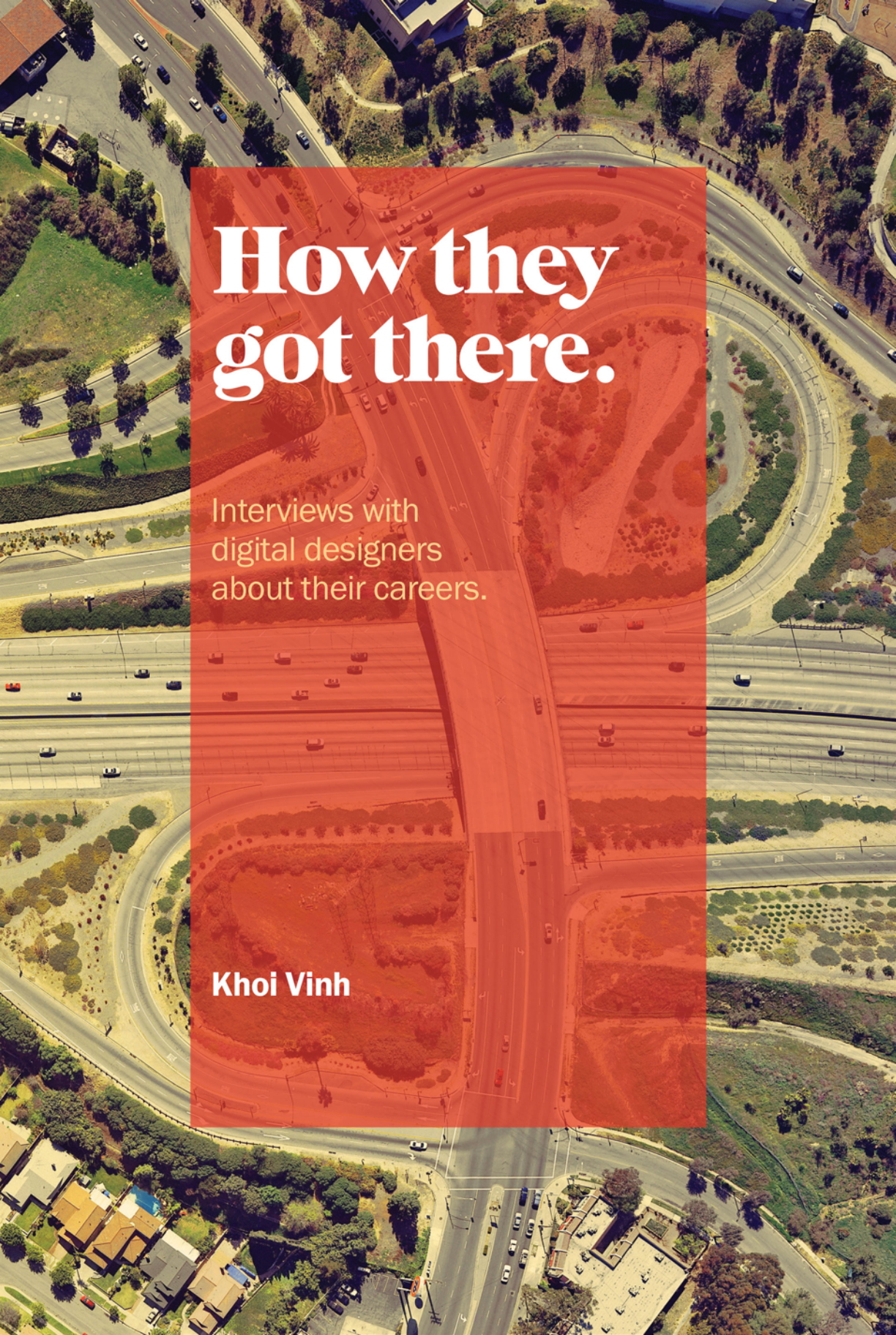

How they got there.

Interviews with digital designers about their careers.

Khoi Vinh

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How They Got There

Interviews With Digital Designers About Their Careers
By Khoi Vinh
with a foreword by Liz Danzico

For Laura.

"People look at a career from the outside and think there is some plan. When you experience a career it's literally like a very, very slow-motion car crash."

Guillermo Del Toro

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Foreword

by Liz Danzico

Liz Danzico is the chair of the MFA Interaction Design program at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City.

"I just couldn't believe there were others like me."

That's just about every person who sits across from me in my office at the School of Visual Arts, as they talk about discovering digital design for the first time. They talk to me about considering a graduate program in interaction design after careers of all kinds—architecture, programming, behavioral science, fine arts, graphic design—in order to chart a new path.

A life in design education has revealed to me something about our future—not just about the future of design, but the future of the world we are making as designers. Learning and design are inextricably linked. The act of designing is always an act of learning. It's an act of learning for the designer and the people she designs and experiments with and for.

In this way, this book chronicles an experiment that happened nearly 150 years ago when a man photographed a

horse. From that single photograph, people created a series of images—thousands upon thousands of them. And today, it's not the thousands of photographs we remember, but rather how they transformed the world. Those photo experiments led to the invention of what would be motion-picture technology. The photographer had captured something whose likeness had never been captured before. And by inspiring iteration, he transformed everything that came after.

Rebecca Solnit, whose biography on Eadweard Muybridge this story comes from, wrote: "A new world had opened up for science, for art, for entertainment, for consciousness, and an old world had retreated farther." Long before there were startups and accelerators, Y Combinator and Techstars, 30 Weeks and General Assembly, MFAs and double majors, there was the photograph of that horse and the iterations that followed. We build upon the past. We learn from the paths of others.

This book is a playbook of bold ideas and their backstories. To you, it can be many things. You may choose only one interview, never read another, and it becomes a story as curriculum for you. Build upon it, iterate, and make it your own. Or take the book as a whole: use it as a framework for digital design today, with each interview acting as a syllabus in a larger curriculum to get you where you need to go.

Building a career is rarely, if ever, a straight line from A to B. Taken another way, there are many ways to get to the same place. We are designing and therefore we are always learning. And getting there isn't about the *there*. It's about the *getting*. So go get started.

Preface

It's an open secret that most careers are improvised, but intellectually knowing that truism is a different thing from emotionally understanding it. For my part, I never pretended to have a grand scheme as I strung together a résumé of vaguely purposeful jobs—I mostly just happened across various opportunities as they arose. It's true that I might have put a lot of effort into preparing myself for the kind of design work that I wanted to do, but when it came to actually getting hired, it was mostly good timing, odd circumstances, and/or friends of friends (of friends) that opened the doors for me.

That's the way life appeared to work for other designers I knew, too; most of the people I worked with also seemed to have stumbled into their own design careers. Or, I'd notice how they'd often stumble *out* of those design careers into other marginally related vocations.

I've worked with people who had previously been bakers, accountants, and nannies, and with others who would go on to become investors, filmmakers and carpenters. For as long as I've

been a professional it's seemed to me that everyone I knew was just making it up as they went along—myself included.

Something changed, though, when I was lucky enough to gain some modicum of notoriety for my own work. That's when I started meeting and befriending designers with followings, whose work I admired, whose careers I aspired to. Those were the sorts of people whom I'd always assumed were following a deliberate professional path, that they had been conscientious about their job choices from the beginning. How else could they have ever achieved what they had already achieved? People don't just get lucky like that.

Of course, the opposite turned out to be true. Almost all of those heroes of mine, it turned out, had benefitted from that very same combination of timing, circumstances, and personal networks that my peers and I had. Which isn't to say that they turned out to be no more talented than the rest of us; indeed, star talents generally are very talented (and very hard working). It's just that they were brilliant *and* they winged it. That was news to me.

When I realized this, I found myself wishing that someone had let me in on this secret back when I was starting out in the design industry; I wouldn't have felt nearly so bad about falling behind some imaginary curve and operating without a plan for so many years. At various points in my career, I've thought my calling was in editorial illustration, corporate branding, agency services, digital journalism, creativity software, and mobile utilities, among others. All of these phases could be nominally classifiable as "design," but no sensible aspiring professional would map out a career with that specific progression on purpose—it would be too erratic, and maybe a little self-defeating. What's more, at nearly every juncture, I felt self-imposed pressure to make up for lost time, to correct for having drifted off of whatever true course I was supposed to be on.

Now I know that in almost every case wandering off course *is* the right course, especially in this still-burgeoning medium predicated on still relatively primitive technology. There's almost no upside to rigidly executing against a career

plan when one's industry is reinventing itself with the regularity of presidential elections. None of us can know where this is all going, so none of us should feel like we have to.

Once I came to accept that career certainty is now a thing of the past (if it ever existed), I came to a new appreciation for the beauty of career *un*certainty. Whenever I read about the premier digital designers, I'm usually most drawn to tales of their salad days—the bits when accomplished practitioners confess the profoundly mundane nature of their big breaks, the unlikely strokes of luck that helped them distinguish themselves from the pack, and the long stretches many of them spent in the wilderness of the unrecognized.

That's the stuff that's most fascinating to me, that I find most useful and inspirational—even now, two decades into my own career. It's relatively rare to hear those stories, though. Most of what gets written about digital designers focuses on their work, their ideas, and perhaps their clients and collaborations. What interests me the most about those designers is *how they got there*.

I wrote this book because it's the book I wish I could have read when I was starting out. It's a collection of conversations conducted with a disparate group of professionals, none of whom share identical job descriptions, but all of whom are designers working in digital media. Through their anecdotes, reflections, and confessions, they generously demystify themselves, humanize their achievements, and offer powerful, instructive ideas for those who are trying to invent their own careers. This is a book about how crummy jobs can provide the groundwork for fantastic bodies of work, how getting laid off can be a doorway to new opportunities, how devoting years towards the wrong kind of graduate degree can still pay dividends in wholly unrelated industries, how the people we meet along the way are important to our journeys—and how big careers can come from little things.

Khoi Vinh
New York City, 2015

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.

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.

Chapter 3

Nicholas Felton

Co-founder, Daytum

With his Feltron Annual Reports, designer Nicholas Felton's name became synonymous with the expansion of information graphics into a new narrative form. With that experience, he built Daytum, a company whose journey led him to Facebook, where he did seminal work for the social network's famous Timeline feature.

Growing up in Mill Valley, California, not that far from many startups and tech companies, did you have any exposure to that world?

I was really fortunate that Mill Valley is 10 or 15 minutes away from San Francisco, and there was a ton of stuff going on there. Industrial Light and Magic was based in Marin, and Pixar was based just across the bridge in Point Richmond, where my father was living. San Francisco, of course, had Macromedia, Adobe. There was Apple down the coast. And flash-in-the-pan companies such as Xaos, which did visual effects for "Lawnmower Man," which was exciting to me—they had either a

Photoshop or a Mac plugin that would do really cool, organic imagery and media effects when I was a kid. I learned about all these companies either through magazines or just bits of coverage that I somehow got access to, and I was able to meet the people who were doing the work I admired as a kid.

Did everybody in the Bay Area know about these companies or were you unique in seeking them out?

It's hard to say. Our media channels were so much more limited then. As a kid I remember Macworld magazine, which started coming when we got our first Mac computer, and that was a source for understanding what was going on. Pixar and Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) would get covered in the newspaper, or at least the movies they were working on would, and then you could go see them at film festivals or these little local screenings. I remember going to see "The Abyss" at the Exploratorium and having an ILM person there to talk about their work on the special effects.

Were you enamored with the technology or was there a design component that appealed to you?

I never found great artistic success or expressive success using my hands to make things. I took art classes in drawing and ceramics, but I was pretty middle-of-the-pack with it. Coming into contact with people who were doing amazing work with computers showed me an avenue to find my own voice. That's what was exciting to me.

Also being on the frontier of something is exciting, so the idea of doing research or inventing things that people hadn't seen before or thought about before was very inspiring to me.

Why did you go east to study at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), instead of staying in California near all those companies?

In high school I interned for a couple years at this company that did video post-production, including editing, and they had a Paintbox, so they could do visual effects and animation. That was really interesting to me. At the same time I'd also been collaborating with some friends on a comic book for years. My friends did all of the drawing, and I did the graphic design and production work that went along with it. It was a real comic book that you could buy in comic bookstores in New York City. It was called Xiola. My childhood friend Josh somehow got funding for it, so we went to San Diego ComicCon once to promote it. He somehow got a preview edition included in Wizard, which was *the* magazine that comic book stores could order comic books from. It wasn't successful, but it was a fantastic diversion for us and really exciting to work at a high level on something like this. So that drew me out of the video/animation world and more toward graphic design.

Was the comic book one of your first experiences doing real hands-on graphic design for something that could be sold?

Yes, I don't think I'd made anything for production prior to that. Every issue was composed in Photoshop, and we'd send out the Syquest drive to the printer every other month, and then we'd get these amazing printed things back. It was a learn-on-your feet experience, and as a result I learned QuarkXPress, Photoshop, and Illustrator. That's when I decided that graphic design was what I wanted to do.

My goal was to either go to a school like RISD or be in New York and have internships in the field. Fortunately I was accepted at RISD. I think I got in because of that comic book, because the rest of my portfolio was not very stellar. I also went and talked to them. I showed up at the admissions office and said, "I'm not sure if this is the right school for me, but this is what I've been doing," and I showed them the comic books. I think I got a plus mark next to my name as a result.

RISD has a very well-regarded graphic design program. What was that experience like?

It's pretty amazing. I went to a really academically rigorous high school, and so switching from that mode to going to art school almost felt like cheating because I was having so much fun. I was actually doing well in art classes for the first time—well, I didn't do that well in drawing, but did well in the other classes that weren't strictly about a visual solution to a problem, where conceptual and process work got taken into account.

At the end of the day, all those things added up and I was doing pretty well. I was enjoying staying up until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. every night to finish the assignments for the following studio.

What was your career ambition while you were in that undergraduate program? Did you want to get a job at an agency or studio, or start your own agency or studio?

RISD is not a school that focuses on what's going to happen when you leave its doors. Everybody there was pretty focused on what's due tomorrow and what's due this week. I got to the end of my education, and that's when I started going to portfolio reviews in New York and showing up with a really unrefined portfolio. There was good stuff in it, but it was in a paper bag. I would see people who had gone to schools that were really focused on job placement after graduation, and those people had beautiful portfolios and had a photographer shoot their work. That's when I realized that I hadn't really been thinking about what was next. I was very short-sighted about doing well in school and pursuing the ideas I had there.

Was that discouraging to get that bit of cold water splashed in your face?

[*Laughs*] I remember going to a portfolio review and having a good conversation with someone from Martha Stewart Living

who liked my work. But my final project at RISD had been all about making artifacts from the book "Catch 22," so I had made my own camouflage and a wartime-y stencil typeface. He thought the work was great, but said, "We have no place for you at Martha Stewart." That was a glimmer of hope.

I decided to stay on in Providence, in my apartment there, and see what happened, if I could do some interviews and get more encouragement in New York. And then if that didn't work out, then I was probably going to go back to California. I came down to New York soon after graduation for a couple of interviews, and one was with an advertising agency called DiMassimo. Through a crazy coincidence, the founder had met the neighbor of my mother who had said, "You should meet my kid who's graduating." I don't know if he was meeting with me strictly as a favor or if he really was interested in finding new talent from RISD, but the agency liked my portfolio.

I didn't even know what went on in an advertising agency. I had done some After Effects work, some animation, and that was something they had an immediate need for, so they offered me a job on the spot and asked if I would start after the weekend. That threw me into New York life. I slept on couches for a couple of weeks, and then went back to Providence, packed up my stuff, and came down.

You said that you realized there was a whole different level that your portfolio had to measure up to. Had you gotten to that level by the time you came across DiMassimo?

Yes, it was no longer in a paper bag. It was in a binder that people could flip through. It wasn't something that I spent weeks putting together, though, which I would do later in my career.

What kind of work did you do at DiMassimo?

I started off doing some production work and doing a lot of

pitches. That's what I remember the most. We'd have a pitch that was due in the week. There would be brainstorming, people coming up with multiple ideas for campaigns, and then the creative director and the writers would come back to me. I think we had only one or two other art directors, and we would just be searching for images, setting type, and making billboards, wild posters, and print ads, and then that would all get presented to the client.

What kinds of clients or companies were you doing this work for?

This was 1999 to 2000, when we were in that first dot-com bubble, so it was a lot of startups. The client that I worked on the most during that time was Kozmo.com, a same-day delivery service. They had that running man logo, in bright orange and green. They bought time on the Jumbotron in Times Square on the millennium New Year, and I did an animation that played there.

Smartmoney.com was another client. I was doing print ads for them and I also did some animation that went on one of their TV commercials.

The design work and the animation were really interesting to me. But being an art director who just lays out or works on ads got tiring quickly. After about a year, I was ready to move on. I told them that I wanted to be doing more pure design work. I was fortunate in that they saw the need to offer their clients design work, because a lot of those dot-com companies were showing up with their first logo, which had been done by the founder, and they really needed to step it up.

DiMassimo hired a design director, Warren Elwin, and he and I founded a design group within the company. We eventually added another friend of mine to do 3-D work. Between the three of us we cranked out projects for another year. It felt

like our own little studio. We had a nice nook in the back of the office, so there weren't people coming by all the time. We had a ton of creative freedom and an exciting amount of work coming through. Very typography-centered, which is what I'd been craving, and a lot of experimentation. It was a really good time. It lasted for another year, and then I was ready to go out on my own.

Did you feel experienced enough to make that leap?

Yes, and I'd already been freelancing on the side so I'd done a bit of client management on my own. My idea was to set up my web site and build on good word-of-mouth from good interactions with clients, so I could bust out on my own and start building a practice.

I had some stuff lined up for that summer of 2001, but also took it easy and used the opportunity to explore New York. Then 9/11 happened, and it looked like the financial world was coming to an end. It was not a good time to be starting a practice, so I went and worked for a really big ad agency for about six months. DiMassimo had been about a hundred people, and I went to Euro RSCG. Their clients were MCI, which self-destructed while I was there, and also Subway, Volvo, Intel. I worked on Volvo and Intel for a while, doing a mix of design and ad layouts and style guides. I did a lot of style guides during that time. I lasted six months there, and then broke out to work for myself, for a period of about nine years.

Why did you leave the agency when you did? Had the market improved or had you saved up enough money to resume your plan to build an independent practice?

Mostly I was miserable at that company. It was not the right place for me. There were a couple of like-minded people, but I was really not happy there. The ad world was valuable for me as a foil to the impractical sides of my education at RISD, and the

fundamentals I learned there have served me well—learning how to talk to clients, how to sell your work, and how it's going to find its way into the world.

Also at agencies I learned about brand planners. They would do research and find out what kind of people were using a product or were interested in it. Then they would come up with a strategy for how the ad should be positioned, which gave them a firm footing for presenting the work to the client. "Because of this strategy that we've come up with and you agree with, we think this is the right direction to take."

In all my work I've benefited from strategies that narrow the space. Instead of an entire universe of possibilities, you narrow it down to perhaps 10 percent, and then you come up with other rules that block in the system even tighter until you come up with one solution and you can walk backwards from it and say, "This is the solution because of A through Z."

In that nine years or so that you ran your own practice, traditional design was starting to really blend with new media design. What did you specialize in?

I would hop around. I worked on an MTV magazine that was cobbled together by some people I'd met at DiMassimo and some other editorial people. We all came together and pitched MTV on making a magazine and I worked on the first two issues for probably a year. I don't think I did anything else at that time. It wasn't really full-time employment. It was just working on the same project for a year.

Aside from that I would have my hand in everything. I'd be designing a typeface for one client and a web site for another one. I'd be doing a bit of logo work and then probably a little bit of ad freelance to pay the bills because the other stuff was not the most lucrative. That was the normal blend. I liked having a little bit of everything.

Were you working just on your own? You mentioned that you sometimes would partner with other folks. Did you want to grow a company?

I liked the freedom to say yes and no. I had an intern once or twice, but it was pretty much only me. For more complex web projects I would partner with some people, such as a developer, but a lot of the time I would just build it myself.

What was your vision for the kind of business that you were building at this time? Did you have a five-year plan?

I didn't think I would be a generalist forever. I knew that being a generalist wasn't a way to make myself unique. So I kept finding things that spoke to me. I thought maybe it would be making logos and brand identity work. For a while I was into designing typefaces and thought maybe that's where I could become an expert and settle into a niche. I didn't want my income to be reliant on doing a day's worth of work. I was interested in the typeface approach, where you could build something and then get a trickle of income off of it. I did release one typeface through T26, and that was not the case [*laughs*], so I had to re-evaluate that approach.

Then you started to produce your now-famous annual reports, in 2004?

Yes. I did a graph once that plotted my personal projects over time, and what I pulled from that graph was that when I first started some endeavor, such as working at a company, I didn't have any personal projects because I was fully involved and dedicated to that job. As I would start to get complacent, I would put more of my energy into personal projects. When I reached a certain threshold, I was probably about to quit, because I was no longer that involved in the job.

When I started working for myself, the personal projects

dipped again but over time they started increasing and increasing. I was making a lot stuff. The typeface through T26 was a personal project that didn't gain any traction. This was the era of pixel illustrations, so I was playing with that. I made travel logs whenever I would go traveling. None of those projects found a large audience.

The first full annual report, which was about 2005, was something I thought that just a few people who knew me personally would find interesting. It was surprising that it spread around the Internet and strangers found it intriguing.

It sounds like while you were doing all these projects, you were hoping that one of them would turn into a whole new vista for your career. Do you think that was the case?

Maybe it's that whatever I'm working on at the time is something I'm really excited about, and would love for that to be a thing that other people are excited about and would like to pay me to do. The travel logs that I mentioned, some of them I put a ton of effort into and thought, "What if wealthy people could hire me to be their documentarian, to come along on their travels and make them a nice book about their trip?" There must be a need for that. That didn't evolve either.

Those projects seem like they took a lot of effort. How much labor went into the annual reports?

At first not much—the first one was probably a day or two of work and happened right around the New Year, when things were quiet. The fact that that one took off made me think this is something that could be worth pursuing, an idea worth sticking with. I liked the time frame of it and not having to follow up with another one and another one immediately after that. It gave me time to evolve as a designer, to think about the project, and in 365 days make a new one and see if anyone cares.

It wasn't until probably the third one that I decided this was something that I would repeat for a while. As the audience has grown it's allowed me to go from this just being a web thing to this being a printed thing that I sent out for free, to this being a printed thing that people would pay money for.

When did you realize people would be willing to pay for it?

The first time I charged was 2007, at five dollars a piece, strictly as an experiment to see whether I could recoup some of the printing costs. That was a great success. I think I printed 2,000 copies—I held onto some for myself, but otherwise I sold all the ones that I had available. That's the moment when I learned, if more people are willing to pay for it, then the more elaborate it could become, both in terms of printing and the time that I dedicate to it. Although I've never been very good at managing that balance. I always seem to break even.

Was that an eye-opening moment for you?

Yes, and it was about that time, in 2007 or early 2008, that I saw how robust this world of working with data was. I was starting to see it everywhere and realizing that the best way to become better with this medium was to start taking jobs that had their root in it.

I got editorial commissions, and at first they just wanted me to apply some nice typography to their charts and graphs. But these projects started getting more and more elaborate, giving me less and less direction. It moved to the point of "Here's some data, what stories can you tell from it?" Those were the most interesting editorial assignments. I'm not sure how long it took to be able to move over to strictly doing data projects, but it was the best way to get better at it and it really keyed into this annual report being a self-promotional tool and a research-and-development playground for it.

Did you think to yourself, "This is what I've been looking for all along," or were you just discovering something new and winging it?

I felt like I was catching onto this upsurge in awareness of a new medium. We had done a little bit of information design in school, but no one said, "In ten years you're going to have photography and writing and data. These are going to be the core ingredients of communication ten years from now." And that was something that I became really aware of. I realized you could approach data in a lot of ways that people weren't approaching it.

Reducing something to a count was a way of developing a shorthand for transcribing my experience. You could always reduce a night out to that perfect photograph that encapsulates it, but what if you could also reduce it to ten different quantities or metrics that also describe the night in a way that you can recollect it? I was interested in pursuing that because I wasn't seeing people doing it yet. A lot of those personal projects came from this desire to tell stories. The story that I had the best access to was my own, and data gave me a new way of approaching it in a robust way that I hadn't seen done before.

You had your design practice, but then your reputation suddenly became synonymous with information visualization and you decided to build a business around that. Could you describe how you shifted over to starting Daytum?

That idea primarily came from my friend and partner Ryan Case, who I'd been sharing the same office with. One day soon after releasing the 2008 report, he said, "Hey, what if we made an app that would allow people to visualize some of their data?" The initial idea was, "Let's make a skin for Last.fm, where you could plug it in and visualize some of your music." That quickly turned into wanting the functionality where you could count the sort of stuff that I was collecting in the annual reports, such

as how many miles you ran or what books you read or how many beers you drank. That led us closer to the idea of democratizing the tools behind the annual report. It's hard to gather this data and it's hard to analyze it and make it presentable. So we wanted to give people access to this kind of shorthand in a single system where they could both count and communicate with stuff that they cared about.

At first we just wanted to build this thing and have it for ourselves and see what other people would do with it. Forming a company was our last intention. We came up with subscriptions at one point, mainly to cover the cost of serving and hosting the company. We got our version 1.0 done with an iPhone app. At that point, we were thinking we could expand this. It targeted a pretty limited audience and it wasn't going to grow that huge unless we started to plug into other services. We were thinking maybe we'd get some funding for this so we could work on it full time. That was when Facebook came knocking.

Daytum seemed like it took a lot of effort, especially for two people. How hard was it to balance that with revenue-generating work?

It was a real passion project. Ryan had a full-time job, so he and I would work on the weekends together. We also built it at just the right time, when the Ruby on Rails community was really vibrant and started allowing people to build stuff at a scale that would previously have been impossible for one or two people to build. Plus, we didn't know any better. It seemed very feasible to build this thing. As we encountered hardships we worked our way through them.

What happened when Facebook came calling?

I got a message from Mark Zuckerberg, saying, "I know you guys are working on a startup, but I would love to talk to you." It's not the kind of invitation that you turn down. A couple

months later, Ryan and I went out to California for some meetings about Daytum and about starting this pursuit of getting funding so we could work on it fulltime. We went and talked to Mark and found out they were working on Timeline. We were especially interested in Open Graph, which was basically the ability to plug anything into Facebook. This included data sources that we were pretty interested in, like music, being able to visualize what you were listening to, or things that you're watching from Netflix. At that point, the question for us was, "Do we want to work on Daytum and try and bring it to a grand scale, or have even a tiny influence on what six or seven hundred million people are using?" That was a hard conversation. We didn't really want to leave New York or our girlfriends, but the opportunity was massive. We're both from California, so that wasn't the biggest of changes, and had some friends at Facebook already and really liked the people that we'd met, so we decide to dive in.

Were you excited by the Facebook path or was it painful to put Daytum on hold?

We had a really strong vision for Daytum and I think we were hoping that we could bring a lot of that to Facebook, and sometimes that seemed very viable. Once we had our first meeting, we were out and working at Facebook within two weeks. We just dove in and Timeline was going to be announced in four or five months after we started, so there really was no time to catch our breath or think twice about the decision we made.

I certainly look back on the first year with nostalgia. The company seemed a lot smaller; engineering and design were in a small building. We were working on Timeline and Open Graph, which were two incredibly transformative, evolutionary leaps for Facebook, both visually and functionally, so it was like reinventing the site. Just a small group of people working very long hours to get this stuff out the door.

Post-launch it became a bit more routine. The company moved to a big campus, and the company's priorities—after being so focused on Timeline and Open Graph—moved elsewhere. It was only then that I thought, "All right, now I have a job in California. I have some free time and I can think about if this is what I want to do long term."

You left two years into your four-year contract. Without getting into sensitive details, could you say why you left?

I could see the balance shift between the work that Facebook wanted me to do for them and the kind of projects I wanted to build or the things that I wanted to put out into the world. It was just amazing, and learning what went into building a company and a web site that's top of class was an enormous education. I'm really happy to have learned that and I think it changed the trajectory of my career to the point where now products are the things that I tend to be building.

Prior to Facebook you had been doing services with products on the side, but now you're focused on products, period?

There are a couple of products that I left Facebook wanting to build. The first was Reporter, and the next one is one that I'm starting work on right now. I think they both come out of the same root inspiration that led to Daytum and led to wanting to work on Timeline, which is seeing these vacuums in the world of how people relate to their personal data and not having enough control over understanding what's there or in being able to express themselves through it. When I see these vacuums, I feel obliged to jump into them and try and build the products that will create the experiences or tools that I think need to exist.

What's your career been like since leaving Facebook?

I left Facebook in April 2013 and I wanted to give myself some

time off just to figure out what was going to be next. During that time I did some traveling and I did some little coding experiments, trying to build my chops in that realm. Then around the end of the year I decided Reporter needed to get out into the world, so I focused on that. I thought that by the end of the year I would have a clear focus as to what was next, but then it came time to do the annual report, which this year is really just a monster and it's taking a long time. This one is going to be the penultimate report. The next one will probably be the last.

Why is that?

It's too hard. The annual report is now more a piece of software than a piece of print. There's an enormous database that underlies it. There are probably twenty processing apps that are feeding into it. It's like a multidimensional creature that's really hard to flatten into a static two-dimensional form. That's a challenge that just gets harder and harder every year. Especially this one: the theme is communication and so I can tell this really rich story of my communication with my girlfriend, but that's a private story. It's not one that I want to communicate to the rest of the world. How do I find this middle path that talks about the kind of overwhelming world of communication we live in without violating people's privacy or violating secrets or NDAs that all encumber the communication we have these days? They take longer and longer every year, so it was clear that it couldn't go on forever and it's a project that I don't want to release unless I feel that it's been done better or on par with the previous one. I can't have a project that takes nine months to do.

It takes nine months to chronicle twelve months?

Yeah, exactly.

When you look ahead, with this ongoing project that's going to come to an end, and you're working on some new products that

are very young, what do you see in your future? Do you think about what you're going to be doing in two, five, or ten years?

I don't know. I think working with data is almost a little fraught, because when I started with it, it looked like "sky's the limit," and I saw it from a very personal angle. Now, if you generate data, the first question to ask about it is, "How is this data going to be used against you?" While I'm still fighting the fight to show the narrative potential of data, there is a real shadow over it. I'm not sure where we land if the value added by having access to your data or having the data saved is greater than the potential damage that that data can create in the wrong hands. That's something I wrestle with at the moment.

I'd like to make a book about the annual report project at some point. Maybe I'll get back to client work or maybe one of my products will do well and that can be something to continue to work with.

When you started you were showing your portfolio in a paper bag, and now you've almost completed a first major chapter of your career. Do you feel any more confident that you will know what the next chapter looks like based on how the last chapter has gone?

I've always been someone who likes being able to do everything myself. It's why I tended to have a one-person studio. For the things that I want to build now, it's much harder because I'm not a programmer who can create projects at the quality I need to release them. I do need collaborators or I do need partners in order to produce the things that I want to see in the world.

At the moment it's a little difficult because I have many partners. Daytum was with one friend/programmer. Reporter is with another group of developers, and the latest product is with another one. I don't know if that's the continuing pattern or whether I will wind up in some partnership with some other

programmer where we just work together to create the kind of experiences that I want to see. That's probably the biggest limitation on my aspirations at the moment.

Chapter 4

Agnieszka Gasparska

Founder, Kiss Me I'm Polish

A self-described math-and-science geek, Agnieszka Gasparska discovered design while studying at the prestigious Cooper Union. Afterwards she worked at the influential studio Funny Garbage and went on to found her own design firm, Kiss Me I'm Polish, which for over a decade has been doing award-winning multidisciplinary design from its base in New York City.

When you were starting out at college or even during high school, were you thinking about design as a career?

No, because, to be quite frank with you, I don't think I was really aware of design as a profession at that point. I went to a public high school in Queens and was lucky enough to fall under the wing of one of those wacky high school art-class teachers that they make PBS after-school specials about, who had a little herd of promising students that showed some unique trait and had us all going to Cooper Union for Saturday drawing classes. I was planning on going to a liberal arts college where I

could study math and science. I was in calculus and doing AP biology and all those very science-focused disciplines. Art was something that I did on the side.

I didn't have the experience at that age yet to understand all the different ways artistic and creative inclinations applied to working in the real world. Graphic design as a profession was never really something that was on my radar until by some kind of amazing luck I completed the home test and got into Cooper. It was really only once I went there that I felt like I understood the full potential of having a creative career.

What was your education at Cooper Union like? How did you find design?

Cooper has a generalist curricula—you are not allowed really to focus on any one thing, whether it's earlier in your time there or later on. Once I got past the foundation year and sophomore year, I started taking design classes. At the same time I was doing a lot of painting, photography, and installation work, and just trying a lot of different things. After doing preliminary design courses and taking typography I started getting into more interactive design courses, and I started to really love doing it. I got really into coding in Director and doing some Flash work.

Looking back on it, I'd found this way to bring my mathematical and scientific geekery into my creative pursuits. I got to sit there and figure out how I wanted to create this creative thing out of numbers and code. Also laying out flat compositions in graphic design required use of the grid and calculating spaces. Even my sculptural work had a lot to do with counting and math. Design appealed to both sides of my interests.

So, I took a few classes in design every semester. Then I went off and did a full semester abroad in Paris on exchange, and I didn't do design at all but focused mostly on my fine art explorations. When I came back I was itching to see where I could

go with design. I got a job right out of school at Funny Garbage as an entry-level designer, working right away on interactive projects. I wasn't doing any programming, but I had to be able to understand how things worked in the interactive space. I was designing only for interactive applications for the first five years of my career.

Would you still have pursued design if there weren't that interactive aspect of it that was able to tap into your interests in both math and science?

Possibly. That definitely pulled me in deeper. When I look back at the courses that I was taking at Cooper at the time, the ones that I really enjoyed the most were the interactive ones. I took a class with Lou Dorfsman at some point in my sophomore or junior year, and I did so badly in that class. It was just not quite how my brain worked.

Dorfsman is a titan of "traditional" graphic design.

Yes. That particular curriculum was very much based on advertising-type projects where you had to come up with a concept and put an awesome image together with a slogan, and I was horrible at that. That was more like, "Here is a blank sheet of paper, come up with something genius." But I wanted to tinker and play with parameters. Online you have parameters, you have constraints, and I think that makes me more comfortable and hence allows me to be more creative, in some paradoxical way.

When you graduated from Cooper Union, what led you to Funny Garbage? Did you know that was where you wanted to work? Or did you send out a whole bunch of résumés?

I had studied experimental typography with Barbara Glauber, and when I came back from my exchange program and was sure I wanted to focus more on graphic design I had a chat

with her. I told her I'd like to find an internship for the spring, and she gave me some people to contact. I could even tell you who they were because I'm still in touch with all those people that I met with in my senior year of college.

I had a couple of meetings and interviews just to see what the work landscape was. This was 1999. When I met with some of the people who were running Funny Garbage then, I was torn. I'd been offered two jobs at that point: one there and one in another company. But I worked at Funny Garbage for five years.

The people who ran that company were so interesting, and the environment was so colorful. The projects they were doing were playful yet nerdy. They were working with arts organizations and museums and lots of nonprofits, doing things that had an element of play while being intelligent and trying to do something really smart in the world. Yet no one there seemed to take themselves very seriously. It was a great environment full of really, really great people. To this day some of my closest friends are people that I met while I was working there.

It just felt like this place where I would have a chance to grow a lot and do some fun projects. That was true my first few years there. I made things I was so happy and honored to be working on. I remember going to meetings with Neil deGrasse Tyson in the first year that I was there. We were designing kiosks for the Rose Center Planetarium [at the American Museum of Natural History] that was getting remodeled at the time. I was like a little squirt coming out of college and now I'm still a super-fan of his.

Funny Garbage was a particularly amazing place to work at that time. Was going right into design as a services business, working with clients, consistent with the way you thought about making your career? Or did you consider working in-house somewhere or starting a product or a studio of your own right out the gate?

No. Even in the way that I've watched my own business evolve in the last ten years, those first five years were formative in many, many ways. Funny Garbage was definitely a service-based design company, but at the same time there were a lot of self-initiated projects going on. It was great watching how some of the careers of the people that founded it evolved. From running Funny Garbage and doing interactive projects, Peter Girardi went on to design the puppets for "Crank Yankers" on Comedy Central. There was just a very fluid way of expressing your creativity there. Our sister company at the time was Red Hot, which was a music company that was doing compilation albums to raise money for AIDS. There was a lot of mixed activity going on, but at the core of the interactive design business was a set of clients who were coming in and having great brainstorms with us.

What I learned in those years was how much you could actually bring to the table. Even if a client came in with parameters, there was so much we could do to mold and push those to express our own ideas. Even though it was very much a client-based business model, we did do what we wanted to do on projects. Clients didn't come to us for highly corporate work. There was a personality in all the things that we did.

How long did it take you to get comfortable with this idea that you could do more than just what the client wanted, that you could bring your own ideas to the table?

I would say a few years. It was a huge learning experience. I remember being put into meetings pretty quickly and being asked to present to a room full of people much older than me, a lot of times to men in very powerful positions. And there's me, this shy, twentysomething person trying to sell them on this big idea that we had for their project.

Did you consider yourself shy?

I was nervous. And shy in the sense that when I had to speak in front of a room with people I got nervous. That practice was hugely important. I've gotten much better at it. I remember those first few times, my stomach turning, oh my god. It's so funny to me now that that was so deadly scary. You learn a lot doing that, and I feel like I was always encouraged to trust my instincts.

Were you encouraged by management or did you have a specific mentor?

I worked very closely with Peter Girardi, who was my boss, along with Helene Silverman. Peter always encouraged me and let me understand that he trusted me. It was basically a "You got this, just do it" kind of thing. It was awesome.

How did you grow as a designer over the five years that you were at Funny Garbage?

I grew in terms of confidence and getting comfortable in my working environment. Cooper Union had this critique-based model. You get used to being in front of a group of your peers, defending your work, and presenting your ideas. In college I got practice for this, but doing it in a professional environment with people who are not your age took a lot of practice. Also, just learning different ways of working and different ways of thinking about specific projects that change all the time. The work itself, the experience, and the exposure were invaluable. Like that Rose Planetarium project, for example; you can't get more science-y than working for Neil deGrasse Tyson.

Could you describe that project a little bit?

The old Hayden Planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History was being redesigned by Ralph Appelbaum. They were re-building the space to include touchscreen kiosks about Earth and space. One kiosk was about the history of the uni-

verse, and there was another kiosk that dealt with the size and scale of known things in the universe—it was like "The Powers of 10" and it went from the smallest object to the largest object. Another set of kiosks dealt with the evolution of the planet and galaxies with an animated interface. Funny Garbage was hired to create these kiosks. They were all developed in Director for touchscreens, and I got to design all of them.

It was amazing. I remember having these very vivid conversations about whether the interactive buttons should have a brushed-steel look and a button-y feel. I was fighting for them to be flat, and I won. They were flat, with no drop shadow and no beveling—the interface was so minimal. That was really great. I got to do that in the first six months of being there.

So at what point did you decide to go out on your own? Were you already doing freelance jobs?

There came a point where friends and friends of friends outside of the office had lots of interesting projects going on. Fashion designers and musicians, they were looking for help with design. Eventually I started doing more of that stuff on my own when the work that I was doing at Funny Garbage started to get less exciting to me—when it was less educational and more commercial. And there was a satisfaction that I was getting from all the work that I was doing outside of the office with other artists and designers. The work was highly creative; it was not the science-y work that I was doing at Funny Garbage in the beginning, but it was creatively a lot more experimental and exploratory. It was a natural evolution, doing a little bit here and there, basically working on the weekends and any hours outside of work.

Did you think with each project that you were working towards building a studio practice of your own, or were you just taking it project by project to see what would happen?

I was taking it project by project. Even when I left Funny Garbage, eventually, I don't think I necessarily had a specific plan in mind of how my practice would evolve and whether I would actually have a company.

Why did you leave?

It wasn't one thing. It was a perfect storm of various circumstances. One was definitely that the work I was getting to do was just not enticing me as much anymore. Peter Girardi had moved out to California, and the creative leadership of the company changed. There just came a point when I felt like I had grown as much as I could grow in that particular environment. It was a five-year job I started straight out of school, so I just said, "Okay, what else is there?"

You had no plan?

No.

So what did you do? Did you travel or at least take some time off?

No, I started working on some projects from home. The plan that I had wasn't even that comprehensive of a plan. There was just something really appealing at the time about shifting out of an office environment. I was really curious to see what working from home would be like, to freelance and work with different clients. That lifestyle had seemed like a fantasy to me, and obviously it turned out to be nothing like what I thought it was going to be.

How was it to be working at home?

At first it was, "Oh, it's so nice that I get to hang out at home and I can go have a coffee at the café around the corner" or "I can hang out in my sweatpants in the morning." Then it quickly

turned into, I'm hanging out in my sweatpants 24/7 and never leaving the house. Now that I'm thinking about it, my business is like a 10-year-old child, and those first two years were like what a mom goes through, where you are at home in your sweatpants taking care of your baby all day.

It was fun and different to be my own boss, even though I never really had a very bossy boss. Still, there is a freedom that comes with that change.

Were you pitching business or was business finding you?

There were definitely contacts and referrals, and work coming in through people that I knew or friends I was already working with. I had put some feelers out, letting people know that I was now on my own and I was looking for different projects. I was just learning as I went along, where somebody first comes to you and says, "We have this project and would you want to do it?"—figuring how I would even go about that process. I wasn't going out and cold-contacting clients. At that point I was maybe 26 or 27, so I was open to what would happen and seeing what work would come in.

After two years of working in that way, how did you decide it was time to have an office and establish your own studio?

At first I needed that time to be on my own, to work in my own space and on my own time. Even if I'm working on my own, though, I will always collaborate with people. I bring people on for different projects. Even at that time I was collaborating with developers and animators and illustrators; we were all working freelance and creating these teams for a given project and then disbanding. Then another team would come together for a different project. There was this very collaborative spirit. That's still actually how my studio runs now. We have a core team, but a lot of our projects involve people outside of the office that have skills that we don't have.

Eventually this fantasy of doing work in my private space and having the quiet to do meaningful work got to be a bit much. It changed the energy of my space, to have that kind of stress and responsibility at home. I missed being around other people and I also felt like there is something to be said for the division of private and work space. I missed the idea of coming home after work.

So, the studio practice started from my need to have a separate space and also that I wanted to have people work with me. I needed help and I didn't want to have people coming and working in my kitchen.

Did you ever consider getting another job at this time?

Not really. Because I was only two years into it I felt like I wasn't done with my experiment. And it was going really well. I was very busy. The work that I was doing was really fun. I was really interested in a lot of the work that was coming in and I just felt like I was at the beginning of this next phase. Going off and finding a job would have taken me off this track that I felt I was on.

My friend Lucy had left Funny Garbage before I did and was doing her own thing, and she was renting a storefront across the street from my apartment in the East Village. She wanted me to share it with her, and at first I wasn't ready to take on the additional rent. Eventually she asked again, "How about now?" And I said, "Okay, now I'm ready." This was about two and a half years into my working from home. So we shared the space and each had our own little business practice. We each had a desk and there were two extra desks. The space was tiny, it was 300 square feet, but it was awesome. I was so happy. I remember laughing when I first moved my stuff in and I was sitting at my desk and saying, "I'm really happy I'm here." And that's how it started.

How did you go from being a freelancer to an entrepreneur and a business owner?

Again, it was something that just felt like a natural progression. After I moved into this space I realized I should really establish this as a business, so I incorporated the name. Also, as I wanted to start hiring people, this wasn't going to be just me doing consulting and one-off projects with people. I also wanted to make it more of a legitimate thing, probably for pricing purposes. I remember getting some advice from someone about working on an hourly basis as opposed to working on projects as more of a holistic process, where you are coming in and you are really thinking about a bigger picture rather than doing it for a certain amount of time. It's just a different way of quantifying the work that you are doing. It was about setting up the premise that what I was doing was more than just being a free agent going in and doing a quick hit.

What kind of research did you do in order to make that transition? Or were you winging it?

I was doing research informally. A lot of friends were doing similar things, so I was watching what was going on in the landscape. I wasn't doing any formal business planning. It was more learning by collective experience and seeing what other people were doing and what was working and what wasn't working for them. My way has always been very organic, for better or worse.

How did you approach the decision to add staff?

The workload kept growing and growing, so having help was really an obvious element. It's funny, now that I'm thinking about it, even though I've had the business for ten years, I've only had official payroll and health insurance for three of them. Up until that point I had people coming in and working with me on a freelance basis, sometimes for a year or sometimes

for less. The team was really shifting and morphing. The more grown-up version of my practice really changed and happened when I moved into the space that we are in now, which was three and a half years ago.

When you're working with freelancers, it can be hard to ensure you have the right people when you need them. If you can't keep them continuously busy, they move on to other projects. How did you go about building up a roster of dependable freelancers?

For everyone that worked with me then, the shortest period they probably were involved is four months. The longest was probably a year and a half. There was always work. I wonder if some of those people would have wanted to be hired. There was this noncommittal thing going on of everybody wanting to freelance and do their own thing and not really commit to one place. It was self-selection that way. The work was just always there.

Some of those people I still know and they're still splitting up their time, doing a six-month job here or a six-month job there. A couple of them have taken on full-time jobs since and have gone on to become full-time art directors or creative directors, earning a much bigger salary than what I could have afforded to offer them.

I've always tried to make sure that the work that we do is really creative and interesting. That was always appealing to people who were younger and trying to figure out what they can do with their skills.

How were you winning these projects? What were your business development strategies?

You make it seem like it's so official [*laughs*].

Having a ten-year business is a significant achievement. You must have had some method.

Everyone does it differently. I do feel like my method has always been to be open and to not say no to things very often. I've learned how to say no *now* for the sake of sanity. You can have a loose plan but those plans change, things come up. How were we winning projects? A project led to another project, which led to another project. Every project we've ever done can be traced back to something else that we did. The work really spoke for itself in some ways and the relationships with people we were working with did, too. I think that, for me, it's always been about the quality of the work and the quality of the relationships that you have.

If I have to articulate the strategy, it's just leaving really good tracks. Each step is something that gets you to the next step. Those steps change and evolve, and it's been great to see how we're constantly moving in a positive direction.

Essentially you were head of sales as well as creative director. How did you build the skill sets to be good at not just the design work but running the business and keeping new business walking through the door?

Practice. Serious practice. And necessity. There was a point a few years ago when I was going through a significant growth spurt where I started working with a business consultant, Emily Ruth Cohen. A lot of my peers work with her, and we met at a conference and I said, "I need your advice. I need you to help me step up my game and get myself to another level."

She was really fundamental in helping me consider things a little bit differently, in organizing pricing structures and managing others. She gave me some insight on how I was negotiating agreements and things like that. Those are very specific, logistical things. I still work with her from time to time. It's been an

ongoing process. Your perception of what your company offers that nobody else does is so important. Just knowing the value of that: knowing how to structure your business agreements around it, how to present yourself to clients, and how to make people understand what it is that you bring to the table. These things are often so much about perception both from the outside and from the inside.

That growth spurt was when you moved out of the 300-square foot storefront and into a bigger space? Could you tell me more about that evolution point?

What triggered the move was my realization that I wanted to have a more solid team in-house rather than these transient freelance resources. When I would interview people in our old space, it started to feel very obvious to me that I needed a bigger space. I was imagining the kind of work environment and the kind of team that I wanted. I could see there wasn't really a lot of room for them to grow or a lot of room to move, both physically and conceptually.

It became a physical necessity but also a change of perception, both for how I view the space and what the space meant.

Do you think your space also matters in the recruiting effort?

Yes, it's the space you inhabit, where you do your work, where we are all living while we are working. It's a huge, important element of any business. We just needed a bigger pot to grow in. I loved that storefront, and I loved being in that neighborhood. There was a lot of attachment there, but we all needed more room to breathe. When we started looking around I decided that I wanted to share the space with [fellow designer] Irwin Chen, as we were already doing a lot of work together. We often partnered on some of our bigger interactive projects. We wanted to maintain our independent practices, but having a shared space seemed like a no-brainer.

Actually the space we're in is the first link he sent me on Craigslist. We looked around for a while but we kept coming back to this space. You come into a space, and if you could already imagine where your desk is going to be, you're done. If it's right, it's right.

We had some friends come in and help us build it out and make it the way we wanted it to be. And while we were still in construction I was running interviews, trying to find new designers to work with me.

What convinced you that you needed people on staff rather than a rotating cast of freelancers?

I just wanted a more solid foundation, just knowing that there isn't going to be this constant negotiation of "Who's going to be available, and are they going to be invested in this project and be invested in this practice beyond just a single project?"

There is so much that happens that's really positive when you have that kind of team in place. It's not even just about the work but about having a shared experience and being able to talk about what's going on. Even just sharing the space with Irwin was awesome. We could come in and start chit-chatting about whatever we were working on. Having a shared experience and doing things together was so much more vibrant and interesting.

With a more stable roster of colleagues, did you start to go after different kinds of projects or different kinds of clients?

Definitely. We were a different kind of practice. The simple fact of bringing clients in for a meeting changed things entirely. It's not like we have a conference room, but we have a much bigger space and a proper table to sit at, and that changes how clients perceive you. Some of the clients we've had probably would have not been so comfortable sitting at our little table. We were

just trying to keep our space in line with the work we were doing and the caliber of work we wanted to do, and not feel like that was something we had to be self-conscious about.

Now that you are in this new stage of the company, has it been harder or has it been easier? Has it been more fun or has it been less fun?

It's been all of those things. It's everything. You never say, "I got to this point, so now, no problem. Done." Every point you get to comes with its own set of new experiences. It's been more fun, and it's been more interesting. More good stuff, and more responsibility, too, because there is more to manage. There are definitely things that are harder, but there's a lot that's easier. It's constantly something, some new set of parameters.

Kiss Me I'm Polish is a ten-year company now. Is it a twenty-year company? Is it a thirty-year company?

Good question.

Do you ever have the itch to try something completely different?

Yes, I do. And that's a healthy thing—because it's healthy and important to know that whatever it is that you are doing, you always have a choice. You are choosing to do this every step of the way. So I think that's good.

Have I ever come across something that I wanted to do more? No. If anything, the only thing that's ever been cause to question what I'm doing is just the work/life balancing. This idea of "Is it even possible to run a small business and still be able to leave work at a reasonable hour and not be working on weekends?" I've gone through phases where I was amazingly successful at maintaining that balance. Then it always comes back because there is some crazy deadline or something goes wrong.

Some balance gets upset and it goes back into that off-cycle. I'm always curious to hear other people's stories about how they manage that. I feel as though everybody who runs their own business has similar experiences. I want to believe that balance is possible.

If you've been at it for ten years, there is probably some part of you that enjoys the not-knowing whether or not it's possible—the having-it-sometimes and not-having-it-other-times.

Maybe. I also feel like having done it for ten years, I'm still doing it differently all the time. The way I'm doing it now is so different than I was doing it two years ago, than I was doing it five years ago. It's constantly changing. I'm still in that process I was in when I first started working on my own, when you asked if the first years that I was on my own did I ever consider getting a real job. I still feel like I'm still figuring it out. Every step of the way, you are figuring it out. I'm not done yet.

Chapter 5

Cemre Güngör

Design Co-founder, Branch

A native of Turkey, Cemre Güngör parlayed a background in computer science into a career as a product designer in the New York startup scene. He co-founded Branch with two friends he met while hanging out in a co-working space. When Branch was acquired by Facebook, he joined that company as a product designer.

Growing up in Turkey, do you recall when you discovered interaction design?

I was lucky enough to get a computer early on. I was always interested. The first computer I had was a Commodore 64 that I did BASIC programming and played BASIC games on. Then the next step was a low-end Windows computer. By the end of primary school and during middle school I got into actually making stuff with the computer. I remember I was making a web page for a science fair in fifth grade, so I guess that's the first work I did.

My interest in programming led me toward more visual stuff. Even though I was a really bad designer, I was still trying to make web sites all throughout middle school. It kind of faded during high school, and then I got into college for computer science. While in college I started picking design back up in sophomore year, where we were starting to do projects and they needed interfaces.

All along were you thinking of yourself as a technologist or developer/coder first? Was design something that you did in order to get your projects done?

A little bit. Until very recently, actually, I wasn't really comfortable with calling myself a designer because I never went to design school. I didn't receive a classical design education, and I wasn't very confident about my work, either, so I was always saying, "I'm a developer and I sometimes design things." I didn't have confidence to actually call myself a designer until pretty recently, maybe 2010.

So you were doing a lot of design, but you just weren't comfortable with calling yourself a designer. Would you specifically market yourself to employers or to clients as a developer who designs?

Not really. All the early work I did was actually just coding work. I wasn't offering design services because I wasn't confident that I was good enough to actually do it.

How did you start getting pulled more toward design?

I don't remember a specific point in time, but I think it started after I graduated from college and then I moved to New York for grad school, for this experimental media program at New York University. I was exposed to more "design-y" things both at school and professionally. I feel like that influence helped me get a little bit better in 2009, 2010. As I was going through

school, I noticed that I was getting better and I was more confident with my work. Then at some point, I was comfortable telling people, "Yes, I'm a designer."

Were you intimidated by other designers?

I was just not confident with my work. I feel like a lot of designers have that for a long time, where they see other people's design work and they see their own, and they very intensely feel how they're lacking. I have the taste to recognize good design, but I couldn't make it myself, no matter how hard I tried. I could see myself inching towards it, but not to a point where I could comfortably show anything to anyone. I also didn't have a design education. I felt like if I went to school for design, I could at least have the confidence to tell people, "I studied this."

Was the vocabulary of design also intimidating? Did you feel like you just couldn't talk the way a designer talked? Or was it really just about the ability to execute?

It was more about execution. When I started designing in middle school, all that was available were actually these web design forums and personal web sites and static sites. They weren't really interactive or apps. There wasn't a big UX component. It was all just visual and impressive and then showing it to people. I don't think it was a vocabulary thing. It was more about me feeling confident about my output.

How did you build up your confidence and comfort level?

Through external validation. There weren't a lot of people back home in Turkey that I could show my design work to, that I felt were qualified to critique my designs. Obviously, I had family and friends and maybe this small web design community, but there wasn't anyone around me who could instill in me that confidence.

Then I moved to the States. I could have done this earlier on the Internet, but somehow it was after I moved to the States physically that I started becoming more part of a design community on Twitter, and I started making friends with other designers. For example, a couple of people I met at Brooklyn Beta back in 2010 became some pretty good friends. I started having people around me whose work I really looked up to, and they could talk to me about my work and getting positive feedback from them. That gave me the confidence.

So it was just knowing designers in real life?

Yes, exactly. Because when you only see people's work on the Internet, you don't know all the struggle that goes into that work and then it just feels like an unattainable, impossible goal, that these people must have super powers that let them do this work. Then you meet them in person and you start talking about how to get to that point, and then you realize everyone goes through the same struggles and you start identifying yourself closer to them.

Were those people at a similar skill level as you or were they more advanced?

Back in the day, I would say they were very ahead. This wasn't me versus someone that was doing work for huge clients or had an agency or had written a book. These were still relatively young people, relatively fresh out of school, but they were so ahead of me in terms of talent and career.

How were those real-life relationships helping your growth? And what kinds of things were you doing: self-initiated projects or freelance work?

Most of it was in the context of school and more self-initiated than doing it for pay. I was a research assistant at NYU and I was designing the user interface for this urban planning project. That

was what I was spending most of my time on. It was all under the context of classwork up until I did StartupBus, and then we had this other product. Then I started doing hackathons.

Talk about StartupBus. How did you come to take part in it?

It's basically a three-day-long hackathon where thirty people—usually ten designers, ten engineers, and ten people with business, marketing, and user product expertise—get on a bus with laptops and spotty wi-fi. They travel for three days to Austin, Texas, in time for South by Southwest. While on the bus people pitch ideas and then groups are formed spontaneously, and then people start developing. At the end of the ride, the results get judged.

The year I went, it was the second year of StartupBus and there were buses from New York, Boston, Cleveland, San Francisco, and L.A., all meeting up in Austin. The way I found out about it was Hacker News. I found it out by accident and I thought it was a stroke of luck for me because I liked those crazy travel arrangements and I also liked making stuff. It was pure luck that I stumbled upon it.

You signed up without knowing anybody on the bus?

I didn't know anyone going. I didn't know the organizers. I had to basically write an application pitching myself, why I would be good to be on the bus. I got in, but until I got on the bus, I actually didn't know anyone. Most of them are pretty good friends of mine now, who I still see.

Did that experience give you a huge leap forward in your confidence as a designer?

Not necessarily as a designer yet, because when I look at what I did on the bus, it wasn't my best design work. But I got to do a wide variety of things. I designed a pitch deck, I shot a product

video, I edited that video, I made a web site. I think it was more about me realizing that I've never really put myself 110 percent into any project ever in my life. If I really put all that I have into one certain thing, then I know I can do more than I anticipate.

What became of the project that you did on the bus?

We had an unsuccessful stint trying to turn it into an actual company. The product itself has a really heavy business component. It was basically a healthcare, medical tourism product. Whatever we did on the design or the code didn't matter as much as the business side. That's why we weren't able to take off. We got interviewed by Y Combinator and Techstars and tanked those interviews. It was a farfetched idea to begin with. I wasn't expecting much, but we went through the motions of actually trying to make it work, and it didn't.

Up to that point, had you thought of yourself as somebody who's going to work in the technology space, in startups? Had you ever considered another path?

Not really. I think that the tech space was what I was inching towards. I went to a computer science school and all my friends were studying to become full-fledged engineers. I was always trying to stay away from the pure engineering route and still focus more on making or designing fun things with the computer.

I knew that I was never going to be a very serious back-end engineer. What that left me with was light coding, which is more fun, and design, which in that context when I was going to school, at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey, nobody else was really designing anything. Out of hundreds of classmates, I was the only designer. That led me to thinking that this is a unique skill that I have.

Not every engineering program produces engineers who will go into startups, so I'm curious to know how you decided that

this is the particular brand of technology that you wanted to focus on.

While I was in college I had an internship in Finland working for a startup, so that was my first startup experience. Then I was doing contract work remotely for one of my classmates who had dropped out and moved to Silicon Valley, where he became the lead engineer of a startup. So I had exposure to these smaller companies. I don't think I sat down and I thought, "Do I want to work at a big company or a small one?" It just came naturally because of this internship and contracting experience led me toward that path.

So you never seriously considered anything else and it seemed natural to you to do the startup thing.

Yes. It was more fun and exciting. I knew friends that were graduating and moving on to working at a bank or a military software company. That just seemed super boring to me. I knew that I was not going to do that. When I was looking at the work offers available to me, at least when I was in Turkey, it looked like all the big companies were doing really boring work. Obviously that's not true and there are big companies that do exciting stuff as well, but I didn't feel like those career opportunities were available to me at that point.

Having grown up and studied in Turkey, what was the adjustment like to being in the States and trying to make a career in technology and design?

To be honest, if I could compare a version of me that stayed in Turkey and a version of me that moved here, I feel like the version of me that's here is having an easier time building a career and meeting people. It has changed since I left, but when I was back home, all the technology ventures and companies were all just meeting needs that existed. They weren't startups with new models.

I also went to international school in Turkey and I studied English. It wasn't like moving to the States was making a big life change for me. I felt like whatever I did up until that point lent itself naturally to eventually moving abroad.

You did the StartupBus, you finished up your research stint at NYU, and then you got a job at Etsy?

Yes. There was this summer fellowship program called HackNY that I got accepted into. At the same time, I had stumbled upon a listing for a designer job at Etsy. The job listing itself spoke to me so much. Usually job listings create negative emotion in me. When I read through them, I just get annoyed because they have such unreasonable demands of someone while pitching themselves as the perfect place to work. But when I was looking at Etsy's, I thought, "I want to meet the person that wrote this," because it spoke to my heart—not only in terms of what they were expecting of me but in terms of how they were portraying themselves as a place to work. I thought, "Wow, this sounds like a dream job." I really wanted to work there.

Then I got accepted into HackNY and Etsy was one of the host companies. I went to an Etsy event, and after that I asked Etsy CEO Chad Dickerson if we could make it so that HackNY would match me to Etsy, so that's how that happened.

By this time you were joining Etsy not as an engineer but as a designer?

Yes, as a product designer. At that point, I was just going to intern. I wasn't quite sure whether I had the chops to be a full-fledged product designer at Etsy. But because it was an internship, I feel like I wasn't as worried about portraying myself to them as a designer. I was on the design track by then.

What was that experience like for you?

I learned a bunch, but Etsy as a product and as a company was really different from anything I had worked on so far because all the startup work I had done, they were small companies with not very well-defined projects so I had more liberty in what I could do. Whereas Etsy had a defined product, was a defined company. I was really happy to embrace the culture of that company. Even though I was just interning there, I felt like it was a really special place and I really felt I was a part of it.

I learned to design within the constraints of an existing product and an existing company. That wasn't something I had done before. I had these little bits and pieces that I worked on, key features or updates that I had to make, but they all had to play with Etsy's existing UX and visual style.

How did you take to designing within those constraints?

It wasn't too hard. On the one hand, it made my job easier because I didn't have to make all the decisions myself. The more constrained your space gets, it makes it easier for you to design within those constraints as opposed to a blank slate. I feel like it was easier than I had anticipated.

After your internship at Etsy, did you want to seek another opportunity that was similar to that, working within existing constraints, or go where you could start something brand new?

To be honest, everything after that happened really quickly. I was interning at Etsy and then the summer ended. I really liked working for Etsy so I thought, "What if I drop my research assistantship and I give up my scholarship, and I work with those guys part-time while in school?" So we did that. Then I met Josh Miller and Hursh Agrawal randomly at Dogpatch Labs. I was doing a personal project there, just using the space. They convinced me to start helping them out with creating Roundtable, which became Branch. Throughout the course of that fall, I was still working part-time for Etsy. I was finishing

up school. Upon meeting them, I didn't drop everything and decide to make that my life. It happened slowly over time. When we did get funding, it just felt like a natural thing for me to do.

When we got the funding and the time when school ended just matched together. Etsy had offered me a full-time position. I didn't take it, but I didn't have to quit Etsy or anything. When my contract with Etsy ended, two weeks later we moved out to San Francisco.

Everything just happened at once?

Yes, it was crazy. That was a whirlwind. I found myself having finished school, having left Etsy, having moved to San Francisco, and having the first day that I had actually worked full time for Roundtable in our new office all at once.

How did you feel? Were you excited or scared or nervous?

I wasn't really nervous because I had never done just one thing at a time before in my life. I always had school and an internship and a side project. This time, I thought, "Okay, I don't have anything else. I have to put all my energy into this one single thing." That was interesting. When we were designing Roundtable, I didn't have that much time so I was only doing the least we could get away with. Then I found myself in a position where we had funding and it was just three of us and it was my full-time gig. I could put all my energy into it.

Previously it was easy for me to make design decisions based on not having time and having to be very basic. But then when it became a full-time, serious thing, I stumbled for a little bit. I think I overdesigned and thought too much because I had more time and I was expecting more of myself. That took a while to get used to.

You were learning an essential product designer skill, which is determining how much design to put into a project relative to available time and resources. And it seems like you were doing this on the fly. Did you just make it up as you went along? Did you consult other people? How did you get your bearings?

During those initial months when we got funding—when it was just us, trying to start it over again, only this time more properly—someone who really helped me was Ryan Freitas. He was one of our angel investors and one of the people that connected us with Obvious Corp. I would meet him every week and talk to him about what we were working on. Sometimes he would help me with concrete design things, but more of his help was with actual product design, telling me, "It seems like you guys spent too much time on this" or "Maybe you should put more care into this."

I think both his help and then our experience with actually shipping stuff as we went helped me get a sense of those "product design-y" questions: How much time should we put into this? How much we should plan? When should we ship? Stuff like that.

Life at a startup is like a rollercoaster—the highs are very high and the lows are very low. How did that affect you as a designer?

There were distinct phases in our company. When we were in San Francisco for four months, I didn't have much social life. We would just work. We would do the regular startup thing where we would work from ten in the morning to eleven at night, six, seven days a week. Then we weren't launching anything because of the amount of money we raised and we hadn't hired anyone. It felt like we had infinite time, like there wasn't anything giving us a sense of urgency to ship stuff. I didn't have many lows or highs during that period because we weren't really that out there. We were still testing it out. We had a beta product but it didn't feel like the stakes were too high.

But then we moved to New York and then we had office space and then we started having employees and then we really wanted to launch the product. Then the highs and lows started happening where we would really get excited about this one thing or we'd get excited about our initial launch, pour a lot of work into it. You can see the spikes and the traffic coming and going. I feel like those highs and lows started happening maybe five, six months in.

Some of that must come with the fact that you're a co-founder and bear extra responsibility. You're not just the lead designer or design director. You also have an ownership stake in the company. How did that affect the way you think about your designs?

It doesn't affect the design that I do as much as my position as a co-founder reflects in other ways. If I was just a designer working here, I would do the same designs. Being a co-founder, I have a voice in what direction we take. I help Josh flesh out ideas and what kind of products we should be building, where we should take the company. And now that I have another designer on my team, I think about how to structure our work so that he can be the happiest and the most productive, and that he has career growth that he's happy about. Stuff like that affects things other than the design.

When you're at a startup and you're the only designer, you're doing everything and there's never enough time. But you also have control over everything. Then the company grows even a little bit, and you start adding a designer here or there. It can be a difficult process to know how to delegate and to maximize your team members. What was that process like for you?

Tough. It wasn't only tough for me, it was also tough for the dynamics with Josh and Julius, our other designer. Because in the designing process before, we would actually flesh out a lot of the aspects of Josh's idea for the product, so I felt like I was

able to influence what we were building even though my job title was "designer." In those conversations, I would nudge the product here and there to a place that I felt more confident with. In this process, I was also doing product work. We weren't super aware of the fact that we have to basically strategize the product before we start designing. Then when we added Julius, I realized the conversations that I'd have with Josh—about whether we should be building this, whether this is the right time, whether the fidelity or the size of this project is inappropriate—we'd have them on the go. And this was Julius' first product design job at a web startup and he didn't have the experience to start asking us questions.

While I didn't want to micro-manage and be in all the conversations, at the same time I felt like I needed to, so it was a tough time for all of us. Eventually Josh and I got to a place where we learned to strategize the product beforehand. We would agree, and then Julius would have full liberty in how he would design it because I was on board with the goal of the products. But it took us a while to actually get there.

Do you get there through trial and error or are there a lot of discussions about process?

Trial and error. Every aspect of our process right now is rooted in a mistake we made or something that wasn't quite right or something we argued about or something we were upset about. All those eventually translate into things we do in the process to alleviate those in the future. We didn't sit down and think about the perfect process and nail it the first time. We were doing it little by little.

The company is young, but it's been through a lot of changes and evolutions. You as a designer have had to reinvent things a few different times. What has that been like?

Now I'm better able to change and put on these two different

hats. The co-founder hat and the designer hat are sometimes at odds with each other. When I put on the designer hat, I just want to make stuff. I want to make perfect, beautiful things. I cling to what I make, so once we make it I don't want to let go.

Whereas wearing the co-founder hat, you think about, "Is this the right thing to do?" or "Maybe there's something very different than what we're making right now that we need to do as a company," and you need to throw away a lot of the sweat and tears that went into a product and do something else because it's the right thing for the company. The toughest thing about being a designer co-founder is not managing a team or your relations with the co-founders, but just that tension between being a maker and a business person.

You made Roundtable, which was great in many ways, and then turned it into Branch, which was really beautiful, and then you made Potluck, which is very different. Has it been easy or hard for you to move on from each?

It was really, really tough in the beginning. I would have these long conversations with Josh about where we were taking the company, and now I see that because I had the designer hat on, I was steering us away from something that could potentially bring us success. Now I'm more aware that if you just try crazy things, something might stick and along the way you'll learn.

I'm the careful, feet-on-the-ground type. We had to figure out the dynamic where I realized Josh's farfetched ideas might get us to success.

When you decided to hire another designer, how did you determine what kind of person you needed?

I recognized the weaknesses I had as a designer and I wanted to plug those holes. I'm not a great visual designer. I didn't receive classical design training in typography or proportions or

color. I'm pretty much figuring it out based on the design end of cowboy programming—doing things not based on principles but based on experience and what looks good. I wanted someone that had a more grounded skill set for visual design.

At the same time, I wasn't quite sure whether being able to code is something we required for a designer or something that would be nice. Then I realized, we're still a startup and we're still building products and we still need someone to be able to do product design and to be able to execute. If I had a ten-person design team, a pure visual designer would be great. I realized with the kind of work that we were doing, if we didn't hire someone who was a generalist, that person wouldn't contribute to the company that much.

We also product-manage all the features that we are shipping. When we design something, we're also responsible for having conversations with engineering about what to cut in order to ship it on time and managing their time and making sure we ship it. After we ship it, we look at our metrics. At first I was just doing all this, and at some point I couldn't manage it, so we decided to break it where the stuff Julius designed he would PM, and the stuff I designed I would PM. Then I realized that he is a much better natural manager. He was more naturally able to stay on top of multiple people's work at the same time and to shuffle and re-prioritize stuff and just really organize. I don't have that ability naturally. This is something that I have to consciously remind myself to do all the time.

Do you feel like your co-founders, Josh and Hursh, have always respected design? Or have you had to educate them on the design aspects of their business?

In terms of hiring and the team, I never had trouble. As soon as I said that we needed another designer, we never had the conversation about whether we actually needed one. I feel like they understand the importance of design because Roundtable was

successful for two reasons: one of which was we had good social engineering to get on board all these people that we didn't really know to use the site. The other was it just looked credible.

It wasn't the best site, but it didn't look like something that three guys who dropped out of school were hacking together. It gave us that credibility, which I feel like eventually turned into us getting press and then getting attention from investors. Everybody recognizes that design was a really important part of why we were successful early on. I feel lucky that they're on board with that.

Now that you are a co-founder of a venture-backed startup, do you still dabble in personal projects?

Yes, but not as much as I'd like to. My personal projects are actually less about designing and more just hacking together stuff. I can't have personal projects that span the length of multiple weeks because I don't have enough attention span, so I can only do something that I can do in one day. The advantage of personal projects is you only need to commit for yourself. As soon as you start adding other people that are more invested in something than you are, it creates a difficult dynamic. If I was helping out someone on a design of a product that was their full-time gig, then they would be thinking about it all the time and I'd be thinking about it only two hours a week, and that mismatch would make it hard. All the personal projects I do right now are for my own personal enjoyment.

Is it hard to balance those with your day job?

When I'm working, I'm working. When I'm not working, I'm not working. I feel like as a startup, we strike a good balance. We have recognized how having a good, healthy personal life pays in the work we do. Everyone at work's a friend. We're all interesting and happy people. If you want to have that sort of company, you can't overwork people twelve hours a day, seven

days a week because that leaves people that are unhappy and uninteresting, because they aren't doing anything else other than their main gig. I think if you're just working and if you're just looking at hours, you spend a lot of time doing stuff that doesn't matter. Limiting your engagement actually makes you more conscious about focusing on what matters.

Do you imagine yourself working with this team for years to come? What would you do next?

I don't really know. This is the same for both my life career-wise and for the life of the company. We have short-term visibility, a couple months in, and then we have real long-term visibility into where we want to go, but everything in between is kind of nebulous. I know where I want to be at when I'm thirty. I don't know how long Potluck would continue or what exactly I would do after. I don't know my next step, but I know that where I want to end up is a place where I can work on a product with a small team in an intimate setting and I have freedom over where I am physically.

I used to be a big traveler when I was back in school in Turkey. I would find cheap tickets to go places every weekend. When you're a co-founder and you have a lot of responsibility, that doesn't work, and I miss that. I feel like there could be a life in which I still have that freedom and I'm still making things and making money. That's what I aspire to.

Chapter 6

Erika Hall

Co-founder, Mule Design

After the dot-com bust of the early 2000s, Erika Hall co-founded Mule Design in San Francisco. Over the course of the next decade-plus, she helped build Mule into one of the country's preeminent digital design studios. Hall also became an influential speaker and author, and wrote the highly regarded design research primer "Just Enough Research."

You studied philosophy at Dartmouth. How did you get from there into doing the kind of work that you're doing? What was the first step?

Well, let's see, the first step was graduating into a recession with a philosophy degree [*laughs*].

Perfect.

Then the first job I got, amusingly, was—you know how venture capital partnerships frequently have girls in the front office?

That's the job I had immediately after graduating. Well, not as immediately as I would have liked—I got it six months after graduating. I did not know what a venture capital partnership was, but I knew that my philosophy degree qualified me to sit at a front desk while I figured things out. It was a pretty unsuccessful partnership. It wasn't even on Sand Hill Road. I had no idea what they did. So I spent a couple of years working at this grunty VC job for no money with horrible people, and all my friends were working at Apple.

Dartmouth sent a lot of graduates to Apple. When I went there it was an all-Apple campus. So I wasn't really aware of what it meant to have what I had there. All of the dorms had AppleTalk and we all had Macs. All the Macs had HyperCard and I taught myself HyperTalk.

This was at the end of the '80s, early '90s?

Yes, early '90s.

That's pretty impressive.

I'd always been interested in computers, too. Actually, going back further, one of my great holiday meltdowns was when I'd asked for a computer and my parents got me an Atari video game system. I had gotten out the Sears catalog, the "Wish Book," and I thought, "Hey, the Atari 800, there's a computer. I want to learn how to program." Then the box showed up under the tree, and I thought, "Yes!" I opened it, and I thought, "A video game system, really? *Really?!*" I was just so angry.

How old were you?

I was 10 or 12, somewhere in there. Maybe middle school-ish. I hung out at RadioShack more than most little girls. I got Omni magazine. I read a lot of sci-fi, too.

Then for my birthday, six months later, I got a Commodore VIC-20, plugged it into the TV, and I learned BASIC and made little weird graphical things happen on the screen.

When I went to college, I drew on that and took a programming class. It was fun. I learned a lot and I learned the basics of programming.

Did you think then that you would work in technology?

Not necessarily. I was surrounded by technology in a way I didn't realize. In the fall of 1988, at Dartmouth, they introduced an email system, BlitzMail, which looked a lot like Eudora, and all the students used email. Here it was, the end of the '80s, I have a networked computer. I send my papers to the library laser printer and then go pick them up on my way to class. I'm learning HyperTalk. I just thought, "Oh, everybody has Macs. That's just the next evolution." Then I graduated and found out 3 percent of people have Macs. I saw Windows for the first time and I thought, "What are you people doing? This is hideous. This is really horrifying."

Anyway, technology had always been in the background. And maybe I had a very early version of that "everybody should code" mindset. I'd always had really nerdy and geeky friends. The first guy I dated in high school was already programming for NASA.

This was just something that really appealed to me, especially coming from Los Angeles. It seemed more substantive. I thought, "We're going to make things with technology and it's going to be awesome."

I was also fleeing from being an English major, which is what everybody thought I was going to be because I was interested in language. I majored in Russian, and then I went to Russia for a while and got back and I thought, "No, I feel like I've

learned all the Russian I really want to learn." Also I saw the state of Russia and the economy there, and I knew, "My friends who majored in Chinese and economics, they're the ones who made the correct bet."

So, I had this stupid VC job and thought, "Okay, what am I going to do now?" One of my friends had Lynx and showed me, "This is the World Wide Web and all of these different servers are connected." Then another friend of mine who worked at Apple said, "Oh, hey, here's this thing called Mosaic." My reaction was, "This! This is everything I'm interested in. This is everything that interested me in philosophy. This is everything that interested me about design and being an architect. This is everything that interested me in publishing."

So when you saw the web, you said, "This is what I want to do." How specific was that idea? Was it like, "I just want to do *something* in this industry" or was it "I want to be publishing here" or "I want to be programming"?

I wanted to somehow be involved. At that point, everybody was making it up as they went along. At the time, we were asking ourselves, "What is this for?" There was no commercial Internet. Having things online, being able to communicate asynchronously, always being networked—that was what I loved about being in school and communicating by email, and hating the phone. That was so natural to me.

I saw that and I thought it was exciting and I wanted to be involved in it, but I wasn't totally clear on what that could be. What kind of job can you do with this? So I just started calling people up. "Hey, I want to do Internet-y things." Something that I totally recommend is calling people up or emailing people and saying, "Hey, can I buy you coffee and have you talk about your career?" People will do that, and I totally did this.

Who were you calling up?

It was tech publishers and maybe more magazine-oriented people. Because of that, it ended up that somebody at IDG Publishing got my name.

So you were calling people looking for job opportunities?

Or just looking to talk. I'd say, "Hey, I'm interested in this stuff." Again, the willingness of people to just talk to you is real. This is my number-one advice for anybody starting out in their career and especially after interviewing a lot of people for jobs. Having a thing you want to do in an industry and being super-excited about that thing is the hugest asset. If you just come in to a place, even if you say, "I want to have coffee," and you talk to somebody who's in a particular field and you say, "What you do is so kickass and I want to do it. Tell me how you did it," that person is going to want to help you.

Sometimes people are kind of shy. They think, "Oh, I'm going to wait until there's a job opening" or "I don't want to take somebody's time up." Seriously, that's a break for somebody who's really advanced in their career. As long as they have any free time at all, they'll say, "Oh, God, I could talk to all these annoying people I work with or I could go talk to a young, idealistic person who's going to look at me like I'm their hero and talk about myself for an hour." That is candy to an experienced professional.

And it totally worked. This was '94 or '95, at this point. I'd quit my stupid job and I'm running out of money in my checking account. Then the phone rings and it was somebody at IDG in San Francisco saying, "Hey, we have this research job. Would you be willing to just come in and we'll give you 15 bucks an hour." My reaction was, "Wow, that's so much more than minimum wage. That's amazing." They had all these tech publications and this was the unit that had Publish magazine, which was about print publishing.

I remember it.

The CEO of this particular business unit said, "I'm trying to figure out whether we should start a publication about the web and about HTML. I want you to talk to people and gauge their interests." So I just got this list and—I can't even explain to you how much I hated talking on the phone, how much the phone just filled me with anxiety—but I knew that, once again, I've got to call random strangers and ask something of them. I wanted this so much, I had to overcome this horrible social anxiety about talking on the phone. That's why I love the Internet.

But I managed to get people to talk to me. I'd shown a certain amount of moxie, so the CEO of this IDG business unit that published four or five magazines hired me to be part of the exploratory Internet team. I don't even remember if I had a title.

This is exactly what they say happens in books. You talk to people and then somebody makes a job for you. It was like "What Color Is Your Parachute?" by the numbers. It was amazing. The greatest part about that job was that everything was just starting. Nobody knew what anybody was doing. I had a salary and really ill-defined responsibilities. It was just us trying to figure out how this publishing company was going to get into the Internet business.

Other than being able to get people to talk, what technical skills did you have?

I didn't know HTML when I went in. I just had this interest, so I taught myself HTML. Then I started teaching myself Perl. I started learning all this stuff and then I started freelancing and getting people to pay me to do things I didn't quite know how to do yet. I got a freelance Perl scripting job and I was making web pages. I got my own site. I got up on Laughing Squid way back in the day. I was getting paid and on the side I

was just learning stuff because nobody knew what to do.

Then this IDG business unit kind of imploded and I went to go work for another part of the company that was doing stuff around online community. The initial idea was that we were all going to be the central service bureau to do Internet-y things for all the IDG publications, and these were all really technical publications like Macworld, PCWorld. They built this whole platform from scratch, like a CMS and BBS together and they said to me, "You're kind of technical but you also know how to write and you're good with words, so you're going to be the producer and you're going to run this online community."

It was called Arcadium and so I was the producer. They let me hire three interns, who were basically just low-paid actual production staff but they called them interns. I learned a lot of things about online communities—that was the buzzword. People weren't quite sure how to make money from socialization online. I think we're still in the same place.

I also got to live through my first community shutdown. It was terrible. I saw the connections people were making online. People met prom dates on this stupid video game community. They met spouses. They made friendships.

So, you found these opportunities by asking for them or being enthusiastic about them, and basically getting opportunities to learn on the job. The things that you were doing gave you training in product design, interface design, and strategy. Did you realize all of this would lead to being an experience designer?

Well, that didn't exist then. I was technical at that point. I'd always been a generalist.

If someone had asked you what you did for a living then, what would you have said?

Internet. That's what we all do. We make Internet.

What did you do next?

This was '98, '99. I interviewed at Yahoo to be the producer of their online games. They really liked me and wanted to hire me, and I said, "No way am I commuting down the peninsula. Not for any amount of money. I don't care." I took six months off and I went to Europe for a while, then I came back and hung out in San Francisco, being unemployed, which was fantastic. If you can somehow manage to be there and not have a job…

It's like a playground.

Yes, infinitely entertaining. It's so great to spend some time without a job in a city like that. Then I thought, "Okay, where am I going to go do Internet things next?" A friend who'd been my manager at the IDG community thing said, "Well, I've got a friend who works at Studio Archetype and they're hiring a lot of people right now." I said, "Well, what do you need? I guess I could be a project manager," because at that point, I was still too general to have any specific skills. They hired me and then I was in an agency.

And I was not only in an agency, I was in one of the greatest agencies going. I mean, that place was fantastic. The people there were so smart. All of a sudden I was part of this multi-disciplinary, problem-solving, Super Friends team. We worked really, really hard. We had these insane long days, but everybody that I worked with was so smart. I just learned stuff from being around these people every day.

Were you still acting as a generalist there or were you starting to specialize?

Well, I was brought in as a project manager, which is really funny because I think no person in their twenties can be a project

manager. The whole skill is having experienced a lot of stuff and being able to say, "Oh, yeah, I know what's going to happen." It was like this runaway train because they had all these clients and there was so much going on that I got thrown into things.

Then I did some writing and I was an assistant project manager on the Xerox account. I had no clue what was going on, that project was enormous. Web projects were huge then because you had to make a site for every single browser. There was no CSS. They required a project team of twelve people and a seven-figure budget, which would be a $5,000 project to do today. It was crazy. What was I even doing? I was faxing things. Then they needed somebody to do some writing, so I did some writing. Then they said, "Oh, would you like to be a content strategist?" I thought, "Awesome. I'm going to be a content strategist now." This is how these things happen.

I worked on this enormous redesign for Electronic Arts as a content strategist. They embedded me with this content team that had all come out of journalism, and it was really cliquish and weird. It made me think, "Okay, I'm a second-class content strategist," but then I did the job and I did fine. I did a good job. That's really where I got into navigation design and interaction design. That's where I had my first screaming fights about navigational nomenclature. It was awesome to be in a place where people would have actual screaming fights about what to label things. Everybody took it so seriously.

Then that job wrapped up and they ended up killing it because they did a deal with AOL. We did this whole project and then we heard, "Oh, well, the client's going in a different direction. We're going to get paid. We're going to get the two million dollars or whatever, but nothing's going to launch."

Then the Sapient acquisition of Studio Archetype was being completed and I decided, "I am out of here." That's when I quit and went to New Zealand.

Why did you go to New Zealand?

I went to New Zealand because I just had these successive crushings of my spirit. "All these really smart people are putting all their energy into this, but, hey, the powers that be have decided to take it in another direction." It was so intense and I thought, I just need to take a long walk in a peaceful place.

What year was this?

That was 2000. I spent a couple of months walking in New Zealand and I came back. I freelanced for a while. I decided I missed working for a team and that's when I went to work for Hot Studio as a project manager because at that point, I was still a generalist.

Then the recession was really terrible and they had to lay people off, but I got out before that. That's where I met Mike Monteiro, my future partner at Mule Design. He was the art director at Hot Studio. He left to go to this photo company Snapfish. I was super miserable at Hot. Their biggest client was Charles Schwab. This giant project that had been keeping us afloat was shut down, and I got out because Mike said to me, "We're doing a huge redesign and we need a writer to essentially write the interface."

We hung out for that summer and I worked on the interaction design. Even though it wasn't really called that, that's really what I was doing. I started wireframing and I was really involved in the research. I was involved in every part of the project and it was exciting. It was the last startup in that period that was paying people, and we felt like the last people. Like, the ship is sinking and we're on the last Titanic life raft out there.

I remember that time, for sure.

We thought, "Hey, we all have exciting jobs!" Then, "Hey,

nobody I know has a job anymore!" People either went into restaurant jobs or, if they'd managed to make any money during the first tech bubble, they were hanging out in Thailand.

You were at Studio Archetype, which then became Sapient, and then you went away and then you went back to Hot Studio—these are all agencies—and then you went to Snapfish for a summer. Did that make you feel that you wanted to be on the product side rather than the services side?

It was more like, "This is a place that's paying and fun." When I worked in the agency environment, I loved having that level of really wanting to solve the design problem really well, and the sense that everybody that I was working with had that shared concern. Clement Mok had written that book, "Designing Business," about strategic design, and it was essentially what we were doing.

We knew that Snapfish was short term. Mike was their creative director, making a stupid salary working with some really not-awesome designers and fighting with engineers about what was possible. I asked him, "God, what are we going to do?" Having been at the mercy of all these top-level, strategic decisions that really affected us as employees, we thought, "Well, we could start our own agency." It's good that we did, because the fact that we had created jobs for us ourselves made us the only people in San Francisco with jobs! Not that we were getting paid. I had a little money saved up and he had some contract work.

So you went out on your own. Did you have any clients right away?

One of the great things to do is to quit your job. Sometimes you quit your job but manage to set up a contracting relationship with your former employer. That's something to consider as a person trying to go on their own.

We got this little starting place and then we started to get clients. That's where I had to learn all the rest of the stuff I didn't know. All the experience I'd had was weird and patchy but super valuable. I'd been involved in business development and I was involved in proposal writing. I'd done things on the technical side. I'd probably even done some terrible visual design, but I've done really everything. It also turned out that the philosophy degree was incredibly relevant.

In what way?

It's very much about constructing an argument and clarifying it. Philosophy is this total precursor to strategy or interaction design or information architecture. Because you create ontologies or you understand the ontology. You propose different worlds. A lot of times what philosophers will do is propose a model. "Here's a model for how the universe is set up." Well, now I'm going to critique that model and propose a different model or I'm just going to do a pure critique. That's what philosophers have done through the ages.

So, despite the fact that I never went through the design school crit process, that sort of building a rationale or critiquing somebody else's rationale was part of my work. If you said to me, "Here's the goal, here's the design solution," I could sell that cold to any client. I can build a rationale for anything. You could call it bullshitting, but then you know how you start saying stuff and you realize after the fact, "Wow! I was actually right."

When did this skill develop? Did you have it there because of your philosophy background or did your experience and lots of client-facing time bring it out?

I think, to a certain extent, I'm a talker. Despite the weird phone thing, I'm super comfortable in front of people. That's something that doesn't bother me. I don't know where that

comes from, but standing up and presenting to people and explaining things to people had always been something that I'd done and enjoyed doing.

Then I just got more and more practice with it and more exposure to uncomfortable situations or when something goes horribly wrong at which point you say, "Okay, what could I do better next time?" It's all just practice, practice, practice.

So this is when you and Mike were forming Mule Design. Did you have a first client to kick you off?

Yes, yes. Mike got his MFA at the University of Texas and lived in Austin for many years. He had an old friend who was the marketing director of a wildlife preserve outside of Austin called Fossil Rim. We started Mule with him as our very first client and that was very exciting. It was a great job and we actually made a really great site for them. The next marketing director came in and screwed it all up, but it was really, really good.

Was it just the two of you doing all of the work? The sales, the client management, the design and development?

It was the two of us and then we brought in contractors because, wow, there were a lot of people available! A contract project manager was brought in, we had a contract coder, a contract Flash developer. We said, "Okay, we have friends with skills who need money." It was really touch-and-go that first year because we had a couple of clients to start off and then we realized, "Wow, now we've got to get more."

We all had a kind of PTSD. I remember we had no money and one proposal out to a prospective client and we thought, "Please, God, sign this soon." We were trying to figure out how to run a business and then Yahoo, amusingly enough, was the first Internet company to revive and resuscitate. We had a friend who had gone to work for Yahoo who called and said,

"Hey, we need some help on this project. Do you guys want to come down and work with us?" It was a big and substantial contract and we said, "We eat tonight!"

The funny thing about Yahoo at that time is it was like the afterlife for the tech boom. We're on this sunny campus with the free cappuccinos and I ran into everyone I'd ever worked with from every job. There were people there from IDG, there were people there from Studio Archetype. I think there were people there from Hot. They were the only people hiring.

For the next year or so, we did a ton of work with Yahoo and then they started hiring some real strategic designers such as Irene Au. They said, "We're going to change from being an engineering-driven culture to having this user experience practice," and then they wanted to bring us in and mentor their design teams.

After a while, we'd gotten everything out of Yahoo we needed. We ended up getting this job working with the UN that was really awesome. Then we were off and running.

It's funny, the one good thing about economic downtimes is that the risk of something not working out is so low. The really exciting thing about starting Mule was that, to the people we talked to, we were this shining beacon of optimism. Everybody else was of the mind, "I'm so screwed. I thought that being an interaction designer was this awesome career and now nobody needs that. Was that just something that we thought was going to be a business? The new economy wasn't actually a thing, and the Internet isn't actually important?"

And there we were, starting a company to design web sites. We got so much great positive reinforcement and people were so excited to hear that we were starting something. We weren't just talking about what crashed and died. We had a lot of cheerleaders just because we represented a counter to the prevailing

attitude of doom and gloom, that everything's gone and it's not coming back.

So to clarify, what was the turning point for you? When did you say, "Okay, now I'm in the business of design"?

I think I was in the business of design as soon as I went to work for Studio Archetype. It felt like, "We're the design team," especially when we went into a client's office. There wasn't this sense of, "You're not a designer," because everybody was participating. That's why I developed this holistic view of how we work. It's not just the visual design. It's not the code. You need the strategic thinking and you need that technological thinking. That was when I formed that identity of "I am a designer," but I also learned that a designer isn't one genius person. For this kind of work, you absolutely need multidisciplinary thinking or you're only going to be solving part of the problem.

How do you feel about your career today? Do you think you've arrived or do you think there's another milestone that you guys are trying to get to, as a studio or personally?

If I'd arrived, I'd be in Thailand.

I sort of feel that at this point you can go to Thailand.

Yes, that's true, but it's good to be here. In some ways, we're the Internet's "children of the Depression," because having been through that experience we're now of the mindset, "The pantry is always going to be full so at least we can eat." When we talked about Mule, we said, "We are never getting so big that we can't weather a downturn. We are never laying people off." We saw what "growth for growth's sake" did to other companies and we said, "Why? What does that get you?" It doesn't necessarily get you more money, because your overhead goes way up and up. We're always going to have close control over the clients so we don't have to say, "Hey, we really need mon-

ey because we've hired all this staff, so now we're working for Monsanto." We never want to be in that position.

What we want is a place that we have control over, that we can go to everyday and do what we want to do. In that sense, we arrived as soon as we founded the company. I feel we're in a good position and we have a lot of choices and opportunities. We continue to make new and better and different mistakes. We're fulfilling the vision, and it's a place that's very pleasant to go to instead of commuting down the peninsula. This work is tremendous fun and it's taking everything we have and everything we've learned and asking, "What can we do?"

I think when you're just starting out in your career and you think about other people's careers, it seems like a super-smooth trajectory and it seems like people do things really intentionally. I love looking back at the things I tried that totally didn't work out. Those things are really, really useful. Things go horribly, but somewhere down the line, that thing that went horribly is going to totally help you do something really fantastic.

Let me ask you about your partnership with Mike. Do you feel like things accelerated for you once you two teamed up? How pivotal was that in your career, finding someone who could complement you and be there as a partner in crime?

Our skills are super complementary—extremely. This also sometimes leads to epic battles, because the flipside of things being really complementary is having these really different approaches. I'll come in and be super analytical about something, and he'll come in with this—I don't want to call it intuitive, that sounds dismissive, but a different sensibility, and a more—I don't know even know how to describe it. Anything I say is going to sound like Spock describing how humans have emotions [*laughs*].

That's how it works, though, because we can come in from both

places. It really helps in that sense because we have this real strength. It's good to have a counter. We're both super opinionated and have a super-strong sense of what the right way to do something is. That difference is good, even though it might be uncomfortable. I talk about this in my book, "Just Enough Research," but striving to be comfortable is not a productive feeling. If you feel comfortable in what you're doing, then you're not challenging yourself and you're not growing. Have you seen the Metallica documentary "Some Kind of Monster"?

No, I never have. But so many people recommend it.

It's so good. I resisted it because I'm not a Metallica fan, but in the same way that "The Wire" isn't really about the police, the Metallica documentary isn't really about metal. What you'll see are people who have become comfortable trying to make music for people who are in this young, striving, rage place. It's like, you can't sit there with your Chardonnay in one of your five houses and talk about raging with Satan, or whatever they did.

I definitely think, if left to our own devices, Mike and I might've each just gone off and been a freelancer or just done our own thing. It seems so terrifying to be responsible for other people. It's good to have another person to share that terror with.

How long do you think you guys will run Mule Design? Is this until you retire? Or is this…

Until we die. I feel like, Mule is what we do. What Mule *is* could change.

We don't have a strong idea about what Mule has to be. It just has to be the place that supports the kind of work that we want to be doing. If someday Mule is the name of the island that we've retired to, great, but I can't even imagine that. And this might be true for a lot of designers—to me the idea of retiring sounds just horrifying. No longer having problems to solve,

other than when I'm going to schedule my knee replacement or where I'm going to play a round of golf or whatever. I have to solve problems for other people. I just love solving problems for other people so much. I can't imagine not doing that.

There's a quote that goes, "You think everybody's highlight reel is their documentary." People have this sense that everybody else has it figured out. And then you're doing it, and you think, "Oh, my God. I don't know what I'm doing." If you do it long enough without knowing what you're doing, then you realize *no one* actually knows what they're doing. That is the liberating insight. People running these enormous companies, they know some things but they're making stuff up and hoping it works out. That's 90 percent of it. Once you accept that about the world, I think that's very calming.

Chapter 7

Naz Hamid

Founder, Weightshift

As a prolific young designer in Chicago, Naz Hamid used his Weightshift moniker for personal projects. By the late 2000s he had relocated with his wife to San Francisco, and Weightshift had become a highly respected independent design business working with some of the tech industry's biggest names.

When did you first start thinking about becoming a designer?

When I was a kid, in London, I used to love art and drawing. I had this creative side to me, which I think few Asian parents really like to cultivate. They want you to be a doctor, a lawyer, or a businessperson, but I always liked the arts. In my teenage years, I was influenced by music, music videos, skateboarding, BMX—a lot of counterculture, punk rock kind of stuff. That's how it starts. I used to play in bands and make flyers and demo tapes. I used to use the photocopy machine and cut out little things and use Paint on Windows 3.1 on my first computer.

I didn't know at that time that this was design. I didn't actually realize until later when I came stateside that, "Oh yeah, art can be design when it's communicating something and when it's solving a problem."

That was my first recognition of what design is, what it can be, and what impact it can have. But I used to just think it was all just art and magazines and just cool things that you do.

You were doing this stuff in high school?

Yes, my first band was when I was 15. I've played in bands a long time. Probably a huge influence was reading Thrasher or Transworld Skateboarding, and just being exposed to the awesome graphics that came out of a lot of that California culture and skateboarding. And that gave me exposure to American street culture and streetwear: sneakers and hip-hop and that sort of thing. I didn't come up learning about design through Paul Rand or some of the classics like Dieter Rams or Swiss Modernism. I didn't learn all that stuff until later.

What was your college experience like?

I came stateside in '98, when I was 19, and went to school in Chicago, at DePaul University, where I did a computer science program—basically information systems and computer science. I started to learn about the Internet, and blogs were what hooked me. It started with fan sites I liked and just poking around and seeing who was linking to what, who was talking about certain bands.

In a weird way, music keeps popping up and playing a central role in all of this. That's when I started thinking about how you can actually apply art to computer science, and that bled into web design. This was '98, '99, when I started realizing that web design could be a thing—it could actually be a career. I wanted it to be a career, but there weren't a lot of choices back then. If

you came from computer science, you were either a programmer or you were in information systems, which I still to this day have no idea what it does for you. Then you had the guys who went into human-computer interaction, HCI, which is probably the closest thing to what we call user experience, UI design, and visual design now.

Information systems is a weird, in-between place where you learned a little bit of HCI, you learned a little bit of programming, then you learned about database design: C++, COBOL, Visual Basic, all this really archaic stuff that no one uses anymore. But I knew that I liked this place where technology and being creative and artistic somehow blended together.

I had a little blog on Geocities, and I tried to make a punk rock zine on the Internet that was about music and books and the things I liked. That came out of doing an HTML class and saying, "I can somehow blend these two things together and I can put it on the Internet for free." There weren't any real costs involved. Even sending black-and-white photocopies cost money, and unless you had a hook-up at Kinko's or something, you weren't going to be able to afford it. I love that the Internet allowed me to have this outlet for creativity, and that's when I started thinking maybe I could do this for work.

Was that your first plan after school, to earn money through design?

Yes, I was working in the computer lab at DePaul for the last year and a half that I was in school, and during that time we had Photoshop and a bunch of Adobe stuff on the computer. I was teaching myself how to use it.

My friend Allan had met some guy up in Evanston, Illinois, who was doing a bunch of small web sites, mostly for local businesses. Allan brought me on because there was a lot of work. The guy paid us 100 bucks, and he was charging clients

$5,000, but he would manage all these web sites for these clients. I believe he was a children's book illustrator.

Allan and I were used to making stuff in Allaire Homesite by hand-coding, and we started to learn a little bit of Macromedia Dreamweaver, but he was using Adobe GoLive, so I learned how to use GoLive, too. It's weird because none of this stuff exists anymore, but that was my first taste of "Okay, I can make some money off this."

I went to job fairs and met with recruiters, but no one was really sure what my degree did because I wasn't a programmer and I wasn't really a designer *per se* and design wasn't as clear-cut or well defined as it is today. I wanted to do web design, but I really didn't have a portfolio. Back then I was talking to places like Tribal DDB, marchFIRST, Accenture, all those classic, crazy digital ad agency types.

Were you looking for a full-time position or freelance work?

I was looking for anything. But I needed full-time work because I was on a year-long student visa after college, so I needed to find a place that would sponsor my H-1B. Again, it came back to Allan. During that first bubble, 1999 to 2001, he started working at ChinaOnline.com as a junior designer. I was selling bagels at a bagel shop for a couple of months, and he hooked me up at China Online.

I also found a part-time job at a place called Liquid Generation. They're actually still around today. Basically, they were building up a directory of links, and I was a link hunter. Eventually I ended up being their webmaster, and at China Online I was a junior designer as well, and just trying to learn from everybody there. I started honing my coding chops and I helped build a PHP management system from scratch, which was cool. That was my start, working for these two dot-coms after college.

So you weren't a designer *per se*, but you were doing a lot of different tasks including some design. Were you naturally gravitating towards those duties?

Yes, Liquid Generation was initially just grunt work, and I basically tried to create this designer position. They were doing a lot of funny Flash movies and doing a lot of the animation and voiceovers and skits in-house. No one was doing HTML, CSS stuff, or stuff that was DHTML-driven. They saw that I could do that. So I'd embed all these iframes in these chat rooms, so that the Liquid Generation community could talk to each other. That was fun.

At China Online, as they began to lose money and the bubble started to burst, more and more people left, which meant that from being a junior designer I became the senior designer, to being the only designer, to being the only person who knew how to do any of the web stuff—I became the one-man web department. At Liquid Generation, I got let go eventually because they ran out of money as well. I ended up staying at China Online longer because of my situation with the visa. I just kept having more and more responsibility piled on me—which was great in retrospect, because it allowed me a lot of freedom to do stuff, and it pushed me to raise the bar in terms of what I needed to know to manage everything, especially in a bigger environment, with an office, and more people.

What were you doing to improve your design skills, because at that time you still hadn't had any "traditional" or "classical" training, right?

Right, everything had been self-taught, and really, it was a lot of mimicry. I think blogs were my first, biggest inspiration for what you could do on the web. When I think about early blogs that I found, I think of a lot of the stuff that the Pyra guys were doing. We're talking about Ev Williams's Evhead.com; Jason Kottke's Kottke.org; Meg Hourihan's

Megnut.com; Matt Haughey's Haughey.com; Jack Saturn; Derek Powazek—basically anybody who was doing blogs around the Blogger period, just seeing what they could do.

The other inspiration was a lot of the design portals: Design Is Kinky, K10K, Surfstation, Pixelsurgeon, GMUNK, and Joshua Davis's Praystation, and all those crazy Flash and Japanese *manga*–influenced graphics. I just mimicked it as much as possible, trying to recreate the graphics in Photoshop, and also trying to figure out the codes, a lot of view-sourcing and just saying, "So that's how you nest a table within a table." Then doing iframes and stuff like that. It was a lot of using the web as my textbook.

After those two startups failed, what was next for you?

Out of necessity, I started freelancing. I was fortunate enough to find a few people to work with. In the beginning, it was a lot of friends, and I'd do it for nothing, or just to build up a portfolio. Keeping up my first journal site, Absenter.org, I'd find people that I liked or admired, or felt a kinship to, and I'd reach out or get connected.

I think the biggest thing was just putting my head down and trying to do as much work as possible and trying to keep myself afloat. At the time, you just worked at a studio or something—there weren't tech startups like we have tech startups now. There weren't those options, and design still wasn't as valued then as it is now. Design was much more marketing-driven. It was a period of great experimentation and just thinking, "Well, I'm just going to keep at this and hopefully someone will like something I do."

So you were just doing freelance stuff? How would you find your clients?

The biggest thing was the web design community. Having the

blog, reaching out to the community, which was smaller back then, was key in building up a reputation and then having a name. It's not the thing that I really went after. I definitely haven't been consistent with blogging. A lot of people who have had success with their blogs or sites, it's because they've kept at it for a long time. Good or not, I think consistency is way more important than the occasional burst. I definitely had some success with the occasional burst, but saying that I'm going to try to make Weightshift my living and the thing that I'm going to focus on was more key than trying to keep up any of the blogs that I had at the time.

Let's follow that Weightshift thread for a moment. I think you called it just a moniker, just a name that you would tag your work with, and then eventually it became a studio. What's the origin of that?

I had three sites—Absenter.org, Boochakanan, and Weightshift. I knew when I bought my first three domains that I wanted them to be three separate things. Absenter was just going to be a personal place for journaling; Boochakanan was a photo journal because I wanted an outlet for my photography. And then Weightshift was just going to be the place where I put my portfolio. Then, everybody had some kind of moniker, and I liked that spirit, whether it was Bradley G. Munkowitz as GMUNK or Thomas Brodahl, the guy from Surfstation, he had a moniker, Xtrapop. No one went by just their names like they do now.

"Weightshift" was the name of a song from one of my old bands, and I liked the visual metaphor—that design is sort of a weight shifting, in a sense, because it's not just the studio, it goes on to the user, to an audience. Weightshift was just me for a very long time. It wasn't until moving to San Francisco back in '09 that I actually thought, "Well, could Weightshift be more than just me?" I wasn't sure how I wanted to do that just yet.

I've been fortunate enough to have had numerous job offers. For some reason, I've been super stubborn about not wanting to do that, even though it has meant missing out on working with some great people at some great places. I definitely value the life-work balance too much. As time went by it just felt like it had been too long since I had been in an office.

Meaning, you didn't think you had the temperament anymore to do a full-time job?

Jen, my wife [and Weightshift studio manager], always says, "You wouldn't last a day in an office anymore! You'd get so sick of it so quickly, the bureaucracy and the people." I think it would have to be a very special situation, and right now I just can't see where that would be. It would be very difficult. At this point, it would have to be my own thing with people I really liked.

At what point did you realize that a full-time job wasn't for you? Was it always your ambition to be an independent freelancer or to own a small studio?

In part I love the idea of independence because it harkens back to some of the ideals I had when I was growing up. I'd seen what reliance and dependence had done to my family in some ways, and I always swore that I'd not be tied to something for my livelihood or for the direction of my life to be dependent on something else. I like being able to control it as much as possible, even though some people might have said, "This would have been a better career decision if you had done this seven years ago."

I think some people look at career progression as a means to some kind of infamy or monetary goal, whereas for me it's about, "Am I happy? Am I doing what feels right to me?" Just giving myself gut checks as much as possible. But I always want to control it as much as possible. Growing Weightshift beyond just myself was a step in that direction. Just to say, "What's it

like to work with other people on a consistent basis, and who do I want to work with?" Scott [Robbin] has played a huge role in the success of Weightshift in recent years. For me, it comes down to "Yes, I want to work with cool people, but I want to work with people that have very closely aligned life goals or vision for how they want to work and how they want their lives to be." I found that in Scott.

How did you meet Scott, and how did he become your development partner?

I met Scott through some Chicago people. We had mutual friends, through Andrew Huff [editor and publisher of Gapers Block]. And Sandor Weisz, who was a designer at EveryBlock and at the University of Chicago before that, and is now doing the Starter League back in Chicago. They shared an office with the guys from Humanized—Aza Raskin and a bunch of those guys—and Scott had space there. I knew of him, but I'd never met him. It wasn't until I went to South by Southwest a couple of times and I kept seeing him there and striking up a bit of a casual friendship with him. I thought, "I like this guy." I knew he did good work as a programmer, and he came recommended whenever I'd had little things that I needed done, so I pulled him in on a few small projects early on, and I really enjoyed working with him based on those projects.

When it came time to think about who could I work with—who I'd really enjoy working with, isn't full of drama, is pretty low-key, has a sharp head on them, and is somebody I can learn from—Scott was one of those people that came to mind. I proposed it to him at SXSW in 2008, actually, and he liked the idea. Then it was up to me to go find a client if I could do it.

What was he doing work-wise when you proposed it to him?

He'd been in a similar boat. He did some stuff for Humanized, became their in-house web team/person, and then he

did a startup with Aza called Songza. And when Songza got acquired by Amie Street, he had to move to New York as part of the acquisition and live there for six months or so. It wasn't until his time was up with Songza at Amie Street, and he was looking for something new, too. He was not looking to get into an acquisition deal and he was looking to have much more freedom and control of his destiny. He came out of that experience a little burnt out on it. It was just fortuitous that it was good timing, and that he was looking for the same sorts of things that I was looking for.

After the two of you teamed up, you said the next step was for you to go and find a client? How did you do that?

Inquiries come into the studio all the time. When I decided that Weightshift was going to be more than me, I redesigned the site a little bit, made an announcement about it on Twitter, and made a blog post, and hoped that seeing that it wasn't just me in the About section—it was now me, Scott, Andrew Huff, and Jen, a four-person team—would signal that we were looking for bigger clients. I was fortunate enough to get a few inquiries and then one seemed to fit the bill. That was Central, a designing consultancy out in Sausalito.

They were looking for a new web site and possible collaborations on some of their clients' stuff. We got this proposal together, I drafted it, sent it in, and negotiated what it was going to be. It was a learning experience for me in writing bigger proposals and talking about the team and managing to secure the deal. The budget supported flying Scott and Andrew out here to San Francisco. Then we had the whole team in-house to do this project. That first one was a lot of fun.

This is the other thing I'm going to say: Having a design studio in San Francisco, just physically planting your flag and having an address here, is a lot different than saying you're a design studio in Chicago.

Why is that?

The amount of business in the waters here is tenfold what it is in Chicago. People get it here. People don't get it in Chicago. I never would have thought that was going to be the case, but it is. I really thought it didn't matter where you were in our digital age, but I found out that startups like working with startups that they can talk to face-to-face or on-site, having that close collaboration. There's a great opportunity in being able to hash out things a lot quicker and faster and make decisions. So, having the address in San Francisco, suddenly the inbox for inquiries tripled or quadrupled.

What about the in-real-life networking aspect? Has that helped a lot?

I don't physically network in the sense that I don't go to meet-ups and things like that in the city. The in-person part helps in terms of, you get to meet colleagues or friends you've admired from the Internet in person for the first time. It becomes more about friendship and the kind of genuine networking that happens.

Conversely, I think a lot of it is based on online stuff. You have to have some sort of reputation online, and having that word-of-mouth connection—if a friend of yours refers you or you refer a friend, you start getting the feedback loop of people that you trust and who trust you. Referrals make up a lot of business here.

So you were getting a lot of business. There must have been some temptation to make Weightshift bigger, right? How did you think about that?

I think 2011 might have been the biggest year for Weightshift. We made a lot of money that year. We had about five or six people on projects, which isn't that big, but for me at the time,

six people felt like a lot of people. Scott was managing another programmer, I was managing another designer plus a copywriter, and Jen was full up to the books with just managing the studio. It became a lot about managing stuff, and I started to wonder after that year whether or not I wanted to get bigger. It came down to "Well, is everyone still happy with the project load? Who are the clients we want to work with?" I fear that the idea of growth or progression is tied to this idea of growth of profit.

I decided that I wanted to work smarter, and that meant scaling back and trying to figure out certain projects that meant more to us than projects that would just pay us, even though we didn't really care about the work. I think Scott and I, philosophically, always want to be excited about the work and want to be excited about the fact that we can do the best job that we can, rather than trying to just fill quotas, or make sure everyone's paid and that sort of headache. Every year at the end of the year, we always try to think about what are the things we learned from the year prior, and then how do we make that better in the next year.

I can tell that you think a lot about work-life balance because you've mentioned it several times. Do you also think about bigger projects that you want to get, or a certain new level of work that you want to bring into the studio?

There are definitely projects that we've had to say no to just because they're of a certain length or there's overhead that I don't want to deal with. If we were to take bigger projects, the approach would be to partner up with another studio that's like us but has a certain skill set we don't, and there would be transparency with the client. I'm not going to say that this is also Weightshift, I'm just going to say, "This is Studio X. They are the best at what they do and we need to collaborate with them to do your project."

We're very transparent with clients. We definitely don't try to say that Weightshift is bigger than it is. What we usually say is that Weightshift is at its essence three or four people, but we have a trusted network of people we work with that we can bring on if need be. We're getting more interesting inquiries from companies of a certain size that are looking to do longer-term things, but until now we have been hesitant to do things that take longer than three to four months, just out of the idea of either we'll get bored of it or it may be a design process that feels way too long compared to the startup-driven, quick, rapid-fire collaboration projects we've been doing in the past two to three years. Now we're more open to having that luxury of time to work and digest the project longer.

To me, it's a win-win because, hopefully, we get to work with people we really like and who are friends, to bring them on and share the wealth. It would allow us all to work with a really cool client and get more heads in the room that I either admire, respect, or can trust, and then say, "Hey, let's knock this out of the park."

You've always done a lot of side projects, too. For instance, you and Jen have Michael James Milton, a pocket square and accessories company.

Oddly enough, we're winding that down, due to interest and also maintenance. It actually takes a lot of time to make pocket squares the way that we make them, and just trying to find that balance of self-marketing and pushing it can be fatiguing. We're not like those people who are shameless. Say, if I write a blog post, I'll pimp it out once, maybe twice, but that's about it. I think to do a company where you're doing tangible products, it requires a lot of that "in case you missed it" repetition. Given that Weightshift pulls in a lot more money and is a lot more profitable, selling pocket squares is not something that I think is worth the time investment.

How have side projects factored into your career? Do you think they've been essential to building your reputation or do they just help in letting off steam?

Earlier on I definitely think side projects or passion projects can give you exposure or showcase what you do creatively without the pressures of having a client. With client projects you might have to make compromises, and side projects can show off what you love to do and what you could do when you have that freedom.

Having those projects can even make a career. I think we're getting to a point where everyone's doing a startup or some app or something, and where you're working becomes less interesting. Whereas passion projects and fun projects tend to showcase your imagination and just the things that you're really passionate about that may not be tech-related, but use technology to push those things further. There are definitely success stories for side projects becoming real day-to-day, make-a-living-off-them projects. You can build careers out of them, for sure.

I definitely would never stop doing them, just because I love exploring what else you can do. You tend to solve your own problems. Some of the greatest things come out of side projects. And the Internet is beautiful for that. The tech industry is beautiful for that because you can build things at relatively low cost, put them out there, and then if they fail, they fail, or they have some modicum of success.

It could just be, "Hey, that was some excitement in my life for a couple of months or year or two, whatever." You move on. I think there's a beauty in being able to move on from them without the huge overhead of opening a real retail, brick-and-mortar shop. The costs are astronomical and then the closing-out costs are astronomical and it feels like a really big letdown if it wasn't a success versus "I put this thing on the Internet. It didn't do well. Whatever."

A lot of designers do client work and then take up side projects until they find the one that can then become their day job. But that doesn't sound like that's your ambition. Is that right?

These days Scott and I think about, "Does this thing have a business opportunity if we really built it out and decide to spend more time on it?" If the effort is considerably bigger than a smaller thing, then it's just the question of what is the projected path versus a small thing where you could bang it out in a month and put it out there. If a side project had some business model, if it could make some small amount of money or teach us something new, it could be worthwhile. There are different sorts of metrics or ways to gauge the success of something.

That said—and having talked to a lot of my fellow studio owners, too—client work is still much more profitable than some of the side projects we've been doing. For me, client work still comes first. If something that we did on the side took off, though, I wouldn't be opposed to it.

What is the long-term plan for Weightshift? When you retire, are you going to be retiring from Weightshift or you don't know yet?

I don't know yet. The odd thing is, it wasn't until just a little while ago that I actually started thinking about the idea of a five-year plan. The beauty of our industry right now is you can do something and then if it doesn't work out, you can go do something else. There seems to be some flexibility if you have the experience, you've been around long enough where you can jump around if you want.

For me, Weightshift is always number one. Last year a few things were put on the table that were quite appealing. There was a brief moment where it seemed like I could go to this place in-house, an acqui-hire thing. That was a weird moment.

Scott and I discussed basically putting Weightshift on a hiatus or folding it. I went to Malaysia and I came back realizing that working with this studio was still the first thing I wanted to do in the morning. While the other thing seemed appealing in the short term, the reality is I'd probably come back to this. So why go do something in the short term when you know your heart is not fully committed to it?

Weightshift has always been a virtual office space—everybody has always worked remotely. Does that work well for you?

It does. There was a time when I wondered about having an office here just because we were getting enough clients and client meetings. Then I realized that most tech startups or tech companies just love having you come by their fancy office. Scott's in Chicago with his wife and kid—they put down roots there. That was one of the deal breakers with the acqui-hire thing, having to relocate. I think Skype is good enough. I think there's a beauty in everybody having their own space.

I read up a lot about the idea of closed offices versus open-plan offices versus remote working. If people are happy where they are, you should let them flourish in the environment that they want to be in. Also, being able to trust the people you work with and knowing that "Okay, you need to get this done. I don't care if you're doing it in the middle of the night, so long as it gets done, when it gets done." All I care about is that it gets done well. Then that's all that matters.

Chapter 8

Karen McGrane

Founder, Bond Art+Science

After a highly regarded run at the pioneering digital agency Razorfish, Karen McGrane co-founded Bond Art+Science in New York City. Eventually she transitioned it into a unique independent consultancy that has stayed at the forefront of digital practice for years. McGrane is also the author of "Content Strategy for Mobile" and a co-host of the Responsive Web Design Podcast.

You studied philosophy at the University of Minnesota?

I did. I have a double major in philosophy and American studies, and I have a minor in religious studies.

That's an interesting place to start from and eventually end up in interaction design. Was there ever any hint of what your career might be?

I had parents who strongly encouraged me to get a good liberal arts education and not to treat college like it was vocational

school. They were quite adamant that the point of college wasn't necessarily to get a business degree, so that was great. That was actually exactly the right thing for who I was at that point in my life. I knew pretty much immediately that I wanted to study philosophy. And my graduate degree was in a rhetoric program.

A fair number of seeds that would lead to the kind of work I would do were planted even as an undergrad. Computational logic was definitely one of my best classes. One thread that went through my undergraduate and graduate studies was ancient Greek philosophy and rhetoric. I take great pleasure in systems of argument, or how you present your ideas in a way that they will be most meaningful for other people.

At grad school I got to see how that actually played out in an academic discipline. The name of my department was Technical Communication and Rhetoric. We did a lot of ancient Greek philosophizing, as well as then using those ideas as a way to present technical information so that it would be most resonant for the user or for the reader, or whoever wants to understand it. I could draw a pretty straight line from my work in philosophy up to the work that I do today.

Was university life very tech-savvy at that time?

Yes, to a very large extent. At that time—and this is pre-web—the Gopher protocol was big at the University of Minnesota. Even prior to college, I was probably more engaged with and more familiar with computers than a lot of my peers were. The school district in the state of Minnesota that I went to my entire life was a magnet district for technology. I can remember being on Apple II computers in the library when I was in first or second grade.

Computers were always there in the background of my entire education, and I think that informs the work that I've done. I wasn't some crazy hacker or a huge computer nerd when I was

12, but I liked computers and I knew how to use them. Once the web took off and I was in grad school, I never thought, "Oh, this is the strange new technology that I have to learn!" I could make a strong case for saying I was always a digital native. It's just I was a digital native on green screens.

You also did a summer intensive in sign language?

Yes, I am hard of hearing and I had a language requirement that I had to fulfill in college. The University of Minnesota offered sign language as one of the language courses that you could take, and I jumped on that immediately. I had taken French in high school, but I did really struggle with learning another language, just in that I couldn't hear the fine differences. I could read fine, but any oral pronunciation or any of the oral tests that we would be given were so stressful for me because every fiber of my being had to focus on trying to understand—to pick up all those little differences in pronunciation that for people who can hear fully it's not that hard.

Sign language was nearly impossible for me to learn, really. My hypothesis is that you're using parts of your brain that, if you are hearing, you don't normally use for language. I know nothing about neuroscience, so don't quote me on my actual understanding of this. It seems like you have parts of your brain that are mapped to language acquisition, and if you're not hard of hearing, then those parts would tend to map more towards your speech and hearing centers. Then all of a sudden you're trying to switch that over to your vision and movement.

What strikes me is that I remember so little of the sign language that I learned. I took it for years in college and I have virtually no memory of it. Whereas with the few years of high school French that I have, I can still go to France and read things, basically. But sign language just went to some other place in my brain that I have no access to anymore.

Has your hearing difficulty influenced the way you think about your work?

It definitely informs my work today. I just joined the W3C Mobile Accessibility group, in large part because I can make such a strong case for universal design and arguing, "Hey, guys. You know what? If you just followed all the basic accessibility guidelines that you should have been following all along, you'd be doing a lot better on mobile right now."

Recognizing that there are situations in which I struggle and that technology could really enhance my life—I think that that is a really healthy perspective for anybody who is working in design professions to have. If people could think about designing for someone with a hearing impairment, or for someone with a vision disability or a motion disability, in a lot of ways you would be making things better for everybody.

One of the most important aspects for any designer is empathy. Is it too simplistic to say that you have an enhanced empathy for people?

I do think empathy and the ability to put yourself in somebody else's shoes are probably the absolute most important things that a designer can have—to have a sensitivity for situations that other people might find challenging and even respect for that. I don't want anybody looking down on me because I can't hear as well.

Sometimes I get frustrated because people get annoyed when I ask them to repeat something or people assume I might be dumb if I don't understand. That level of disrespect bothers me, and so I want to be careful not to treat somebody else that way. If someone doesn't understand something or if they're frustrated with the technology, it's not because they're dumb. It's because there's something wrong with the design or with the technology.

One of the things that I know about myself is that I'm just profoundly idealistic. It may be one of my best and my worst qualities, but I genuinely believe that we can make a better world and we should help out the people who need a little bit more help. I know that's super idealistic, but I find that very, very motivating.

What did you do right after college?

I worked for a company called VEE Corporation, the only company that is licensed to make full-sized Muppet costumes. I'm pretty confident that I'm the only person that you know who has been both Bert and Ernie in mall appearances for children. I was not working in costume on a regular basis, but in the office every once in a while they'd say, "Hey, we need to do a parade or mall appearance. You're the right height to be in one of these characters."

I count it as one of my formative experiences, being in one of those huge heavy costumes, which smell terrible on the inside. Knowing how hard it was to even get led out into a mall and have some toddlers grab onto my ankles, I can't imagine being in one of those stage shows or being one of the characters in a park. I have a huge amount of respect for that job. That's hard.

How did you get that job?

I had a friend at the time whose sister worked there, and I was looking for just a little post-collegiate job in Minneapolis. I think I worked there for a year and then went to grad school. I knew that I was going to go to graduate school. I felt pretty strongly that I wanted a bigger career than I was going to get with my degree in philosophy from the University of Minnesota. At that point, I was ready to take on more vocational training, or more advanced training that would land me a better job, and it most certainly did. I credit all of my professional success to graduate school.

How did you decide to do HCI work in grad school?

To a certain extent I got lucky. I would never have called it this at the time, but I was good at content strategy and information architecture. I was good at structured content and at what I'd call technical writing, and I knew that the Internet was going to be the place to be. This was in '94, '95. I was excited about what was going on. I thought, "Computers! They're awesome. There's bound to be jobs on computers, right?"

I got a full-ride scholarship to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and then I found myself living in glorious Troy, in the armpit of New York State.

Why do you credit all your professional success to graduate school? What was the experience like?

I feel like I got a fantastic education—I would give huge props to that RPI program. It was so perfectly aligned to what I thought my skills were, the kind of work in writing and information architecture or taxonomy or structured content. It also opened my eyes to this whole other world of design that I didn't know I was going to be learning about. I describe it as the idea that these words had shape and somebody would be navigating through this information; the idea that the design shapes the meaning, and that layout and stylistic considerations weren't just purely decorative, but rather they deeply informed the way that meaning was constructed. That's exactly what should happen to you in graduate school. It's like your whole brain explodes and you think, "Oh, my God. I have never been more excited to explore this."

I tell people I remember where I was the first time I heard the phrase *information architecture*, because to me it was a beautiful encapsulation of the intersection between language and structure, of the verbal with the physical, spatial, and tactile side of design. To be a really effective communicator you need to be

able to work with both sides. That right there shaped my entire perspective on my career and continues to shape it to this day.

I feel very lucky because in many careers, and in many academic programs, it's very easy to be shunted over to the word side or shunted over to the design side and not be encouraged or even forced to integrate the two perspectives. I think truly successful work in digital or on the web requires that you be able to do both well or take both perspectives and do something with them.

To what extent was your graduate work vocational or were you exploring this as an academic pursuit?

I would say decidedly *not* vocational. All of the professors there were quite explicit about saying, "We are not giving you professional training." I can remember one graphic arts professor going off when a student was complaining that they weren't teaching us how to use Photoshop well enough. He said, "I am not here to teach Photoshop. I am here to teach you the basic principles underlying visual communication that you will be able to use for the rest of your career. Your knowledge of Photoshop 2.5 is not going to last you that long." By God, was he right. Still, I was learning very practical perspectives that I was able to take and go right into a job. Those perspectives still inform my work to this day.

After getting your master's, where did you go next?

I threw all of my stuff into the back of a friend's Jeep and went and got a job at a little company called Razorfish, which was about thirty people when I started.

How did you come across that job?

The guys who started it are from my hometown. I didn't know them before, but somebody from my graduate school program

had gotten a job there and she introduced me.

What was your title on day one?

My title on my first day of working at Razorfish was Information Designer/Writer.

What were the responsibilities that came with that title?

That was somewhat unclear [*laughs*]. I was the very first person they hired with an HCI and information architecture background. At the time, there was a very large team of traditional graphic designers—maybe fifteen or twenty people, by far the largest group—and some random producers and some developers. My experience the first couple of years was not unlike what a lot of people in the user experience fields have dealt with, which was, "How do you evangelize for this new position and way of thinking that integrates its perspectives from design and development and communications, but is not any one of those things?"

When I was interviewing at another firm, I remember they said, "We need somebody to code HTML." I said, "I don't understand why you would hire me and have me code HTML." Razorfish was really the only company at the time that when I said I was a user experience person or an information architect, they said, "We need more of that. That's what we want right now."

What kind of projects were you tackling?

My very first project was making a bank for Citibank. I look back on those years and I laugh.

You said you made a bank?

I made an online bank for Citibank. They hired some kid right

out of grad school and had her designing their new online bank for them. This was in the years when everybody wanted to do an online-only bank. It was in the same years when all of the airlines decided that everybody hated the airlines, so what they should do is build an entirely different airline brand, like United had Ted and Delta had Song. Ah, companies!

My favorite project of that era was when I went out to Los Angeles and Silicon Valley and worked for a year on Go.com. Disney bought Infoseek and they decided they wanted an Internet portal. That was an interesting project. I had a number of meetings in the Disney boardroom with Michael Eisner and Bob Iger and the executive team. I was some kid, I didn't know what I was doing. I learned very many interesting things about how corporations are run by seeing the Internet up close and personal.

What was it like, figuring out and redefining your role several times a year? Were you doing it entirely on your own or did you have mentors?

Looking back at that time, I was managing the UX and information architecture team, and I did a lot of interviewing. Full days or weeks or even months of my life were entirely given over to interviewing UX candidates and hiring them.

I found it striking how much high-minded thinking was going on in the industry at that time. You would see new processes or new deliverables take hold and you could almost see the ripple effect through people's portfolios, where all of a sudden everybody was doing personas when six months earlier no one had been talking about that kind of stuff.

There was an almost osmosis-like awareness of what was going on in the industry and a desire to figure out which ideas were good ones and which ones were hype—the things, the processes, and the principles that you thought were effective, to sit

down and figure out how to make them as effective as possible.

I quickly started to realize that the real challenge had less to do with specific processes or deliverables, and had way more to do with the people side of the problem. How do you get people to work effectively together? How do you have a smoothly functioning design team where people feel that they have appropriate authority?

People want some autonomy over their work, but also want, and need, to collaborate. So how do you set people up to succeed? A lot of the process challenges that you might run into are rooted in things that designers often don't think about or touch very often—things like how the statement of work gets written, how the work gets contracted, how the project plan is set up, or how the project manager is being evaluated in terms of project profitability, timing, and scoping of the project.

Those kinds of organizational or operational questions are more interesting to me than some of the actual hands-on design work.

You're speaking of the management track versus—for lack of a better term—the individual contributor track?

For everybody who works in design—and this is undoubtedly true for developers and other roles as well—you have to strike the right balance for yourself and face this question of "How much management do I want to do versus how much hands-on contributing do I want to do?" For me it makes a lot of sense to try to keep both of those sides of my brain alive, but that doesn't necessarily mean every single day on every single project that I get to do both things. Having coached and counseled dozens of people over the years on how they work through those issues, there's no right answer for how you do it. You will have to answer that question for yourself.

How was that process for you? The way you talk about it, it sounds like you naturally gravitated towards taking on management responsibilities. Was there ever a crisis for you, that you'd given up too much of the craft?

For me, no. With the work that I do, especially around content strategy and more publishing-focused or editorial work, I keep my craft up. The information architecture and the content strategy stuff is a bit more stable in that things don't change quite as quickly as they change on the design and development side.

If you told me that I had to design a really awesome mobile app right now, I probably couldn't do it because I'm not up to speed on the latest design solutions or technologies to know what's possible. But as for the underlying structure and publishing processes, I feel like my craft there is as strong as it has ever been. I can do that and also focus more on the management or organizational or operational questions that I want to solve, so I'm very happy with that.

I have sympathy for people who are deeply involved in doing front-end design and development. It must be exhausting to keep up with. You must just have this sense of "Oh God, if I blink even for a moment, the world is going to have changed and passed me by." It's hard to balance keeping up with the field with growing a business or managing people or understanding broader organizational and operational trends.

You were at Razorfish for a good long time.

Yes, over eight years, almost nine.

How did your job change?

It was a different company every year. Every year, it was a different job in that I went through so many mergers and acquisitions that, even if it wasn't a brand new job or even if I had the

same manager from year to year, I definitely had new co-workers every year. I can remember around 2004, 2005, I thought, "I am sick of proving myself at the same job I've been working at for seven or eight years now." That does keep you fresh and it certainly kept me very engaged. I generally liked working there, but after a while it was nice to step back from that and go, "I'm done proving myself."

Was that wearying for you or did you build up a skill for adapting to new mergers-and-acquisitions scenarios?

Yes, it was wearying for sure. There was at least a fair amount of consistency in terms of the core of people who I was dealing with on a regular basis, so that provided the right amount of stability. I really did like my role. I liked the UX team there. I felt like I had a fair amount of autonomy. I felt like I had a fair amount of respect. I could make it so that the people on the UX team didn't feel unnecessarily buffeted by all of the changes. When I'd ask them how the merger was going for them I'd have people working for me say, "Oh, we never really notice it, that never really changes our jobs that much." If that's what somebody is saying, then I was doing a very good job.

All along you were having good experiences working with your clients. Was that one of the things that sustained you through eight years there?

Yes. When I was starting to think about leaving, I described my job as "I was doing the work and then I was telling somebody else how to do the work, and then I was telling executives that somebody else was telling somebody else how to do the work." I was in this weird meta-job not doing very much work at all, and I woke up one day and I thought, "My job is resource management spreadsheets. How did this happen to me? This wasn't what I signed up for."

When I was in graduate school getting all excited and feeling

like a heroine in a William Gibson novel about information architecture, I was not doing resource management spreadsheets.

That's the challenge of everybody's career. I got very good advice once from Jean-Philippe Maheu, who was the CEO at Razorfish at the time and was doing my performance review. He said, "Look, Karen. You have to figure out what it is about your job that you love doing and you have to make sure that you do it, whether that's every week or every month or every quarter. You have to explicitly build in time for yourself to make sure you're doing the parts of your job that you love, because otherwise you're just going to get sucked into doing stuff that you hate. The stuff that you don't want to do is a bottomless pit and you have to be responsible for that."

I tried to be very careful about that. I tried to make sure that I built in time for myself to work on the kind of projects that I wanted to work on. I couldn't do it all the time and I certainly couldn't be doing a lot of hands-on design work, but I tried.

What are some of those projects that kept you going and doing what you really love to do?

There was this one project called The New York Times, you might have heard of it. That's the kind of project where I really thought, "I want to get this right." It was horrible and I hated every second of the project and I don't speak to anybody that I worked with on the project anymore. And I couldn't look at it for six months after it launched. It was so painful to work on, but yet it was exactly the magnitude of intellectual puzzle that I wanted to be able to solve. And then I left almost immediately thereafter.

I've never been on a worse project [*laughs*]. It's not that I quit because of it, but it got me to the point where I thought, "What else do I want to do here? Now this would be a good time to go out on a high note," and that was that.

Had you already started thinking about what's next?

Some of my former colleagues from Razorfish, Jeff Dachis and Evan Orensten, said that they wanted to get together and start a company. I made an incredibly impulsive decision to just say, "Great, I'm going to go do this." In retrospect, it was a perfectly fine decision. I have zero regrets about it, but I would not say that it was a decision that I made particularly thoughtfully or strategically. I had absolutely no break in between jobs, which was a dumb idea. Don't ever do that to yourself, that's not right.

What was the concept for Bond, this new company, when the original partners started it?

When I left Razorfish, it was as though I woke up one day and realized I worked for an advertising agency, and this was shocking to me. To Razorfish's credit, I really do think that they valued UX work. They had a tagline that was "Everything that can be digital will be," which I thought was super motivating and a great encapsulation of why the work that we were doing was transformative.

That was in support of their positioning that they called "digital change management," and I just remember thinking, "No, we make web sites." Somebody calls us up, they want to build a web site, we build them a web site, we try to make a good web site for them—that is what we do. What I walked away feeling was, "You guys, you're missing what we can be, which is a digital agency that helps organizations through digital change by working on platform initiatives broader than just the marketing campaign."

So at Bond we were all extremely well aligned about what the vision for the web and mobile should be, how the kinds of client relationships that we would have would be much more focused on organizational transformation and broader operational concerns than just "go build me a widget" kind of projects.

Your partners eventually left and then you were the sole remaining partner, with a staff to oversee. How was that transition?

We were five partners when it first started and one of them fell off relatively quickly. Jeff went and he's doing his social business thing down in Austin. Evan Orensten and Josh Rubin went back and did Cool Hunting. I just kept the brand name and the legal entity because I needed those things. The only reason that I stuck with our brand name was that I had this really nice box of letterpress thank-you notes that have the Bond logo on them.

We probably had fifteen people at one point in time, and then over the years I just maintained a small team of about five. It just became really clear to me that the things that I wanted to be doing and what I was doing with a team of designers and developers, it just wasn't aligned all that well.

I actually have a much easier time now as an independent consultant, because companies can hire just me. If I position myself solely as providing strategic consulting services, I can get brought in much more easily and then partner with whatever design or development or production teams they have. Whereas if I have a team of people that I have to keep busy doing copywriting and design and development, then that limits me.

So you went from a company of many to a company of one, which allowed you to focus on strategic thinking and higher level solutions for your customers?

Right. I don't do any design and development work at all and very explicitly tell clients, "At no point when you work with me will you get anything that looks remotely like a web site or a mobile application."

I focus now on doing content strategy consulting, particularly

around how they need to set themselves up to get their content onto mobile devices. This could not be a better alignment with what I think I'm good at and what's a real, genuine pain point in the world.

The work that I do now is almost entirely not competitive. I don't respond to RFPs or anything; clients just call me up and ask me if I'll come in and consult with them. I do a lot of full-day consulting sessions where I'll get hired to come in for a day and talk about problems and hash out issues, and then coming out of that I often will also do longer-term strategy projects.

How do you come across this work?

It's mostly word of mouth. I do a lot of conference speaking and so somebody will see me speak and contact me to say, "I wish all of my executives could hear what you have to say." And I'll say, "You know, I do that for money." Sometimes they just want their executives to hear things. Sometimes based on that, they'll come back and say, "Great. Now we want to actually do this. Can you help us with the initial pieces of this so that we can then do a redesign or re-platform our CMS or build a mobile app or whatever?"

It sounds like you've really engineered the ideal working scenario for yourself.

I'm extremely happy with the type of work that I'm doing and with the client relationships that I have. They're bringing me in as a trusted adviser, so I have this unique positioning that directly addresses one of their pain points, and I feel like I've succeeded quite well in that. This will probably only last a few years. As organizations are making this transition to mobile, it seems like this will be the kind of thing that's not competitive for only a couple of years before I will either have to shift gears a little bit or deal with a more competitive environment. I'm not sure, but right now it's great. Total green fields.

It's interesting that you already see the end of this, this era that you're reveling in.

I think that's inherent to working on the web and working in this space. I've seen so many transitions. You think this era is going to last forever, but then it actually only lasted three years, just like the last one. I have definitely been putting a two-to-five-year timeline on this, what's going on with the mobile web right now, or more broadly mobile publishing practices, to help organizations figure out how they're going to deal with true multi-channel publishing. Most organizations are going to have dealt with that question within the next five years.

I don't know that it will be an entirely solved problem for these organizations, but I would imagine within five years from now that every major digital agency would have a point of view on how to deal with this stuff. It won't be people saying, "Oh my God. We have this problem. Go hire that one lady who talks about it all the time." It's going to be more that everybody is going to have to have a point of view on how content management works, how publishing processes work, how responsive changes your design and editorial process. That stuff will just be more commonly known.

Do you know what you'll do next?

I think I'll figure it out. That's probably one of the best benefits of being mid-career. I've got a good fifteen, almost twenty years under my belt, and I've easily got another fifteen to twenty years in me to know that I've seen lots of change happen and I feel very comfortable that some new change will roll along, and that I'll be able to adapt to it if I want to. That's a great feeling. It actually lends a significant amount of confidence to my work, to be able to look back on challenges that I've had, rough spots in my career, and say, "I got through that. I'll get through the next one, too."

Chapter 9

Wilson Miner

Creative Director, The Factory

Wilson Miner went from Wichita, Kansas to the heart of Silicon Valley in just a handful of years. He logged time at both Apple and Facebook, was a member of the founding team at EveryBlock, and co-founded The Factory. Along the way, he forged a reputation as a preeminent speaker and design thinker.

When did you first become interested in design?

Early on I had expressed some interest in graphic design as a career choice, to the extent of doing little projects such as designing tee-shirts. I had HyperCard when I was younger, and I would make fake games. I would try to create the art and the loading screens for a bunch of games that I never officially made. That was probably the beginning of it.

I had a summer job in high school building web sites for a one-man design shop in my hometown, Wichita, Kansas. I did that for two summers. I bought the David Siegel books [author of

"Creating Killer Web Sites"] and copied stuff out of them, and built stuff in PageMill and NetObjects Fusion.

How did you get that summer job?

I had an advantage because my dad, who was a historian, consulted on some projects for the city, and this designer had worked with him. When I was 15 or 16 years old, my dad said, "You're going to get a job this summer. When you're sick of mowing lawns, talk to this guy."

His name was Dana Britton and he did a lot of logo and identity design for local businesses. This was 1995, so the web was pretty new, and people were starting to ask him for web sites, wondering whether they should have one. I told him, "Sure, I can figure that out."

So you had an idea of what graphic design was at that point? That's not always the case for kids in high school.

I had a cargo cult–like idea. I enjoyed games and movies, and I latched onto graphic design that way. I thought, "Here's a kind of art that I can do with computers, even though I can't draw."

So I built a few web sites for his clients. I think he paid me in cash, and every now and then he would buy me some cheap cigars. I was underage, so it was a very fruitful relationship—a good introduction to the life of a solo freelancer.

Did you think at the time that this could be more than just a summer job, that maybe this could be your profession?

That started to give me an idea of what it would be like to do this professionally. I considered it a big career head-start. I think I was overly serious about the idea that I was a professional designer before I even got out of high school.

Looking back at it now, I was just figuring things out, which is the way I'm still doing it. Back then I thought I was pulling one over on everyone. I thought, "I don't know how to do this but I'm going to figure it out on the job, and then I'm going to get paid for the result." I don't think I realized that that was basically going to be the template for my entire professional career [*laughs*].

Nobody knew how to do this. We were all faking it and figuring it out. As long as we stayed a few steps ahead of the people who were paying us to do it, it was sufficient. But, yes, I had grandiose ideas about my vast experience as a graphic designer at that point.

Did you have a sense of the scope of the design industry at that time? Were there famous designers that you looked up to?

Dana did a good job of pointing me in the right direction in terms of that stuff. I figured out who Josef Müller-Brockman was and followed that path down through the whole Swiss structural design style. I got really excited about copying and deconstructing and unpacking the elements of that style into my own. That was pretty formative.

Industry-wise, there was a pretty healthy ad agency and design community in Wichita. There were a lot of big ad agencies out of Kansas City, and a little bit of that spilled over into Wichita, mostly working for local aircraft companies and business-to-business kind of stuff.

I had an idea that this was an industry with lots of different facets of design, and commercial design was the aspect that I latched onto. I liked the idea of design as communication and actually applying it to solve commercial problems. It wasn't until a lot later that it clicked for me that you could use design to make something that people used rather than to just communicate a message.

What happened when you went to college with this experience in making web sites for clients?

Right, so I was a big-shot professional designer by the time I went to college! Actually, I had originally intended to study film and was all enrolled in the film school at the University of Kansas, a state school in the Midwest that was also a great place to go to film school. For some reason I ended up changing that and enrolling in the graphic design program, which was in the School of Fine Arts at KU, which has a great design school, too.

I think that shows that I wasn't 100 percent set on that path. I wanted to do something that was creative, but at that time it seemed equally plausible that I would be a film director as a graphic designer.

So, you went from filmmaking to graphic design?

For my first year of college I was in a graphic design program, but I dropped out and switched my major to journalism. The design program was a lot of work—I had to put in a lot of all-nighters—and I thought I had learned more when I was working on my own than I was learning in this program. Like any 19-year old, I knew better than everybody, so I decided that this was a waste of my time. For better or for worse, I became a self-taught designer, despite all this formal education.

You actually graduated with a journalism degree?

Yes, at that point I decided to study what I enjoyed. I ended up getting an internship, which then led to a job with a local ad agency doing design and web design, so I got my design education on the job and got whatever else I wanted out of an education.

The journalism degree was called "Strategic Communication,"

and it was actually an advertising degree. I wanted to learn the business side of things and the mechanics of how the advertising business worked.

What did you think you would do with that particular combination of self-taught and formal education?

By the time I graduated my plan was to go to New York and get an art director job at an ad agency, which, luckily, looking back now, I'm glad I never did. I visited the city and had a bunch of informational interviews with different big agencies. I remember having a mild epiphany while sitting across the table from a couple of young-gun art directors who were nice enough to sit down with me and go over my book and ask me what I wanted to do. A couple of them were kind of assholes, though, and they were giving me shit. I remember looking across the table at them and thinking, "I don't want your life."

That was probably just insecurity on my part, but I also didn't have a clear idea of what the actual day-to-day mechanics would be of doing the job that I thought that I wanted to do. That was what saved me from a career in advertising and steered me towards the web, which led to everything else that I've done since.

And working on the web was what you had been doing and where your skills lay already?

Yes. I had been working at this local ad agency doing the kind of stuff that you do in a small market: local business ads, fliers, logos, a lot of print design. Out of everybody in the office, I was the one who was willing to put the most time into learning how to do everything that we needed to do on the web. That was where I picked that up, deconstructing stuff and trying to figure out how everything worked. That was the most practical skill set that I had, so I just decided to keep doing that instead of trying to do glossy magazine ads.

How long were you in that position, moving away from advertising while working at this small ad agency?

I stayed there for about a year after I graduated, at the same old ad agency that I had been working at during college. Sometime close to a year after that I had met Adrian Holovaty, who was working as a web developer at the newspaper company in my college town, Lawrence, Kansas. He was at the Lawrence Journal-World, which had hired him as part of this new effort to build their own web tools and actually have an in-house web development team. That wasn't common at the time for newspapers—you just bought a CMS and gave it to the journalists—but Adrian was doing cool things.

I think Jeffrey Zeldman linked to the weather site that they did for the local news station, and I remember it had a cool CSS background image. I reached out to Adrian and said, "Hey, you know, we're both doing this weird CSS stuff, so we should get lunch sometime," so we did. A few months later he got back in touch with me and said, "We're looking for someone to be a project manager. Would you be interested?" I left the ad agency and started working for the newspaper, where I was doing project management and web design for commercial clients.

What did you do in that job?

The way they were funding the web team at the newspaper—because newspapers on the web weren't making any money—was they were hiring out part of the team to local businesses to do web development, which in retrospect is a terrible way to make money. It's just siphoning resources away from the thing that everybody is there to do.

For a while, though, that was my job, to wrangle those projects. Eventually the CMS software that Adrian was developing there led to Django, which was an open-source framework that we released and had extracted from the tools that they were

building at the newspaper. Then we were also licensing the CMS software that was built on Django to other papers.

That became more and more part of my job, managing the client relationships for software licensing. All through that I was still doing web design, but mostly that was side-project stuff. In retrospect I was very lucky to have that diversity of experiences and to learn how a lot of how the business and client sides work. At the time, though, I just wanted to spend more time designing and less time dealing with all that nonsense.

You were at the intersection of technology, design, and journalism. Did you enjoy working on the technology side of a newsroom?

It's a messy, chaotic relationship, but there is a lot to the way a newsroom operates that was really conducive to learning and cross-pollination of skills. Just the process of the reporters, who were always running around, starting with an idea of what we need to know, and then they would just go and learn everything we need to know about it really fast.

That mentality and that way of working had an effect on how we worked on the team. It's the nature of the web, too. Everybody can be an expert for those hours after they discover what something is. I think we did a lot of that.

How long did you stay at Lawrence Journal-World*?*

I was there for about three years. My career progressed from project management for commercial clients to getting bored of that and trying to insert myself into the cooler stuff that Adrian and the developers were doing, which turned into Django. On the tail end of that progression I was doing more business development and software licensing, and I was definitely not interested in that at all. There was a point where I was going over red lines for 65-page licensing contracts for enterprise

software development. It's interesting to know that side, but it wasn't that fun to actually do.

Did you go out looking for your next opportunity or did it come to you?

I was looking around for a different situation. My girlfriend at the time and I were talking about getting married and moving away since we had both stayed in the college town where we graduated from. She was working at an architecture firm, also doing graphic design. We both felt like we had gotten the one job in town that we would ever want to do, so if we wanted to move on, we were going to have to leave.

We started looking around for places to live. We were sure for a while we were going to move to Austin. Her architecture firm had an office in San Francisco, and she had talked to them about moving out there, which never actually panned out, but that got us started on the process of looking at places there. I started milking anybody I knew for contacts who would be willing to talk to me. I talked to Bryan Veloso, who had worked at Facebook, and he helped me get an interview there. I probably should have taken a job at Facebook in 2006, but I did not.

Why do you think you should have worked at Facebook then?

I meant financially. If I had taken an offer from Facebook in 2006 and managed to stay there for three or four years—which based on my patterns I probably wouldn't have—then I would be calling you from my yacht.

So what did you do instead?

One of the companies that I ended up talking to was Apple. Michael Lopp, who writes the Rands in Repose weblog, was an engineering manager on the Mac OS X server team at the time, and they were starting to build some web tools. The job was

for a pretty intense JavaScript programmer, and I think I just fudged my way through the phone screen interview because I wasn't remotely qualified to do that job. I did the whole round of interviews for that job, and by the time I got there they figured out that I wasn't actually qualified.

But Michael liked me, and we got along well enough that he passed my information along to a hiring manager on the Apple.com team for an actual web design job, which I would have been qualified for. So I went back out and interviewed there. That was the job that I ended up taking. My wife and I got married and we moved to San Francisco.

What made you want to take this particular job? Was it because it got you to San Francisco? Or would you have done anything to work at Apple? Or was this just the logical next step for your career?

I think it was the confluence of all those things. I was super excited even the first time I got to go talk to Apple. When I got an offer from Apple, it was far and away not the best offer. I had talked to a couple other companies like Facebook and Yahoo, and the Apple offer was a six-month contract with no guarantee of full-time employment after that, and the pay rate wasn't as good. I said, "I don't give a shit. It's Apple! Of course I'm going to go work there."

And how did you know Michael, who was basically your advocate at Apple?

It was a few degrees of connections. I had a weblog at the time, but Jeff Croft, who I had hired at the Journal-World, had more of a well-known weblog and had been blogging about Django and some development-side stuff. Michael was looking for someone with a mix of engineering and design skills, so he was emailing people and he emailed Jeff. Jeff was super excited about it, but didn't want to move. So I told Jeff, "Well if you're

not going to do it, tell him to email me!" It was kind of a favor that Jeff did. I didn't know Mike before that at all. We've gotten to know each other since, but it was one of those right place, right time, random people connections.

What was that year at Apple like?

It was intense. I'm really glad that I had that kind of experience when I was younger. Even then it was tough, just the stress and strain of big company stuff. The deadlines and the demands on personal time and everything was, and is, pretty high at that company. It was chiefly rewarding in terms of the people that I was able to work with and learn from and the impact of the stuff that I was able to work on. The whole Apple.com team was eight or nine people when I started. Now it's a much bigger part of the marketing organization. That was a very compressed learning experience.

Did that job with Apple change what kind of designer you thought that you were and what kind of career that you could make for yourself?

We were still just doing marketing design, so I was still on the path of the stuff that I had been doing. Being embedded in the culture of a software and hardware company—of a product company—definitely rubbed off in certain ways, though. I got to see and understand a lot about how products got made and started to feel like that was something I could understand and apply my skills to.

Were you conscious of wanting to move into designing products or were you still happy to focus on marketing?

I've just gradually done more and more product-oriented stuff and less and less marketing design stuff over the years. I don't think at any point I ever said, "I can't do another marketing web site," or pined to do UI design. The aspect of web design

that I was most interested in and had an aptitude for was the systematic side of design: designing systems. I had also gravitated toward that part of print design and editorial design, but it was a step up on the web because we actually had to think about how we were going to build and construct something that would be the container for the design.

What that experience at Apple did was accelerate my frustration with marketing in general. That was just a crucible kind of experience where it was a lot of the best and the worst of deadlines and stakeholders—stuff that just makes you want to throw up your hands and say, "I'll never be able to make anything good under these constraints." Of course that isn't true, but those situations can feel really restrictive when you're in them.

What prompted you to leave?

The reason I left was not that I burned out. Adrian Holovaty, who I had worked with at the newspaper, had gone to work for The Washington Post for a couple of years, doing web development projects, and he was getting ready to leave and start his own company, EveryBlock, a hyperlocal news startup. He had an idea for a product that he wanted to build and he convinced me to come help him do the design. I probably would have stayed at Apple for another year or a couple of years. I had to decide, "If I'm going to do this, I have to do it now." My last day at Apple was the day that the iPhone came out. We were sitting around and watching the keynote. That was fun.

Was it a tough decision to leave and become a co-founder or was it an easy choice to make?

Adrian used to make fun of how I would agonize over every decision, so he just expected me to spend a lot of time with it. Originally part of the deal was that I'd move to Chicago where he was, but we had just moved to San Francisco and I really liked it. That was a big deal, to move back to the Midwest, but

we negotiated our way around that and I ended up working remotely from San Francisco.

It was definitely an agonizing process, though, because, as frustrated as I was with some of the machinery of the work that we were doing, I was still excited to be at Apple. I had adjusted to the Silicon Valley time scale where working somewhere for six months is a long-term commitment.

What was the EveryBlock experience like?

I'm very risk-averse, personality-wise, but this startup had an unusual structure that made me willing to do it. The Knight Foundation was starting this grant program where they were going to fund journalism-related projects for a year or two, and they had approached Adrian to apply. That was a unique opportunity at the time, to get a lot of the aspects of starting a company funded and having some runway to work with, without the risks of taking VC money. There would be tradeoffs either way, but it would have been different if we'd taken funding.

We said from the beginning we wanted to make EveryBlock a business, so this wasn't going to end up being a project where we just dumped some code on the world and moved on to the next thing. Over the course of building it, though, the incentives that they had to meet the goals of their grant very often came in conflict with what we needed to do in order to set up the groundwork to actually build the business and eventually make a profit. In the end, we delivered on the terms of the grant and released the code open source, but then sold the company to MSNBC because we basically hadn't been able to build a business model over that period of time.

As the founding designer, how much did the realities of the business environment affect your job of building that product from scratch?

Well, there were four of us to start with, so we took things on as a group. Both the grants and then the acquisition process in the end had very little effect on the actual design. There were very few requirements for what we needed to do. We had to figure out the nature of what we wanted to build on our own, which ultimately was the biggest challenge for me through that whole process.

I spent about three years working on that, figuring out the product and realizing there is this gap between an idea that has potential and an actual product that people want to use and has real value. It was a bit humbling, but to some degree it was a risk-free environment to experiment and learn the impact of different decisions.

I spent a lot of time in the beginning on things that I thought were really important to the product, but that didn't really turn out to be. I ignored or set aside things that probably would have been much more impactful. That was helpful to me later to realize, to try and be more open to a holistic approach to product-making decisions.

From EveryBlock you moved on to Rdio, which was not what it was called yet but was this early-stage, music startup. How did you get hooked up with that?

Todd Berman was the VP of engineering for the company and they were using Django. I think he found me since my name is in the Django credits as the designer. I was living in San Francisco, so we got coffee and he explained what they were doing. Music was something I was interested in, so I started working with them.

My involvement kept expanding until eventually I was full-time at Rdio, and still contracting for MSNBC after they bought EveryBlock, which is not an allocation of time that I would recommend to the designers reading this.

Had you planned to freelance for a while or were you eager to find another full-time gig?

I had planned to gradually step down my involvement in EveryBlock to where it was just one project among others that I was contracting on. But Rdio was more interesting than any of the other freelance projects that were available to me at the time, and they were very much interested in having somebody on full time to build out a team. At that point I just decided to stick with it.

While you were head of design at Rdio, that company grew very quickly.

When I started it was around fifteen people, and now it's in the hundreds. I started as a designer and gradually built out and hired a team. By the end I was basically managing and directing others but not doing any actual hands-on design. That was after almost three years. By the end of that cycle it felt similar to the newspaper job, where at first I was doing a mix of things that I enjoyed but eventually my responsibilities got narrower, and soon I was itching to change things up and to not just be a manager.

Was that your first time managing a team that had to grow really fast in a company that was changing rapidly too?

Yes, I got really lucky with the people that we hired. Adam Polselli, who was the first designer that I hired, was just amazing. He was 22 or 23 at the time and didn't really have any product experience to speak of, but just plugged in and understood exactly what was going on. He was the perfect first hire for a company that size. Also, Ryan Sims, who I knew through South by Southwest originally, had recently moved out to San Francisco and he came in early and did some contract work design for Rdio. From then to when he started actually working there, there was this long con of me trying to convince him to

come. Everybody there was talented and the perfect combination of being skilled and humble and adaptable. As a manager it's easiest to manage a team that is functional on its own. I really didn't have huge challenges on that front.

What inspired you to leave?

It was probably that gradual progression of responsibilities again, where I was unable to get in and actually do design hands-on anymore, because my number one responsibility was managing others. Not that that was unrewarding to me, but I didn't want it to be the only thing I was responsible for.

I had close friends who worked at Facebook. Tom Watson, who lives in Portland now and works for Pinterest, had been at Facebook for a while and he had been working on me for a long time. Eventually when that entered the realm of possibility in my head, that I might be ready to move on from Rdio, we just connected about it.

By that time, when someone went to work at Facebook, everybody else would say, "Why the fuck are they going to work at Facebook?" For me it was because there were probably ten designers that I knew of who were there, any one of whom I'd work in a salt mine for a year if I got a chance to work with them.

Also I was and still am interested in the idea of large systems and the analogy of Facebook being at the leading edge in the mass production of user interfaces. The designers who I looked up to were the Eames, who turned the idea of industrial mass production into an advantage or an inherent attribute of a product. I was interested in the idea of designing something that is better because it's mass-produced or which could only exist because it was mass-produced—not just mass production as a means of producing shittier versions of things that would be better if they were handmade—and how that applied to dig-

ital interfaces. For a year or so I got a lesson in all the dynamics of how products work under those constraints.

What was your experience at Facebook like?

Equal parts rewarding and frustrating to the extremes. I went in with my eyes open, mentally noting that maybe just big company environments aren't conducive for me. But still, just like Apple, I would do it again. It was a hugely rewarding experience. I still miss working closely with that particular group of designers and engineers.

You stayed at Facebook about fourteen months?

Yes, less three months for paternity leave.

How did you transition to your next thing?

I'd had my reservations about working for a big company again. My biggest quality of life improvement was not commuting to Menlo Park every day. I was at Facebook for a year when we had a child. When I came back from paternity leave, I found myself looking at the clock, sneaking out of 4:30 p.m. meetings to get on a shuttle to get back to put my kid to bed. I realized that if I was going to continue to do this, I needed to feel like I was doing something worthwhile that I couldn't do anywhere else.

Around the same time, Adrian came along again with something else. Malthe Sigurdsson, who had been head of product at Rdio and who I worked with the whole time that I was there, had just moved on. He and Todd Berman, who ran the engineering team, were talking about starting this new thing, which is now The Factory, which is what I'm doing now. I had coffee with Malthe and we caught up and he explained to me what they were going to do and I said, "Sure, why not?" That was how I ended up here.

And what is it you're doing with The Factory?

What we're doing with The Factory is we're trying to make the kind of team that will put together a product for a company like Rdio, made up of engineers and designers, for mobile apps or web-focused digital products, who are not tied to the team or to one particular product—more of a studio model, but without clients. It's a little bit of a lab, a little bit of a studio, a little bit of a product company where we just change our minds about what we're working on, on a much shorter timeframe than some other companies. We released one product already, an iOS app for parents of newborns to keep track of feeding and timely nursing and diapers and stuff. We're working on a couple of different apps now that we're going to try to build and release sometime this year.

Now it sounds like you have every opportunity to craft your own challenges and really create your own job. Looking back at your career and where you started, does it make sense to you where you are right now?

The hard part about being able to build whatever you want is deciding what you want to build without having the constraints of a company that's already made the strategic decisions for you, or a client who is paying you to do what they think is right. It's a different kind of challenge. When the three of us were talking about what we would want to work on and the things that we would want to spend our time on, it did turn into a retrospective of career ups and downs, having the opportunity to build a new environment, to minimize the pitfalls of previous jobs, and optimize the things that we really enjoyed.

If you just look at the timeline of my career, all the different stages for me have been relatively short. I have moved on from one thing to the next. For a while I felt guilty about that or felt that was a bad attribute—that it meant I wasn't loyal, I couldn't stick things out. In the California style of self-rationalizing

and making yourself feel better about decisions, I figured out a different way of thinking about it and saying, "How could I optimize the choices that I've made and the situations that I put myself in, so that that's an advantage and not a detriment?"

As a group we tend to gravitate towards starting things—getting things off the ground and then building something new. We're trying to build a reusable infrastructure so that even if we did throw away a project that we're working on, we'd be able to build on that for the next thing. I'm thinking about the components as if they were open source projects on their own, even if we never release them, at the same time thinking about designing systematically and about the structure of the company.

After having a career where you haven't been able stay in one place for too long, now you've created a situation where you don't have to work on any one thing indefinitely. Sounds like a conundrum you've created for yourself.

Exactly!

How long do you think you'll want to work without having to commit to anything for very long?

I don't know the answer. Maybe I'll get tired of that!

Chapter 10

Jill Nussbaum

Executive Director of Product and Interaction Design, The Barbarian Group

During her nine years as a design leader at the digital agency R/GA, Jill Nussbaum used her unique mastery of design, technology, and storytelling to breathe life into a string of high-profile projects for Fortune 500 clients. In 2011 she took on a new challenge as Executive Director of Product and Interaction Design for the award-winning agency the Barbarian Group.

Where did you do your undergraduate work, and in what field?

I went to the University of Virginia, where I studied history and studio arts.

At that time, did you have any inkling of what design was or that you would ever work in the design field?

It's interesting, I don't think I was super familiar with design as a term or even as a subset of fine art, even though I took a class that was called "New Media." I don't even know if the class title

had the word "design" in it, but it *was* design. It was opening up Freehand and opening up Illustrator and learning some basic design principles.

Did that resonate with you?

I didn't think of myself as a designer. My first exposure to design was actually working for a weekly alternative magazine. We had switched to QuarkXPress to lay out everything. Someone I worked with on the paper who did the design introduced me to desktop publishing, and that was my first introduction to design.

When was that?

That was in probably '97. I worked on it in between classes, and then every Tuesday night we would put the paper together and we would spend the night there. It would start at seven in the evening and go until about five or six in the morning.

Did you just happen into that job or did you seek it out?

I knew a guy who said, "Come in and be a literary editor." It was satirical content, so I wrote a few jokes, but I wasn't really that great at it.

Because I was studying photography at the time, a guy there said, "Hey, do you want to take over as the photo editor? Let me show you how to scan negatives." I had been developing my own negatives, but he said, "All you do is put it in this fancy new scanner and then, *voilà*, you can bring it into Quark and lay it out."

It was there that I learned about grids and layouts. That was a minor introduction to design. I don't know if I thought of it as design, though. "Learning computers" is how I thought about it [*laughs*].

That was actually really appropriate for that time. One didn't learn something specific on a computer—one just went to *learn computers*.

Exactly.

So you finished your undergraduate education with a degree in history and studio art. What happened between that time and going to graduate school?

First of all, I knew I wanted to go to New York. I just always wanted to come to New York.

Had you ever lived there before?

No, but I visited as a kid. I knew I wanted to get out of Virginia and I knew I wanted to come to New York. I knew a lot of things I was interested in were there. I was interested in publishing—I had actually done a short internship in the photo department at Rolling Stone magazine in late '97 or '98. I was still very interested in maybe doing something like that, going into a photo department at a magazine. Or maybe designing book covers. Or I was thinking I should go and apprentice for a photographer and get into fashion or fine art photography. I wasn't super sure.

Was photography a significant part of your undergraduate work?

Yes, that's really what I minored in: studio art with a minor in photography. Most of my credits were in photography, and I ran the darkroom there.

I was interested in publishing because I really loved magazines, and I was reading a lot of magazines at the time. In the course of reading I came across a few interesting people that either taught at ITP [the Interactive Telecommunications Program

at New York University] or were students there. I looked it up, and I found out that it was an art and technology program in NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, and I thought that sounded super interesting.

I applied there at the last minute. It was the only graduate school that I applied to—I wasn't necessarily planning to go to graduate school when I got in.

Was there any economic question about going to graduate school?

Not for me. I was very fortunate in that my parents told me that if I went to an in-state undergraduate school, they'd help me pay for graduate school, because UVA is crazy cheap as an in-state student.

When you got your acceptance letter, was it a no-brainer for you to go down this path?

No, I visited New York first and went to a few other events that were designed to help college kids get into publishing. I remember it was weird because I had to put on a suit to meet all these different publishers, and that was so bizarre. It was a lightning-round interview kind of thing.

Basically, as soon as I got to ITP, I was so excited. I thought, "This is the place! I want to be like everyone here." They were making things with all this new technology. Once I was there, it was a no-brainer.

What did you focus on in the program?

I focused mainly on interaction design. I took a lot of classes. The two classes that had the most impact on me there were taught by Sigi Moeslinger and Masamichi Udagawa of Antenna Design. Sigi taught the interaction design class, and Masa

taught a class about designing experiences. Those were by far my favorite classes. I really enjoyed that approach to design: personas, user scenarios, telling stories about how things work, and thinking about service design, as well as interface design. Those were the classes I loved the most.

Other classes I took included Learning to Program in Lingo for Adobe Director, so a lot of programming, and I took Physical Computing 101. I did a Flash animation class, too, actually.

Wow, that's pretty varied.

Yes, it was very varied. I loved it. There were a lot of group projects as well as solo projects. There were some theoretical classes that I took as well.

Were you thinking of a career as an artist at that point?

Potentially, yes. I was not entirely sure what I wanted to do, and it was at that time that I first heard people talk about the difference between art and design. That was the first time I was actually a part of those kinds of discussions, where people were actually openly discussing the differences between those two things.

My first year I was still very open-minded about what I might do. But the longer I stayed, the more I gravitated towards design. It was really in my second year when I started taking design classes and started opting to take those over the physical computing classes that everyone else was taking.

Was that a conscious decision of yours?

Yes. It was also the dot-com boom. There was a lot going on in New York around the Internet at that time. You couldn't escape it. There were all these agencies that don't exist anymore. That's when Razorfish and Frogdesign were super cool and they were

all having parties. And everyone was working there or freelancing there, doing all these projects and making a lot of money for not doing very much.

How much were you influenced by this cultural wave of interesting things happening in the industry, and how much did you think that this was your calling?

I thought it was right for me because it brought together a lot of different skills that I had. From photography I was able to pull out layout, composition, and color. Even my history studies were really just about rational thinking and constructing an argument based on facts. In a way, design is a lot like that. You're trying to make a rational argument based on what you know and what you think the outcome is going to be. It brought together a strategic outlook with a design approach.

Were you doing any freelancing or independent projects to try to get a foothold in this industry while you were at school?

I did. I used to work a little bit for gURL.com, which was a site for teenagers that was started by some ITP students who were a few years before me. I did some Photoshop work for them.

Then one summer I worked as a Flash design intern at a company called Rumpus Toys that made really weird plush toys like Gus Gutz. You could pull his guts out of his mouth. They had a whole Flash web site with a lot of animation and games that was being run by an 18-year-old. I'll never forget it. He was trying to audit a couple of classes at Columbia at the same time. He came straight from high school. It was amazing.

So when you graduated from ITP, what was your plan?

Oh my God, I had no plan. The bubble had burst maybe six months before that, and it was not a good time. It was the darkest of the dark days when I graduated from ITP. I just

wanted to get through the final show, at which I showed some of my work, and then I was going to go on a vacation for a couple of weeks. That was it.

So what did you do?

I came back and I moved to Brooklyn. I was hanging out with a guy that was a year ahead of me at school who worked for a former professor at ITP, Will Pickering, who taught a Creative C class. We were at a bar in Williamsburg, and my friend just looked at me and said, "I'm moving to Mexico." Then he looked at Will and said, "You should hire Jill to take over for me."

We had a couple of beers and Will said to come by the next day. I did, and then he invited me to a party for July 4th, and we hung out then, and then I came in the next day, and he hired me. So that all happened a month or two after I graduated.

Even though it was a downturn, it sounds like there wasn't enough time for you to get discouraged.

It was an awesome job, but I was basically an apprentice, running a small design-build shop that did custom electronic and fabrication for artists. Super-cool job, but not necessarily what I was passionate about. I wasn't doing design.

Did you think you would just wait it out until the market came back?

I thought, "Hell, yeah! I have a job! In Williamsburg! So I never have to leave!" And I didn't [*laughs*]. I rarely went into Manhattan. I got a bike. All my friends were there.

I just settled into that scene. There were guys who mixed paint across the hall from the studio. The guy I worked for owned the building. It was filled with artists' studios. Every room was somebody doing something completely different.

Even though that wasn't what you had gone to ITP for, did that feel like a certain level of success? You'd come to New York and were working in the arts.

Absolutely. The projects we were working on were really, really cool—it's just that they weren't *our* ideas. We were just making them happen. But I got to meet Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, and I got to hang out with Ben Rubin and Mark Hansen. We did some work for Masa and Sigi, and I still hear from Sigi every once in a while. We were working with cool artists and designers, and that was awesome. We got to work at the Whitney and help install things, as well as go to Sunset Park into an automotive parts factory for some industrial design thing we were doing. It was very interesting.

Did you have a sense of how long you wanted to keep doing that before finding something else?

For the most part, I was having a good time. I wasn't that career-minded at that age.

Then September 11th happened and New York was in an economic downturn. There was a pessimism that ran through everything. The work started slowing down. I knew that the end for that job was near.

At the same time, some former classmates of mine reached out about a job opening at R/GA. The chair of ITP at that time was very good friends with Bob Greenberg, who runs R/GA and would recruit a lot of people out of there. There was a position open, so I went in for an interview. They called me back and said, "Actually, can you come in now and freelance for this pitch today?" And I just never left.

When you're in school, you're worrying a lot about your field of study, but so much of it is about the people you meet. Those critical connections were how I got jobs later on.

You must have thought about working in services before. Did you feel like here was your chance to make it in this hot agency and do the work you'd been training to do at ITP?

It's funny. I wasn't thinking I'd made it. I just thought, "There's a bunch of cool people here who seem really smart and interesting, and I'm learning something new." It felt more like an extension of graduate school or of the job I had just before. I was just excited by it because it was all new.

I had no idea that I would end up staying at R/GA for nine years. It was just, "This is fun. I'm learning stuff and figuring it out."

What was your first role there?

They hired me as an interaction designer. One of the main things that interaction designers did, and still do, is create wireframes for digital experiences. I remember my first day, this guy that was managing me came over and said, "Can you create some wireframes for this web site?" I just looked at him and said, "What's a wireframe?" I didn't know what he was talking about. He had to open up Illustrator to show me, and he said, "I like to use shades of gray."

I thought, okay, I get it. But it wasn't super defined, and at R/GA—which people think of as a super-defined place—there wasn't *one* way to create wireframes. Every person you met was doing something different, and I had to talk to a few people and figure out what my method would be. There was a lot of figuring it out as I went along.

Did it tap into things you had learned in graduate school, only maybe they were packaged differently, using different nomenclature?

Absolutely. Different nomenclature, for sure. And a deliverable

that a client would see just demanded a different level of rigor, as is expected in a professional environment. I actually really enjoyed applying that rigor to the thinking and the collaboration with the other disciplines—mainly with the visual designers. I would do the wireframes and they would do the visual design, and we'd go back and forth, and then we'd hit a problem, and we'd sit down and try to figure it out. And there were writers, producers, and developers, too.

Were you able to draw on any past experience in client services?

I had very little experience with clients. Most of it I just learned on the job. I remember the first year going into client meetings, and the clients asking questions about the work, and having a manager there who could easily answer all the questions. I'd feel totally freaked out and would just freeze when asked. I can remember thinking, "Wow, it's amazing that even though the manager didn't really know the work very well, he was able to speak to the question better than me, and *I* made it."

I can definitely remember a time when it was very difficult, but as I became more confident as a designer, I began to better articulate my design decisions.

Do you think your ability to work with clients fueled the evolution of your role at R/GA?

Yes. My first few years as an interaction designer were about learning my craft: understanding how to think holistically about systems, how to create a design with interfaces, how to understand what people—users—want and how to give them what they want. I was exposed to all the pieces of the design process. While I did have some limited training at ITP, this was the professional training.

Being able to defend my design decisions—even though I wasn't doing that to the client at first, I was learning and

getting better at articulating my process—I started to be able to say, "I made this decision because of this." Then if somebody said, "What if you do it that way?" I could answer, "You could, but then…" It was about being able to think a few steps ahead and being able to try different approaches so you could come up with the best solution.

You had several different job titles at R/GA. Each time your role changed or your job title changed, was there a pattern to why that happened?

I started as an associate and became an interaction designer when I was handling a client on my own. I became a senior when I started managing someone else. Then I became a director when I was managing multiple projects with multiple people. The big difference is that as I gained experience, I became both a manager of people and of projects, and I became more and more client-facing.

When I got to the top within R/GA, the role was "director." After that, I could either stay as a director and just be a principal designer, or I could expand as a creative director, which meant managing people who sat in the creative department. At R/GA, that included writers, visual designers, and interaction designers.

By the time I was an associate creative director, I was probably managing anywhere from five to ten interaction designers on the account I was on, but I was also looking over projects and managing the overall creative. That's when I got on the creative director track. By the time I was an executive creative director, I was managing creative for the entire account, which I think was two hundred people, with probably thirty to forty creative people.

That's a pretty dramatic shift from starting as just an associate. How opportunistic were you being about getting the new title,

getting the promotion, getting the increase in responsibility?

If I thought I deserved a promotion, I would ask for it. I didn't necessarily wait to be handed out promotions, but I also really thought about what I needed to do to get to the next level. And I would write it down: "Am I doing these things? This is what the role involves, so am I doing that?" I would talk about it with my manager and we'd work together to get to that next stage.

Was it ever a fight or a struggle? Did you ever have to make your case and win over more senior decision-makers?

I always made my case when I asked, but it was never a contentious struggle. I was always communicating about it ahead of time, saying, "Hey, manager, just so you know, in six months I'm going to ask for a promotion, and this is why. Do you see any reason why I shouldn't? If so, what should I work on?" It was never a surprise.

That kind of foresight is not common to most designers. How did you know to do that?

I didn't know. I just did it. I was just being logical about it.

Also I was a manager, managing other people and going into their reviews. Maybe they would be upset after a review because they didn't get a promotion, and I'd say, "Did you expect a promotion?" Then they'd say, "Yeah." And I'd say, "I had no idea or I would have helped you."

Also because I did advance fairly quickly in managing people—before I was ready, to be quite honest—I could draw from that experience as well. I thought to myself, "What would I like as a manager?" I was an interaction designer, so I was always thinking about the user and in this case the user is my manager. That made me think, "What are they looking for?"

You said that you were managing people even before you were ready?

There was a project that I was working on, one of my first big projects. I had worked on some marketing stuff that was easier work from an interaction design point of view. Whereas this was doing an account service section for TMobile.com, I think, to allow users to go in and manage phone services and pay their bills. It was pretty complex transactional stuff. That was the project I was working on and it was just really freaky.

I was trying to understand how to approach that and what to do. I had to interface with the client a lot and present my work. Then they brought on someone to help me, someone who needed training, when I was already maxed out just trying to figure out what I needed to do. So I don't feel like I was super successful in managing her at that point because I didn't have the time to properly work with her. It became a burden instead of a help.

When did you start feeling more comfortable with managing?

This happens a lot when you bring on someone who is green. When they're green, it requires a certain amount of your work to get them up to speed. Actually, this happened to me the first time I hired an intern as well—you just underestimate it. You think it's going to be help, but a lot of times, it's actually *no help*. It requires more of your time to help them, depending on how skilled they are, and you won't always know that at the outset.

That was a really big learning lesson: When you are managing someone, you need to put aside time to manage people and time to review their work. You need to create smaller deadlines, before the client deadlines. Don't wait until the day before the meeting to look at their work. I didn't have any coaching at that time on what it meant to be a manager. I didn't know any better.

How did you balance becoming a better manager with becoming a better designer?

I never felt like I was balancing. They go together, because the more people you manage, the more projects you see. And the more designs you see, the more you see the similarities in approach, and the more problems you see. You actually learn faster that way.

Toward the end of your career at R/GA, was there a moment when you took stock and suddenly realized nine years had passed?

Yes [*laughs*]. I was shocked. I was still learning so much, and I thought the work was great. I worked on Nike for six years. I worked on Nike+ for probably more than five of those years. I loved thinking about what was essentially a service design product, and I really enjoyed that work, as well as some of the other more application-oriented work that I did there like Nike ID, the custom shoe builder. I was into it.

You enjoyed it, but how about the lifestyle or the demands on you to provide great service to a huge client like that, over that amount of time?

It was exhausting. There were a few times when I felt tapped out. It's good and bad. There are demanding clients and then there are clients like Nike, which are demanding but they are design-oriented clients. I enjoyed working with them because I believed in them and I believed in what they were doing. They had a creative sense and a design sense. The things that we were pushing hard on were really different designs. It wasn't just creating work for the sake of creating work. I felt like they were really invested in making good work.

How bad did the exhaustion get?

Pretty bad. It was tiring. There was a lot of flying to Portland, Oregon, which is a six-hour flight. Once I took off for six weeks and went to Thailand and laid on the beach.

When you took off for that six-week break, did you know that you would come back rejuvenated or was there ever a point where you thought, "I don't know if I can keep doing this"?

I took that six-week break right after I pitched all the work for the FuelBand and for the Nike+ shoes, so I knew I wanted to come back and work on that stuff. I was super into it. This was FuelBand—imagine knowing about that years before it came out. I was just super-tired after that, but I knew I'd come back for the work.

When did you start thinking that your time at R/GA was going to come to an end?

At a certain point, we'd gotten through most of the concepting and design for the Nike+ Digital Sport work that I was on. At the same time, I was adjusting to being a manager of creative directors. I really wanted to get close to the work again. Also, R/GA changed a lot. When I joined, it was probably two hundred people. It became a thousand in New York alone. I was interested in going to a smaller agency that had a different culture. I thought to myself, "Can I do this somewhere else?"

I'd become so much of a part of the R/GA family, it was hard to leave. It was really an emotional decision, but I just felt like I needed to go and experience working somewhere else.

What was the process of coming to that decision like?

It was a process that involved just thinking about how I felt and what's next. Also thinking about what's good for me in the long term, and then going out and starting to meet people, and being more open to taking that call from a recruiter or

following up with that person that somebody thought I should meet. So I just started meeting with people and started pulling together my résumé, and questioning what should I do next. Because when I told people I worked for R/GA for nine years, that was not necessarily a good thing. The way certain people responded to that fact when I interviewed, it was like, "Whoa." It was funny.

Who did you talk to, aside from recruiters? Who did you turn to for counsel just to figure out if that was the right decision? Did you ever talk to your colleagues at R/GA?

The last year I was there, I partnered with a good friend of mine and we creatively ran the digital sport accounts together. I definitely gave him the heads up that I was interviewing. I guess I talked to a few recruiters, but mainly it was people I had met at some point who would reach out to me and say, "Hey, there is this opening."

At any point did you talk to management at R/GA? I imagine you got pretty close to everybody there.

When I quit, I had a couple of offers, but I didn't know which one I was going to take. The head of the company asked me to tell him about them so he could help me decide. So I left on good terms.

When you left, were you confident that one of them was going to work out? Or were you in a rush to make a decision?

No, I wasn't in a rush. I interviewed at a few places, and narrowed it down to the Barbarian Group and one other place. It was a tough decision, but I felt pretty good about both places. They both had people working there who I knew.

I made a list and compared the two. Somebody told me to do that. I made an Excel spreadsheet—and I never use Excel—just

trying to compare apples to apples: what I liked, what I didn't like, what they offered, didn't offer…

What were the things about the Barbarian Group that edged them out?

The Barbarian Group makes everything in-house. That was probably the main thing that pushed it over. Not only were we designing products but we were shipping them, and that made a big difference to me. I wanted to be actively making things, not just making decks.

How is the Barbarian Group different from what you were doing at R/GA?

Here I'm not just working on one account. I work across the entire company and I sit on the executive committee. I contribute to more company-wide decisions, and I have a multidisciplinary group that focuses on product design.

Has this been a logical outgrowth of where you were in the later days at R/GA?

Yes. I had become more interested in the business side of design, and one of the reasons I decided to come here was to find out what it means to run a small agency and be on the executive team. I have a lot more exposure to things such as the financials and how do you position the company. I do a lot of presenting company credentials and I meet new clients. At an agency as big as R/GA, all those types of activities were segmented and I was never really exposed to that side there. I was doing the creative work once we got the request for proposal; I was never involved in the request for information, or talking to big clients and generating new business.

Is that something that you were explicitly looking for when you started looking around?

Yes, I wanted to learn more about what it takes to run something, and I wanted an opportunity to be entrepreneurial but within a safe environment.

You've been at the Barbarian Group for two-plus years. Do you think it's going to be another seven years?

I have no idea. Unfortunately I am not very good at thinking ahead too much. As long as I keep learning, I'm into it. When I feel I've hit a place where I'm not learning anymore and it's like "Groundhog Day," just doing the same things over and over, I start to get restless.

When you look back at your undergraduate studies in history, studio arts, and photography, and where you are today, what do you think of your journey? Has it been completely unexpected or do you see some clear through-lines?

I can see the connections, but there is no way I would have had any idea. My 18- or 19-year-old self never could have seen my 37-year-old self.

Are any of your interests from back then still surprisingly present in the work that you're doing now, even though it's so different?

Yes, absolutely. When I studied history, American modern cultural history was my specialty. When I wrote my thesis paper on advertising and representation of women and advertising, my thesis was "History of the Future"—looking at how people think about the future and how that informs their everyday socioeconomic situation. It's all related, but it's in this other context now. Every day I am thinking about the future. I was always interested in the same topics, in the same themes. For me, I see the through-lines.

Chapter 11

Evan Sharp

Co-founder, Pinterest

In the middle of earning a master's degree in architecture, Evan Sharp switched tracks and headed West to pursue a degree in the tech industry. He went to work at Facebook in 2009, as the company was becoming ubiquitous, but left before long to co-found the phenomenal visual discovery company Pinterest.

When you started college, what did you think you would do professionally?

In college I didn't know what I was going to do. I went to the University of Chicago, which is a very academic, liberal arts-focused school, and I ended up getting my undergraduate degree in history, which was a lot of fun. After I finished, I worked for three years and then went to Columbia to do a Master of Architecture program, which I never actually finished.

Why did you choose to do architecture?

I had always been interested in it growing up. I grew up on the East Coast, in what I'd call "the country"—definitely not a city. I hadn't been exposed to graphic design, so I didn't realize that was an option, but I always knew architecture was a profession one could do. I remember doing a career project in the third grade, and I chose architecture. It had always been in the back of my brain as something that I would want to do one day. I don't know why I didn't pursue it as an undergrad.

I really enjoyed school. No one really enjoys high school, but I always found academia very interesting and stimulating, so when I made the choice about where to go to college, I wasn't considering architecture or any profession. By the time I had finished my four years, I was yearning for something more practical and applied. I did a summer program in architecture right after I graduated. It was a few years before I actually ended up going to grad school.

Was your grad school experience in architecture enjoyable?

It was revelatory, actually. I've always been a good student, made good enough grades to do well, and enjoyed a lot of different subjects. It wasn't until I went to architecture school, though, that I really loved school work. All of a sudden I was working harder than everybody else. I felt like I had found what I should have been doing for years. I got addicted to the hands-on problem-solving through the process of making or designing something. Architecture school was really influential and amazing.

You hadn't had that approach to solving problems before then?

I mean, growing up I had been lucky enough to have my dad's old hand-me-down Macs. I used Photoshop for years and used to draw skins for MP3 players and draw icons for Mac OS 8. I had always done pixel-level stuff for fun, not realizing that was a career. And I had never done any of those things as, like

you said, a method of solving a problem. For me those things felt like a hobby. It was something I did when I was messing around instead of doing my homework. When I finally experienced having to do that type of stuff for my homework, it was amazing.

At what point did you realize that this stuff that you were fooling around with could become your vocation?

It wasn't long after I graduated from college. After I graduated, I worked for City Hall in Chicago doing zoning and licensing, which was really interesting and weird—and fascinating. At night I started doing design work, coding web sites. I started hacking and realized that I could actually do the web stuff pretty quickly and at a decent level. I was at that city job for two years and then I jumped and went to a startup, also in Chicago. That was my first design job. I did all of their front-end code and web design. They were called Catalyst, and basically they do the technology that powers a lot of real estate search engines. I got to design a whole real estate search engine. I was only there for about eleven months because I ended up leaving for grad school, but that job was super formative for me. Some of the people who hired me there are actually now working at Pinterest.

Did you also start becoming aware of other designers or other people designing for the web?

Yes. It's funny, this guy Matt Brown hired me as his replacement there. He moved to Seattle with his wife, but he and I became really good Internet friends. We'd instant message all day as I'd be working and he was trying to start his own little agency in Seattle. He was way more plugged into the Internet scene than I was. Even now I'm pretty oblivious to most of it. He helped me find influences in the industry, and that's when I started reading web design blogs and sites. It was a little bit before Twitter, so blogs were still the main source of information.

You said you didn't complete your master's. How long did you stay in the program before you left? And what happened that made you change course?

It was a three-year program and I left two years in, which might have been stupid [*laughs*]. I moved to New York after living in Chicago for seven years, since doing my undergrad. I did that program for two years, and I loved it. I had amazing classmates and great teachers, who I am still friends with. The whole time I was doing that program, though, I was also doing freelance web stuff on the side to try and offset some of that cost, because grad school is so expensive. I didn't have the resources to pay for it before I went in, so I was just doing work on the side. My buddy Matt would throw me some work from his agency to help him with, a few times for Microsoft.

Two years into the program, Facebook emailed me out of the blue, because they had seen my portfolio. It felt like a really great opportunity. This was 2009. Facebook had been around for a few years and had come out my last year of college, so I was familiar with it; I had an account pretty early on. But in 2009 people still didn't think of it as a tech company. It was still a little bit of a startup. I had always been really excited about the way they wanted to reorganize the world around people and it seemed like a really good opportunity. At that time it was a pretty small team of really interesting people. It was California and it was a tech company. For me that felt really exciting given that, growing up, I had been obsessed with computers and the Mac, and spent so much time on the Internet, so I just decided to do it.

How much of the culture and the geographic characteristics of California drew you to Facebook? Were you tired of the East Coast and Midwest winters?

I definitely fled Chicago, but not even for the winters. They don't bother me. What bothered me about Chicago is that it's

flat. It's just flat for hundreds of miles in any direction—no hills, nothing. I grew up in the rolling Pennsylvania countryside, and it literally drove me crazy. I loved New York and I was not ready to leave, but I didn't feel like I got to experience it fully because I wasn't making a lot money. We lived in upper Manhattan—which I actually really liked and would live there again—but barely spent any time in Brooklyn or lower Manhattan. My wife was a student then, too, doing a one-year jewelry program at the Fashion Institute of Technology. We didn't have plans to leave New York. At the same time, realizing that I could have a career in the technology industry was really exciting to me.

I didn't move to California for the geography, even though I do like it. It's got amazing strengths and amazing weaknesses, and they're kind of inverse to New York. For me the biggest advantage was gaining this tech industry connection and being part of that. I take that for granted now, which is bad. I don't take this life for granted, but I do take the fact that I'm so deeply in this tech industry now for granted. That was why I moved here.

So when you received that out-of-the-blue email from Facebook, was that the moment when you realized, "Hey, I could actually have a career in the tech industry"?

Yes, that's exactly right. I didn't think I was good enough before. I have always been pretty aware of what I'm bad at or what I need to get better at. With that email I had finally hit some threshold where I was good enough to go into the tech industry and to go work for one of the most interesting companies.

Facebook was very scrappy then. They had a very potent sell. It felt like a very empowering place to work. At that time especially, it was just people my age running around doing crazy shit. That felt pretty intoxicating.

I should also say, even though it was definitely not my primary

motivation, the financial aspect of it was important for me, too. I was facing a six-figure debt that, as an architect, could take me decades to pay off. It was that versus the chance to make all of that in a year working at Facebook. What that offer crystallized for me was that I would rather work in tech for now and there would be lots of other benefits to that as well, besides just enjoying my job everyday.

Is it right to say that you had an equal passion for both architecture and technology?

It's funny because I still really miss architecture. There's still a chance I'll do that for a big chunk of my life—we'll find out. One thing that I love about the tech world, or whatever you want to call it, is just how much one person can do. In architecture you're basically in a profession that's an agency. Every architect is working for clients. And their projects, if they're lucky, get built over the course of many years.

It's not that agency work is bad or that I couldn't do that for the rest of my life, but I'd been doing that on the web. When Facebook came to me, I learned that I could do the same work without the clients. I could build things without having to worry quite as much about what someone else wanted. I could build something that *I* thought was really cool. For me that was an exciting opportunity.

When you were freelancing during school, did you enjoy working with clients or did you find it to be burdensome?

I have always had a hard time saying no, so that was part of it. Architecture school was too much work already for me to be doing so much stuff. To be totally honest about it, though, I don't really enjoy working with clients so much. Part of that was just me being new to the whole thing—doing it all by myself, and working with clients that I didn't really know. There's a learning curve to knowing how to get clients, to get to do good

work, knowing how much to charge, finding a lawyer, all of the logistical details. I would much rather be building one of the ideas I had than building a web site for Microsoft or whatever.

How far up that ladder of "mastering" client services do you think you had climbed before you had had enough"?

Rung two out of ten [*laughs*]. Even working at a big tech company like Facebook, which got big really fast, it's a different type of client services. Unless you're really lucky in who manages you, it's the same thing.

So tell me about your experience at Facebook.

I was only there for about a year and a quarter, which is hard because I feel like it takes three-to-six months to really get running anywhere you go. But it was an amazing experience. I learned so much. Whether or not that company was the right fit for me culturally is kind of irrelevant. Just the experience of being part of that company while it was basically transitioning from fast-growth startup to a full-fledged, official company is pretty amazing. Learning how they think about core things like design and engineering, and seeing how they worked on those problems, was really educational.

Working with great engineers and a few great designers was a new experience for me, and I loved it. When I started there they were just starting to do mobile, and when I left there were all these apps, so seeing that transition was really interesting. It's fun to build a product for a huge chunk of the world.

How did you grow as a designer when you were at Facebook?

I grew just by doing it and working my ass off, putting in the reps, for better or for worse. I went in there just good enough at visual design, just good enough at coding, just good enough at interaction design, just good enough at product thinking and

product design. Facebook took me from maybe 33 percent to 66 percent. I'm still not 100 percent in any of those areas. It was a place to up-level all my skills and see how these small teams of people built product.

Those are the two things I learned: One was just doing a lot of design work and better training my eye, training my taste—which I still do, and need a lot of work on. The second thing was really seeing how product was made at a product-focused company.

Talk more about training your eye. What's involved in that?

Honestly, what's involved is finding people whose work I admire and spending all of my time with them and consuming vast amounts of work. Understanding what I like. Trying to understand why it's good or bad. I've been catching up on the history of graphic design. A couple of years back I did a crash course on that for myself. I just bought a bunch of books: stuff like Josef Müller-Brockmann. Looking through a bunch of stuff online too. It's about exposure: exposure to work and exposure to people who have better taste than I do that I can learn from.

When you started teaching yourself about design, did you have a sense of what you didn't know or what you wanted to learn?

I had a vague sense. I knew there was a huge gap in my knowledge. I didn't know much about typography. Not to oversimplify the industry right now, but I feel like there's a large group of people who came out of graphic design into UI, and then there's a group of people who came out of hacking and coding into UI. They both bring different strengths. I'm the guy who came out of hacking and coding to UI. For me it's really important that I try and understand that other world of graphic design.

Where do you think you first developed your sensibilities around graphic design, visual design, and typography?

It came from architecture school, partly. In architecture school there's so much visual communication and presentation. Architects have this graphic design style that drives me crazy—nearly everyone uses the AutoCad font and they make it look "techy." Some of it, though, the good stuff, is amazing, like Bruce Mau.

School is a great time to get your chops right by doing a bunch of work. I spent seven days a week in the studio. That was where I started to think about learning graphic design. When I left to work at Facebook I was around other designers who were better than I was. I leaned on people more to help me understand what's good or bad and why.

You said the two things that helped you grow while you were at Facebook were learning about design and learning how products are built. Could you describe that experience some more?

It was incredible to be working with back-end engineers who were so talented and could do things to scale. Working with them, I could think through products holistically—not just what the experience flow would be, but what powered that experience, how we could use the UI to get better data. I worked in the growth team there for a little bit, and that was really interesting, just seeing how they analyzed and understood what drove adoption of the service and how to optimize that. Seeing that at work was really interesting and gave me a core education in growing any product.

I also got exposed to a lot of the conversations about product philosophy. Growing up, I was just as interested in computers as I was in people. I grew up tinkering with systems and drawing icons in my bedroom as much as I spent time hanging out with my friends. What was remarkable about Facebook was how emphatically Mark Zuckerberg had drilled "people" into

the psyche of the company. Everyone there thought about the product through the lens of your friends: "How are we reorganizing information for you through what your friends are doing?" That was a really interesting education in how a company can create a product through a philosophy or a set of beliefs or values.

When you went to Facebook, did you think you would stay there a very long time?

I'm not good at planning like that. I don't think I knew what I was going to do. I had no plans to leave. I only left because I built Pinterest as a side project with my buddy Ben [Silbermann] before I started at Facebook, and it was starting to get big. I felt like, "Well if we're going to do Pinterest, I'm going to have to do it now." Either do it now or let it go—sell it or let other people run it. I made the choice that I'm just going to go do it. I really like working with Ben. Pinterest is my favorite product and I'd made it. I designed the whole thing back then as a project. It just seemed like the right call.

At that time, we were growing fast, but it was still super small. I'm not even sure we had 100,000 users. I did not think we would get nearly as big as we did. I mean, I didn't think we wouldn't, but it wasn't obvious to me that it was going to be as successful or as popular as it's become.

What's it been like to build Pinterest into a company, from the ground up?

We ended up hiring people at Pinterest who I feel like are my peers. Even though technically I manage them, I have been able to create that environment. When you're the co-founder you get to pick the people. So by definition for me it's one of the best companies to work at because I made the company and it's a reflection of me in some ways.

What were your hopes starting out?

One thing that excited me a lot was the potential for what we could build on the platform, how we could use the data. The data we have as people pin, about objects and about what people are interested in, will allow us to build a lot of really interesting stuff that no one else can build.

Did the fact that you were already in Silicon Valley influence your decision to do Pinterest?

I think if hadn't gone to Facebook, if had stayed in New York, my guess is I would have finished school and then ended up working at Pinterest anyway, because we built the product before I moved out here. But if I hadn't gone to Facebook, I don't want to say we wouldn't have been successful, but a huge amount of what makes me good in my role is built on a foundation that was laid for me at Facebook. Coming out to Silicon Valley and just being around people who really enjoy building product and building companies was a big deal for me. There are a lot of people out here who are here for the wrong reasons, but there is a big core of people who just want to build product, who are trying to live as moral a life as you can live in this environment and aren't motivated by fame or by money first. I found a bunch of them out here and that's been really amazing.

I think for Ben, the Valley was even more influential because he took a different type of risk. He had quit his job and did a bunch of startups before Pinterest and had sunk in his savings. All of that was enabled by an environment in which you can fail and you can try again, and it's not a big deal.

How did you first start working with Ben?

I met Ben through a friend of mine from college who knew him from high school. He hooked us up because the three of us were all weirdly obsessed with infographics and he thought

we should do something together. I was in New York and Ben was in Palo Alto, working with his buddy Paul Sciarra, who's the third co-founder at Pinterest, although he is not with us anymore.

Ben and I hit it off because we're both excitable about the Internet. Ben knows more about startups and cares more than anyone. The first time we met we just got coffee and hit it off and talked for hours, and it's been that way ever since, really.

We're also both avid collectors—growing up we'd collect things like coins, stickers, rocks, anything. And as an architecture student I would collect images obsessively—thousands of sections, renderings and photographs—but it was a challenge to organize all these found images and refer back to them when I needed to. We thought we could solve this problem, so we created a prototype, shared it with friends, and Pinterest was born.

When did you release Pinterest beyond your immediate circle?

We built it at the end of 2009. I did the front-end, my buddy did the back-end. We didn't launch it until March of 2010—and "launch" is a strong verb for what we did. We just kind of put it out there. I wish it was a more epic story. What was epic about it was just how unremarkable it was at launch. Once it ramped up it has been radically fast, but that initial year was really slow.

Did you start it as a lark or were you thinking this is going to be a company?

For me it was a side project. Ben was doing it full time, but he had also built a few products, all of them interesting but none had taken off. I think what he would say about why Pinterest got successful versus these other startups is that he literally just stuck with it longer. Pinterest was the one that he put a year and a half into. This was at a time when everyone was saying to

pivot. "Build something, then change it." It's not that pivoting is bad. It's just that he didn't do that and it ended up working out. He went out and hand-built a community of people that became the core base of the service, and that took time.

You left Facebook to do Pinterest full time, when the overall user base was still small. How would you describe your job at the company in those early days?

That was the best. My job was to build a startup with Ben and then do all the design and front-end code on the web—we didn't have an iPhone app at that time.

Was it hard?

What keeps me going is knowing that not many people have the basics. There are not many people who understand that creative management is a very different thing than normal management. You don't manage accounts like you manage designers. Learning what those differences are and freeing yourself to follow your instincts has been a good thing for me to learn. The process has been painful. I always feel like I'm behind. Just like how I learned design, I learned: "We try it. It breaks. You try it again." Then find someone who can be your mentor who is just further enough along than you are, that you admire, and get their advice and assistance.

Was the process painful because you really wanted to be more hands on or because you were trying different management techniques and not getting the results you expected?

Both. I mean, I definitely have to do something creative or I go crazy. I have gotten really into photography recently. I still do design, just not as much as I want. It took me a good six months to a year to really be okay with letting other people design. The thing that got me over that was hiring a designer who I really trusted deeply and felt could do better work than

I could. Learning how to enable him to do his best work and make the product better has been great.

Did you have any management expertise before Pinterest?

No. That's something that I have learned from scratch at Pinterest, and I have lots of thoughts about it that I think are at least moderately interesting. What I've learned about managing designers is that it's like managing a soccer team. It's about talent. You treat them very differently than you treat other designers who are more junior or who aren't as talented. A lot of management ends up being about dealing with people who aren't performing as well as they should be, and that consumes a lot of time. It can teach you the wrong lessons. It can teach you to normalize people's behaviors to say, "Here is what you're not doing well," rather than saying, "How can I help you do your best work?"

Another way of saying it might be that most of the designers out there could be bettering their craft in many ways—they could be better visual designers, better interaction designers, better coders, whatever it is. So you need to hire people who see their weaknesses. That's one of the most important things. If you have a good eye for design, it means that you're set up well to see what you're good and bad at. If you see what you're bad at, you're going to work on it to make yourself better, and that's at the core of any great design team.

If you hire designers who think they're the shit, it's just not going to work. It's like an exercise in psychological triage to hire the right people, and then you have to separate out the designers who are bad in an area from the designers who just have a weakness they are going to overcome. It's tough because there aren't a lot of really talented, self-aware designers out there. I think we have a few of them at Pinterest now, designers who get UI and product and experience. We do not draw out a black-and-white line between design and engineering.

I think that's really insightful. It's hard to articulate what it takes to get a group of people who are not extensions of your brain to do the work that you want done.

That's right.

If there were no Pinterest, what kind of career do you think you would have? Would you have stayed at Facebook longer?

I think I would have stayed at Facebook for at least four or five years, and then I would have tried to do my own startup. But everyone thinks that and not many people do it. Actually I didn't do it that way, either. I built a product on the side that ended up becoming a startup. I am not an entrepreneur. I did not jump into something, throw my money into it, and take that risk. To do a startup is a big risk, and it's really hard.

How long do you think you'll be at Pinterest?

The next hundred years? I don't know. What motivates me is making this product achieve its potential and then building the company to achieve that goal. All I care about is that we get great work out there—that we build a great product. Shipping good stuff is what motivates me right now. No bullshit, I'm really excited about what we're building. I feel the next two years will be more exciting than the past two because now we have the talent to do it.

I'm excited about building a great design team. Most Internet companies don't really understand design management. They have designers and they build decent products; some of them have designers in leadership, so that language of design is part of the business. But none of these Internet companies have a great design team yet. I'm trying to build one now.

Chapter 12

Geoff Teehan

Co-founder, Teehan+Lax

Toronto native Geoff Teehan came up during the first dot-com boom at pioneering digital agency Modem Media—until the market crashed. But he managed to salvage a client roster from that business and, with fellow agency veteran Jon Lax, co-founded Teehan+Lax, which went on to establish an international reputation for stellar digital design.

What exposure to design did you have prior to college?

I was never very studious. I struggled in high school a lot. I didn't do all that well with structured learning environments. I was always a very visual person, so my grades suffered. I had one brother who was exactly the opposite of me; he did very well in school and was not a very visual person. I thought that I had to do whatever he was doing.

I thought I wanted to get into architecture. Then I realized how much structured learning there is to get into that field, so I

quickly looked for something else to do. I had a friend who was working at a print company, and he would do designs for small clients: posters, flyers, that kind of thing. This would have been the early '90s, so he was using Corel Draw. I thought, "Oh man, that looks like fun. I could totally get into that." I started to do rave flyers for people, back when that was a real thing.

Did you know that what you were doing was design?

Yes, I did. It wasn't good design, but it was design, nonetheless. I was making a tiny bit of money at it, but I was still going to school, and I hadn't yet decided what I wanted to be when I grew up.

Then this guy who was doing the flyers turned me on to this program at a local community college up here in Toronto called Seneca. They had a school of communication arts, which was in this really rinky-dink building in a strip plaza. It was a three-year program.

The Internet was just starting to become something, but there were no design careers in that. The focus was still primarily around print, although we were starting to use computers to do design work, early QuarkXPress layout stuff. When we were doing typography, it was marker renderings on vellum, that kind of thing.

I really got into it. Because it was something I was passionate about, I decided to double down on it. I took summer programs so I could get through it quicker. I did the three-year course at Seneca in two years. Technically, though, I didn't attend enough hours, so I actually never got my diploma.

So, technically, you don't know what you're talking about.

Yes, exactly [*laughs*]. I could have done another semester, taken two more courses and gotten it. But part of the program was

doing an internship. I went into a local design firm here in Toronto called HM&E. Paul Haslip, who was one of the founders of that agency, was a very good print designer at the time. I went to go work for him for a summer semester.

How did that come about?

The school did placement, and HM&E had taken placements in the past. I worked with him for a summer in the mid-'90s. I really enjoyed it. I learned a ton about what we call "flat design" today. That's what you did back then.

Did you know about this studio before you were placed? Would you say you were aware of the design world?

Yes, definitely. It was a really big part of the college program, actually. We talked a lot about who was doing good work. A lot of times we were talking about people who were in the UK: Emigré and Rudy VanderLans, that kind of stuff was really big back then.

Were the people at HM&E your design heroes?

I don't know if I'd say they were design heroes, but I certainly looked up to them and aspired to be as good as they were. They weren't world-renowned, but they were definitely well-known locally. I actually think I had to apply to a few different ones, so I got a couple rejection letters, and I got accepted.

I remember, I went into work and it was pretty daunting at first. Even though it was a small company, we were working on good projects. They did a lot of annual reports and identity design, which is something that I was really passionate about: working with tabular data, working with real information, not just doing print brochures and poster work. I was really into more functional design.

Back then, annual report design was gorgeous. Companies spent a ton of money on their annual reports, so it was something I was really into. To get exposed to that, at that level, was really important. It really helped shape me and helped me find the kinds of work that I still like to do today, which is highly functional work. I don't really love doing a lot of the brochure-ware type web sites. I'd far rather work on things that are grounded in utility, which stems from my experience doing annual report design.

At what point during school did you get this gig?

The last semester was a placement semester. I was two courses shy of graduating, but after that experience I decided to look for work. I tried to get work at the same place I was working, but that didn't pan out.

Why was that? Weren't they hiring?

They were hiring, but maybe I wasn't good enough. Whenever I look back on the work that I've done, even just a few years back, some of it I find really cringe-worthy, even today. Back then it was probably the same thing. I think you always think you're better than you are. It's nice sometimes to get a reality check. I definitely got one, and it forced me to go out and look for work.

My mother, God rest her soul, was golfing one day with somebody who owned a print shop up here. She mentioned me to him, he brought me in, looked at my portfolio, and hired me. I ended up working in a print shop for the first couple years of my career. We did a lot of movie and music posters, so I was doing things I didn't want to do, but I was getting paid for it, and I was getting great experience. I loved getting to know the guys back in the press room, following everything from design right through to production, which I thought was really amazing.

You mean to see the whole process from end to end?

Yes, and being able to make changes. There were no digital presses, so I was processing the film, going into the darkroom, and then I would print plates and take them back to the press room. I'd get to know the guys who were running the job, and once they got the registration right, we would work on how heavy the ink should be and the different colors. It was great, getting to fine-tune everything.

In a lot of cases I was working directly with their clients. I would be an in-house designer if they didn't have somebody. One of the clients I happened to work with was an Internet startup, I would guess it was '95 or '96. They needed an identity package, and they were this company that would get you on the web for $1,000. It was this crazy menu-based Internet package deal that started at $1,000, and you could do add-ons, such as, "Here's an email template, that's an extra $50," or whatever it was. I did all of their brochures, their identity, the stationery, and all that kind of stuff. They invited me to their Christmas party, and then offered me a job.

What was the name of that company?

It was called NetSteps, Inc. We worked out of their house for the first maybe eight or nine months, and then got a real office.

At this point, where did you expect your career to take you? What was your vision of what you thought you would be doing going forward?

My ambition then was to work at a similar place to the one I interned at, where I couldn't get the job. I needed to build up my chops, and I needed real experience. I needed face time with customers. The print shop felt like a good starting place. I thought it was really healthy. To be honest, I didn't aspire to do anything but print design and annual reports and identity work

for a small company like HM&E. I would get to know other parts of the industry, too, which I felt could probably be valuable if I was to go into another boutique print design shop.

What was your relationship with technology like at the time? You were using analog for printing purposes, but you were obviously using computers, at least at the outset of the job, right?

My relationship with computers started early on. As soon as they were around and consumer-friendly, that's when we got them. We always had computers at home. We didn't get the Macintosh when it came out, but my parents ended up getting the Apple IIc. Later, I had a PC at home, and that's where I was doing all of my early freelance work, my rave flyers and that kind of thing. I remember computers were so slow back then, and so memory-intensive. I remember having to take all the profits from one particular job—maybe $1,600—and I spent it all on 32 megabytes of RAM, so then I could actually run Photoshop properly.

Having worked with the print company, I was exposed to some of the better equipment. We were working on Quadra 900s, which were these huge, beige Mac towers—massive, these things were. They were the best at the time. I was lucky enough to actually get to work on some pretty decent equipment for the time.

So, after the print shop, you went to work at NetSteps. Were you thinking, "This is a good job for now," or, "This is a great job, and it's also the future"?

It was the future. Immediately I thought, "I can't say no to this." It was scary, because it became clear that this was something that was totally different, building and designing web sites. There were loads of constraints that were different from print—the constraints of screen size, how interactive things could be, page size. This was just a different set of design constraints, and

I found it really fascinating.

It was a whole new learning experience. I didn't know anything about what it took to design a web page at first, yet I knew right away that it was probably what I was going to do for the rest of my career. I figured I would probably still dabble in print, but from a career perspective, I couldn't ever see myself going back. I gave up pretty quickly on that dream of doing annual reports.

Did you learn HTML at this startup?

Yes, really basic HTML. I learned it on the job. They had hired webmasters back then, who were actually in charge of doing the code. I was doing design. I was basically working in Photoshop, from an early stage, but I would do a little bit of code, not very much. Back then the web was so basic.

How long did you work at the startup?

I worked there from pretty much the time it started, right to the last day, when the banks changed the locks on the doors [*laughs*]. It went bankrupt; they couldn't afford to pay the bills. What they were selling, no one was buying. They struggled for a few years. The owners had made a lot of money in a fax business, believe it or not, and then they basically spent their millions running this thing into the ground. I worked there right until the very end, which would have probably been '97 or so. There were a lot of good people that worked there. We started a new chapter together after that company went down.

Was that the earliest foundation of your professional network?

Yes, absolutely, it was. With a few of the people that worked at NetSteps we started a company. One of the guys, I remember, came into the office one day and announced, "Hey, I got this new piece of software, and it's pretty game-changing. It's called

FutureSplash" (which later became Macromedia Flash). We were blown away and started doing full-screen animation. We thought, "This is what every site needs!"—which now is obviously ridiculous. Back then it was really something.

We started to do a lot of that stuff, or we tried to pitch it on clients, anyway. When that company went bankrupt, we had all been working in FutureSplash since its inception. All we were doing was Flash work.

On day one at NetSteps, you were a print designer making the transition to doing web design. When you left NetSteps, how would you have described yourself?

I'd say I was a web designer. We were doing some relatively interesting work, for the time. There were probably only a handful of shops that were doing what we were capable of doing on the Internet, so we felt pretty confident that this was the direction that we were going to head.

Personally, I felt like I had taken my career in the right direction. Leaving behind the print industry and the dream of doing really great annual reports was probably a really sound decision even back then. I wasn't making a lot of money. I didn't really have much of a name for myself. We didn't have the networks we have today, where you could build a reputation. Everything just resided in this little vacuum. I didn't have a personal portfolio site—no one did that kind of thing, or not to the level that it happens today. Still, I felt like I was headed in the right direction, and that this type of work was going to be where my future was.

When NetSteps went bankrupt, what did you think you would do next?

I was scared. I didn't have a job. The market was a little bit different. There were very few interactive shops. The agencies

hadn't started to do that kind of work. I thought, "What do I do? Do I go back to print design?"

So we opened up our own shop, Templar 3, with some of the guys who had a technical background. This is pre-Teehan+Lax. We started with three guys. It took us maybe a month to find a space, and get up and running. It happened relatively quickly.

Did you have an anchor client, somebody that you were able to take away from your experience at NetSteps?

No, in fact, I don't think we had any work when we started it. We had built up a small network of people that we knew. One of the guys was connected with the entertainment industry, and one of his contacts fed us a relatively good piece of work at the time. That's where we began to build a reputation as being a decent Flash shop. Some agencies caught wind of that, and our clients then became primarily agencies. We weren't doing a lot of direct client work. We were like an outsource firm for Flash work.

Who was doing the business development?

Initially, we all were. Then after a few months we hired somebody fulltime to take that on. We talked about, "Should one of the partners take that role on?" But we didn't think we were going to be very good at it, so we hired somebody else. It turns out that they didn't really move the needle forward for us, either. Selling that stuff was hard. No one had a budget slated for it. It was considered an extra. The bigger clients were focused on spending their budgets in the same ways that they probably had for the last fifteen years. It was a very difficult sell.

Through the Bell Broadcast and New Media Fund—funds set up by the Canadian government to help companies that wanted to do things on the Internet—we actually had some traction. We found some clients to work with, so we could build some

decent stuff. Then we got in touch with this agency called Modem Media. They were digital only and had really good clients, and that's where we really started to do better work. We didn't have to worry about new business. We could just focus on doing the work.

We still weren't making that much money. Outsourced Flash work, back in the late '90s, was not exactly super-high paying. We did what we could, and then after a while, it became clear that we might as well just go work for these guys, because it's all we were doing anyway, and we could probably make more money doing it, and not have to worry about all the back-office stuff, such as billing and everything else that comes with running your own business.

What sort of Flash work was being outsourced to you?

We were doing a mixture of microsites and advertisements, such as IAB Flash ads and GIF replacements—all the stuff that makes the Internet such a nasty place today. It used a skill set that we had, and it enabled us to then begin another chapter.

All of us at Templar 3 ended up going over to Modem Media and working. That's where I met my current business partner, Jon Lax. He was the creative director. I got hired on as an art director, and then eventually became associate creative director.

Were you still paying your dues at that point or did you feel that you had arrived?

I was definitely still paying dues. Today, there's that term "digital landfill"—that's all we were doing. None of the stuff we were making was going to be around in, hell, six months, let alone six years. We knew it, and that didn't feel great. The Internet couldn't offer much more than what we were doing. We were doing probably the best we could at the time.

It wasn't until we started to work on this really early weblog, which came out at around the same time that Blogger did, that I started to feel more invigorated about the industry as a whole. We had actually built it for General Motors. It was a social network where kids could talk about things that they were interested in, and it just happened to be sponsored by GM. For all intents and purposes, it was a weblog and we got to do really interesting, functional work there. It wasn't necessarily great, but for the first time in my career I felt like we were building something that could have some use to people, and it wasn't just about advertising.

Was that a revelation to you, that you could do work for businesses and it doesn't have to be advertising?

It wasn't even about me. It was a revelation of what the Internet could become. We can do really functional things here. We can actually enable people to communicate, and it's not just through email or Instant Messenger or whatever the flavor of the week was.

This was the web doing this, and that was a whole new thing. It made us think a little bit more strategically, not just jump into Photoshop. We had to formalize an information architecture practice. That got me really excited.

How about the client-facing aspect of your job? Were you presenting or managing clients?

Maybe a year in, I started doing client presentations. At first I was art-directing other designers, but I wasn't managing them. I got promoted to associate creative director, and then I was running clients. We had other people who were strategists and technical leads, but I was leading them from a creative perspective.

The client-facing stuff was really intimidating at first, because

we were dealing with really big clients such as General Motors and Coke. That was intimidating as a young designer, to have to stand up in front of your clients—not just your peers—and speak passionately about your work and defend your decisions.

That was definitely a learning process. It was another aspect of the job that I hadn't thought about. I had always just thought about the craft. There's obviously a whole other side to it, that I still like to this day.

Did you like interfacing with clients right away or did you have to warm up to it?

I hated it. I wouldn't sleep the night before. I was totally nerve-wracked. I'd have to rehearse. I don't speak off the cuff very well. It's just not part of who I am as a human being.

I got more comfortable as time went on, but I remember the first year of it, I would never look forward to that kind of stuff. Even if I was really excited about the work; even if I thought the work I was going to present was going to be well-received, and if I thought I could defend it well, I was just nervous and young and inexperienced in that aspect of being a creative professional.

What prompted you and Jon Lax to leave Modem Media and start your own company?

At Modem's height, they had more than five hundred people in ten offices around the world. When the dot-com bubble burst, they shut down almost all the offices, including Toronto. While I was saddened to see the company fold, it was also exciting. There were still opportunities out there. Agencies were starting to build up their digital arms.

I'd had a very good relationship with one of my big clients, one that Modem Media's U.S. firm wasn't going to take on. It was

Maritime Life, a life insurance company out on the east coast of Canada, and we were working on an intranet for the entire company. We were probably halfway through the information architecture and still had a lot more work to do. I talked to the other people that had been on my team and Jon about going out on our own.

I asked the U.S. division if it was okay to pursue the client, and they said yes. So we started with this large piece of work, that would probably take another two or three months. It was a really good, healthy budget that would sustain us for a while. That was what launched the next chapter.

When Jon and I were interviewing around the city at various agencies, we weren't happy to see that everybody was doing the same thing. Digital agencies were structured after traditional ad models, with tons of layers of hierarchy, these A-teams and B-teams. We thought, "There's got to be a better way to do this." We decided to take on the Maritime Life work, and we started Teehan + Lax.

How could you tell that you and Jon would make good partners?

I interviewed with Jon at Modem, and I remember liking him immediately. He was young to be a director in that company. He was just very smart, and had a very good sense of the industry and where it would go. And then we got to have a good working relationship. He is incredibly pragmatic. He is insanely loyal. He comes from a copywriting background, and I come from an art background. Back then, art and copy were the match made in heaven. We just played off each other really well. We're very different in terms of our personalities, but I think that that helped us as well. He very much challenges decisions, in a healthy way, to try and get a better product out.

It was a good fit and we knew it. We figured we could probably

make a pretty good stab at this on our own.

So you and Jon were co-founders, with a few freelancers from your old team. Tell me about the process of turning it into a viable company.

We had that big anchor client, so we didn't need to go into debt. Through Modem we had a couple of new clients. We didn't really have to worry too much early on about new business. We didn't really have to worry too much about money. We had a really good network of talent that we could hire. There were definitely moments where it wasn't easy, but I felt really fortunate that getting the company off the ground in the first six months was relatively easy. It was really liberating to run our own thing.

We did quickly run into the realization that there are a lot of other parts of running a business besides just doing web design. We did have to worry about billing. We did have to worry about payroll, banking, credit, cash flow, dealing with people who don't pay. There's a whole bunch of things that we had to deal with that definitely brought on levels of stress. Again, Jon is an excellent business partner, and he took a lot of that stuff on. He's a driving force for the business, always has been.

How did your job evolve once you became a co-founder and co-owner of a company?

I was doing tons of design work at the beginning. When we grew to about thirty people, that's probably when things started to change, where I was doing a lot more client management than client work.

To be clear, I still do client work. I still consider myself a designer. I still like to design. I definitely spend a lot more of my time going after leads and following up on new business, but I try to maintain a good balance between managing the work

and doing the work. It's important to me, personally, that I stay active doing that stuff, because it's still what I love to do.

What were the major milestones that you had?

In 2002 or 2003, we won a really big client up here called Telus. They are a big mobile carrier in Ontario. That was a huge win for us. It had recurring revenue, so we could literally staff a team against it. This was our first solo win. We had Maritime Life, but that didn't feel fair because we got that from the previous company. That was a huge, huge moment. And we kept that client for five years

I also think of small things, like when we first leased a color copier. That was a really big accomplishment, because it was our first big investment. This thing cost $20,000 or $25,000. It marked a commitment that this company was for real. We were signing a three-year term on this piece of equipment, and it meant that we weren't just going to walk away from it. It meant we were going all in. We were not going to just shut the doors and go get jobs; we were making commitments.

I think the same thing could be said for when we were hiring people. It was the same thing: "We're committing to this." With contracts and freelancers, there's less of a commitment. When you're asking somebody to leave a job, or to start a career with you, that's a big milestone.

What were the low points? Was there ever a time when you thought, "Maybe this isn't the future for me"?

Yes. That Telus client, we lost them. They represented more than 50 percent of our revenue, and we lost them.

That was after five years?

Yes, new management came in, and they wanted to consolidate

agencies. They went with the agency that did all their traditional work with TV and print, who also had a digital arm now. They gave all the business to them, so we lost them overnight. That was really hard. It took us a while to recover.

I remember Jon and I didn't take paychecks for three months, so that we wouldn't have to fire anybody. I don't think we were ever at the point of, "We need to shut down." But it was definitely a conversation that we had. We had invested so much into this company, we were not going to just let it go. We didn't want to have to let these people go, only to have something bounce back and then try to re-hire them. It's not really their fault. It's just a byproduct of the industry. That was definitely a low point.

How did you claw your way back?

We just grinded. We made lots of phone calls. We waited. We weathered the storm. This industry is such a beast. What I'm about to say used to stress the shit out of me. And that is, we probably only have six to seven weeks' visibility. In a month and a half, I have no idea what we're working on. We have built up a level of trust that something will come in the door. And it has—knock wood—for eleven years. It doesn't stress us out like it used to. We definitely cut it close to the line sometimes, where things get a little sketchy. Thankfully, we've been good about reserving cash for when things do go sideways. We have some runway, where we can allow some gaps. It's definitely a stressful business, especially when you have so many people that rely on you. If it were just Jon and me, that's not as stressful. When you have fifty other people to worry about, it is.

Looking back, what are the things that you've done that really distinguished you from the countless other studios and agencies out there?

Very early on, we did a PVR report, a report on personal video

recorders. This was back in 2003 or something. We did this 40- or 50-page report on the state of the union on PVRs. We did full reviews, and on the back half of the report, we designed our own. It was a self-initiated, not-for-profit piece that we did to gain reputation. The digital channel back then was all about one screen: your desktop. We felt like there were other screens to design for, if we could get that opportunity. We thought this might be a good way to demonstrate that our skills could transfer into other interfaces. We chose the living room.

The report got picked up pretty widely. It was good for our reputation and it got us some meetings. I don't think it ever translated into actual work, but I bring it up as something that I'm proud of, and that I think we do differently. That is, we will take chances and do things in an effort to advance our skills and our reputation, in areas where we maybe don't have much. We did that with the PVR report. We've done it with other things, like creating applications for iOS. We've built out an entire labs group, and all they do is tinker with technology and physical Internet.

We created a UX fund, with fifty thousand real dollars, and chose ten companies that we felt do a really good job of creating great user experiences. We invested it for a year, and we created a site that tracked it against the indices. Things like that are interesting.

Also the work that we've chosen to do primarily has been grounded in utility. I think that's pretty common these days, but back when we were starting out, that distinguished us from a lot of other places.

It's been eleven years since Teehan + Lax was founded. Is this a rest-of-your-life company?

The rest of my life? I don't know. I think as long as we're doing great work, as long as good work comes in, as long as we're

happy, yes. Jon and I have definitely talked about, "What is the next chapter? What's the end game?" I don't think we know. I just love working on products. As long as I get a chance to work on great products, that's what I'm going to do.

Chapter 13

Justin Van Slembrouck

Design Director, Digg

Justin Van Slembrouck studied design in Detroit before moving to Brooklyn, New York, for a relatively solitary career as a freelance designer. Eventually he found his way to a design position at R/GA and then at Adobe, before joining Betaworks' News.me project (which ultimately acquired Digg) as its resident design director.

You went to the College of Creative Studies, in Detroit, and got a BFA in communication design. Did you know you wanted to do something like what you do today?

No, I actually started in an engineering program at another college, Oakland University, which is a good regional university in Southeast Michigan. I thought I wanted to be an engineer, maybe mechanical or electrical. Computers weren't really on my radar. The Internet was just barely a thing. I got my first email address as a freshman and I discovered Mosaic. It was early days for that. I started in an engineering program and just kind of sucked at it. I thought it was going to be creative because en-

gineers are people who make things, and that wasn't really the case. I even took Computer Science 101, and I was no good at it. There was no tangible result to the stuff I was learning, and I sucked at calculus. I just didn't have the right motivation.

When I got into coding a few years later, there was a real connection between these numbers and instructions on the screen and the output. And because it was a creative thing, I was much more passionate about it. The engineering program wasn't working for me. After a few semesters my parents—I give them so much credit for this—said, "Take some classes in things you are interested in. Just try some stuff." I had always been interested in art, but I went to a long string of shitty-to-mediocre private and public schools growing up, and my last art class was probably in grade school.

So, I took an art class at a local community college. I had friends who were down at CCS, which is where I ended up, and decided to get a portfolio together and apply there. Even then, I didn't quite know what I was going to do. I thought I was going to get into advertising, like my friends.

How did you put together that first portfolio?

It was really basic stuff, from charcoal drawings to color studies. I think I had a few samples of something that would qualify as design, but it was pretty rudimentary. And I'm not some super-talented artist. I can't draw that well. I didn't have technical fine arts skills. But it was enough to get into art college.

Did you know what design was at that time?

Not really. There wasn't much of a real design culture in Detroit. If I had been a 19- or 20-year-old in New York City, I think I would have understood much more of what design was. At school I had some instructors who were designers. I don't know if there was one moment when it hit me, but doing advertising,

I saw there was a higher level of craft with design and it was maybe more creative.

When you started to take these classes, did design immediately start making sense to you?

It was really challenging; the focus was on the conceptual. I don't think my design craft was that great, at least for my first few semesters. And even after I got out of college, I don't know how great a designer I was. I think I was prepared, though—I was almost better prepared to think conceptually than to make design where the type looked good and where it was just visually great. The conceptual side was the most interesting and challenging.

How would you rate the design education that you got?

I'd have to say it was good. In a lot of ways, though, it didn't prepare me at all for the practical side of being a designer. Out of school I freelanced for a couple years, and that was really hard. I was working on my own. It's not something I would suggest to any young designers. "Get out of school and work for yourself" is just not a great way to go. Not a great way to continue learning.

Where were you living when you got out of school?

This was the summer of 2001. The plan was to move to New York. I was looking around for jobs and talked to a couple of design studios, but then 9/11 happened, and then just nothing was happening. So I hunkered down and stayed in Detroit, picked up some freelance for a year, and then moved to New York in July 2002.

Did you have a community in Detroit at the time?

I had my friends from school, and there were a few design firms

and a lot of ad agencies. The scene in Detroit is all focused on automotive and was not the most creative place to focus on design or even advertising. There was a small scene. But in the larger culture, design isn't highly valued. I mean, there's a great design heritage from Detroit, but it's a little sparse.

So you originally wanted to go to New York, but 9/11 happened, so you stuck around Detroit. For how long?

I was there for probably about a year, maybe ten months. In the summer of 2000 I came to New York for a trial run and I worked at a startup called Upoc. An instructor who became a friend of mine was the design director and he invited me to come out. It was great to be in New York.

I was doing more marketing-focused design stuff. I didn't have a real sense yet of UX or UI. The words "user experience" weren't something that I'd ever uttered. It was an interesting company because it was a mobile social networking platform. They worked across carriers and it was based on SMS. Looking back it was pretty remarkable and ahead of its time.

No one I worked with there understood why I would go back to finish school. "Why don't you work here? Or work in tech?" That was weeks before things all crashed down, before the first dot-com bubble burst.

So it's good you returned to Detroit to finish school. Where to next?

Brooklyn. My wife and I had just gotten married and we were both young, more or less just out of college. I had enough freelance going on. I had one or two clients who were in New York, connections I had made through that first summer. I did a little bit of work for Tommy Boy Records, making Flash microsites. I knew Flash pretty well and cobbled together some jobs that way and just sort of went for it. I didn't have a full-time job. I

barely knew anyone out here because we'd just moved.

And so those Flash sites you did were primarily marketing-focused?

Yes, it was these artists' sites that had a gallery, and maybe you'd have a little player that played a sample of their song or you'd have tour dates. Who knows if these things were kept up. I made a couple of thousand dollars for each one.

Would you say you were using your graphic design and marketing design skills to win those jobs and teach yourself user experience and interaction design?

I don't think I was teaching myself anything, really. Maybe I learned some stuff, but the way I approached projects, I wasn't considering who is going to visit this site and why. I was focused less on what I'm solving than "I need to make this good for myself or for my friends who see this." Maybe that's just a young designer thing, in the absence of any sort of real instruction such as, "Hey, you should think about who's visiting this site and why they're there." It was the early days of the web. I was learning something, but how to make a great user experience wasn't one of them.

I did that for less than a year, cobbling together freelance jobs. It was pretty touch and go.

Were you enjoying it?

I don't know if "enjoying" is the right word. It was a struggle and I was working at home by myself, and that's hard, especially when you're new to this big, new city and know just a couple of people. That was a tough time.

I think it was six months or nine months, and then through one of my old instructors I got a medium-term freelance job

for Imaginary Forces and they needed a new web site. At the time they were trying to make this push to do more interactive work. Imaginary Forces is known for their work in movie titles, commercials, and motion, and that felt like a big break. In a way maybe it was. I was in charge of designing this whole site.

It was probably too much responsibility. It was a Flash site, and it was me and this other Flash developer making it. This was probably his first or second major job, and we were in one corner of the office working away on it. I think I was there six months and finally launched this thing. From what I remember, it was probably too flashy, not useful enough, but the design was actually okay. For some reason I remember leaving that gig and not feeling good about it. Like I hadn't done a good job or that it could have been better. I don't know. I didn't feel good at the end of it. Maybe it was that I didn't do good enough or this wasn't quite what I wanted to do yet.

What was at the root of that dissatisfaction?

I think I didn't have enough experience to make it good. My design chops were probably fine or good enough, and there were enough good designers around Imaginary Forces to ensure it was good. But I didn't know how a project was supposed to be put together. I just had to birth this thing and it had to be amazing, and if it wasn't amazing, it was going to be my fault and that would mean I'm not a good designer. I didn't understand that it wasn't all on my shoulders. And I'd never seen anyone really put together a web site. I didn't know how long it was supposed to take. I didn't know that you should have a schedule, that you should plan things, that there should be a project manager. Even though I had been doing freelance on my own, I don't think I really had a good grasp of that. I think that's why I was disappointed because for me it was this personal project of mine instead of this job. I didn't have distance from it.

From that job I went to R/GA. I had a friend who had a two-person company, and I'd done some work for them a few months before, and he had recommended me to the hiring manager at R/GA. That was really educational because that's when design teams were all co-located in this one big room. The company was still fairly small. It was 150 people, 40 designers, a really collegial atmosphere. Everyone was around the same age. And the work that came in was pretty high-quality work with perfect clients. And you had to work quickly. I learned a lot, especially being around other designers and seeing how they worked. I saw the right way to make things. It wasn't this lonely process where the lone designer had to come up with something brilliant, which was what design was for me until then. No one had ever told me differently, coming out of school. So that was a better time. And I actually had a job, so that was nice to not have to be chasing these little freelance things!

Beyond the stability, it sounds like having designers to work alongside and being part of a design culture were really good for you.

Yes, I think so. I think that was what I needed. I had thought of myself as more like a design firm kind of designer, that the boutique firm was where I should be. And that's not what I was doing, so at the time I felt some ambivalence. It wasn't exactly the work I wanted to be doing, but I'm sure every designer who works in an agency has these feelings. Nevertheless, I learned a lot. And I think on some projects, at least, I got to do some decent work during my four years there.

That's a good run.

Yes, I left in early 2007. It was a pretty good run. The company grew a lot and changed a lot in that stretch. From 2003, when I started, a lot happened in terms of what people made on the web. It was a good time.

How different were you as designer by the end of that run?

I think I was more confident. I learned to work more quickly and just increased my levels of proficiency and speed all around. Also I was better at working with other people. Coming in there I hadn't really worked on a team with other designers or non-designers, and I wasn't that great at it at first. Some meetings I'd come out of and if I didn't agree with the ideas or whatever, I would think, "Fuck this."

But I think I realized that you can't do that if you really want to be collaborative and if you want people to listen to you. And I was at the point where I was managing a handful of designers, and that felt good, too, because I felt like we were able to do good work. I think these people liked me. Coming in, I was this guy who had worked by myself but wasn't feeling great about the work I'd made. And coming out, being able to work with others and manage and direct was an improvement, for sure.

During that time you started managing people, which is pretty significant. How did that responsibility come about?

Not in the smoothest way. We'd gotten a big client, and this team just got cobbled together. I don't think it was this official thing like, "Justin, you are now a manager. Thank you for your excellent work. Here's your team. Team, this man will lead you in the ways of design." It was a little more "Lord of the Flies" than that. It just happened somehow, rather than being this thing that was bestowed. It seems like that's the way I've always seen it happen. It's rare that someone comes up and gives you this position or something. Normally it's something that either happens or you have to step into it. That's the way it's worked for me.

Did you think, "This is great, I'm in my element," or was there a learning curve?

There was definitely a learning curve, and it wasn't at all smooth, either. It was this big account that was high pressure, and probably badly managed. The process at the agency was starting to get better; they were bringing in people who had real agency experience, managing projects or account managing. But I think we were winging it for a while. By the end it was a little bit smoother. I moved on to work on other projects, and I got into a decent group and learned how to get good work out of people without them hating me.

What was your next move?

Whenever you're in a job and you find you're not learning anything new, it's probably time to move on, and that's what happened for me with R/GA. I forget how it came about—I interviewed for a few different places, and this was the biggest job hunt I'd ever done. I interviewed at Frog and Razorfish and some other places, and had some good offers. Adobe was this wild card. I had seen a job ad somewhere. There was no personal connection, and almost everything that I'd done professionally up to that point was because I knew someone who had worked with me or known me. This job was just out of the blue but I ended up going to work with Adobe in New York City. I think I was the only designer in the office besides my boss.

I didn't realize that Adobe had designers in New York.

At the time I'd never heard that either. That might have been what was intriguing about it. And it was a weird role, too. I don't think I fully understood what it was, going in.

What did you think you would be doing?

It was for this consulting group within Adobe, part of a sales organization; they would sell licenses for a Flash media server to companies and then we would come in to create a custom app for them. For Verizon we did this almost iTunes–like, web-

based experience. Some of the work was actually interesting and good. I ended up moving into niche work in a different group that was still focused on the Flash platform, at one point it was called Adobe Air. I worked with The New York Times on the Times Reader. It was about Adobe pushing its platform, but we were able to make it into an interesting product rather than some technical implementation or porting an app from one technology into another.

You were a pretty expert interaction and product designer by then. Is that something you picked up at R/GA and that paved the path for you at Adobe, or did it come from the Adobe experience in building products for enterprise clients?

I think I learned a lot at Adobe. I had been used to making informational sites for corporations, such as marketing-driven microsites, mostly web-driven. At Adobe it was more like applications where the tasks were more complex. It wasn't just about conveying information or funneling people somewhere. I learned a lot about UI and the level of craft was higher. I was pushed to up my game. I already had a pretty good sense for what a good, fluid experience was, and I was pretty adept with animation and making fun user interfaces. But the functional part of it, that part of my skill set improved a lot being there.

Did you eventually get more designers in New York?

Another guy, Bruce Bell, joined a couple months after me, but no, we never really got any more designers after that. We worked with the main design office in San Francisco and we'd go there every couple of months. But Bruce and I, we were the New York team, which was kind of understaffed in a way but also we were pretty autonomous. We were able to run our own projects and be our own little satellite design office.

In a lot of ways it was great. We had a lot of freedom. It was the best of both worlds. We had the comfort and ease of working

in a big company, plus the freedom to interact directly with customers and make the calls on how we wanted something designed. When you are in a big company, that high-level strategy can be hard to influence. I might not have stuck around as long if I'd been in San Francisco or, heaven forbid, San Jose. We were in a unique working situation.

How long did that last?

I was there just under five years. My five-year sabbatical was just a couple of months off. I was like, "Oh man, I don't get to take my month of paid vacation."

Is that the point when Betaworks Studio started talking to you about joining its News.me team?

Yes. Adobe had worked on Times Reader, which was pre-iPad, so the timing of that thing was weird. If it had been on a tablet, it might have been something that's actually still around now. But this was still a year before the iPad. After that we got into talks with magazines. There were rumblings of something like a tablet coming from Apple in six months or so, and that's when we did the rounds with all the major magazine publishers and settled on working with Wired on a prototype digital magazine. Long story short, that prototype became this whole platform after the iPad launched, and it's still in use, and apparently doing pretty well for Adobe. I've got lots of feelings about that experience and how that could have gone, but, at least business-wise, it's been doing well for them.

Were you eager to join a startup at that time?

I wasn't yet. I wasn't on some kind of job hunt or anything, but I think I had gotten to that place where I wasn't really learning anything new. I had some ideas about what the right focus should be, especially working in publishing and media for the last few years. It was on my radar, maybe on alert to find

something that was interesting. I wasn't eager to join a startup. I think I was actually quite scared of that.

Why scared?

I had a job that paid pretty well. I'd just had a kid. A startup is when you and two or three other people rent a small room, and you put all your savings into something and you just pray that it works and it probably won't. It sounded terrifying. My vision of it was something that was very high risk and not for someone like me who had responsibility and a family.

But when I was between projects at Adobe, I was catching up with Mike Young, who had worked in the New York Times' R&D lab, and he said, "Let's have lunch or get beers, and, by the way, I don't work at the Times anymore. I'm at this start-up called News.me, so if you don't want to meet, that's cool. I just thought I'd let you know." And my reaction was, "That's awesome. It's even better that you are on the outside now, on the edges of the publishing world." Because News.me started as a Times project and then came under Betaworks. So I was intrigued by News.me and thought it looked like something interesting.

Anyway, I just hung out with him, talking about what I was up to, and he asked if I would help out. News.me just seemed like such a long shot. But then one thing led to another and then I was considering working there. It was only three people at that point. They were spinning it out into an actual company and I think it took more convincing to join a startup than it did to come aboard that team, that company.

It helped that Mike and I were about the same age, and he had two kids. I thought, "If he can do it, maybe I can."

So you joined News.me. You were the only designer when you joined. Is that still the case?

It's still the case, yes.

Besides your years at R/GA, it seems like you've pretty consistently been a designer who runs the whole show.

Yes, I don't know if it always feels that way, but maybe that's true. "Runs the show" sounds very important, like I know what I'm doing.

Do you still feel like you don't know what you are doing?

I guess I do. Sometimes I feel like I know what I'm doing, that I have experience and a point of view that I can bring to bear on something and say, "Yes, let's do this," or, "No, this is a bad idea." But I'm constantly wondering if I'm doing something right.

It's probably just the process of designing, where you look at something and think, "Gosh, this sucks. This is not coming together." So you just work away at it and it becomes better, and maybe it's good by the end of it. After doing this for more than ten years, I'm not brimming with confidence and dashing off amazing designs like maybe I thought I was going to.

News.me has obviously evolved and has acquired the Digg brand and site. And you guys have been pretty adept at changing things up. Your job as a designer has changed a bit, too, is that right?

Yes, it's changed a lot and that's part of why I left Adobe to go to a startup. I really felt like my design process wasn't right, that this wasn't the right way to make things. At Adobe the process was very much that, as a designer, you come up with the pixel-perfect mockup, you deliver it to the engineering team and beat them over the head until they make it look exactly like what you want. And the results were never fully satisfactory, and then the thing you made from the version 1.0 never

evolved either. You could never change that thing that you wanted to change, or that thing that you thought would work but didn't, and you could never go back and revisit it.

So when you brought the design to the engineer, you also had to have all the answers on how everything works?

Yes, there were really long cycles of design where you would virtually create the whole thing and then engineer it. It was slow, and it wasn't effective. I learned a lot about considering use cases and making sure it looked good in all those stages, but it wasn't the right way to make stuff. I wanted to unlearn some of that and try something new. Now I couldn't tell you what my process is. Maybe I could try to explain it, but I don't have this repeatable process that would bring about a successful product. I'm still learning.

Your job has changed many, many times over the course of your career, and each time you've had to adapt your skill sets. It seems like you are rarely content to keep doing the same thing over and over. You put yourself in situations repeatedly where you've got to learn something new.

I always want to build on the skills I have, and it's not just technical skills but it's also conceptual skills. Since News.me acquired Digg I've had to think beyond just the UI and think strategically about "Is this going to help us grow the number of users? What should the higher-level focus be, and how do the little design decisions in the UI help bring us towards that?" We're a small team, and I'm the only designer, so things are never going to be visually perfect. Sometimes I feel like they are far from it, but for the greater good, for the long-term goals, I have to learn to be okay with that.

Have you ever been at a stage in your career where you were able to look at your portfolio and could say, "This is exactly the portfolio I want to have"?

I don't know. I don't think so. I don't know if I have a vision for what exactly that would be, but it seems like there's always something missing. There's always better work out there, too. So I'm never happy with my work. Especially now with this startup, design is about constantly changing or adjusting your direction or your goals and you're launching stuff that will need to be improved. I'm not taking time out to snapshot stuff for my portfolio because I'm still building it, and that goes on for months and months and months.

Chapter 14

Marcos Weskamp

Head of Design, Flipboard

If there ever was a profile of an international designer, Marcos Weskamp fits the bill. He grew up in Argentina, studied in both Japan and Italy, and then came to Silicon Valley. Along the way, he created Newsmap, a groundbreaking visualization of current events, and worked at Adobe Systems, before joining mobile news innovator Flipboard when it had just a handful of employees.

Where did you grow up and how did you first become interested in design?

Let's see. I grew up in Argentina, where I was born. I don't know when I really started picking up drawing, but I remember that that's something that I would constantly do. I'd draw everything that I saw. By the time I was in high school, the drawing had evolved into graffiti. You know, it was the '90s and I was listening to Nirvana. I bought some airbrushes early on and I used them when I was I kid to paint plastic models.

Over time I realized that with those airbrushes I could actually start painting, and that's what I did. I ended up painting t-shirts right after school everyday. That turned into a business, because every t-shirt I painted, everyone wanted.

The business kept on growing. The more I painted t-shirts, the more people wanted them. I started getting bulk orders of tens, twenties, and fifties.

Around that time I was beginning to become more interested in graphic design, and that's when I started picking up Ray Gun magazine. And the design that was used in that magazine was completely different from everything else.

I didn't know much about the designer behind it then, but I did start imitating that a lot. There was so much in Ray Gun that was perfect for my age at that time. I was feeling rebellious; I just wanted to do everything against the rules. That's what the design of Ray Gun was all about.

A few years later, I realized that it was David Carson behind it. Here was a guy who was giving the middle finger to everything that has been established in design before. It was eye opening. It was like, "Wow, you can actually go well beyond the established rules and create design that communicates."

Were you studying design at this point when you were exposed to David Carson? Or were you still teaching yourself?

I was still teaching myself a lot. Right after I graduated high school, that's when I ended up in architecture school, learning about graphic design and fine arts.

In Argentina, university is free. It's amazing. The best education that we offer is free there. It's really, really good. I was taking courses in all of these different subjects. I found in each of them something magical: all the freedom of doing anything

you wanted in art; the rigidity of trying to communicate in graphic design. Trying to build houses in architecture was also fascinating.

Somehow, in each of them, I always bumped into Japanese design. I remember that very clearly. It was one of those things that was enigmatic, that I wanted to learn a little bit more about.

It never really crossed my mind to go study in Japan, though. What I really wanted to do was to come study in Pasadena, at Art Center College of Design, which had the best industrial design course around. I had been there when I was a kid; my parents took me when we came to California on holiday. We went to that college and it was just incredible, the things that these guys were building.

So I went back to Argentina, and as I was trying to finish my first and second years of college, I realized that I would like to go study abroad. As I was aiming to go to Art Center, that's when I thought, maybe that's going to be way too expensive and I should try to get a scholarship.

For some reason—I don't know exactly why, perhaps it was that early inspiration about Japanese design and architecture—I ended up at the Japanese embassy with the objective of just learning what the application process for a scholarship would be like. I went for the interviews, sat for the exams, went through the whole process, and eventually they told me, "You're going to Japan next month."

That's pretty quick!

It was very quick and I wasn't really expecting it at all.

At this point, were you specifically looking to study industrial design, to make physical products?

Yes. I remember when I applied for the scholarship, they made me write a list of what I wanted to study in Japan. I remember putting product design first, then graphic design, and then architecture.

They picked the college for me. They took everything in my application and they went through a bunch of different colleges to see who would accept a foreign student.

Oh, so you were applying through the Japanese government, through the embassy? So it was a government program of some kind.

Exactly. So they placed me into a graphic design school. Before going to graphic design school, I was going to have a full year of intense Japanese learning, so that when I reached school, I could actually understand a little bit of what was going on.

I left home, I was 20 at the time, and moved to Japan, and I remember landing in Japan and realizing that I had no clue what I was doing there. I had no clue about the language. I didn't know anything about anything.

It was one of those points in life where it was completely blank. Everything was ahead of me.

Had you spent any significant time abroad before that?

No, not much. I did travel a little bit to come to the U.S. before that, but I had not really traveled too much beyond that.

So now you're on your own, you're embarking on this whole new chapter in your life, and everything is completely different.

It was completely different. It was a completely new country, culture, language. There was so much for me to learn and absorb every day. I was still eager to learn about design and

architecture. I remember that first year of learning Japanese was painful because I really wanted to go beyond where I was, and the language was getting in between, preventing me from learning what I really wanted to learn.

How much Japanese did you speak the day that you arrived in Japan?

Zero.

And so that first year was essentially learning Japanese and not studying the discipline that you were so eager to study?

Yes. I would go to school, where we had eight hours a day of Japanese, and then as students we'd all go back to the dorm where we stayed, and there I would design, I would paint, I would write code, I would do stuff. I remember wanting to do a lot more. So I kept myself really, really busy.

Now, the cool thing is that, I was in a group of students where everyone was more or less in the same situation. There were maybe twenty students from all over the world who landed there in a similar situation. And nobody spoke Japanese. So it became a race between us to see who could learn the language the fastest. Although none of us would really say that we studied a lot—we would try to pretend that we were not really studying—we actually spent a long time learning how to read, write, and be the one who could become most assimilated to Japanese culture the fastest. That was really cool, because at the same time that I would try to go as deep as possible into design, I was pushing myself also to learn the language. Within a year, I felt pretty comfortable that design school was going to go well.

But I was completely wrong, because landing at design school was a different thing. My Japanese was way too formal and everyone in school was very informal with me. It was not that easy

the first year. Eventually I picked it up and it went very well.

What was the schooling like? Were you learning abstract principles or were you learning vocational skills?

The schooling was pretty broad. It was broad and analog in many ways. This was the year 2000. I knew that the future of publishing was not going to happen in print, yet everything that I was doing was for print. I would learn how to typeset on these amazingly big machines. I was not allowed to touch computers for the first two years, and that was driving me crazy.

You were forbidden?

I was forbidden. It was not cool to play with computers.

You mentioned earlier that in your spare time you would write some code, which means that you were already tinkering a lot with computers at that point, is that right?

Yes. I think more so as soon as I landed in graphic design school. It was definitely that contrast of being there at that time while there was an explosion of Internet sites and Internet publishing here in the West. In Japan, the Internet revolution didn't really pick up immediately. I felt very alone in school thinking that the future of publishing would happen on the web. That pushed me to, yes, to spend a long time at night coding and learning how to publish on the web.

How did you cope with your frustration?

Well, by trying to imitate what we were doing in print inside the browser, and trying to get as close as I could.

And you would do that for a class project or for side projects?

For myself, pretty much. I only had one project in school where

I was finally touching the web, but it was a very lonely experience. No one really understood why I was playing with computers.

When did you finish that education?

That was around 2002, I believe. Right after that, I had already learned a lot about how to wrangle with HTML and JavaScript, and at that time we were using a lot of Flash. I landed at an ad agency where I started as a graphic designer, but I sat right next to a programmer. This guy looked at what I had been writing in code, and I remember him getting mad at me and saying, "No. You're doing it the wrong way. You should learn this," and he gave me a book on programming. That was such a good book that just opening it—on the first page I was drawn in and immediately I just wanted to learn the whole thing. I don't remember exactly which book it was. But it was one of those moments. Finally, I could see how I could match design with programming.

When you started reading that book, were you instantly at home or did you rely on this colleague as a tutor?

It was pretty much both. I would go through the book at night at home and code all the way until the morning, and I'd show up at the office and show this guy what I had built and he kept on encouraging me. So I would repeat that throughout the whole week. It was really cool.

That sounds like it was a really exciting time. It also sounds like you did not have much of a social life?

[*Laughs*] Not much, no. I was so deep into learning. From the moment I got to Japan, that was always the objective: learning. Learning the language, learning the culture, and then I really, really wanted to learn how to design and how to program.

So your job at that first agency was graphic designer, but then, afterwards, you became a web developer. Is that right?

Yes. I think I went a little bit too far on the programming side of things. For a few years I completely forgot about design. I was just obsessed with writing the most effective, clean, portable code that anyone could write.

I went pretty deep into object-oriented programming. I started jumping from one programming language to another one, trying to learn the strengths and weaknesses of each of them. I went very deep into Java–land. I was playing with databases.

Did you leave design behind entirely during this period?

I set a big part of design aside for a long while. Once I went deep into programming-land, I sort of forgot about publishing. At that point I was obsessed with information visualization. And that's because I saw this situation on the web where we had a lot of graphic designers learning about interaction design and learning coding, but always leaving things on the surface. Always only focusing on interaction.

Then, at the same time, something very similar was happening with engineers and with people that would go really deep into building amazing systems, but no one was trying to bridge these two worlds.

There were a few projects that touched on information visualization that I was exposed to at that ad agency, so I started buying more and more books on the topic. That's when it clicked for me that all the projects that I saw on information visualization—although they were talking about finding more effective ways to communicate, to tell stories with large data sets—the output of each of these different programs was always very poor. It was not really thought through, design-wise. And that's where I thought I could make a difference.

My objective is always to write less code by building clean things. I believe that the more efficient and the more structured your code is, the easier it is later to realize it and do better things with it.

While you were working at the ad agency, you were working on a lot of projects for yourself on the side. Was that a good balance for you?

Yes. It was good, although I have always tried to keep those two things separate—what I do at work and what I really want to do.

I realized early on that, being a young designer, it was really easy to just be told what to do. And if you allow that too much, then you always end up building other people's dreams. I couldn't find a way to turn things around in that environment. Whereas if I was working on my own projects, then I was completely free to just pick up and experiment on crazy ideas that perhaps would have been harder to sell to a client.

So, yes, I remember spending a good number of hours at the office and trying to learn as much as I could from everyone there. But then as soon as I went home, I would spend more time building things for myself, building the projects that I knew would become important for me later on.

How did you know that they would become important to you later on?

I don't know. I just felt completely passionate about them. I was solving real problems that touched on things that were going on around me.

Actually, that's how Newsmap was born. Being in Japan, I was always feeling that there was no way for me to catch up entirely with what was going on around the world. I wanted to know what was happening in the news in South America. I wanted to

know what was happening in Europe. I wanted to know what was happening in Asia. And I wanted to absorb that knowledge from picking up newspapers, but there was just too much of everything.

That was where I thought perhaps I could experiment with what I had learned, and see if I could build something that was meaningful.

Was Newsmap what led to, or gave you the opportunity to, open up your own agency?

Absolutely, yes. I think that was the first project. I had done a few other projects that touched on information visualization, but that was the first project that got enough exposure that I could then stand on my own. I was still working at that agency at the time, but it was a year or two later when we started our own thing with a few friends in Tokyo.

Actually, in a couple of weeks it's going to be ten years since I launched Newsmap.

Did you see your studio as an opportunity to do the things you had been doing in private, such as Newsmap, but make that your day-to-day business? To not be told what to do anymore, as you put it earlier?

Yes. And as soon as that launched I started getting daily emails from all over the web, from people who wanted to build similar things. It's crazy how the moment you build something that's meaningful, there's going to be a million other people that will look at that and say, "Oh, I can apply something like that to this other problem that I have." I was getting so many of those requests that it made sense for me to start a business on my own and try to work and adapt these ideas for all these other people that so desperately wanted them.

And how was that experience of building your own business, which you had for four years? You continued your education at the former Interaction Design Institute Ivrea, in Italy, during that time too, correct?

It was really good. I never entirely worried about making money—that wasn't a problem. I just wanted to continue building amazing products. Sandwiched somewhere in between those four years I actually left for Italy to study interaction design. Newsmap launched in 2004, and I think that same year I left for Italy. While at school abroad I continued working with my friends in Tokyo, so I never really left that job. I was just doing pretty much the same thing I was doing before, only now at school.

What led you to eventually move to San Francisco and join Adobe?

At that very first job that I got after design school, with the ad agency, I met a few people who were from the Bay Area. They always told me how amazing this place was.

And I actually got the opportunity to visit San Francisco a few times throughout the ten years I was in Tokyo. I think it was around 2002, when the very first batch of students from the school in Italy came to visit Tokyo. They were all there on a field trip and they happened to know my boss. So they came to the office and they gave a little talk about what they had been studying in Italy. And it was incredible. From then on I remember thinking that I wanted to go to that school.

These were all people that were from San Francisco, who had moved to Italy to go to that school. So the San Francisco influence was all over it. Even when I went to Italy and I was in school, I kept on hearing how amazing this place is, so I knew that eventually I would have to move here.

I'm curious, were you paying for school in Italy through the continued work that you were generating in your business?

Yes, I would continue working. I was paying myself through the work that I was doing back in Tokyo.

Was it hard to balance work and school?

Not really. I think that part I had already figured out by then. What was tough about being back in school was that I was coming from a world where I was just building, and building really fast, and I wanted to build as fast as possible. I had ideas and immediately my instinct was to go and try to code them up and see how far I could get.

In school it was all about thinking about how to build and it was at times very frustrating to go through all the questions, asking *why* a thousand times before you could touch any code at all.

So in late 2007 you moved to San Francisco.

Right. That was through a job at Adobe. I knew many people there. I was very close to everyone at Macromedia back in the day. And then Macromedia was bought by Adobe and eventually, as I was talking to my old Macromedia friends, I mentioned to them that I would love to move to San Francisco one day. And immediately they told me, "Well, we might be able to help you out with that." So I moved there in October 2007 and joined the experience design team.

What happened to the business that you had built?

I had to give all of that up when I went to Adobe. It was hard. It was hard because I was giving up a lot of income to go back to work as an interaction designer at a big corporation.

So you took a pay cut in order to relocate geographically to this area that you wanted to be in, and to work at this company that you wanted to work at?

Yes. But I wasn't worried about that at all. I knew that the environment was going to be a thousand times better. In ways, I think I was feeling very lonely back in Tokyo. Tokyo is a fantastic place. It's home to me. I have friends, family there now. I feel I grew up there, and I owe the city and the country a lot.

But I think what was going on was, all these crazy ideas for projects that I wanted to build while in Tokyo, they were not really going anywhere. Mostly, perhaps, because I just didn't have the right people around me. And after hearing so much about San Francisco and the Bay Area—every time I talked to friends from there they would all tell me, "You should go to San Francisco because that's where you're going to meet the people that will help you build all these ideas."

So that's what I did. I thought, "I'll just take the plunge and move to San Francisco," and hopefully, eventually, I was going to meet those people.

How was the Adobe experience? Was it everything that you had hoped it would be?

It was really good. We had a few very interesting projects. It was a large corporation, though. Everything moves very slowly and not much of the work that you do ever makes it out.

But what was worrying me was that Adobe at that time was very much addicted to Flash. By 2007, the things that you could do in the browser already—in HTML, JavaScript, and CSS—were already quite amazing. The way Flash as a tool had evolved at that time was way more complex than what it had originally been designed for. It had reached a tipping point where if you wanted to build anything in Flash, it would take

you ten times longer than it would take in HTML to build something similar.

At some point I remember just wanting to do what I had been doing again, working late at night at home and building all my own projects. I think around that time is when I started hearing rumors about the iPad, and I kept on thinking that that would be an amazing place to launch a new product. If Apple was going to do the same thing that they did with the iPhone, it could be really, really cool.

For the projects you were doing on the side, were you working with this hypothetical device in mind—that nobody had seen yet? Had you started to think about tablets?

Yes, a little bit. I was trying to build a newer version of Newsmap at that time and I wanted to see where I could take it. It was around that time, in 2009, that [Flipboard co-founders] Mike McCue and Evan Doll got in touch with me.

How did they come to know about you?

I think that they found me through my portfolio. And they had definitely seen Newsmap before.

When they gave me a call, we started talking and they kept on asking me what I wanted to build. I remember telling them my story and asking them about what they were building, but they wouldn't tell me much. They would nod at everything I would say, but eventually, once they told me what that thing was, it was very clear that I had to leave everything and that I had to go work with these guys on Flipboard, because it was very much the same thing.

So did you leave Adobe straight away?

I did leave Adobe straight away, yes. This was January of 2010,

and then it was a race to build a product before the iPad went on sale.

How many people were working with you? Was it just the three of you?

We were probably five at that time. It was incredible. It was a race. It was very, very intense, but it was a lot of fun.

Did you have the feeling that that experience at Flipboard, when you were in the thick of it, was the culmination of all of the previous experiences that you'd had? It seems almost like a perfect project for you.

It was a definitely the perfect project. It was a dream project come true. Now it was no longer about trying to build it alone as an experiment. I was lucky enough to have both Mike and Evan and a few more, with everyone entirely focused on building a company out of this, not just building an experiment—because I'm pretty sure that's what would have happened had I tried to do anything on my own again. It would have just been another experiment.

Is that how you characterize what you had done before? Do you think they were more like passion-fueled experiments than businesses?

I think so. I always focus on and love what I do too much. I was trying to solve a problem, but I never really thought of how could I make a living solving that problem. I kept on thinking that I could find more problems to solve, but not really about how to build a business around one of the solutions.

You started out as one of about five people at Flipboard, and now how many are you?

We're now 130 people over here.

That's pretty remarkable. Your idea of what your job is or what role you play must have changed many times during that period from 5 people to 130 people.

Yes. It changed a lot. Early on, everyone was doing everything, and I was working on everything I could. I had to work on the logo, I had to work on the product itself, I had to work on the branding, I had to work on the web site. I remember, it was about five days before we launched the product when we realized that we hadn't really done much progress on the web front. That's when I started sketching a few things—but we were still fixing a lot of bugs on the product itself, so I didn't really get to focus on building the web site until a day before we launched.

Up to three hours before we launched we were desperately coding it with Charles, one of the engineers here. Around thirty minutes before we launched I was taking the photo that was going to be on the front page. We uploaded it to the web site just minutes before the product went live.

It was crazy, but it was a lot of fun. I think, through the years, as the company grows, you try to be more organized. The role changes a lot. You go from doing everything to trying to focus a little more on what you can really do well.

Flipboard's been around for a number of years already. How long do you think you'll be there?

Years! There's still so much more that we need to do here. I always feel that we're at 10 percent. We have a very long list of things we want to do with the product that it's hard to think what to do beyond this. This is really a passion right now, and I really want to make it happen.

About the author

Khoi Vinh is a designer, writer and entrepreneur. He is currently VP of User Experience at Wildcard, and co-founder of Kidpost, Inc. Previously, he was co-founder and CEO of Mixel, a groundbreaking mobile startup, and digital design director for The New York Times. Khoi writes a widely read blog on design and technology at Subtraction.com. He lives in Brooklyn, New York with his wife and three children.

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.

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