

Talk

to

me

Design and  
the Communication  
between People  
and Objects



# Conversations with the Network

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The design world that I came up in—the graphic design industry at the end of the last century—was fundamentally about fashioning messages: ornamenting and embellishing content so that a core idea, product, or service could be more effectively consumed. Even if a designer felt compelled to obscure the content, as was the style of the postmodern discourse that dominated the field at the time, the operative notion was that design was still elementally about the transmission of messages.

It took nearly a decade of working in digital media before I understood that this idea was fundamentally at odds with the new archetype inherent in networked technology. To be sure, digital media is conducive to communication; in fact, the Internet is perhaps the greatest multiplier of communications that the world has ever seen. With its enormous and pervasive reach it transmits ideas across great distances with great speed, among a large number of people, and in unbelievably rapid succession, all as a matter of course. In many ways such freedom and efficiency have drastically democratized communication, obsolescing the more deliberate, thoughtful pace that communication took when mediated by graphic design. But in this new world designers are critical not so much for the transmission of messages but for the crafting of the spaces within which those messages can be borne.

To understand this difference, it's helpful to look back at the predigital world and recognize that the predominant notion of how design worked was this: every design solution was the product of a visionary who birthed and nurtured an original idea, a radical insight, or an inspired revision. The designer gave it life and labored over it, so that the original inspiration evolved into a complete and definitive work. There was no design without the designer.

It was a useful construct through which to comprehend design: the idea that a single person (or small group of people) was

responsible for a design solution allowed hopeful young designers like me to understand this mystery as something achievable on human terms. It made inspiration knowable and potentially reproducible, provided role models, archetypes to aspire to. If genius could be embodied in a single person, then anyone might be a genius, or at least, with work and discipline, could learn from the ways of their design heroes. These heroes could be interviewed, written about, studied, even encountered in the real world at lectures and conferences. They walked among us; if we were lucky we might even come to know them personally.

In this model the designer was something of a storyteller, and the finished design functioned as a kind of narrative. The designer created the beginning, middle, and end, leading the audience through something immersive, wondrous, bracing, satisfying, and/or inspiring. Thus the core product, whether an advertisement, magazine article, or consumer object, would be transformed into a visual story: an ad for a museum might become a map of the human body, an interview with a musician might become a travelogue of an alternative mindscape, a jar of pasta sauce might evoke a classical age lost to contemporary sensibilities. Whatever the conceit, the audience was beholden to the designer's grand plan, experiencing the design according to those original intentions. The closer the audience's experience to the designer's original script, the more effective the designer.

Many of the greatest designers in history have been measured by their ability to tell compelling stories. As an aspirant to the trade, I marveled at Alexey Brodovitch's groundbreaking midcentury work in the pages of *Harper's Bazaar*. Brodovitch forged hypermodern tales of glamour from expertly art-directed photography, type, and graphic elements. In each magazine spread he juxtaposed models in unexpected poses with inventive layout, commanding the narrative as effectively

as the magazine's editors and writers; in many ways his was the hand that compelled each issue into a coherent whole.

In my early career I also pored over David Carson's deconstructive work from his signature stints as art director at Beach Culture and Ray Gun. With blown-out type and nearly unreadable text, Carson practically usurped the narrative in favor of his own creative agenda, privileging the relationship between designer and reader while demoting the relationship between the writer and reader; he abstracted his own reading of the content into an unconventional, heady brand of visual narrative, something that spoke to the unique persuasive power that designers possessed.

These were my heroes: Brodovitch, Cipe Pineles, Paul Rand, Alexander Liberman, M. F. Agha, and other originators of the visual storytelling methods still plumbed by designers today, as well as Carson, Rudy VanderLans, Why Not Associates, Ed Fella, P. Scott Makela, Neville Brody, and the rest of the graphic-design insurgents who were then at the frontiers of design authorship. It's not easy to rationalize such diverse bodies of work into a coherent influence, but what they had in common was that they were all storytellers.

As I pursued a career in interaction design, I saw it as my duty to carry this sensibility over to a new platform. The Internet was then, and today remains, a young medium, and I reasoned that it could only benefit from a century's worth of design conventions and lessons accumulated in the analog world. And in this I made a fundamental miscalculation.

The designer as author, as craftsperson bringing together beginning, middle, and end, becomes redundant in a space in which every participant forges his or her own beginning, middle, and end. And that is exactly what happens in networked media. The narrative recedes, and the behavior of the design solution becomes prominent. What becomes important are questions that concern not the author but the users. How does the system respond to the input of its users? When a user says something to the system, how does the system respond?

Where analog media thrived on the compelling power of narrative, digital media insists on much less linear modes of communication. Instead of the one-to-many model that dominated the last century—for example, a magazine article written by a single journalist and encountered by thousands of readers—the Internet is a many-to-many platform, a framework in which everyone

talks to everyone and every utterance might inspire a reply. It is a conversation rather than a broadcast.

Although we are approaching the commercial Internet's third decade, it feels like we are still in an evolutionary phase, still coming to grips with this transition from narrative to conversation. We remain preoccupied by the residual power of brands built upon aging narrative authorities: the major broadcast networks, the major publishers, and the major record labels and film studios. Yet few of these industries have achieved truly comfortable footholds in the new landscape; they continue to grapple with the new digital paradigm—sometimes elegantly, often fitfully, occasionally with tremendous intolerance.

In part this transitional difficulty can be blamed on the superficial resemblance that digital interfaces can share with artifacts of the analog world: pages, headlines, paragraphs, logos, icons, and photographs are just as common in digital products as they are in print products. Graphic communication appears to be a thread common to both analog and digital worlds, so for many, like me, who came from the former, it has only been natural to try to apply narrative thinking to the latter. But to understand digital media as a form of narrative is to misread the problem entirely.

Digital media is not a printing press; it does not yield publications but objects of a new kind—some people call them products, a decidedly commercial (and not altogether objectionable) term, but I prefer experiences. The great experiences of this new medium have no beginning, middle, and end; there is no narrative arc for Google, no measurable breadth for Facebook, no climactic resolution for Twitter. Of course the companies that brought these experiences to life have a narrative of their own: they were founded one day in the not-too-distant past and they will fold one day in the unforeseen future. But in the day-to-day interactions of countless millions of people, these experiences exist as a continuum.

Certainly they are a coherent environment of pages, headlines, paragraphs, logos, icons, and photos, but they are also an amalgam of invisible user cues, organizational structures, intentional and unintentional system responses, ambient content, constantly regenerating activity, and, most important, reflections of each user, in the content, in the ornamentation, in the very personality of the experience.

To design these systems is to anticipate what cannot be planned, to create a framework in which the unexpected can be expected to happen. The designer's job is not to execute the vision of one person but to establish the

conditions under which rich, rewarding conversation can happen. This work occurs at many different levels, from the prompts for user input and the character of system output to the channels for peer dialogue and the continual iteration that takes place over a product's life cycle.

Take the search function. A user enters a term in a search field, and the system reflects back the user's intention and then some; it must respond in a manner that acknowledges the thrust of what was requested, but it must also provide more—more accuracy, more depth, more variety. Just as a conversation between two people must move forward, search results must reiterate what one participant says to the other while simultaneously sharpening and broadening the subject of discussion.

The search function is perhaps the most common interaction performed today, across every subject, under the aegis of many different brands, and in countless contexts. Yet it is quite often thoroughly unsatisfying, mostly because few systems can participate in sufficiently rewarding search-based conversations with their users. I might argue that in spite of its critical importance, searching is so difficult a problem that it has required the most overwhelming combination of human intellect and raw computing power to design a search experience that can adequately converse with users: Google. Its success is well known, but it's still worth emphasizing how thoroughly Google's effectiveness has shaped the Internet experiences designed in the first decade of this century. Designing systems in such a way that their core content is transparent to Google—that is, so that it will be found by Google's remarkably effective search—became a nonnegotiable design principle for countless digital products.

Perhaps because of its inherent difficulty and the fact that few sites have the resources to do it well, searching, in most digital experiences, is designed only as a supplemental feature. In recent years more and more digital experiences have come to rely on the more readily available power between peers; social networks have become so expansively propagated that the conversations between users on these networks threaten to eclipse the primacy of search in terms of directing traffic. Conversations on Facebook and Twitter—status updates, tweets, and other fragmentary bits of communication—can contain within them recommendations, references, asides, and links to other content and Internet destinations that are much richer and more powerful than search

results because they originate from trusted sources. As a result we are entering an age in which these conversations can be more effective at driving attention and commerce than results provided by Google and other search engines.

Designing for social media is an exercise in negating the designer's authorial privilege. Experiences that hope to reap the rewards of rich social interactions must be incredibly modest in demonstrating the storytelling skills of the designer, because they are very much in the business of creating the conditions under which these rewarding conversations can happen. They must allow the narrative to recede and the behaviors of the system to come forward.

The most popular social networks—and social networks are always measured in popularity—have been paragons of neutrality. There is a brand presence at Facebook, of course, but it is decidedly less prominent than the artistic showmanship in the pages of any major print magazine. The design of its predecessor, Myspace, was distinguished only as a platform for some of the most uninhibited, aesthetically unsound user customization ever brought into the world. And Twitter, that unpredictable outlet for billions of stray thoughts, may be a harbinger of design to come: a design practically without a design. For many users Twitter is experienced through third-party client software; the Twitter logo and the Twitter brand are all but invisible, yet at the same time the experience is indelibly Twitter. This is what digital design looks like when it does away with the biases of the analog world.

But social networks must do more than allow for conversation between users. If they were simply bulletin boards for motivated users on the networks, if their only design challenge was to let those who would talk be heard, they would be something very different. They must also allow for passive conversation, for the thousands of users who pass through a posting without speaking up. These lurkers may mark a post as a favorite, or they may make the implicit endorsement of republishing it, or they may forward the post to their own networks; although they take no explicit action, the simple fact of their having viewed a post is automatically recorded. These ghostlike tracks are also a kind of conversation; they say something back to the original poster as well as to themselves—their presence is participation in itself. Designers who create social experiences must anticipate these marginal but critical behaviors, and there can be a multitude of them—enough so that there is little or no room for the designer to execute expressions of his or her ego. As a design

challenge, social media is still new; it is significant in its implications today but will only become more and more so as social networks become more prevalent, more complex, and more diffuse.

In the last decade of the twentieth century it was clear that the Internet would transform everything; now that this has nearly come to pass, it is becoming increasingly evident that social media will do so as well. But part of that transformation is a sense of continual renewal, and this is the last and perhaps the most significant way in which digital media transforms the work of the designer: the designer's challenge is to create a framework for the user to engage in conversation, but the designer is also now charged with engaging the user in conversation through the framework itself. Design solutions can no longer be concluded; they're now works in progress, objects that continually evolve and are continually reinvented. A designer creates a framework for experience, the user conducts experiences within that framework, and through feedback—both explicit and implicit—the designer is expected to progressively alter that experience to reflect the user's usage patterns, frustrations, successes, and unexpected by-products. In the language of digital products: iterate, iterate, iterate, and then iterate some more. Each iteration, each new version of the product, each modified or optimized function, each newly added feature set are all parts of the conversation between the designer and the user. When an inveterate user of a digital product encounters a new change, she is listening to the object talk to her.