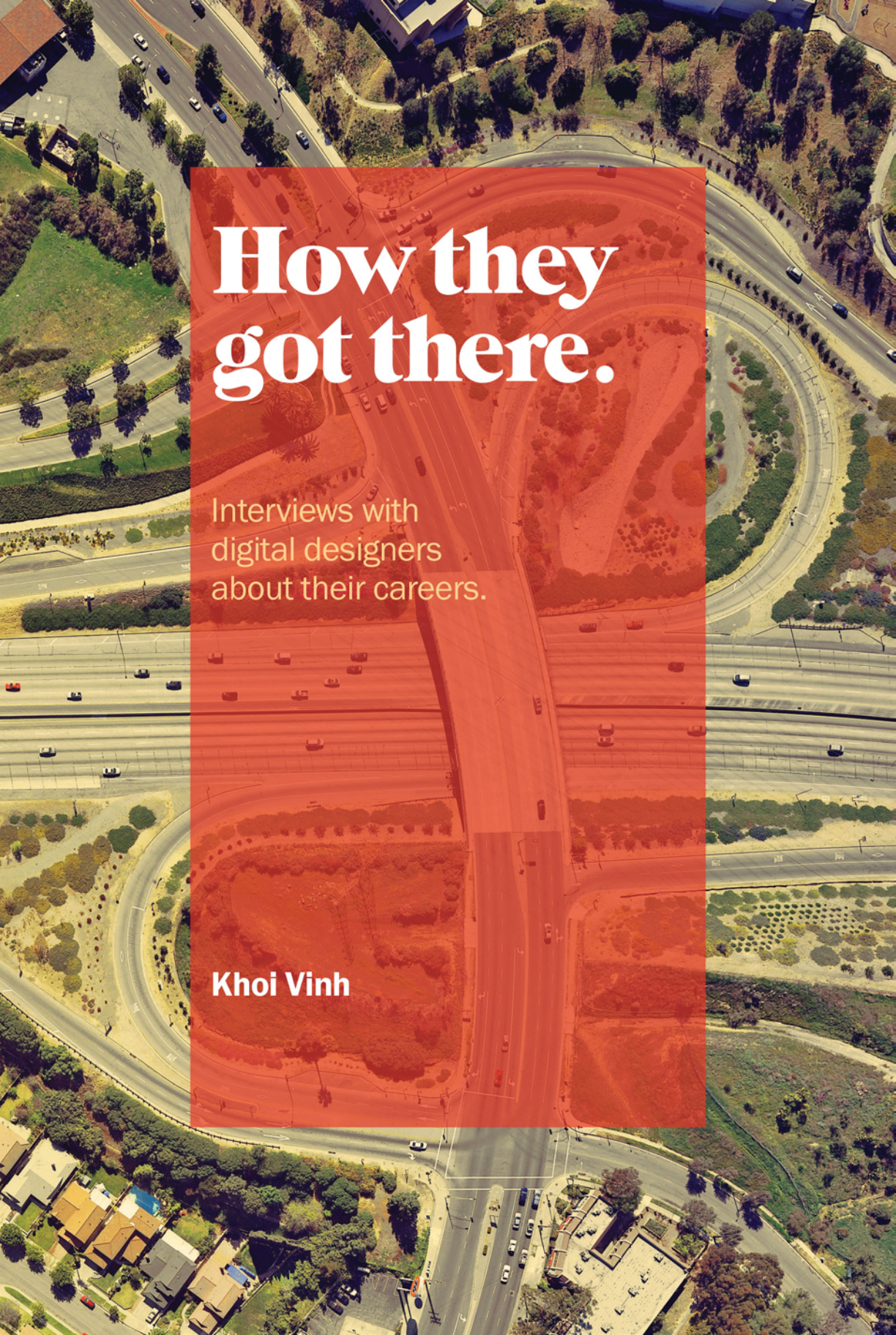


How they got there.

Interviews with digital designers about their careers.

Khoi Vinh

Chapter 2

Alex Cornell

Co-founder, Firespotter Labs

In less than half a decade, Alex Cornell went from an undergraduate degree in psychology to graduate work in print design to co-founding a Google Ventures–backed startup alongside veteran entrepreneurs. In that time he built a robust portfolio of successfully launched mobile apps and, surprisingly, a side career in wildly creative video productions.

You studied psychology for your undergraduate degree at Duke, and then you eventually went on to do graphic design. What led you toward that transition?

I studied psychology, but my main focus was music. I played in a band throughout college. Like most bands, we needed design all the time to promote our shows and albums, and that responsibility fell to me just by virtue of the fact that we divvied things up. Not that I was any good at it.

When did you start playing in bands?

In high school, and then a couple of different bands early in college. The last band was in my junior and senior years, and we were really serious. I'm not in that band anymore, but they are still going, and the band is now called Delta Rae. At the time we were called Running Lights. I was the de facto designer for the band.

I always remember what illuminated design for me, that it could be this awesome and powerful tool. We made this photo-realistic promotional sticker that looked exactly like an electrical outlet and then in very small letters it had our band's web site on it. We'd put them all over campus, in classrooms and at the library. People would try to plug into them and get really annoyed, but then they'd read it and see that it was from our band. People kind of hated it, but it was remarkably successful in getting our name out there.

I used to take art classes, but I'd never been exposed to graphic design. It was an amazing experience of "Wow, this medium speaks visually to people and has an effect on them." The fact that this was art but with a goal of some kind was new to me and really exciting.

Had you done well in the art classes that you'd taken? How did it come to pass that you were the band member chosen to do the design work?

I guess you could say I did well in art, and I've always had at least some penchant for visual things. My mom was an artist, so that endeavor always was encouraged at my house and ran in the family a little bit. I was really bad at it then, but had an eye for it. I was always seeking design out, unknowingly. I was looking at other bands' web sites and always keeping folders of what I liked about them, not knowing that I was looking at graphic design. I would just think, "Oh, The Strokes are cool, and they've got this crazy web site." More than anyone in the band, I was just consuming design the most, and therefore I

was able to speak the language the best, and then turn things into web sites and posters.

I was really enjoying doing the band's design work and by that point had learned that graphic design was actually a field. I remember reading Print magazine and seeing the movie "Helvetica," and this whole world opening of "Wow, this is a real thing. This is amazing." The band wanted to stay in North Carolina, but I didn't. I wanted to go to California, so I moved to San Francisco to go to graphic design school.

How did you start investigating this idea of design?

Somewhere along the line, in my last semester at Duke, I took a graphic design class. Duke is not a design school by any means, but I had a really good teacher there. She exposed me to Print magazine and also Computer Arts, which back then was my favorite thing ever. It was an extremely basic class—the type of class where they would say, "Draw two dots on a piece of paper. You just made a work of design." But it was awesome. I had fun drawing dots on the paper and thinking about why I put them where, making shapes and lines.

Somewhere along the line I found the work of Scott Hansen [designer and founder of ISO50], and I eventually worked for Scott. He did a cover for Computer Arts right around the time when I was first being exposed to everything. I remember seeing his work and it struck me in a way that no work had struck me before, and thinking, "Whoever made that, I need to find them. And however they made that, I need to learn all the skills required to make something like that." That was a major catalyst for making me at least want to learn more.

How did you decide to actually go and get a formal education in design, to go into a graduate program?

I was pretty self-conscious of the fact that I had this bachelor's

degree in psychology and didn't really know anything about design. The concept of teaching myself and learning via the Internet sounds super-obvious now, but back then that didn't really seem like a viable option to me. I grew up in a culture where if you want to learn something, you go to school for it.

I didn't have a portfolio besides my outlet stickers and an album cover. And I didn't want to get another bachelor's degree. I wanted to get a master's because it seemed like what people did—the next degree they get is a master's degree, so I'll do that. Most schools wouldn't take a student like me that had no training or experience. Academy of Art, in San Francisco, had a very open master's program, which was great for me. In retrospect, in design a master's wouldn't have mattered. I could have done a bachelor's program, anything. All I needed was practice and experience.

Before you entered the graduate program, did you have a vision for what kind of design you wanted to practice, specifically?

At the time I was very much interested in pure graphic design, specifically music-related. I liked posters. I liked album covers. I sort of liked web sites, but I had no idea what interface design was. Where I've ended up now, that whole world didn't open until later. My goal was basically to go work for an agency doing creative work for music and find a home at some place like Crispin Porter or one of the more avant-garde advertising agencies that has a graphic arm. That was my plan when I entered the field in 2007, right after school.

What was graduate school like?

It was awesome. I loved it. The Academy has an interesting program. It's predominantly project-based, so you'd pretty much spend most of your time at home just working on projects. Once I made it through the initial classes on design history and "this is a typeface" and was actually tasked with

some fun projects, I had a blast.

In college I was there because that's what people did after high school. I wanted to get a good education and I took the classes I was supposed to. But in graphic design school, I *really* wanted to be there and I wanted to know everything. I was just trying to comprehend as much as possible, as quickly as possible. It was really fulfilling and challenging, too.

I was bad at first, and it took me a long time. I always look at my design consumption as being one of the most helpful things for me. At a certain point, if you look at enough good design over and over again, you can't help but try to consciously or subconsciously replicate what you see. Over a few years that started to happen, but I didn't do very well initially.

When you're consuming design in that way, what do you think is happening in your brain or coming through your hand?

I come to the creative side of design as a musician, and I always draw a lot of parallels. One of the most successful ways to improve at music has always been learning other people's songs and then playing them over and over again. Learn it, get really good at it, and then little mutations happen. Memory has a lot to do with this. "Little Wing" by Jimi Hendrix was always one of my favorite songs, so I learned how to play it. When I'd go back to play it again, weird mutations and creative synapse jumps would happen. I would improvise a little bit because I'd forget a part. I'd synthesize my own personal understanding of music with what I'd learned and what I'd memorized, but it wasn't perfect, so I'd end up with this progression of my understanding of the piece that I'd been learning. In doing so I'd also develop my own individual skill.

The same thing is true with design. If I'd see a really cool poster, I'd say, "What's awesome about this poster? The typeface is great, so I'll download DIN," and then, "I love the color palette.

I'm going to use this exact blue," and then, "I like the half-tone pattern thing," or whatever. The next project I'd do, I would have remembered that awesome poster that I found and maybe I'll use DIN on this, but I have to use black and white on this project so I'll scrap that blue.

That same kind of improvisation would then happen at a certain point, but on a much larger scale. It's not just one poster I've looked at—it's thousands. In remixing everything that you've looked at, you do an amalgamation of everything you've seen, plus the little mutations of your own forgetfulness. I've always found the more inputs I had, the better that recipe would become.

Would you literally go home and try to recreate things you'd seen, things that impressed you, as self-initiated projects?

No, it's more about breaking down why something resonated with me and trying to study it in that way, and looking for similarities. I'd do the same thing with things I didn't like. I'd ask, "Why do I think this is bad?" and then try to remember those reasons. It's more like building a visual library in my head as a good jumping-off point.

While I was in school, I was working for Scott Hansen. My job for him initially was looking at magazines and pulling cool imagery, such as ads and photos from National Geographic from the '60s and '70s. He would then go through what I pulled and say which ones he liked. This person who I held in the highest regard was then grading my ability to pull this cool imagery, in a way, by comparing it to what he thought was cool.

I didn't have any inherent visual taste, so I just calibrated mine to his, in a way, and I think that influenced a lot of what I was doing in school. If Scott thought it was cool, and then I thought it was cool, then I would say, "Okay, that's a good way to handle this layout." It was a nice way to skip a few steps.

How did you get the internship with Scott?

I was aware of who he was before I moved to California. Sometime really early on, when I started at Academy of Art, I sent him an email and asked if he needed an intern. I was in class only six hours a week, and I thought it would be good to get a job outside of school.

I sent him an email, then I sent him two emails, and never heard back. Then I approached him at a concert he was playing. [Scott Hansen is also a recording artist.] I was like, "Hey, man, I've sent you all these emails, and I'd love to come in and work for you. I'd do anything, really." He was probably a little weirded out because I had just come out of nowhere, but then that gave me the opportunity to send him another email and say, "Nice to meet you, and I would love to work for you." Eventually he responded and said, "I don't have anything specific that I need, but if you really want to, you can come in and source through these magazines."

That's what I did, and that was the process I was just describing, which was awesome.

Was there anything in the curriculum at graduate school that said, "Go out and get an internship," or was this is all self-initiated?

That one was definitely self-initiated. School didn't encourage doing internships until later on, understandably. Early on the classes are really time-consuming outside of class—a lot of homework. Later in the program I worked at IDEO for my "school-sanctioned" internship. The school certainly didn't have anything against my internship with Scott, and it was actually great for everybody. Scott came to talk at the Academy once, and a great relationship came out of that for all parties.

It was definitely a tough load, though. I'd go to Scott's two or

three days a week, from 1:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. or so, but it was really chill. If I told Scott I needed to go do my homework, that was okay.

It started as just going through the magazines, but it evolved. Every once in a while, I'd look over his shoulder and learn Photoshop, and then eventually I was running the print-shop work. He used to sell limited-edition prints, and I was running that shop. He had a huge demand and people would order tons of posters every day. I got the experience of running a small digital print shop with a lot of quantity needing to get pushed out. That was really a great learning experience.

Somewhere between your first day in graduate school and when you left, you went from thinking of a career in traditional graphic design to thinking of a career in digital product design. What happened along the way?

When I moved to San Francisco, I was the only one among my friends there doing design, but a lot of them were doing engineering and in the early stages of software startups. It was 2007, so the iPhone just got released, but there was no App Store yet, so none of that crazy, gold rush–style stuff yet.

Of all my friends in engineering, one, Mark Hendrickson, needed a logo for his then-startup called Plancast. This was back when the word "startup" wasn't diluted and actually meant something—when it wasn't a five hundred-person company. They needed a logo, and I was the one semi-vaguely artistic person that he knew. He said, "Hey, why don't you give this a shot?" It was good experience for me—I don't even remember if I got paid. I did a little penguin logo for him that I loved, that *they* loved, and it worked really well for them. Plancast is still out there, and I think they still use the penguin.

That showed me this other world. I hadn't really thought of design as being something that I could use for my friends'

small companies that they were starting. I had a web site. I was constantly iterating on my portfolio site. I understood web design was a way to go, but interface design wasn't something I'd thought about until then.

It was exciting, the idea of people actually using and getting real utility out of my design. It sounded to me like graphic design on super steroids. I was used to designing to get the word out for a show or for a CD. To think that somebody would actually be able to interface literally with what I had designed was mind-blowing in the same way that it was mind-blowing when I learned that graphic design was even a field in the first place.

It was weird to have these thoughts and aspirations and then to be at this school that was still print-design oriented. It's hard for schools to keep up with the technology landscape. One project would be to create a print portfolio, and I remember being really resistant to that because why would I design this thing that I can only show to one person at a time, and I have to be there in person? This doesn't make any sense. Why wouldn't I just make a web site?

That first job for Plancast started the switch. One of the partners at Google Ventures saw the penguin logo and liked it, and had a company in their portfolio that needed similar work. I started working for them as a contractor, and then from that point I was in it neck deep.

Did you have any reservations about leaving behind your original ambition to do traditional, print graphic design?

No, because I felt like my knowledge of print design—or my classically trained understanding of layout and typography and visual hierarchy, all those skills I'd learned in school—gave me a leg up in the technology space. When I look back at where I started, the interface stuff I was doing was all total nonsense and terrible. But I felt like my background gave me an advantage.

I definitely didn't miss doing traditional types of projects because it just seemed that, from the perspective of impact and reach, the number of people seeing the things that I was doing and using them, you couldn't compare that with what I was doing before. I was doing logos for recording studios in Ohio or something, which would get seen by a few hundred people. Then suddenly, to do an interface for this company that's in the App Store, and thousands of people are using it, is really exciting. It was a totally different high, so I didn't regret it. The only thing I ever felt a sadness for was leaving music behind. That initial switch from music to design always left a little bit of a hole.

Was that a motivation all along, to do work that had the widest possible reach, or did you only discover that when you started doing digital products?

I would say it's always been there. I think that stems from music, because if your aspiration is to be a singer/songwriter/guitar player, the goal is, basically, to become famous, or whatever that actually means anymore. When I was growing up, I always wanted to play a big show at Madison Square Garden. That desire was my nascent understanding of what happened when you become successful in music. The pure feeling, though, is you want to reach as many people as possible, so as many people as possible can experience your work and understand you in a deeper way.

That carried over into design in that I liked the idea of having an impact on the world and on people. With design, the decimal point has moved far to the right, in that there are so many more zeros in terms of the number of people that you're talking about. When you think about how many people could potentially use something that you did and actually get a real usefulness out of it, that's really exciting. What it really boils down to is a feeling of fulfillment.

So you were still in school when you got this job at Google Ventures that set you off on a whole new path. But you eventually decided to leave school without finishing your degree. Could you talk about that?

I was really close to the end, one semester away. At school the curriculum was basically trying to groom me to be a really good agency designer by building this awesome print portfolio. I had already developed thoughts of doing something else, so that stuff wasn't as exciting to me anymore, and it was a huge time commitment. Portfolio was an enormous class. My thesis was a big, ambitious project. At the time I was also starting to work on a book. With these three huge things at the time—school, my book, work—there was no way I could do all that at once. Certainly I was trying for a while, and school was the one that was suffering. I moved to New York for the month of October, I remember, to work for a startup through Google Ventures. I missed a month of school and somehow still passed that semester, but barely. I hated that because I actually wanted to be learning and I didn't like missing the classes, but I had to be there in New York.

Something had to go. I figured that the Google Ventures thing and the book were both great opportunities that probably wouldn't come again. Whereas school, I felt like I could always start that again. I probably should have just focused on one thing because, eventually, the book suffered greatly via the job, and I had to delay that quite a bit, too. I was trying to do way too much at one time.

Had you ever gotten into a situation like that before?

Not on that scale at all. If I ever did, it was just, "Oh, I have these three school projects that are all due," but where I'm the only stakeholder. Never had I been involved in a situation like that where there were many more people involved, people that had a lot on the line, or where I was responsible for more than

just my own work and didn't want to let people down. In that way, that was a totally new experience and a function of never saying no. I've learned to keep things a bit more lean-and-mean these days.

It sounds like it was a stressful episode, but maybe a pretty valuable learning experience.

Yes, absolutely, it was super valuable, seeing the edge of my capability and how much I can do at a time, and learning time management, too. Learning how to work fast and efficiently was something that I developed then. I'd say if there's anything that is my biggest asset, it would be that I can work very fast, very efficiently, and still maintain an acceptable caliber of work.

What was that period of time like, once you made the decision to take this job and commit to a new career?

I was working as a contract designer with a startup in New York called Signpost, and it was a great, really fun, typical start-up experience, working until four in the morning, eating ramen noodles, the whole deal.

Around that time, when I came back to California, my friend Wesley Chan at Google Ventures introduced me to a guy named Craig Walker, who was leaving Google to start a new company. He'd started Google Voice and was leaving with exciting ideas and a few great people as well. They all three had just quit their jobs. We started hanging out and messing around with ideas.

It was a great situation for everybody. This was when design was starting to get some street cred in startup land, when people were starting to say, "We care about design." They were excited about working with a designer really early on, and they had this designer that was really eager.

But I remember, I didn't tell them that I was in graduate school, because I was embarrassed. I wanted them to see me as available, as a resource. Eventually that professional relationship started to formalize, and there was talk of "Hey, what if this was a company? We could actually turn this into a thing." To work with those guys I had to drop out. I remember when I told them that. It was a funny moment.

In retrospect, do you think you needed to hide the fact that you were in grad school?

No, definitely not. I didn't know them very well, and I was worried that any weakness on my part would jeopardize my situation. Craig was the entrepreneur-in-residence at Google. He quit with these two other guys from Google and it was a big deal—two really great engineers and this really impressive entrepreneur. Having had experiences with a few other startups that were just not at the same level, I knew, "This is the real deal." I definitely didn't need to hide it, but I was doing everything I could to be valuable in that situation.

We worked for maybe five months in Craig's house and at the Google Ventures offices, not getting paid, nothing on paper, just working. It was really informal, and my mom was really worried because I was working in this man's pool house, literally, without getting paid. I dropped out of school. She had just seen "The Social Network" and thought that I was going to get screwed.

But it worked out great. Those five months went by fast, and eventually Google Ventures invested in us formally as a company, with the four of us as co-founders. We started getting paid, and it became a real job, although it didn't ever feel like one.

How were you able to go through five months of working without pay?

I had had the IDEO job—it's called an internship, but it's basically a placement where you just work there for five months and it's a super awesome experience. That summer I made a lot of money, or at least it was a lot of money in my mind. I was also doing a lot of freelance work through Scott, who was always encouraging me to take freelance gigs and to charge what I was worth. I was always wanting to charge $15 an hour or something because I was very timid, and he would say, "Dude, what are you doing? Charge $100, charge $150. People will pay and you're worth it. You have to maintain this sense of value for your work."

That was always really helpful for me and allowed me to actually make a fair amount of money doing that. I'd made a fair amount of money, too, doing the contract work with Google Ventures. All that at least gave me enough of a cushion to get through that five-month period.

Also the kicker—and when people hear it, they're always like, "That's totally cheating!"—but my friends and I all lived in my friend's family's old, awesome mansion in San Francisco. We all crashed in this house for two years rent-free, basically, which in San Francisco is no joke—you save a lot of money that way!

Still, it certainly was a little scary. It's a long time to work without getting paid. It wasn't like my book was going to make any money either. The company back-paid that time eventually, so come that April, when we got the investment, we all got paid for the time that we'd spent already. It worked out.

So the four of you were co-founders of Firespotter Labs, and you were the design co-founder, is that right?

I guess you could say I was co-founder number four. Initially, they didn't know me at all, so I was just the designer. At the time I was the only designer, so I would do everything from the app design to the interface design, the branding, the logo, the

naming, and the marketing videos, which became my favorite thing to do. I was the only designer for the first year and a half, at least. Now there are five designers here, and I'm fortunate to have an extremely effective team. Technically I'm the creative director, but our titles are all just bullshit.

What was it like after the investment and you were the only designer? Was it like your previous startup experience, working all night and eating ramen?

No. I mean, it was close, but we had a good situation with Google. They had given us $3 million as a series A, and we were able to work in their Google Ventures startup lab for free. We had this giant empty Google office to ourselves and a lot of money, so it was pretty comfortable.

My other experiences were much more bootstrapped. This felt a lot more like being a sponsored athlete. I had a nice paycheck, and we had a really nice work area and a really great investor, and our team was growing. We were with Google from day one. We were very lucky.

That was my first experience leading a design project at that scale. Building a product from zero was not something that I had ever done before. Working with engineers was something I had done, but not like this. There are a million different facets to building a product from zero that, if you've never done before, are all crazy learning experiences. "We need to design the whole onboarding flow"—to a designer coming out of design school, that's not something I was familiar with. I didn't understand that you need "forgot password" and error states, signup screens and login screens, all that stuff.

As you were mastering these new skills and discovering these new responsibilities in your job, where did you turn to fill in those gaps in your knowledge?

Here in San Francisco there's a community of designers and engineers and people at startups, but I was not part of that community back then. Even though my friends were engineers working for startups or Google, I didn't have other designer friends or people I was hanging out with and learning from. There was Scott, but he wasn't really doing interface design. I didn't have that many people to turn to, and that was an isolating feeling.

The Internet was what I turned to. I remember reading a lot of books and TechCrunch and trying to keep up with every source of information I could. It's so different now with Dribbble and numerous resources that exist for interface designers to learn the craft.

Learning by putting a product out there and having people use it and have problems and then fixing them was really helpful. Even though it was tough, it was great to go through that, and all relatively by myself.

Looking back at where you started your career journey, from studying psychology to now launching digital products, are there any themes that have underpinned all of your work?

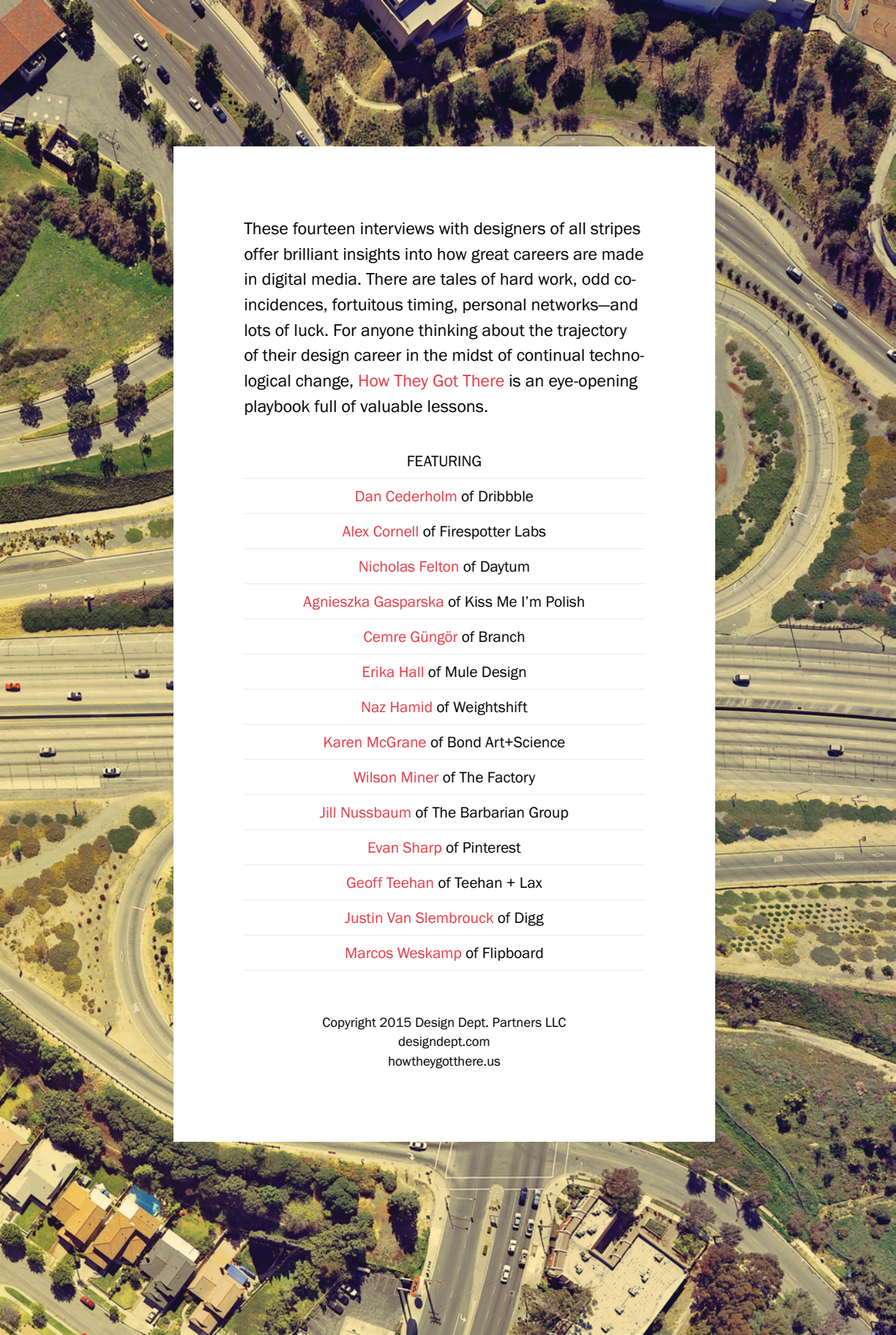
A few things are consistent. One I learned from Scott: Every new thing he would go into, he would learn in a really deep way. He would suddenly know everything there was to know by virtue of the fact that he was staying up late on message boards and talking to people, going deep on whatever it was he wanted to learn. I replicated that. Any time I've started something new, I've maintained the goal of gaining a comprehensive understanding of whatever it is that I'm doing. Obviously that's not possible initially, but in trying to achieve it, I feel like I am able to learn that much faster.

Take something like designing for the iPhone, which I didn't really know anything about but was probably my first project

at Firespotter that I did. I remember buying and reading every book that existed at the time on designing for the iPhone or building iPhone apps, and I would download and use every single app. Basically every single possible point of knowledge, I would go there and grab it. I've done that ever since school, and I still do that with music, too. I think that's always been really helpful.

Something else that strings through my career, I always like to do projects where I'm maybe 60-to-70-percent comfortable, and then there's a definite percentage that I am unsure of or don't know anything about. I usually try to have one element that I've never done before, anything from working with actors to motion tracking. With projects where I'm a little more than half comfortable and a little less than half uncomfortable and I'm going to need to learn or rise up to whatever it is, I've found that to be a great way to learn.

I guess that's a complex way of saying I like to learn through experience. It's deeper than just learning through experience, though. To sit back and think, "What do I feel really good about on this project, and what's a little weird?" It's a very high-level thought process going into some of that stuff. That's something that I've found consistently helpful throughout my career, even to this day.



These fourteen interviews with designers of all stripes offer brilliant insights into how great careers are made in digital media. There are tales of hard work, odd coincidences, fortuitous timing, personal networks—and lots of luck. For anyone thinking about the trajectory of their design career in the midst of continual technological change, How They Got There is an eye-opening playbook full of valuable lessons.

FEATURING

Dan Cederholm of Dribbble

Alex Cornell of Firespotter Labs

Nicholas Felton of Daytum

Agnieszka Gasparska of Kiss Me I'm Polish

Cemre Güngör of Branch

Erika Hall of Mule Design

Naz Hamid of Weightshift

Karen McGrane of Bond Art+Science

Wilson Miner of The Factory

Jill Nussbaum of The Barbarian Group

Evan Sharp of Pinterest

Geoff Teehan of Teehan + Lax

Justin Van Slembrouck of Digg

Marcos Weskamp of Flipboard

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