

Designers, This May Be Your Greatest Opportunity in Years

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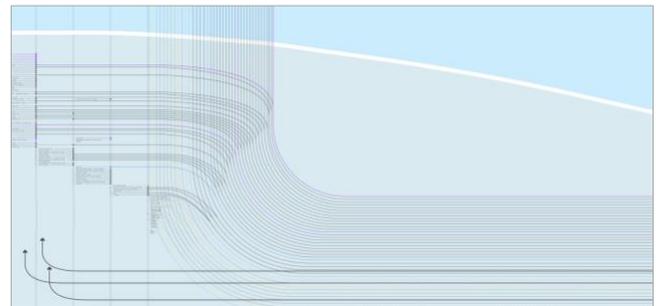


Before design thinkers skimmed a couple of techniques and a few key moments from a centuries-old design process and packaged them up for mass consumption, businesses borrowed something else from the design world – the open plan workplace – the designer’s studio. But just as these huge rooms of undivided workstations, full of gathering spaces, and whiteboards covering entire walls finally became the norm, a pandemic has scattered the collaborating workforce. Offices and studios are empty while their former occupants retreat to their homes in an attempt to slow the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The question now is, will we ever go back to normal? Can we ever feel completely comfortable crowding around a whiteboard or a computer monitor again? I have no doubt that designers will return to their studios; that environment is too integral to our work. But as we improvise during this current crisis, we are developing new skills and techniques. And what skilled designers are *doing* and what they are *making* during this strange time are changing before our eyes.

Suddenly Center Stage. In a recent Zoom meeting, I listened and watched as six people attempted to define the relationships and characteristics among data elements within a business operation. At the instruction of one of the meeting participants, the designer was asked to capture everyone’s input in a spreadsheet. As the spreadsheet filled, I couldn’t help but think of the old Indian proverb of the blind men that were asked to describe an elephant. Each meeting participant was adding their perspective on a different aspect of the data, but within the spreadsheet there was no impression of the overall information environment coming together. Like the blind men in the Indian proverb in which one man described a hard tusk while another described a long soft trunk, the spreadsheet was just a list of individual thoughts and ideas. In the next Zoom meeting, the designer showed up with a virtual whiteboard in which she led the organizing of people’s thoughts in relation to one another and evolved a complex and beautiful model that was more valuable than its individual inputs.

The designer in this case was not simply organizing puzzle pieces into a singular idea. She was, in real-time, creating a compelling abstraction of dozens of disparate ideas, thoughts and comments. This was not a UI/UX exercise where a designer is managing the input of many into the sequencing of screens or arrangement of display controls. And she was not evolving an affinity diagram through virtual post-it notes. This designer found herself inventing and evolving a complicated structure that revealed how, by

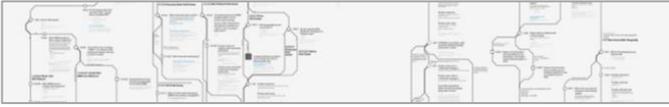
understanding the character of these data, the group could also explore logical pathways that translated into automation possibilities. The designer was at the controls helping a half-dozen business and data experts see what their stream of ideas might mean, how they may come together cohesively, and if all of this discussion made sense. The designer in this case was not exploring the form of a proposed product – the radius of a curved edge, the sequence of screen displays or the position of a push button. She was developing the form of many ideas coming together as a concept – ideas coming from the minds of many people located in as many different places communicating with one another through video conferencing.



In these strange times there is an opportunity for the designer to assume a pivotal role that leverages one of the central aspects of their training and most important professional skills – communication. To do this, the designer must be willing and able to understand the language and context of the people around them, and to possess the courage and ability to assume a leadership role by making whatever is necessary in order to articulate vision, to enable exploration, and to build consensus and understanding.

The Models We Make. In the last year I have interviewed dozens of design professionals answering a job posting for *Designer*. It has been discouraging to see so many designers presenting the sum of their skills and talents as the arrangement of a few words and fairly standard buttons and lists on a smart phone screen. App after app, wireframe after wireframe, screen after screen, these designers began all of their projects with the assumption that eventually their design efforts would add up to the optimal arrangement of words, colors and shapes on a computer screen. In the virtual world that has resulted from the current pandemic, there is a need for design output that doesn’t assume a particular set of formal characteristics, but is instead the product of a designer in real-time building models and inventing forms that are

beautiful because they communicate ideas and abstract concepts so well that collaborators can see, understand, react, evolve and participate fully in their definition. The designer's model needs to be able to describe, well, almost anything.



Yes, designing user interfaces for the apps that we use every day is important work. The designer's wireframes and screen flow diagrams help build understanding and consensus during the creation of these digital objects and experiences. But as the use of UI design patterns and best practices become the norm, it becomes an exercise that is often less about design and more about variation and production. However, the greater opportunity for design in this time of the dispersed workforce, is the designer's ability to create whatever model is necessary to bring people together, to support the building of consensus, the management of details, the illustration of risk, the whole, and the parts. The designers who begin their work driving toward the production of an app may never need to create a model other than a screen wireframe. For designers who recognize their value to the exploration of problems and ideas, their ability to make whatever model is necessary to bring people together makes them an invaluable contributor to any effort.

Years ago I had the privilege of working with a team of designers who, after observing healthcare workers perform within emergency response events, were tasked with describing to hospital administrators what they had witnessed. In order to do this, they invented a visual system that simultaneously presented a variety of data like physical location, timing, technology access, verbal discourse and human interaction within a complex and beautiful set of diagrams. To hospital administrators and clinicians these models were clear and compelling stories of inefficiencies, invention, risks, breakdowns, opportunities and the unknown. To people outside of this project, these were complicated assemblies of lines, colors, shapes and text that meant little without some explanation. These powerful images were never intended to explain anything to the uninitiated. But to the professionals within this exercise they were invaluable tools that established understanding, presented insight, and charted a path toward innovation. These were designers who found reward in their ability to make whatever was necessary to bring people together, to share understanding and to solve problems.

Past, Present and Future. More than thirty years ago, I was among a handful of designers pushing their way into a technology industry reluctant to embrace the participation of designers in their work. At that time, we could not have predicted that what we were doing would become a vast field of practice for designers.

Designers, their training, methods and tools expanded into the interaction, user interface, user experience, “(enter whatever the latest 'X' term) Design” world of today. Looking back, what that handful of designers was doing, was changing the nature of what we design, and how we go about designing. In the past eight weeks I have watched carefully as designers, like everyone else, shift the manner in which they work and the nature of what they create and I am starting to think that design could be entering another exciting period of transformation.

Are designers ready to step into the opportunity that has become so clearly defined for our discipline during this time of remote work? Inside every collaborating team there is a need to enhance communication, to understand one another's thoughts and ideas accurately, and to simply see better. Will design educators embrace the idea that the most valuable and most beautiful object that a designer may make could be something that is only understood by a few, but has brought clarity, impact and purpose beyond the object itself? If we begin to challenge *how* we make, and *what* we make, designers will find themselves in new, indispensable roles *across* businesses. However, the role of communicator and model maker within industry is not ours for the taking – it is ours for the earning. More on this later ... 😊

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