assume nothing

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A s the world begins a period of major flux, the good news is that disruption is supposed to be a clever business strategy and designers thrive on change. Designers are in the business of creating change. We eat change for breakfast! (Does that make us some kind of cannibals?) “The good news is,” David Byrne said at A/D/O’s Utopia vs. Dystopia conference, “we are flexible.”

Designers deal with uncertainty and mistakes all the time—we actually do fail fast and fail often. We are always balancing the complex and contradictory requirements of users, manufacturing capabilities, economic goals and ecological effects—all with possible unintended consequences. Current events are throwing all kinds of assumptions up in the air, clearing the board for our design talents, and giving us the opportunity to make sense out of confusion and to create a brand new future.

“One should never let a good crisis go to waste,” said former Mexican Ambassador Arturo Sarukhán. Our experience gives us an advantage in a topsy-turvy world. It’s like shaking up the pulp in the OJ; chaos is good for innovation. When things are out of place, or things are moving every which way, fresh conditions reveal hidden things, things break apart, unusual things collide, random new things develop. Disruption shakes up hierarchies, unplugs power reputations and shuffles co-dependent relationships. That’s when inertia is on our side—like in judo.

“I’m always trying to turn things upside down to see if they look any better,” said the famous graphic designer Tibor Kalman (founder of M&Co). He constantly questioned why everything was the way it was—even when it meant reinventing himself. He was the king of disruption—it allowed him to do better work. He called his 1986 AIGA national conference Dangerous Ideas because he thought those are the only kind of ideas worth thinking about. He was always ready to throw all the pieces up in the air—not just because he enjoyed watching all the king’s men trying to put Humpty together again but because it gave him the opportunity to grab more pieces and reorganize everything in a totally new way.

Math has a theory to explain turbulence, like the weather or stock market prices, that is effectively impossible to predict. Chaos theory deals with complex systems whose performance is very sensitive to slight changes, which essentially describes the design development process. The math theory says that a small difference at the beginning of a complex sequence will lead to wildly differing outcomes over the course of time—like the famous butterfly effect: a couple of flaps of a butterfly’s wings in Mexico through a long chain of events caused Hurricane Sandy to hit NYC. Chaos theory tries to describe liquid dynamics, like the slinky effect of Long Island Expressway traffic. It’s the same concept that encourages me that our little improvements in the usability or beauty of the coffee machine or smartphone will be amplified through mass production and will make some users happier, which Rube Goldbergs all the way to world peace! (That’s what real design thinking is and how I feel GoodGrips “won some victory for humanity.”)

The essence of design is change—there can be no progress without change. (There’s no going back without change either—undoing is a design challenge, too. In the January 1992 Design magazine I wrote an essay, “Doing Nothing,” about how designers have three modes of design: 1. Do something, 2. Do nothing, or 3. Un-do something—but that’s another story.)

Enjoy the mess. It may feel like the plot of Westworld, but designers wrangle disorder every day. In turbulent systems, there is less friction, which makes change easier. Unthinkable solutions come out of chaos: Yes, we are going to make new jobs. Yes, we can find new energy. Yes, we have to trade with the world. Yes, we can make everyone happy.

Humanity may have been battling chaos for eons (nature is literally wild). Today the world would be facing a crisis even without Trump. Paradigm shifts, C changes, inflection and pivot points are rough weather; entering the Fourth Industrial Revolution is especially troublesome. Remember the First Industrial Revolution (where we got our name: ID)? It was mechanically based; it used water and steam to power production and spawned the mass
“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

—Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass

migrations to the cities. Then electricity defined the Second. Electronics and information technology moved industry to Silicon Valley and the Rust Belt jobs out of the Third Industrial Revolution—Moore’s Law, information explosion. Remember Richard Saul Wurman’s Information Anxiety (1989)?

In 1998 Razorfish promised that the revolution in digital technology would drive us into the Fourth Industrial Revolution because so many things could be digitized; music, money, intelligence, robots, all kinds of dealings can be turned into bits. “Everything that could be digital, would be,” Chief Scientist Craig Kanarick always said. Not only could we do it, we had to do it, because digital technology would be faster, cheaper and better. Faster (than physical labor) and cheaper (than bricks and mortar).

But the question today is, is it better? Who says what’s better? Is crowd-sourced news better? Are alternative facts better? The truth is that on the digital magic drive toward utopia, designers have to figure out not only what the
passenger experience is in the self-driving car but where we are going and on the way what all those out-of-work drivers can contribute. Just like the cavemen who introduced the new technology of fire, we are building this new technology, and now we need to keep it from burning everything.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is deeper than the Internet of Things. According to the World Economic Forum, it is “characterized by a fusion of technologies that is blurring the lines between the physical, digital, and biological spheres.” Artificial and natural merge. AI and machine learning put post-humans in the driver’s seat of the postindustrial world. We will be able to make (or grow) almost anything. Just as we were realizing that the human imagination is no longer limited by the tools and materials to make our dreams come true, we are faced with a more difficult problem:

Now the question is, what’s better?

There’s a whole bunch of folks who think that most of the things we’ve done to improve things actually didn’t. Before gentrification, they were more comfortable. They would rather not change, and they don’t like the friction that diversity causes. Who cares about going to the moon?

President Trump is tweeting loud and clear: whatever it is, it’s not better! Although it seems that the clock has been turned back to an America where greed trumps innovation, and even though thinking ahead is ridiculed today, curiosity and risky business are hardwired into human DNA.

Design is the constellation of skills and talent that harness those urges toward making the world better.

What if it’s not better?

Maybe we are members of the professional elite causing the problems of progress. Let’s reexamine our beliefs and figure out what is better.

Here’s what I think defines better. Like beauty, it’s a quest not a destination. It’s a moving target. Making things better is what designers do. Many of us think we could even improve

Dieter Rams’ calculator! Of course, better is more beautiful — beauty. And for us industrial designers, our beauty is not one-offs; it’s mass produced, so it needs to be liked by lots of people. When we start with the user, better is also better from their point of view (user-centered). Better is not exclusive, it is not a contest, it shouldn’t be hoarded. Better is health and happiness now and for future generations.

Better is not greedy or elitist.

That Fourth Industrial Revolution is making all those little moves and complex actions apparent in real time; they matter because we all can see what’s going on in every tornado or stabbing or war everywhere. We can all share every cute cat Vimeo. All the interconnections make people’s feelings matter to everyone. Design can come to the rescue. Artist and engineer Natalie Jeremijenko says that we have “response ability,” pointing out that since designers respond to all kinds of problems with our extraordinary abilities, today’s climate is showing us that our job adds up to even more reasonability!

So there is better and we should use our privileged position to remake Humpty Dumpty in a way that’s better for everyone. Really great!

— Tucker Viemeister, FIDSA
www.tuckerviemeister.com

SHOWCASE

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