

“Value, voice and culture work in these weird times”

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It's really a challenge to find something new to say after so many great people have already spoken. But I will try.

For the last two years I've had the honor of teaching with the graduate faculty of the Media Design Program at Art Center College of Design. We revised our curriculum when I first arrived. We've put a new program in place to accomplish a new set of goals.

As we look at the professional landscape that awaits new designers, we see a growing trend in both branding and in the design of products and services toward transmedia strategies. Increasingly, design involves many different media types that are integrated into a coherent whole, employing various combinations of web, wireless, print, video and audio, and objects. We want our students to become media strategists who understand how to orchestrate these various media in ways that take advantage of the unique powers of each. Tomorrow, it will not be enough to be a Flash expert. Our goal is to produce great designers who can be thought leaders in the emerging discipline of transmedia design.

In keeping with this new mission, we have designed a new studio course, called Super Studio, that our first-year MFA students take for three terms. I teach the studio, along with the help of a visual design faculty member – this year, Allison Goodman, who has just published a wonderful new book, *The Seven Essentials of Graphic Design*. When students first arrive, we give them themes to think about. Their job is to come up with a grand strategy, strategy, and tactics for addressing those themes. That includes identifying the target audience and articulating what their particular project will be.

Last year, we gave students the theme of the Human Genome. After several weeks of research and field studies, they arrived at the grand strategy of helping young people become informed citizens who will be able to understand crucial issues regarding human genetics. Their strategy was to create a suite of products directed towards teenagers, to provide tools for understanding the science, promise, and perils of the Human Genome project. The materials they produced, under the name of CODE23, were directed at the education market. Tactically, they utilized video, web, and print in the form of a wonderful hybrid between notebook and magazine formats.

This year we began by thinking about energy conservation. Then 9/11 happened and we did some rethinking. We changed our themes to energy, entitlement, and brand and asked students to look at the intersections among these ideas. We felt that the petroleum economy and the global environment were more important issues than ever following the attacks. The students arrived at the grand strategy of improving air quality and reducing petroleum consumption. Their strategy is to promote the adoption of hybrid vehicles. They have designed a business that has benefits for manufacturers, dealers, potential customers, and drivers of hybrid cars. They are utilizing web, wireless, print, and video media.

As we thought about this project, we noticed some things that we needed to invert. For example, “green” marketing typically implies that people must *give something up* for the common good. While this is a good idea in general, it has not proven to change our culture greatly, and has had almost no impact on car culture. Although some customers will be turned on by the idea of giving personal endorsement to the Kyoto accords, we decided to de-emphasize the “green” approach and instead to look at the “value propositions” of traditional

vehicles. Then we inverted the meanings of those values to demonstrate how they could be met by hybrids, with additional advantages as well. We discovered that many new hybrids will soon enter the U.S. market – from a hybrid BMW motorcycle to a hybrid Honda Civic a hybrid Ford Expedition, and eventually even a hybrid Humvee – enough variety to meet almost any customer’s criteria.

So far the students have done field research, home visits, and user testing of brand and positioning concepts. They have also developed a business plan and media strategy for the program. They’ve done all kinds of design explorations. By the end of the second term, they’ll select the design direction that is most likely to make the project a popular success. By the end of the third term, they will have produced working prototypes that will allow us to present the program publicly. We have named the project “Upshift.” If it were a real company, by the end of the third term we would be ready to pitch it to investors and partners. In fact, we may just do that.

There are a couple of things about the program that I want you to notice. We are committed to themes that are “socially responsible” or “socially positive.” Why? We want the students to find their own voices as designers, and socially positive materials tend to engage their emotions and opinions. And this may be the first opportunity that they have had to express personal values that they feel passionate about in the world of design.

I want to share something that happened in the studio last term that I thought was quite wonderful. One of the students said sadly, I wish we could put our values in our work all the time. But as professionals we will have to do work for clients that are only looking to make money. I thought about that for a few minutes. Throughout the term we had been talking in terms of grand strategy, strategy, and tactics. So I reasoned that a client, say a manufacturer of athletic shoes, hires a design firm to help achieve their *strategy*: to sell more shoes. The client’s *grand* strategy, based on traditional business principles, is to “maximize value for their shareholders.” However – and here’s the fun part – the designer is free to invent their *own* grand strategy, as long as it serves the strategic goals of the client. One strategy can support two grand strategies. So although your client wants simply to make money selling shoes, you could formulate a socially positive grand strategy for your design – for example, enhancing values of health or self-esteem in the intended audience. And if you did a really good job, you could accomplish your own goals as well as those of the company in a way that would give you your voice.

Denise Crisp, the wonderful designer of my new book, has told me many a tale of how female designers have managed to work feminist and humanist values into commercial design. It seems to me that this technique begins to redefine voice and its value in commercial as well as personal terms.

In my new book, *Utopian Entrepreneur*, I try to get at the values that underlie business and frankly, to offer some strategies for subverting them into something more humane. I also have advice for designers and entrepreneurs about how to bring their values to the front.

One thing to notice is that there is no good reason to consider business the exclusive tool of, you should pardon the generalization, rich old white guys. There are many things that can be redefined about business by determined people. For example, let’s look at the state of design

and content on the web. Right now, diversity of content and design has withered as the result of recession, the Wall Street “free lunch” frenzy of two years ago, and failed of business models. Massive consolidation under huge web publishing companies has been one result. But healthy cultures, like healthy ecosystems, require diversity. It’s not acceptable that cultural diversity on the web be supplied *gratis* by devoted designers or artists or journalists in their spare time. Yet it seems that is what we have allowed ourselves to come to expect. Without the ability to earn an honest wage through content creation, diversity is inherently limited and independent content production is permanently marginalized.

The philosophy of the “free market” suggests that those who produce work which others value should be able to receive value in exchange. This theory headed south when the idea that the goal of business was the *creation of value* mutated into the idea that the goal of business is the *production of money*. It’s time to turn our attention to fixing the apparatus behind the curtain. Direct economies of value provide promising models for funding cultural production while sustaining diversity. Alternative business ideas like micropayments and modest subscriptions on the web have the potential to support a more nearly direct transaction between creator and audience. We who work in the fields of design and content creation can no longer simply duck and cover and hope for the best. These times require us to understand and have an opinion about the economic context of our work.

Consumerism demeans us. Nobody wants to be a consumer. The power relationship implied by the term should be unacceptable to everyone. I picture a “consumer” as something like a giant slug, a simple tube through which stuff passes from retail to landfill. As Paul Hawken and Amory and L. Hunter Lovins exhort us in their book, *Natural Capitalism*, environmental and geopolitical realities demand that we broaden our understanding of business to include the costs of what goes into the slug and what comes out. Consumerism is simply not sustainable.

Obviously, an all-out revolution against consumerism isn’t practical, but a head-change is definitely in order. I’m proposing that each of us actively redefine the success criteria for business to include the cultural and material costs and benefits of the product, as well as what we currently think of as “the bottom line.” Every person who manifests this point of view through their work or their investments will contribute to a positive change in the world. People who start companies can look for socially positive investors. They’re out there, and working together we can make some big changes in how business works, regardless of the unwillingness of our government to control its ill effects on the public good.

At its best, commerce is sustainable, and it is based upon the free and fair exchange of value. By contrast, consumerism consists in the creation and fulfillment of desire, regardless of the actual value of the product to the individual or to society. And who decides what value is and which values are to be put forward in the design of experiences and things? Designers do. We do.

Design gives voice to values. Design suggests what is useful or beautiful or pleasurable or true. The affordances of a design suggest desirable actions. A design that has not engaged the designer’s values may speak, but with a hollow voice. We know the rules of *good* design. But it often comes as a delightful revelation to young designers that *brilliant* design not only permits but requires the designer’s personal voice.

And so we arrive at the happy confluence of responsibility and power. We are only the victims and servants of business as usual if we choose to be. This work of transformation – which I have come to think of as “culture work” – must be approached carefully but with great conviction and effort. The tactic of culture work is not straight-ahead revolution; rather it is to inject new genetic material into the culture without activating its immune system. By intervening in the present, we are designing the future.