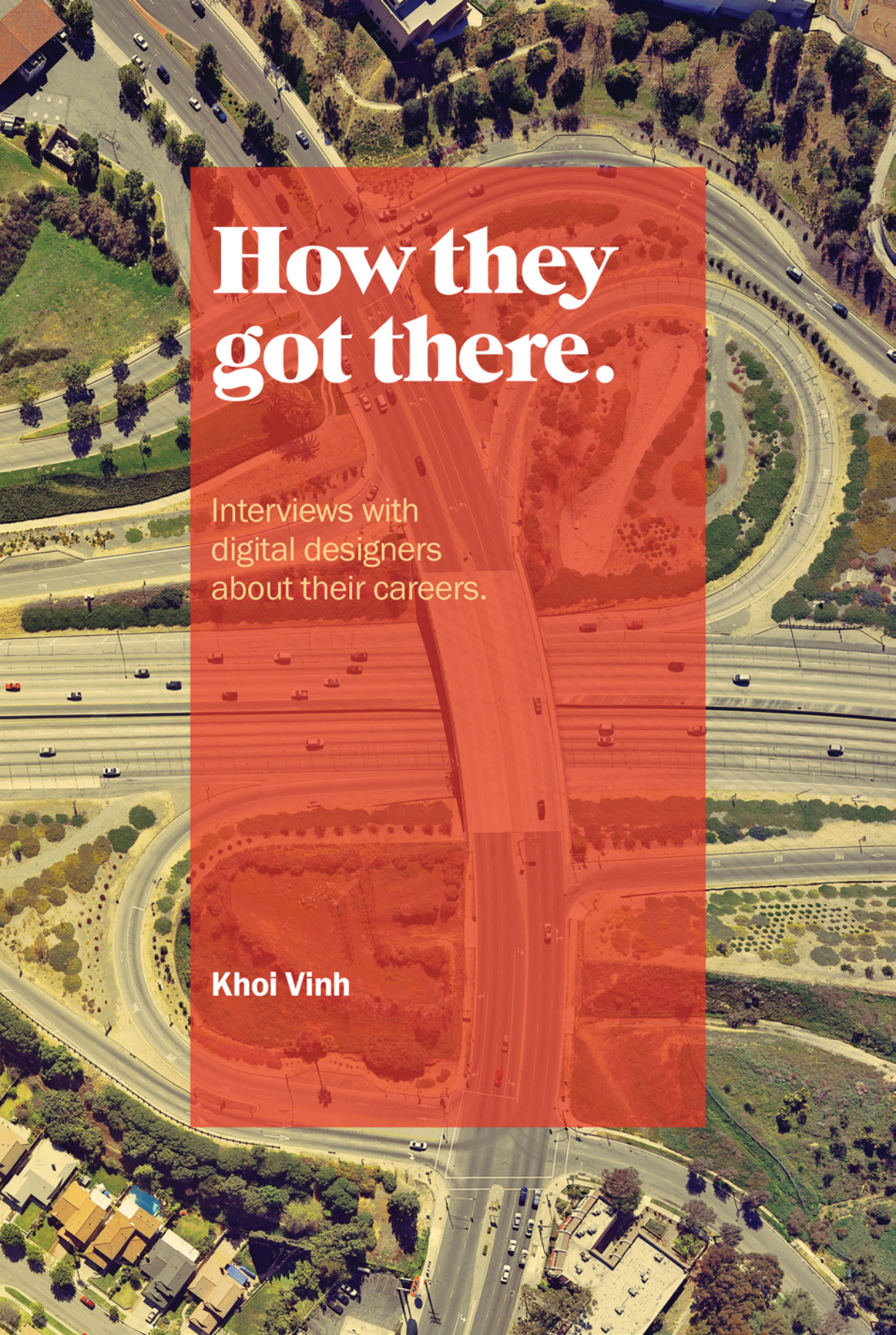

How they got there.

Interviews with digital designers about their careers.

Khoi Vinh

Chapter 1

Dan Cederholm

Founder, SimpleBits, and Co-founder, Dribbble

A world-renowned designer, author, and speaker, Dan Cederholm lives in Salem, Massachusetts. He first built his reputation on pioneering web standards-based designs, and went on to co-found Dribbble, an online community that has changed the way designers share their work.

You came to design through an early interest in music. Could you talk about that transition?

I was interested in music from an early age. I took drum lessons when I was 8, and from then on music shaped my life. As far as having shaped my interest in design, I don't think I knew that at the time—I didn't put it together. But I knew that I was always interested in the album art and packaging.

I remember I had this little band in seventh grade. This is back in the '80s. We did a four-track recording and made a cassette. I designed the cassette cover on a crazy mimeograph machine

that my dad had in his office, printed them off that, and clipped out things from magazines to make it. That visually creative side was always something that I was interested in, I just never understood how it worked.

I was really interested in skateboarding when I was younger, too, which had a large branding component, a loyalty to certain brands and artwork, stickers, t-shirts, all that stuff. But I didn't really understand how it was created or that I could do that.

The people who designed actual skateboards and actual album covers just seemed to be in a world that was far away from what I was doing. There was a sort of barrier there. I could understand how a photocopier worked, though. I took a stab at creating a little record label when I was little bit older and would make seven-inch covers, going to Kinko's to do it. I didn't know what I was doing, but knew that I really liked to do that stuff.

I wish someone had come along and said, "Hey! There's a whole world over here that you can be involved in and people are doing these things with computers." Growing up in rural Vermont, there was not a lot of exposure to those kinds of careers.

So because music was the passion that you understood, that was the field you decided to pursue?

From an early age that's what I wanted to do. I started with drums and I later went to guitar, which I still play. I don't have any aspirations to be a rock star anymore, but music is still an important part of me. It fueled the first half of my life, defined my direction in work, and eventually would lead to a career in design on the web. That's the weird path that I went on.

What was your first step from music to design?

Initially I went to Emerson College for audio recording and ended up dropping out after a year because it was a very expen-

sive school and all I really wanted to do was get into the studio there and learn how to record stuff. Studio time was pretty scarce for a freshman, and I was getting antsy. I was still playing music; that was my passion. I ended up dropping out and going to a one-year program at Northeast Broadcasting School, a small school that was also in Boston and specifically focused on audio engineering and production.

I did that and thought, "I've got to make a living, but I'm certainly not going to do it playing in a band," so maybe working at a studio or opening a studio would be something I could do. I interned at some places and I quickly realized it didn't match up with my lifestyle. It was a lot of overnights and late nights, and dealing with musicians who were mostly terrible people. I hate to say that, but it just wasn't a good career path for me.

I was interested in the technology of it, though. I had computers as a kid, a hand-me-down computer from my brother—a Mac Classic. I was interested in the technology side of recording, but not necessarily the business side or the social side of what it meant to have a studio.

That all led to a job at Rounder Records, which is a record label that used to be in Cambridge, for folk, bluegrass, and Americana music. I was just happy to have a job. At that point I knew I couldn't do studio stuff, so I just got a bare-bones, bottom-of-the-ladder warehouse job for minimum wage. Because there are so many people that want to work in the music business and get into the industry, the pay is horrible.

That's a very prestigious label, though.

Yes, it is, and it was right in my backyard, so I thought, "This is perfect. I'll try to work my way up, and that will be a way to be involved in music but also make a living. I can even work normal hours." It was a terrible job. The first thing I did was re-

turns, which is getting old broken stuff back from other distributors and checking it in. It's just the absolute worst job.

I made a lot of good friends there that I still have today, though. The people were great, and a lot of them were in the music scene in Boston. I was still playing in bands, but this was right around the time when the web started exploding. I remember having email there and I was really excited about it. We were using the Pine email program on monochrome terminals. It was awesome. I was blown away by that and wondering, "How do they do it?" That convergence of me wanting a job with normal hours and the web coming up really set the next stage.

I had worked a little ways up the ladder at Rounder into a job with a desk that had a computer and Windows 3.1 on it and Internet access, which I was too poor to have at home. I had it there and it was really eye-opening. I just sort of immediately fell in love with the web and web sites and wanted to know how they worked, wanted to know how they were designed.

I was in a band at the time and had a friend that designed our web site, and I remember being able to look over his shoulder a little bit, and I was fascinated by what he did—embedding WAV files and other ancient stuff. Immediately I thought, "This is amazing."

Finally I had found a way to be creative where I could really have control over something completely. With music you can play it on your own but being in a band requires people and practice space and getting gigs and just a lot of logistics. On the web I could see a place to be creative that didn't have any constraints logistically. As long as you had a computer with Internet access, you could start learning and you could start teaching yourself, and that's exactly what I ended up doing.

Was it the independence that appealed to you most or was it the vocational possibility?

More the former. It was like a playground, in a way. It was early in the web days, and I thought, "Maybe I could do this." Part of it was the continued influence of that friend who designed our band's web site. I knew that he was getting paid to do this and it was fun and he was creating stuff. I was also really sick of working for the minimum wage and I finally said to myself, "Let me get out of the music industry because it's not going to go anywhere for me."

Was that a hard moment for you?

It was, to be honest. It was a growing-up thing. I didn't want to be that 40-year-old guy that hangs out at the rock clubs and works at KFC or whatever. I wanted more out of life, and I was lucky to find something that I actually enjoyed and that eventually would lead to a career that also supported me. I'm sure a lot of us who work on the web feel that way, that this thing that emerged within the last twenty years has created a place for us to be and make a living. It's fantastic.

But at that point were you making a living yet?

No, I wasn't. I couldn't afford much because of that crappy job. I bought a computer on a credit card so at home I could soak it in and learn. I spent a lot of late nights learning HTML and seeing this whole community of personal web sites and sharing knowledge freely. I thought that was amazing. Everyone was explaining how to create the stuff that you were seeing.

I talked a little bit before about the barrier to understanding how design worked or how people created stuff. On the web it's a little more transparent—you can learn about the medium by being in the medium and viewing source. You could take things apart and learn how they're built.

It is interesting how in the analog world keeping a trade secret can be a competitive edge, but in the web revealing your trade

secrets *is* the competitive edge.

Yes, absolutely. In some cases it's a trade secret and no one would want their process revealed, whereas with design on the web there are certain portions of it that are exposed. The people that are successful are the ones who embrace that and are able to share how they built things and pass that on to other people. I immediately loved that about the web.

You had this computer that you charged on your card, and you were learning from this community of people teaching each other how to build this new world. What came next?

After that I made a little bit of a leap in that I left Rounder and got a job at an ISP in Newton, Massachusetts, called Galaxy Internet. I was at Rounder for three years, so I endured a lot of warehouse dust. No regrets. I mean, every job that we have leads to where we are right now. I left and went to another sort of bottom-rung job, doing customer support for Galaxy. I liked that I was immediately surrounded by people who knew how the web worked—a bunch of kids, to be honest—manning phones and doing tech support and stuff. I guess we were all kids at that point.

There was one guy named Paul Yasi, and he was kind of the Yoda of Galaxy Internet. He was the only one on a Mac. I learned a ton from him about the technical aspects of web design. That was extremely valuable. The ISP would offer web design services, so toward the end of my tenure there I ended up doing some web design for some clients, which was a big deal for me.

You said the ISP job you jumped to was low level, but did it feel like an upgrade because you were getting exposure to people like Paul and to all that technology?

Yes, totally. There was a buzz in the air about the web at that

point. Anything in that space, in technology, felt like the right place to be, and I knew something exciting was happening. Almost immediately after I got hired we expanded to a new office and hired a bunch of people. Even though I was at the bottom of the ladder, I was excited to get in there and learn as much as possible. It was just another stepping stone in the end, but the stuff I learned there was invaluable.

And you were working with clients for the first time?

Yes, I hadn't done that before and didn't really know what the hell I was doing. The good thing at that point is that no one really knew how this stuff worked. The clients certainly didn't understand how it worked. Whereas today most people are savvy about the web in general, in some ways it was easier back then because you could make a lot of mistakes and not be found out as a fraud—which I'm always so fearful of today. Back then it was easier to hide.

I was at Galaxy for several years. Next I went to a company that was essentially living the "Office Space" script, minus the criminal behavior. This was 1999, right before the dot-com bubble burst. We were a cubicle farm, three hundred quality assurance people doing god-knows-what on one web site. I was hired as an online editor, which is bizarre because I didn't have a degree or any writing experience. Myway.com was a portal, a Yahoo clone, in a way. One of the things they made were custom home pages for businesses, and they made the custom home page for Galaxy Internet, so that's how I knew about them. There was a little bit of HTML involved, and we were responsible for the home page of this web site.

Did you apply for this job or did you know somebody who helped you get hired as editor?

A couple of friends of mine from the music world had worked there, actually, and had spoken highly of it because they had

stock and they were doing well. They were a CMGI company in Andover, Massachusetts, so it was still local. It was sort of a dream at that point. A job that actually pays in this industry? That's what I needed next—a real job.

I applied not really thinking I would get it, but for some reason I did. I think part of why I did was I was starting to do my own stuff on the side. It was '98 or something, and I had a personal web site where I was experimenting a lot with web design and blogging. I think that's what got me in there, to be honest. I didn't have much experience, but I did have something I could point to where you could see what I was up to.

I didn't have a degree and had a music background, which was useless in that case, but I did have that job at Galaxy and a little bit of experience doing web design. This was my first real job where you got a salary and you got health insurance and you're in a room with a bunch of other people and there's managers and project managers and QA people. It was a big Internet operation. The CEO owned an island. It was that kind of place.

What kind of things did you do there?

I was an online editor, so we were in charge of the home page, and that was anything from putting up headlines to making packages of special events. We had this one very small window of the page that we had control over and we could stick HTML in there and do stuff. I didn't want to just sit there and create headlines and then clock out for the day, so I ended up trying to do some creative stuff in that tiny constraint of a space.

This was right around the 2000 presidential election, so I had a project manager that was all excited about making this a big deal on the home page. I ended up creating a logo for it and doing some different HTML layout stuff within that little box. I think it impressed a few people there. I was trying to make

the best of what we had to work with and I ended up being able to flex some visual muscle there, which I hadn't done much of before.

That was a great experience. Luckily my boss at the time, Linda Tischler, left and went to Fast Company magazine, and when My Way was tanking, she said, "You should come apply, we're hiring for the web team."

Without a formal education in design, how were you teaching yourself about typography and layout?

As I said before, one of the great things that l love about the web is that all the information is *there*. It's like taking yourself to school when you get home. You just start reading online and you start following people that know about the stuff that you want to learn who are just sharing what they know about that. And that's how I picked it up or how things started to click. I've always been interested in layout and I've always noticed things such as the way movie posters look or how packaging for food looks. All these things I had been paying attention to throughout my whole life suddenly made sense. Also a lot of late nights and soaking stuff up. Around the same time I got really into BeOS—are you familiar with that?

Yes, that was Jean-Louis Gassée's operating system.

Exactly. At the time the Mac was dying and everyone thought Apple was going to go away; this was before Jobs came back. Nexus was going on, but at the same time BeOS was interesting because you could run it on a Windows machine. I thought it was really well designed and it had an interesting community behind it. A lot of the interface of BeOS was fascinating to me, and the iconography was an early influence on my pixel-icon days. The logo for my freelance studio, SimpleBits, was probably directly influenced by that. Of course BeOS went away and then luckily Apple came back and kicked ass, so I could be

excited about interface stuff for computers again. I just went off on a tangent there…

We were talking about learning about design.

Yes, it was just learning by observing and discovering what you like on the web that other people are doing, but pulling back from past interests like music packaging and skateboard design and related brands. I remember I was on a breakdancing team when I was really young [*laughs*]. I was in fourth or fifth grade. Me and my friends, we were the Turbo Breakers. Graffiti art was a big part of that—not that I did graffiti, I was too much of a wimp in Vermont. But you'd throw your cardboard out that you're going to spin around on, and it would be decorated with graffiti art. And then there's a whole fashion associated with it, obviously, like Nike wind suits, and Adidas. I had always loved the branding and design part of it but I never really put it together. Those things linger around in your head and once you start putting it together, it all becomes an influence on how you design and how you create things, whether it's subliminal or not.

So you went to Fast Company to work with a colleague from My Way. Could you talk about how you gained your first exposure to web standards there?

Fast Company was a step up. I was nervous about the job. You had really smart people working there, really talented, creative people—and a killer design team for the magazine and also for the web site. This was sort of at the beginning of the web standards movement, and I was blogging a lot about that on my own.

When Doug Bowman did the Wired.com redesign with CSS and web standards, that was a watershed moment, a large commercial site proving that you can do this, and it pointed the way forward for a lot of us. What was cool about that is that

FastCompany.com and Wired.com, they had a lot of similarities in terms of being a publication and so I was able to go to my boss, Rob Roesler, who was a great guy, and say, "Look what Wired did. I've been playing around with this stuff on my own, and look at how much it helped their flexibility and workflow." And he said, "Yes, let's do it."

What was your job title when you went to your boss?

I was Web Design Guru [*laughs*]. They had all these wacky titles there when I first started. That was probably the least wacky of them, actually. I was basically just one of the people on the team that did a lot of HTML, taking PSDs from the print team and making them work on the web.

It was a small team, probably fewer than ten people doing the web site. It was the type of place where if you took initiative on your own and had a passion for something, they would let you run with it, which was great. I owe a lot of where I am now from that position because my boss said, "Okay, go for it."

Having the title Web Design Guru wouldn't necessarily imply that you would be responsible for proposing a major re-architecture of the site, right?

Exactly. I was not in the chain of command there. I wasn't anywhere near the top. I wasn't an art director or project manager. I just knew a lot about this emerging stuff and had a lot of interest and passion for it on the side. And so I really owe a lot to Rob for giving me a chance. I think the timing worked out that he was comfortable enough in what I was doing to let me take a stab at it. It ended up being a major architecting of the whole site, and a new art direction for us as well. I was really fortunate to be able to lead that. At the same time they also let me talk about it and blog about it, and that launched my career completely.

Did that open up a thousand new doors?

It really did. It was kind of amazing. Again, I'm just lucky to be there at that time and to have Fast Company. It wasn't Wired but it was known enough where people could point to it and fuel the fire for the web standards movement, and say, "Here's another major commercial site that is working with web standards." Every time a site that had some visibility did that, it was a big deal because it was good news for web designers and it was living proof of what everyone knew was a better way forward.

That got a lot of attention, and my own blog got a lot of attention because I was writing about the process. I remember getting an email from Christopher Schmidt, saying, "Why don't you come speak on a panel at South by Southwest?" I was freaking out.

The panel was Doug Bowman, Dave Shea, Molly Holzschlag, and myself. I had never met in person any of the web people that I had learned so much from and admired for so long, so it was a big deal for me. I don't like to fly either, so I was doubly nervous about this thing. Public speaking was another one of my fears, but you can't say no when someone asks something like that—you've got to do it. It turned out pretty well. I mean, I didn't bomb completely and survived it, and that was one of those doors that opened for me.

You had effectively made this huge forward leap in your career. Did it feel that way, too?

I was just happy to be doing that work and getting paid for it, but something pushed me into changing my career again and that was Fast Company got bought by a company in New York and moved the whole operation there. You could either move to New York if they wanted to keep you or just take the severance. I didn't want to move, so I took the severance and didn't know what I was going to do after that.

Fortunately I was able to get some good client work while I was on severance, which I owe to Mike Davidson, who worked at ESPN back in the day when they did a web standards redesign as well. He said they needed a consultant on this stuff. That ESPN was one of my first clients out of Fast Company was a lucky break. I remember a couple of months went by and I said, "Wow, I'm paying the bills this way. That's interesting."

You didn't expect to have a career as an independent freelancer?

No. I figured I would just get another job somewhere because, frankly, the idea of freelancing or doing your own business was scary. It was all new and I didn't know if I could do that, but six months goes by and I've paid the bills, so I guess I'm freelancing now. I stopped looking for a job and started down the path of running a one-man agency.

You said something before about always feeling that you were going to be found out as a fraud. When you were freelancing, because you did it for a number of years, did you ever feel like, "Okay, now I'm legit and nobody can say otherwise"?

Honestly, no. It could be because of not having a degree or being formally trained in design. Or going back to my childhood and not understanding what makes someone a designer. I always felt like a fraud. That's kind of cliché, but it is true. I think that's also healthy, in that it keeps you on your toes and it keeps you wanting to learn more. If you get too comfortable, things start to get stagnant and maybe the work would decline. Always being worried about your capabilities has a negative part and a positive part.

What are the positive parts? It pushes you harder?

Yes, it pushes you to create and try to do the best you can and to care about what you're doing, regardless of who it's for or what it is. Because when you stop caring about the details, it

shows and maybe it's time to do something new at that point.

How did you come to start Dribbble?

I had been freelancing for a long time and was always interested in creating products. I had dabbled in that a little bit with Cork'd, which is a wine-sharing site that was short lived. I was always creating stuff through SimpleBits, t-shirts and icons, and I liked having side streams going on to supplement the freelancing.

Dribbble started through a couple of things. One was Rich Thornett, co-founder. We're neighbors here in Salem. He had a job in Boston, but a couple of days a week he could work from home, and we ended up sharing an office on those days and got to know each other that way. At the same time I had this idea from people I would see only at conferences. Back then we were communicating through blogs mostly, which is really slow and asynchronous, and I'd always be wondering what they were working on. I wanted to look over their shoulder and ask, "What are you working on now?"

That's the original idea for Dribbble. Two other things inspired it: Cameron Moll's Screen Grab Confab, which was basically put up a screen grab of something that you made and comment on the craft, and I thought that was really interesting. Then Twitter was also another inspiration, in that you've got this constraint of 140 characters with quick hits, and it's easier to digest stuff and follow people. It's less time consuming than going to someone's portfolio, which may be outdated.

I made a logo design on a t-shirt and we just started building it, and it took a long time. It was a side project, as we both had full-time work. When it came time to invite people, we sent them a t-shirt and a hand-written card with a code on it. These were sent mostly to friends and colleagues that we knew. Selfishly, I just wanted to see them upload stuff, to see what they

were doing. That was the reason to do it. There was no business plan. There still isn't, really [*laughs*]. It was a long road from creating that first beta to the two of us going full time, and then turning it into the small business that it is today.

Because you were both doing your day jobs, how did you divide the work?

Rich was actually able to go full time with Dribbble first. He does the brunt of the work managing the site, and we collaborate on product. He was able to go full time first when we had enough revenue to do that, and then later I came on board full time probably three years ago. We've just slowly bootstrapped it to the point where we can hire a few more people on and it's been a slowly growing monster since then.

It's been fun. New and different challenges, juggling a lot of different things during the day. Not necessarily doing CSS and design every day, but doing more running-a-business stuff, which is both fun and terrible.

This time did you finally feel qualified to be doing this job for Dribbble, to be running the business side of things?

I think both Rich and I struggle with that a little bit. I don't think either one of us has the background or even had the desire to learn business skills, but it just sort of happened, and then you learn on the job. Luckily our inexperience hasn't killed it. It's thrived, largely because of the community that was there at the beginning and that is still forming from that.

One of the most favorite parts for me is going to Dribbble meet-ups and actually meeting the people that use the site, who maybe have gotten jobs through it or it's helped their careers or they've made connections with people through the site, whom they've started businesses with. To hear that kind of stuff makes it all worthwhile. We usually get energized from that and come

back and feed it into running the business.

Being qualified is interesting. It's yet another one of those "being found out as a fraud" things, but then as you're doing it and you're working with other businesses, you realize that no one knows what they're doing in that regard. Even more so than design as a discipline, there are so many different ways to handle running a business.

When you had that realization, was it empowering to you or was it frightening?

It's empowering. Frightening, too, because you realize that the world is a messy, unorganized place. But powerful in that "I can do this"—the same way I had that revelation about web design. "Okay, there are three thousand different ways I can create this web page." A lot of it is convincing yourself that you're doing the right one when there isn't really one "right one." There are a whole bunch of avenues you could take. That same thing goes for running a business. There are myriad ways to fuck it up, and hopefully you don't.

Dribbble is such a phenomenon and has been very influential, and you've fully committed to doing it full time. Do you know what the future is for you there, or do you make it up each day?

It's funny, for the most part I do kind of come in and make it up for the day because things shift and change so much. I'm really enjoying it because it covers so many different facets of being creative, whether it's designing physical products or events or UI for the site. I can't see myself getting tired of that.

It just occurred to me: It sounds almost like Dribbble is your band and now you can design all these things that you wanted to do when you were a kid.

That's hilarious. I hadn't thought of it that way, but you might

be right on the money. It has opened up a lot of avenues creatively for me. Rich, for instance, is a brilliant guy, and is really the engine of the operation. At the same time, he's not a designer and has less interest in the design side of it. For me, it has opened up a lot of opportunity to just create things, as though it were my band [*laughs*]. I can take it on the road to these meet-ups, and that part of it is a lot of fun. I hope to continue to be able to do that. Business-wise, who knows. We're continuing to grow a community and add products and features to it that we hope will make it better. That opportunity to play with a brand and be creative with it is definitely not lost on me.