

QUARTERLY OF THE INDUSTRIAL DESIGNERS SOCIETY OF AMERICA **SPRING 2018**

INNOVATION

Innovation On Innovation

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QUARTERLY OF THE INDUSTRIAL DESIGNERS SOCIETY OF AMERICA **SPRING 2018**

INNOVATION[®]



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Left: Dine with Design. See p. 46.



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TRUTH: REAL MATTERS

Let's remember how important truth is. George Washington may not have actually told his father "I cannot tell a lie," but the principle is true. Truth is the foundation of democracy and collaboration. Designers are experts in the truth business sector. When we translate dreams into reality, we have to know the difference! When ideas are transformed into something concrete and I show up at the meeting with a real model, I feel like the mythical Washington. It can't lie. It's not a dream. Reality is the kind of communication you can't argue with, giving us shared truths that are the basis for explanations, understanding, compromise and progress.

Verifiable, indisputable, real, actual, factual—these criteria make something generally accepted as true. People may have different views on what is beautiful, but truth is easier to pin down. Seeing reality from different angles is what makes it more true! The scientific method is not just experiments in a lab; it is an iterative design process—repeat the experiments, check and recheck the hypothesis until it is established as true. Scientists are happy when they prove a new hypothesis. Then when they discover new evidence, scientists are the first to challenge the old theory. We know there will always be better answers. Poking holes is a place to find opportunities.

Buddha said, "There are only two mistakes one can make along the road to truth; not going all the way, and not starting." Research is looking for the truth. Whether you're working in a library or observing phenomenon or real users, the design process requires research to ground the project. Designers are proud of their ability to pull insights from subjects that normal focus-group facilitators overlook, because our curious minds are looking for the truth behind every curtain.

In this era when fiction is king, truth seems to be riding in the backseat (maybe hanging onto the bumper!). We should take this opportunity to study how misinformation and disinformation work and understand how the truth is bent and what the consequences of cutting the safety cord to reality mean. What can we learn from the masters

of bending reality? Look at how magicians use distraction and misdirection to pull off their tricks. Even exploring myths and legends is a way of getting to the essence of the truth. Designers are not innocent; we exaggerate and cover up mistakes. (I suppose that patching up mistakes on models with Bondo is a form of lying.) Lies are more than the opposite of truth; a lie is meant to intentionally mislead, usually to protect yourself or to exaggerate the benefits or minimize the faults of something. We make snappy renderings to seduce clients (knowing that at some point we'll have to get real). The bottom line is that lies take more effort and they compound.

George Orwell's *Ministry of Truth* and newspeak are the most sinister form of lying because disinformation causes confusion, doubt and distraction. "The most effective forms of censorship today involve meddling with trust," wrote Zeynep Tufekci in *Wired*. "As we drown in more speech than ever. . . Creating a knowledgeable public requires at least some workable signals that distinguish truth from falsehood." There are facts and reality. Fantasy is useful as long as we don't pretend to believe it.

Hopefully truth triumphs. Sometimes it takes too long, like during the Inquisition, the Salem Witch Hunts and the Holocaust. A product based on misconceptions and delusions is bound for failure. It is easy to seduce people with made-up stories, which don't have to coincide with real events or align with true life—in fact, fantastic exaggeration makes better propaganda. Truth is always battling myths, preconceptions, stereotypes and magic. A firm dose of reality eventually turns the tide. Reality-based truth has a long shelf life—but so does the Big Lie.

This is not fake news. It's not just a question of ethics; truth, like beauty, has value and is functional. Conventional wisdom gives us the tools to understand and explain things to each other. People do see the same thing in different ways. Although heavy philosophy from Kant and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle are a good debate, regular people literally do have different points of view. That's why truth needs to go with understanding. Diverse empirical



evidence—what we sense with our eyes, ears, fingers, nose and tongues—always trumps fiction when everyone sees the same thing! We hold these truths to be self-evident.

Whatever anyone says about truth, designers take a sensible approach when form follows function! For designers, it's a practical issue—we need to find the truth before we reshape it and then we need to see how the new truth actually works and what it means. We need reality checks. Prototypes are so important; by acting out the strategist's and the business's ideas, issues become real. Seeing is believing. Then the project can be built on a firm foundation instead of smoke and mirrors. PS: don't be seduced by renderings that look too real (although it seems like we are headed for a Photoshopped, synthesized, vocoded, augmented utopia).

Making things easy and less complicated necessitates hiding the mechanism. Technology is buried in smart products and disappears into the internet of things—it's impossible to tell where the experience begins and ends. Like Donald Rumsfeld pointed out: "There are known unknowns. ... But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know." How much of a real touchstone does virtual reality require? When we lose control of what we know, how will we find our real reality?

Proof will be buried in the software. Truth needs to be the reality check, or will it fade away like the gold standard for our paper money? Just like the rules of a game, truth grounds discourse. Richard Saul Wurman, the founder of

TED, said, "In the future, the truth will be our most valuable commodity." Truth needs universal appreciation. Why do you think printers insist on making a proof before the job goes to press?

The human mind is not a real environment; people get ideas in their heads, and, like dreams (OK, they are dreams), they exist in their own reality and can have their own logic. So when you wake up and try to draw that thing you were dreaming of, you realize how the legs can't line up like that or the motor can't fit in there. Ideas can be crazy—they don't have to make sense until we want to actually bring them into the real world. It's why sketching is so critical: Drawing is a quick reality check, a way to pump a little reality into ideas.

One of the critical things we learn in school is how to see. George Nelson wrote a whole book about it. Visual literacy is being able to decode nonverbal messages. Literacy is the bedrock on which all modern societies rest. As design students we learned to see the world in ways others might and to *read* our work—to look beyond our assumptions to see what our designs *really* look like instead of what we wish they did. "Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom," wrote Thomas Jefferson.

It may be complicated, but designers are always on a quest for truth and beauty! Like Einstein's work with time and space, I bet there is a unified field theory that explains how truth and beauty are the same and the key driver of good design!

—Tucker Viemeister, FIDSA
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