

Essays on Design

Albert Shum— Microsoft

Jae Park— Amazon

Jamie Myrold— Adobe

Mike Kruzeniski— Twitter

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Opt In



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Opt In is a collection of essays from the industry's leading voices in design. For the history books: it was conceptualized in 2019 at a certain crescendo of discourse around design's responsibility in technology and society. This experimental issue is a call for leadership, optimism and thoughtfulness not only from those in the design field today, but those who will discover design's path in the future. Your impact matters.

Contents

5

Albert Shum — Microsoft

Foreword

16

Jae Park— Amazon

Turning On The High Beams

28

Jamie Myrold— Adobe

Designing For The Digital Business

39

Mike Kruzeniski— Twitter

Design Exploding

Foreword



Albert Shum

A wonder of the sun
and all the sea,
stranger and song
that breaks the
chariot bright.

Let's say this quote is attributed to Aristotle. Or Sappho. Or maybe it's William Blake, or Sylvia Plath. Some visionary with the heart and mind to bring language to life. It's lyrical and rhythmic. Uplifting. Distinctly human. Right?

I almost hate to tell you this quote is AI-generated. It was produced by a machine I interacted with at an exhibition in London; a collision of art and technology, human and machine, legacy and future. If you're reading this collection of essays at the time of its 2019 release, this will make some sense to you. You might feel disappointed, maybe even threatened by its quality, but it's not surprising. As I write this, we've seen AI-generated art sell for nearly half a million dollars at Christie's. We've seen philosophy professors passionately defend art as an unequivocally human endeavor.

We've seen our virtual assistants evolve to whisper, laugh, and finish our sentences. We've seen digital tools that can all but design for us through the magic of machine learning.

In short, we've seen the death of the designer

If you're reading this in some distant future where this revelation seems quaint: I'm so happy you found this book. It means the death of the designer was not catastrophic. It means humanity has not been lost. It means the act of writing – and designing – still means something. It means the essays here can still help us create more human connections, and that this evolution was inevitable. No: a boon. A chance for us to reevaluate our place in the world and our responsibility to people, and to carry the profession forward through more thoughtful leadership.

That's the goal of this essay series, *Opt In*. To consider the legacy of design leadership that led us to this point, and to see a future of creative reinvention. To opt in to a new

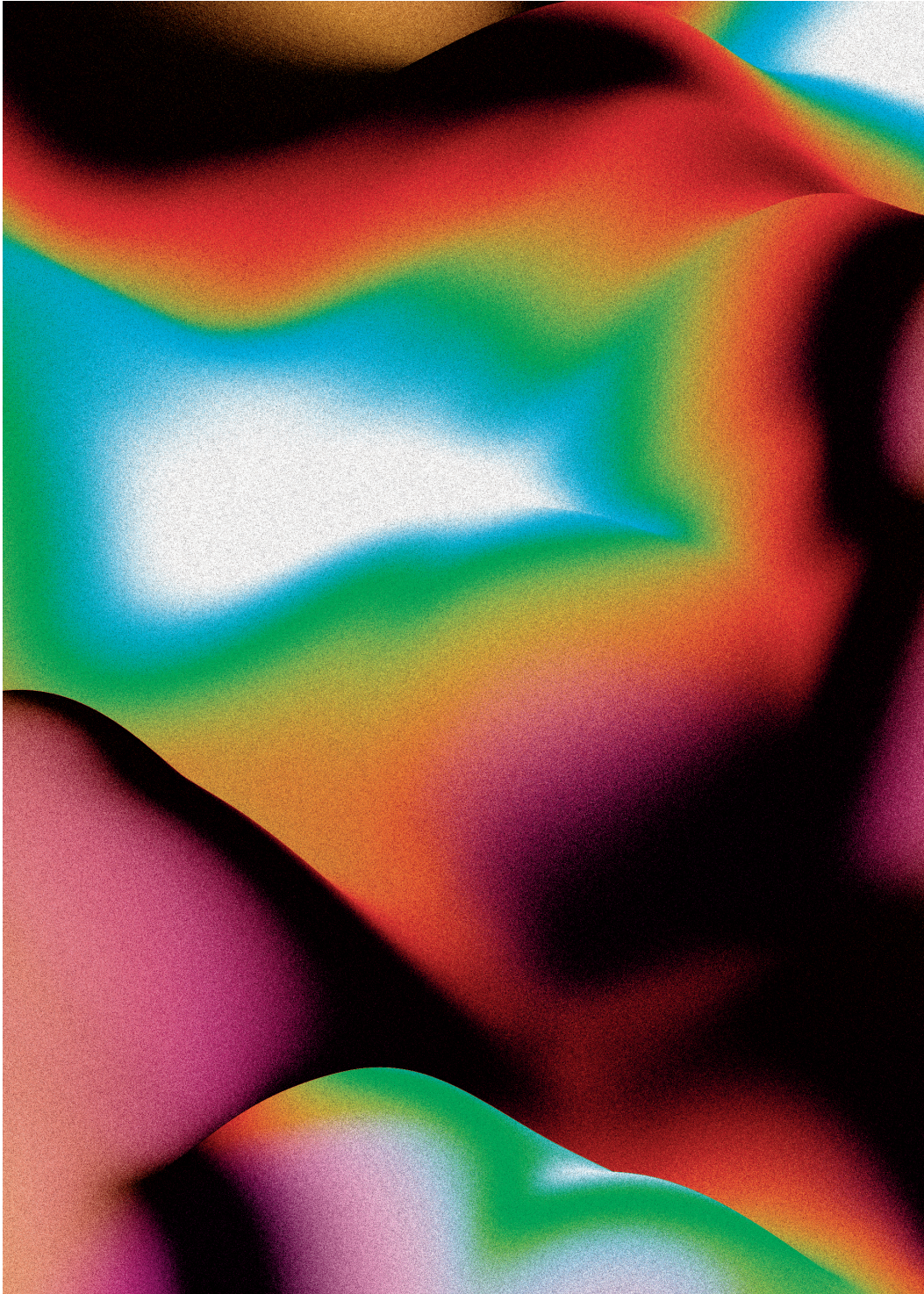
paradigm. In the realm of design we tend to define legacy by our bodies of work. The monuments. The things we created, built, delivered.

But for me, legacy is defined by the people we connect with, the lives we improve, the moments of thoughtfulness someone gifted me or that I gave to others.

With the scale of design we have today, we can do so much to shift the way people connect, to enrich lives and create more meaningful engagement. Legacy is more than what we design. It's how we design it, and who is impacted.

This might sound a bit wistful, even forlorn. I don't mean "legacy" to indicate the end of an era, but rather the continuation of brilliance

that leads us into a new one. Looking back helps us see the path forward and create new horizons and a sense of wonder, showing the way to a brighter future.



In this essay collection, you'll hear from three such visionaries. I ask all design leaders to look at their path and help pave the way for others, no matter their perceived legacy. *Opt In* collects the voices of Jae Park, Jamie Myrold, and Mike Kruzeniski. Together, as the respective design leads of Amazon, Adobe, and Twitter, they're responsible for thousands of designers' professional futures and millions of customers' daily experiences. In other words: They're design leaders in every sense.

Twenty-five-plus years into my career, I'm still pondering the meaning of design leadership. I'm evolving alongside the next generation of designers, watching how they perceive the vast changes that have disrupted design as a practice. For them, it's simple. The modern values are intrinsic. Be collaborative, be flexible, be curious. Be adaptable, because things move fast and there's no room to stand still. Be a generalist, because specializations are finite trends. Ask why and keep asking, because design impacts people's lives along every axis.

You have no idea
how difficult it is
for some to
adopt the values
that you know
as truths.

To the next generation of designers reading this collection of essays: We value you. You have no idea how difficult it is for some to adopt the values that you know as truths. As you launch into your careers in design, we hope you'll go with your gut, because it knows what it's doing.

I'm only vaguely aware of how I became a design leader. Yes, this is mostly Canadian humility, and I do know I can plot my life's trajectory and study the data points, each adding up to where I stand today. But, genuinely, I have a lot of questions, and I want to know what it is that makes a design leader a leader – not just in the classic sense, but in the contextual sense of design's past, present, and future. How did we get where we are, and who led us here? What does it even mean to design? Is leadership intrinsic or hard-won?

As I thought about it, I was fortunate to know I'm not alone. There's a huge world of design leaders thanks to steady, meticulous, block-by-block education. Not just educating new designers, but educating others on why design matters. Our best design leaders made this happen through a lot of strategy, action, intelligence and patience. I sought out these exact voices for this book; it's an opportunity to showcase the great diversity of thought we have leading the design industry today.

Opt In is about paving the path forward. Sharing what you've learned is human nature. Stories are why we're here at all. We try, we fail, we learn, we share. This is what matters: joining in the journey together.

*A wonder of the sun
and all the sea,
stranger and song
that breaks the chariot bright.*

Does it matter that this was AI-generated? Let me tell you something about artificial intelligence: It is taught by real human thought – millennia of art, science, survival, design.

Our input produced this output. Human in, human out.

For my path, not knowing where the path leads is part of being in design. Taking that mindset to observe, listen, learn, make, break, and adapt has helped me shape my leadership journey. This series looks to expand on the paths of others, and open those paths to anyone interested in moving forward.

Thank you for reading.

Albert Shum, Microsoft, 2019



Turning On The



High Beams

Jae
Park

Design leadership starts by providing a strong sense of direction for the team you're leading. I like to say I'm "turning on the high beams" for our studio.

It's easy to focus only on what's in front of us, but by turning on the high beams I set the long-term direction for my team's culture, our products and our impact on the customers. While I set our destination, I'm not afraid to allow my team to forge their own path or adjust the destination along the way as the landscape changes. I believe my past has both shaped how I navigate what's in front of me and impacted how I approach design leadership.

I experienced diversity and inclusivity very early in life. As the son of a Korean diplomat, I moved to a new country with my family every three years. A year after I was born in Korea, we moved to Sweden, then to Finland, back to Korea and then on to Kuwait and Austria. My educational experiences exposed me to a



variety of approaches, starting with a bilingual Swedish/Finnish kindergarten, followed by traditional Korean elementary school and on to international schools in Kuwait and Austria, all before landing in the U.S. as a high school sophomore. The experience of structured, open play in Finnish kindergarten, and my classmates' openness to the only Asian kid at school, is a memory I still cherish and that impacted how I evolved as a designer.

Our understanding
of truth is a
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than the binary
black and white we
so often see.

These early experiences taught me that there are multiple perspectives to the human condition, and that there are many ways to approach and experience life.

**At the same time, I realized
that humans at their
core are more alike than
not, despite the different
cultural skins we all wear.**

Our understanding of truth is a gradient, rather than the binary black and white we so often see. As I became adept at dealing with ambiguity, my anxiety of facing unknown countries evaporated, replaced with a desire to move across diverse cultures, connect the dots, and see a bigger map of the universe. I felt like I was both a character in a book and the reader of the book at the same time.

Though I couldn't articulate it at the time, I began applying the "high beam" concept early on in my education and career. I intuitively understood that I didn't control what was

ahead of me. Instead of a clear blueprint, I relied on establishing a general line of sight and giving myself the flexibility to follow my interests as they led from one thing to the next. My interest in humanities led me to a liberal arts college studying art history, political science, religion and economics. My passion for art led me to RISD. It was my ability to blend art and humanities that led me to industrial design, and industrial design taught me about human-centered design and building scalable solutions. I remember debating with a musician friend in 1990 about how digitization was changing the music industry. We let ourselves imagine how far the digital transformation would carry our world. I was turning my high beams on to cast the future.

My first job was working for a startup as an industrial designer, designing a head-mounted display for video viewing and PC gaming in 1994. I took a chance with the internet wave in 1998, shifting to B2B web service design for an investment banking system, which ultimately led me to software platform design for Microsoft in 2001. At Microsoft, I was fortunate to be a part of the

Windows Phone design group that introduced the Metro design language, and helped define the Windows Phone three-year vision that outlined the rise of service companies, backed by an intelligent cloud. I saw Amazon as one of these service companies. So in 2012, I accepted a creative director position on Amazon's Devices team, knowing it was all going to be new again. I looked at adjusting to the new culture as a design problem, and used the Amazon leadership principles (e.g., Think Big, Customer Obsession, Learn & Be Curious) to frame how I approached my transition. Now, six years in, I'm leading a multidisciplinary team designing consumer electronics experiences that blend hardware, software, and services for Fire TV, Fire tablets and the portfolio of Alexa devices at scale.

When I look back, there are common themes that tie my meandering. They include having empathy for humans, being curious about how the world is evolving, asking how design might contribute, building solutions that can scale, and always being open to learning something new.

I also recognized early on the importance of building an inclusive culture that can work together from start to end.



These common themes are the high beams that have guided my approach to design leadership, and which I have been applying at Amazon over the last six and half years.

In our Amazon Devices and Services Design Group studio, we have five pillars that serve as the foundation for how we approach our work: Design for Humans, Design for Innovation, Design for Scale, Design for Excellence, and One Studio.

These pillars provide clarity for the areas we need to invest in and raise the bar over time. They also give us a way to ensure we're considering and growing the right talent and skills to be a design studio that's at the forefront of modern design thinking, techniques and thought leadership. Here's a bit more about how we think about these five pillars:

Design for Humans: Our products and services generate large amounts of business metrics that are used to assess how the business line is performing. However, metrics don't always tell us whether the experience felt great to our customers, or what the impact is. Design

for Humans is our long-term goal to better understand our customers by not only thinking about data-driven insights, but also about qualitative feedback we receive.

Design for Innovation: To think big we have to spend more time in the future. We call this “looking around corners.” We aspire to practice three levels of living in the future. The first is the immediate next 12 months. Here, we believe in starting before what working on right now is done. Then there are bigger bets within the 24 to 36-month horizon. These are known bets that require a longer runway and the right level of investments. The ones I like to lean in on are the ones that are further out, much further out. So, the third type of living in the future is about looking 10 to 15 years out and thinking about how we might contribute to our evolving world.

Design for Scale: This pillar allows us to cover an ever-increasing UX surface across our products and services by creating reusable patterns (design systems) and communicating usage through Human Interface Guidelines (HIGs). These are unified by our One Design visual system. This empowers design teams to build new features without reinventing, and frees

up my team to focus more on innovation.

Design for Excellence: In this fast-changing world, we believe in evaluating our design community across key design dimensions, such as leadership, mastery, ops, and culture, to name a few. This provides us with a better baseline for where we stand and how we need to evolve. Our goal is to make design a measurable discipline with the ability to self-reflect and evolve to stay inflation-free in the future.

One Studio: One Studio is our team's philosophy on a way of working. We believe that together we make better things for our customers by listening, respecting, trusting, empowering, and learning from each other. Without great, diverse people we won't achieve much. By fostering a culture of inclusivity, team members feel comfortable sharing their perspectives and advancing design thinking.

I often ask designers,

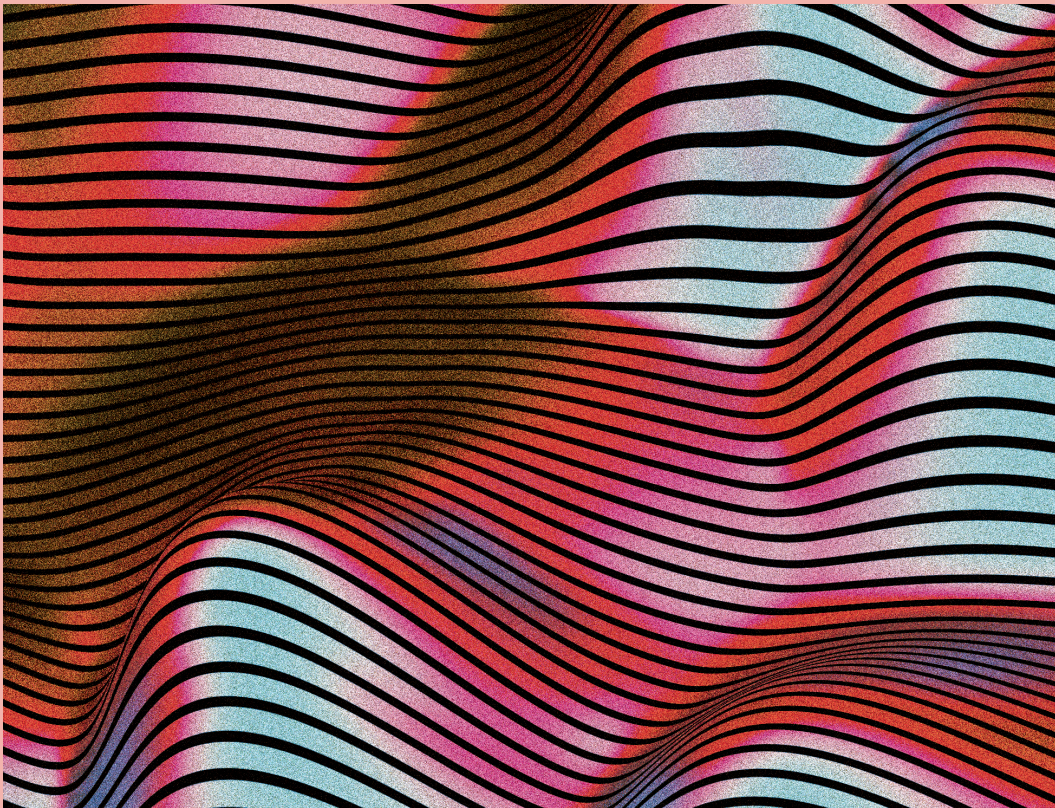
**“Do you know where you are
and where you're going?”**

In my mind, a good designer can come in on any day and understand where they are in the grand scheme of things. They have the ability to see from the granular level of the feature they're working on to the broader view of their product or service. A great designer can see up another level to how the product/service really connects to the broader world, and can anticipate changes that have yet to occur. The right design leadership gives the team the ability to look up and forward. Our studio pillars ensure design leadership has a shared language and mental model for doing so.

In summary, I find that studio pillars help the team see the forest, despite the trees. The high beams are turned on for the long term, and we share common truths as we wander together.



Designing For The Digital



Business

Jamie Myrold

The summer before my senior year in high school, my art teacher recommended me for a program at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. While I'd always loved to paint and draw, I'd never been the greatest student. But my teacher's encouragement and the program itself – a life drawing class – ignited my desire to pursue a creative career. I earned an MFA in communication design from Otis and went on to get my first job as a letterpress printer.

Since those early days of ink and hand-set metal type, my career – and the field of design itself – has evolved in concert with the technological advances of our time. Today, my team at Adobe is designing products for the augmented and virtual realities that are driving contemporary retail and entertainment experiences. We're designing for voice input, in response to the growing presence of voice-activated devices in the home, car or office.

Day to day, my job looks pretty different than it did at the outset of my career. But there are underlying principles I believe are essential for anyone in today's rapidly changing design field: an abiding connection to creativity, the ability to learn and evolve, conviction in your own work, and a commitment to mentoring the next generation of designers. I'd like to share some additional thoughts on what this has looked like for us at Adobe and the design field in general.

BEYOND THE COMFORT ZONE → As

I mentioned, we've entered the era of voice computing, which is already transforming the way we live, work and think. Designers, like me, have had to learn the nuances of voice input as

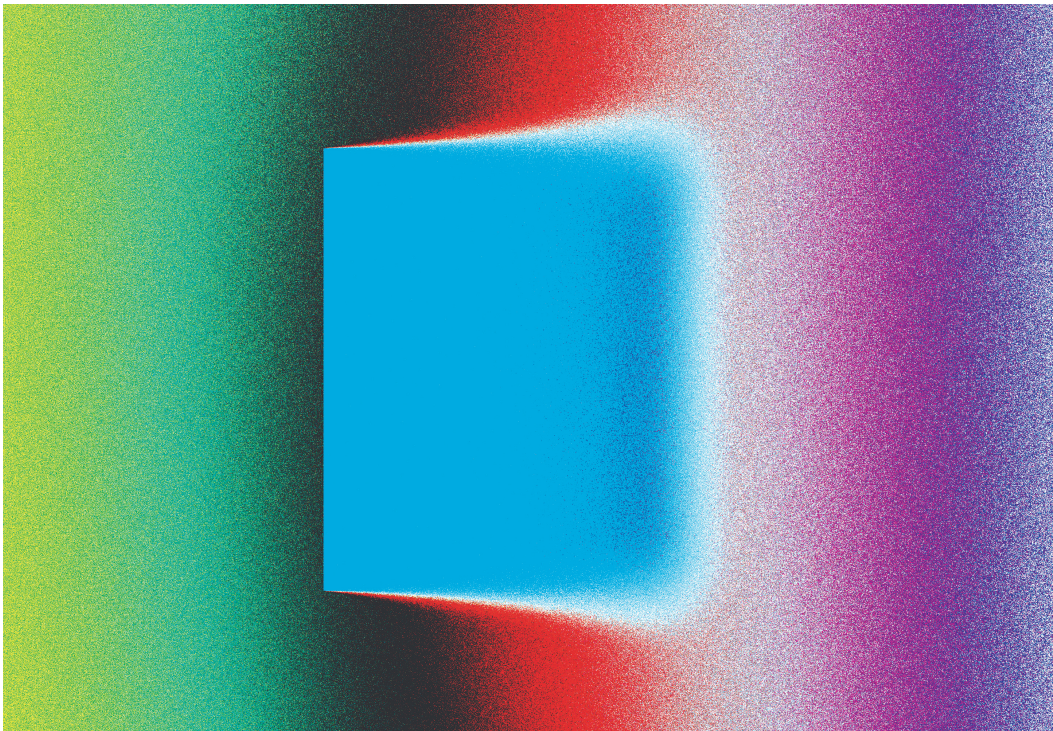
UX/UI design tools integrate voice commands into their feature set. Designers need to be comfortable going outside their comfort zones – and this requires leadership, trust and mentorship. I need to continue to learn and push the boundaries of my own comfort zone, and I need to lead my team to do the same.

We'll continue to see new mediums coming to the fore, because the information age is behind us and we're now in the age of experience: people don't just buy products; they buy experiences. And great experiences don't just happen. They are designed. They are curated. I see this in my work every day. Adobe has been through a massive transformation over the last decade. We've left behind having a hands-off relationship with customers, where we only talked to them when we had a new product to sell, and design was the decorator of the user interface.

Adobe now has a 24/7 relationship with customers, because our products are connected across devices and the web. Iconic brands such as Photoshop have morphed into sophisticated multi-device systems of constantly updated training and best-practice

examples and connect to new services, such as fonts and stock photography, that streamline creative work. We have to work every day to keep our customers engaged and productive, because if they aren't they won't renew their subscription membership at the end of the year.

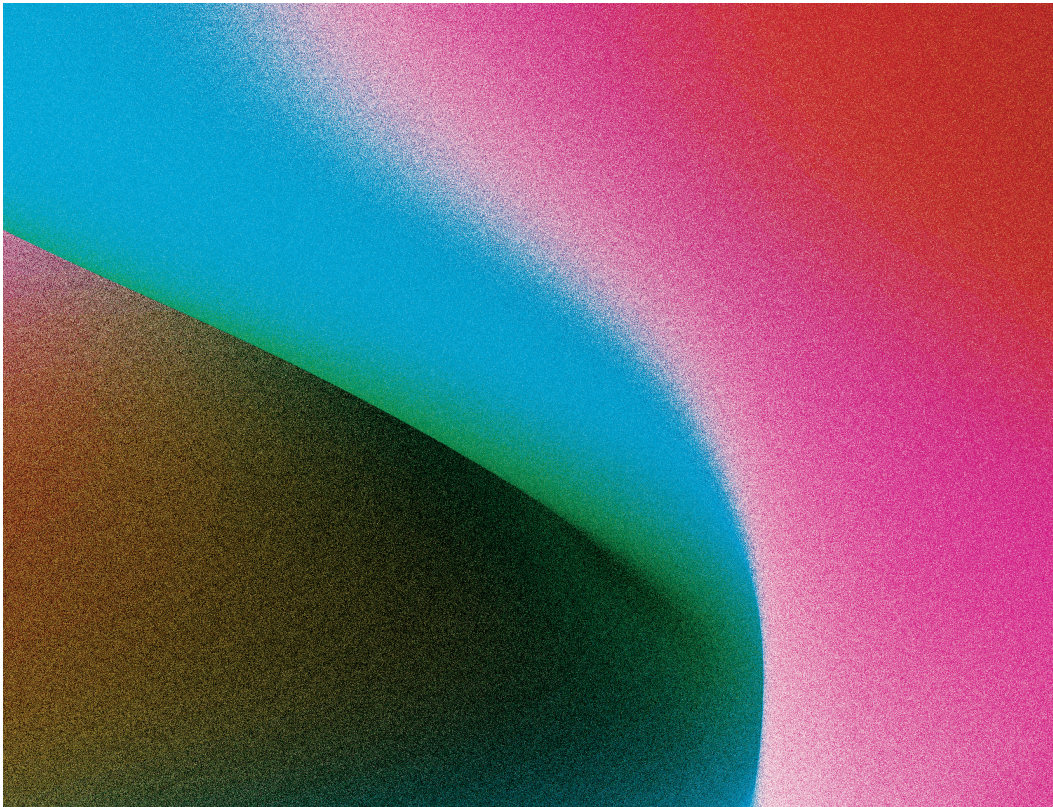
Consequently, Adobe Design (our new name!) is now a strategic function, centered on customer journeys, with the goal of delighting at each touchpoint. Doing this requires a focus on design beyond the products themselves. We're now involved in design decisions across technology groups, marketing, sales and support.



As design becomes a team sport, what should we look for, as we lead and mentor younger designers? Exceptional designers have strong human values such as empathy, respect, and honesty. These values not only influence a designer's approach to developing products, but also their approach to working with colleagues. Great products don't get created in a vacuum. When collaborating in cross-discipline teams, designers must bridge the divide between design and business. I think there are three values that set exceptional designers apart from the pack.

EMPATHETIC WITH A TWIST OF BUSINESS-SAVVY→Traditionally, designers advocate for user experience, and product managers lobby for business requirements. Exceptional designers take an empathetic approach to not only understanding the person they're designing for, but also the mindset and requirements coming from each stakeholder in the process. Designers who can blend the two, in my experience, are the most successful.

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OPEN AND RESPECTFUL BUILDER OF RELATIONSHIPS→Building relationships and respect is a bit like the story of the men and the elephant. A group of men in the dark touch an elephant to learn what it's like. Each one feels a different part, but only one part. They then compare notes and learn that they are in complete disagreement about what they've found. Nobody concluded it was an elephant. Exceptional designers not only deliver great work for their discrete area; they also illuminate the whole. They build relationships across product management, marketing,

and engineering. They wear multiple hats – regardless of their position in-house, at an agency or working for themselves – to filter through the various perspectives coming from bosses, clients, co-workers and customers. They work with, not against, differing perspectives. They're open to ideas that improve the business as a whole. They sit down with product managers and business leaders to understand their goals to improve their own designs.

SELFLESS ADVOCATE & COMMUNICATION BRIDGE → Designers are the visual voice for customers. They make a product beautiful and user-friendly, but an experience that is only skin-deep will not sustain a product or a customer base long-term. Exceptional designers put themselves in the shoes of the person they're designing for. In doing so, they become the communication bridge between the user and the business requirements, and they listen to both to find the best solution.

Exceptional designers help transform business and product development into a human-centered endeavor rather than a numbers-based one.

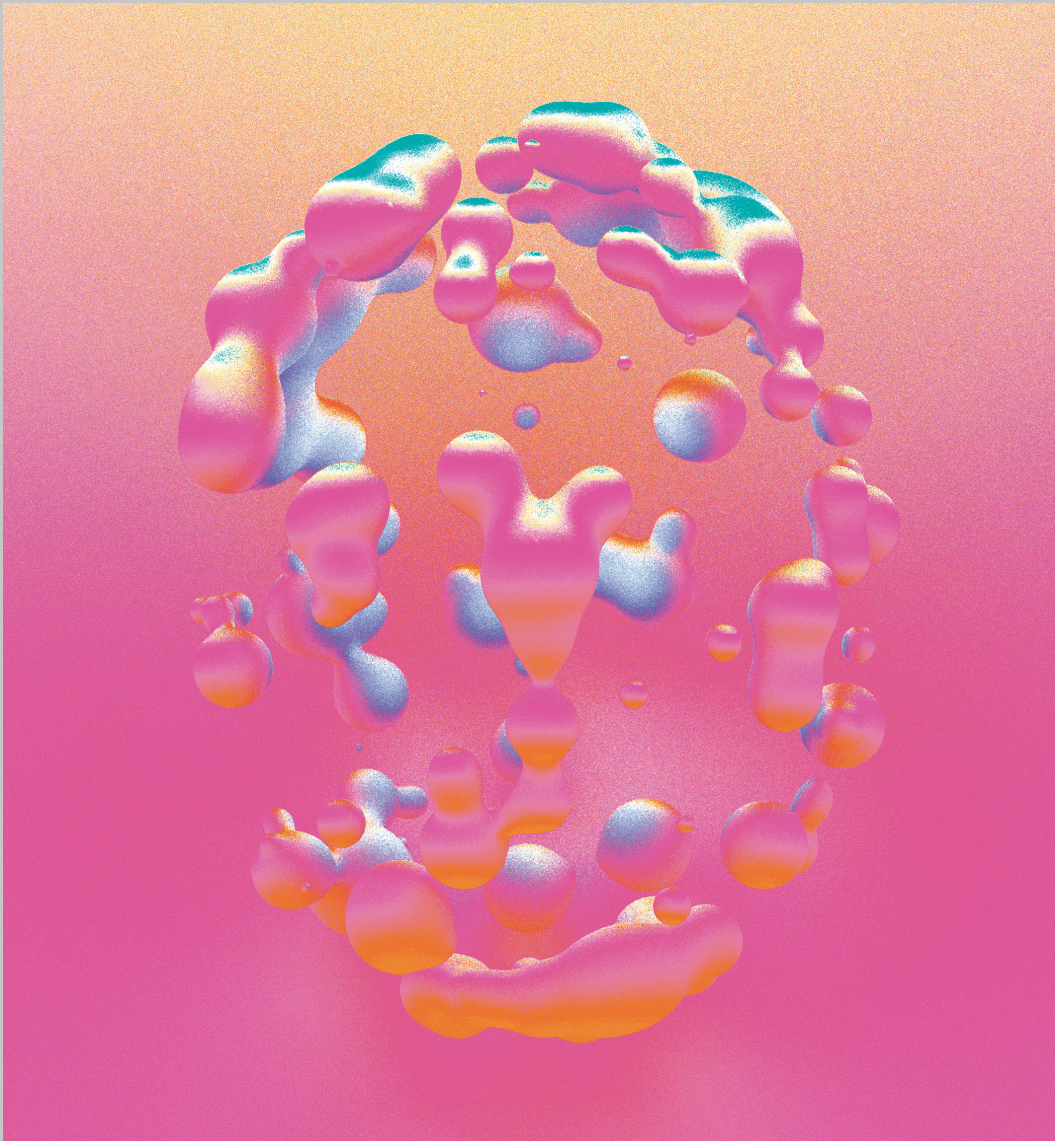
As design leaders, these are the values we need to mentor to a new generation of designers. When I started my career, my designs were personal and the only thing I had to manage was my time. Running a design team that has global impact is something that came gradually and required constant learning and the acquisition of new skills. I couldn't have done it without help and inspiration from more experienced design colleagues.

The new reality, in the age of experience, is that design has never been more in demand. Our work impacts more people than ever, across more screens, more media. What I learned early on from my mentors was that design requires conviction. To be able to stand behind your work and advocate your point of

view. From ink to voice, I don't think that has changed for me. All our designs should aspire to have as wide a reach as possible: a beautiful app; a stunning website; a campaign that changes perceptions. Design matters, so let's make our work count.



Design Exploding



Mike Kruzeniski

Did design school prepare you for the work you do now? School can't prepare us for everything, of course, but it's remarkable just how drastically and rapidly the design profession has changed in the last 15 years. The pervasiveness of software and services, the deep embedding of design into companies, the massive scaling of design teams, the global reach of the products we build, and the emerging social consequences – any of these are significant professional developments on their own, but together they have completely reshaped the work of designers today. We weren't prepared for this.

Personally, I found my way into design the old-fashioned way: I went to art school.

As I finished up high school, I struggled to decide what to study in college. Choosing a major felt like a commitment to a discipline that might include some of my interests but exclude others. I wanted to know everything about art, creativity, science, technology and engineering,

and I found entry to all that through design. Every class I took it, pulled me in more. I enjoyed the focus on solving problems for people, and the variety of methods, tools and inspiration that could be involved in solving those problems. Some projects were more creative or aesthetic, some were more technical; some days you'd be working on a lamp, other days you'd be working on MRI. Every project was an opportunity to learn and try new methods. I enjoyed that it was a field that was open-ended, always changing, and something you could take in many directions. It was fun and exciting, but, apparently a kind of work that wasn't well appreciated. This was before the iPod and iPhone, before Design Sprints, and long before the many sophisticated collaborative-design prototyping tools designers enjoy today. Small companies like IDEO were still working hard to convince the business world the merits of design. I remember a professor telling a class that most of us would never get jobs, and the jobs that were out there didn't pay well, so if we weren't absolutely sure we wanted to be designers, we were probably wasting our time. It was a labor of love, so you'd better love it, and I did.

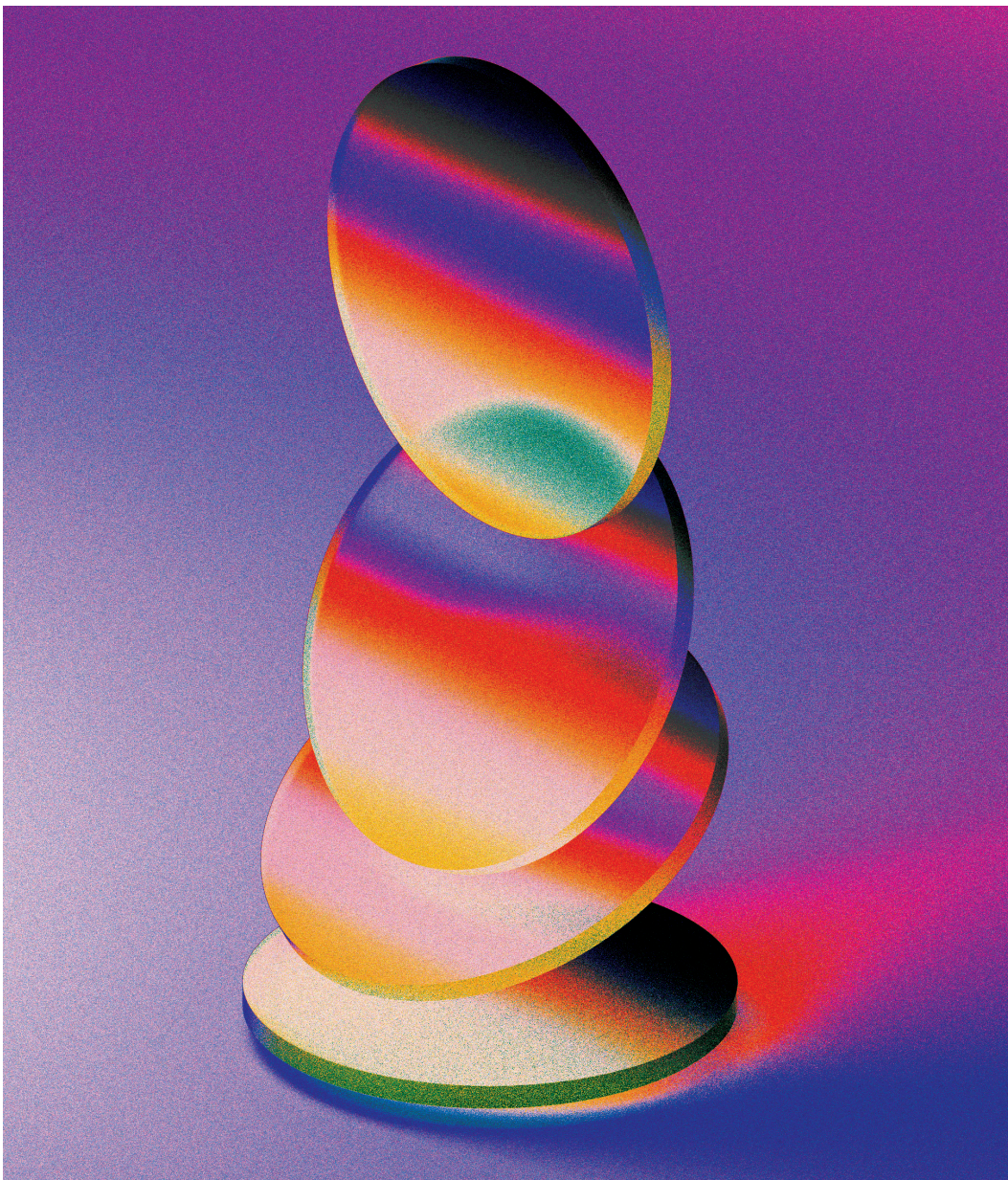
As technology products competed for attention, design became a solution for companies to differentiate and attract customers.

AN EXPLOSION→The opportunities for designers started to change with the expansion of a surprising partner: the tech industry. As technology grew out of being a niche interest and found its way into the homes of regular people, design became a solution to making it more useful and usable. As technology products competed for attention, design became a solution for companies to differentiate and attract customers. The design industry exploded. Design suddenly became a popular and well-compensated profession, with an abundance of jobs available and not nearly enough talent to fill them. This is truer than ever today, and the opportunity for the design industry, designers, and design leaders has grown by orders of magnitude.

Alongside this growth came a transition in the design industry from designers as consultants to designers as owners. With the rise of the tech industry, most new design jobs moved in-house, and the consulting industry shrank. Most designers now work inside companies to shape products and strategies as partners with a stake in the business, rather than consulting from the side – which allowed

designers to more directly transfer design into business value.

Designers had long argued that design could help businesses grow, with design tools and process – by helping them understand their customers, through creative-problem solving, by building experiences, by caring about quality and storytelling. This is hard to prove from the outside. Working in-house gave designers more opportunities to demonstrate and share their ways of working and thinking. Companies that adopted a customer focus built better products, wasted less time making things their customers didn't want, and attracted more customers. These companies thrived and grew quickly. Today, a customer-centric focus is pervasive across most of the tech industry; designers aren't alone in building this way of working, but it's the future of business that we dreamed of a couple decades ago.



AN INFLECTION→10 years ago, a successful product might have millions of customers – tens of millions if it was a smash hit. Now it's not uncommon for designers to work on products for hundreds of millions or even billions of customers, in countries around the world. It's hard to learn how to design at

that scale; the methods you use to design for such a large number of people are different from designing a product that is used by thousands. When I studied design in school, this kind of product reach was unheard of. There was no class for designing for billions. I learned how to design for scale on the job, and I assume that's true for most designers who found themselves working on products at massive scale. This new scale brought new tools, new systems, new incentives, big teams and powerful partnerships. Big opportunities for design leadership emerged to guide designers into this exciting new territory. Designers took on prominent leadership roles, leading extremely large teams at multibillion-dollar companies. Some design leaders took a step beyond design to lead product and engineering teams. Building on what they've learned working within tech companies, many designers are building products of their own, starting new companies, and investing what they've earned, with equity, back into the tech startup ecosystem.

With massive scale, however, also came new consequences and some reckoning.

The products we design are bigger and reach farther than ever before.

Their impacts are more apparent. From the contributions to climate change and gentrification to online abuse and misinformation, designers are having to grapple with the societal effects of their work in ways schools don't prepare them for. This is perhaps the biggest change the design industry has gone through in the past 10 years: real-time learning in a global arena. It's no longer possible to take a packaged set of traditional design skills out of school and focus on refining them over a 30-year career.

The last decade of growing up with the tech industry created a monoculture of design leadership, with a narrowed view of success oriented around growth. Big products, big teams, big systems. The challenges of designing at scale turned the work of design leadership into how well you can oil the machinery, so leadership in design became focused on hiring teams and building systems. Humans became

data points. Design success became measured by company valuation.

As the consequences of the things we build have snapped sharply into view, designers find themselves asking some difficult questions, and finding uncomfortable answers. Customer data points are real people with real lives; it's not fantastic to fill the world with plastic; and big valuations don't matter when you don't feel good about your work. As a field, design has always been focused on helping people and believing in making the world a better place. We all want our work to have an impact on the world, and of course we want that impact to be positive. It used to be easy to know whether you were working on something positive – or at least, so we believed. So what do we do when that answer isn't so clear?

A CORRECTION→Many years ago I had the opportunity to work with Bruce Mau on a project. Late one afternoon, the team got in to discussing some of the problems that kept us awake at night. The weight of them all started to feel crushing. With an understanding and comforting smile, Bruce gently said, “Look, we design forward.”

Great leaders will
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good of them.

Does design matter? If it does – and I believe it does – it only matters in relation to the problem it's solving. There are a lot of problems in the world that need help solving; some of which designers have had a hand in creating and will need to take responsibility in correcting. Building delightful and usable consumer products has been fun, but as an industry we've largely mastered that. Bigger problems are waiting for us.

If the last 10 years were about design embedding itself in businesses and learning to work at an extraordinary scales, the next 10 are going to be about merging those skills with activism and specialized knowledge in critical issues like the environment, health, energy, education, information, security and policy. The problems the world faces aren't going to get any simpler. Climate change is getting worse. Misinformation is going to get more complex. Inequality is compounding. I've always appreciated Bruce's sentiment, but I see it now as being too passive. To design ourselves forward will require acquiring new skills and knowledge that aren't common for designers today. Design school didn't prepare

us for the last 10 years, so it definitely didn't prepare us for the next 10. Designing your way forward will require proactively studying topics well outside the scope of design books, schools, and conferences, because they don't have the answers to the problems we need to tackle. Once again, new opportunities will emerge for designers and design leaders who are paying attention and learning the necessary skills. Designers such as Emily Cunningham – who is fighting to make climate a top priority at Amazon – are already showing the way. Great leaders will take some of the dystopian problems we face and make good of them.

The field of design is changing again, perhaps not entirely because it wants to – but because it will have to.



Consider this the beginning.
Do good and lead.
Opt in.

