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THE ROLE OF EMPATHY IN DESIGN AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF DESIGNERS TO
CREATE WITH THEIR USER IN MIND

by

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ABSTRACT

By looking at several professional and personal design case studies, I aim to identify the weight of responsibility of a designer in a fast-paced, aesthetically driven world through the lens of human centered design. This study observes how putting people first might not be a quick money-maker but will ultimately create a more successful, well-received project designed for the people it is intended for.

In the world of design, placing value on people over profit is easier said than done. Ethical design is the term used to define this difficult responsibility. It is understanding the effect of one's design on users, and making moral decisions based on those responsibilities instead of one's profit or gain. By looking at several professional and personal design case studies, I aim to identify the weight of responsibility of a designer in a fast-paced, aesthetically driven world through the lens of human centered design.

What a designer creates, whether that be a website, a graphic, or a physical product, affects real people. In the world of visual communicators, which encompasses designers of magazine spreads and app prototypes to product designers, architects, interior designers, anyone who designs products for people to use or be subjected to, this definition of ethical design involves adherence to a personal moral standard. While there is no blueprint for moral standards, simply being a quote-unquote good person does not qualify a designer's work as ethical.

There are several practices and tools that aid a designer in making every decision along the design process. While an observer of the design process might attribute a designer's success to artistic intuition or taste, designers rely on universal laws of researched, tried-and-true fundamental values and principles of design. These laws act as rules for a designer and include such tools as line, shape, form, color, and such implementation of these tools as pattern, harmony, contrast, and more. These tools are invaluable for creating projects and products that portray the intended message. The best designs do the work for the user by guiding their eye from most to least important information or evoking specific emotions through soft or hard shapes. Similarly, designers don't need to, and truly cannot, rely on their

convictions to make their work ethical. There are practices and tools that guide designers in creating messaging that is intended for the benefit of the user.

The forefront toolkit for design ethics used by the design industry today is human-centered design, a process attributed to design studio IDEO. Human-centered design is unique from other methodologies such as design thinking and user-centered design, despite the three often being used interchangeably. Design thinking is the process of determining a solution through several stages. User-centered design accounts for user interaction at every touchpoint, being utilized by interactive products such as apps and websites. Put another way, design thinking can be used by any brand or business to find a monetarily incentive solution, and user-centered design makes sure that the solution adheres to the demographic it was designed for. Human-centered design brings empathy into the equation. The goal is to focus first on finding a problem that needs to be solved and building a solution from the empathetic perspective of the user affected by the problem.

An additional distinction must be made between designing with sympathy and designing with empathy. The former is the act of showing concern and generally places the concerned in an elevated place from the problem. The latter, empathy, is putting oneself as completely in another's shoes as possible. In other words, sympathy is looking down with concern on an individual that is in a deep, dark hole, while empathy is getting down in the hole with them.

Human-centered design, while involving a three-step process, is more of a philosophy than a strict set of methods. It is a framework that considers human perspective throughout the design process. Its phases include Inspiration, Ideation, and Implementation. The inspiration

phases consist of understanding and observing to develop an understanding of human needs.

The ideation phase is the process of generating as many ideas as possible, and then prototyping and testing over and over again. The implementation phase puts the evolved tried-and-true solution into effect. A fourth, Validation, is usually added and is a continual check and balance of an implementation's success. This process is not linear, but loops back on itself continually to assess if the steps and solutions brainstormed solve the predetermined problem. In more ways than not, this design method is close to the scientific method: a hypothesis, an experiment that you design, an outcome, and continually rechecking.

Why is this important to a designer, when a profitable product is achievable without the specific method of human-centered design? According to a report by CB Insights, 42% of failed designs are attributed to the solution not being needed in the first place (CB Insights). When a designer trusts their creative ideas above their audience's wants, needs, and desires, there is a disconnect. As put by Dr. Prabhjot Singh, the Director of Systems Design at Earth Institute, this is a common issue of spending a "lot of time designing the bridge, but not enough time thinking about the people who are crossing it." (Taylor)

Why does this method of human-centered design work? At its core, human-centered design is about cultivating deep empathy with the user, to the point that they are not a mere "user" but a stakeholder, a valuable investor of insights into the problem a designer is solving. Designing with a human-centered approach is all about understanding people and their needs, wants, and understandings. There is no perfect blueprint for this, only guidelines to help create the space for this type of research to take place. That being said, a four-step process is not enough. If people are not the purpose and the driving force, foundation, and motivation of a

design, even going through the motions of human-centered design just to check the boxes isn't fruitful and falls back into patterns of preferences or leaning on aesthetic trends.

Designing with people in mind from start to finish and every moment in between makes a difference. There is no doubt that creative people are capable of coming up with creative ideas. The real question is asking "why?". Is there a problem that needs fixing? Is that creative idea the best possible solution? Several large-scale, professional design projects, specifically product design and social venture projects, shed light on how empathy play into the outcome of a project's success or failure.

In terms of product design, Apple made history with the launch of the iPhone in 2007. It was revolutionary, rising beyond its competitors and changing the way people communicated, connected, and even how intake information. The ease with which users were able to accomplish tasks on the iPhone was thanks to revolutionary technology, but also to the implementation of that technology that made people's lives easier in a world of clunky cell phones.

Google's Glass project was not so successful. Critics of Glass argue that Google built a solution before identifying the problem. Like the iPhone, Google's smart glasses dropped on the scene as a formidable accomplishment in technology. Unlike the iPhone, the inventors of the Glass didn't define or validate the users of such a product or determine what difficulties it would solve for them. Rather, the product was hoped to be successful with the expectation that its hype would be enough to appeal to all.

Similar to these contrasts in product design, two distinct social ventures ended with different outcomes. SmartLife, a scalable water and hygiene business, was built out of a distinct problem before anyone starting working towards a creative solution. Several IDEO designers observed that in Kenya, only 61 percent of people had access to clean drinking water, only 84 percent of preschool-aged children were vitamin A-deficient, and diarrheal diseases were among the top 10 causes of morbidity and mortality. Numerous organizations were working against these crises at the time, but solutions were often inefficient and unsustainable. When presented with the problem, the designers from IDEO didn't come up with solutions based on their own knowledge or experience but spent several weeks in Nairobi investing in the people and understanding their needs. Even after that ideation phase, a final solution did not occur right away. They had to continually adapt and alter their ideas based on its success in aiding the people they designed for, such as the time of day to provide access to water. SmartLife is present in several sites around the city to provide clean water and hygiene products and reveals the longevity of design and subsequently redesigning for people.

In contrast, the Gyandoot program in Madhya Pradesh, India missed the mark by providing computer kiosks in rural areas. This program was hit hard by lack of electricity and poor connectivity, so only a few of the Kiosks proved commercially viable. In observation, their goal of reaching a rural location with technology was not a bad one. But there wasn't a problem that needed to be solved to meet the user's needs and desires. Getting a computer kiosk was not a high priority for those living in that rural community.

In viewing these examples, it is clear that a designer can trust the users' needs more than trust their instincts by clinging to an idea that they love or are attached to. Returning to

the user's point of view does not always make sense, but the user is an expert in the problem and therefore should be the center of the solution.

I took a step back and subjected my own work to a similar critique. I was able to implement human-centered design thinking into several of my projects over this school year. The first being the app prototype Sown that connects small business owners and provides a safe space to ask questions. I used IDEO's human-centered design method in my research and development, attempting to put myself in the shoes of a young small business owner. But I neglected to continue consulting my audience as my project evolved. Many of the design decisions I made ended up being based on my personal preference and instincts, as I left my users behind in the research and ideation phase, sticking to an early idea I was excited about.

I began my research based on the prompt: What do you wish your government officials were talking about? I landed on the topic of supporting small businesses, specifically in COVID times where large corporations were flourishing and small business owners were struggling to make ends meet. I brainstormed possible solutions and determined an end goal: to provide easily accessible business assistance by helping small business owners understand difficult business questions. I defined a problem, that being a lack of business knowledge for young individuals passionate about their craft but lacking in education in those areas. In my qualitative research, I conducted one-on-one interviews with 5 local small business owners, from which I created a user story and use case, hypothetical scenarios in which a user in my demographic would interact with my app. The prototyping phase was where I began to lose touch with my audience. I relied heavily on functions and interactions of current apps, assuming my audience would be identical in wants and needs. But in retrospect, a user can just as easily google search

a question instead of jumping through the hoops of registering on my app and waiting for a response from other business owners. My prototype is nice to look at, and does the user interactions I intended it to do, but solves a need in my own terms, and I doubt would be successful on the market.

A more successful project is my infographic panels for SPU's Longbranch Whale skeleton that is currently hanging in Eaton. I used the same methodology but held myself to a high standard of empathy. Unlike my app design, I did not know what my design was going to look like from the early stages. I changed and adapted and tweaked more than most projects in the past based on my users' needs. I researched over several weeks, researching data on gray whales and the effect of the fishing industry. I worked with a research team of fellow designers to compile as much data as possible, from gray whale anatomy and habits to harmful fishing practices. I interviewed the head of the Longbranch Whale project, SPU English professor Peter Moe, and conducted a 2-minute survey over social media to my demographic: SPU students and family who would be visiting the whale. We asked about familiarity with terminology and what questions each individual had, receiving 76 responses in 24 hours. This was extremely helpful in understanding what information my audience would need. I created user journey maps and audience profiles to dive deeper into empathizing with my audience, the fact that I was part of the demographic certainly aiding in getting in my users' shoes. With a strong foundation, my audience was in mind while choosing colors, organizing my information into digestible pieces, and balancing content with breathing room.

While neither one of these projects was tested on an audience by being put out into the world, both of these experiences acted as practices for stepping out of my design bubble. My

research was small scale but my empathy, or lack thereof, was evident in my decision making. In observing my work, I understood that the implementation of IDEO's human-centered design thinking is not a magical checklist that creates an ethical design like flipping a switch. Designing ethically must be paired with a personal conviction and a desire to put others above my personal agenda. Design must be in partnership with the observer in a relationship between the viewed and the viewer.

What do these discoveries and my design work have to do with my academic pursuits as an honors student? I wrestled with the themes of authority and research, which I believe bridge the gap between Visual Communication Design and Honors Liberal Arts, my two majors. Authority is found in the choices of a designer that directly impact what is available to an audience and whether those decisions consider an audience's needs and wants. No individual is free from the effects of design; just in terms of advertising, the average individual sees 6,000 to 10,000 ads in a day. In some ways, humanity is a captive audience to designers, as every day individuals are interacting with design products, spaces, virtual experiences, and the like. The theme of research is at the heart of human-centered design. Designers need to understand people to design for them. Instead of researching to get in a user's head, human-centered design is researching to understand a user's heart.

Because of this authority, there is an equal level of responsibility. Designers have been trained in how to guide a viewer's eye, how to portray the messaging they want, and they can influence an audience. It is up to the designer whether or not that power is used for good or

evil. Integrity, responsibility, and valuing human life above personal gain, especially that of personal monetary gain, are key to designing meaningful work.

As relational and contextual knowers, believers, and makers, humans were created to be curious, to learn, to think, to do. Creating and designing is part of my humanity, as is valuing other knowers, believers, and makers. Truly, all of humanity. Humanity is in the very name of human-centered design. If I love humanity and place inherent value on each individual through my work as I would in any other aspect, I am not only honoring humanity but their Creator. Just as I believe my calling is to share the good news, the designs I work on should emulate my values and strive for the social good. And that is not possible if I design in a bubble. Based on my research and reflection, my goal going forward in the professional world is to design with a personal conviction that my job is not to hone my aesthetic, or to get better at making things look "good," but to learn to problem solve and to create visual solutions that help people. And encourage others in my field to do the same.

By observing several professional and personal design case studies and their varied successes, and reflecting professionally and personally on these examples as a designer, I am further affirmed of my need to design with people at the center. It is central to my humanity and my faith. The weight of responsibility of a designer in a fast-paced, aesthetically driven world is heavy but tried and true tools are available. These tools, paired with a dedication to placing value on people, will get a designer farther than any trendy, profit-centered project can. This is increasingly necessary in an ever-changing world. Things constantly fade and change, but human value never does. A designer that recognizes this value will never go out of style.

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