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| The Veteran Designer Reflects |
| A Professional Reflection on the Project and Class |
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| Jeff Jones Global Campus, Southern New Hampshire University Graphic Design & Media Arts GRA-491-X4182: Graphic Design Portfolio 22EW4 Professor Cibonay Russell April 21, 2022 |
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GRA-491: Graphic Design Portfolio

Southern New Hampshire University

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Throughout my second journey in college, I have viewed myself as a “veteran” of the graphic design field. When introducing myself in the discussion boards at the start of each class, I would say that I was an “experienced” designer who had made the decision to return to college and finally pursue my Bachelor’s degree; yet I would never really divulge my age, nor the year that I obtained my Associate’s degree. At this point, I feel it finally time to reveal this information: As I sit at my computer and write this reflection essay, I am 49 years old, with over 20 years of experience as a graphic designer, art director, and in-house creative director. As I think back over my career, I feel that I’ve done well for someone who earned his associate’s degree in 1994, at a time when programs such as Photoshop were on the verge of becoming part of the college curriculum for design students in training; and the internet was a year or two away from reaching the public eye.

While the training I received in the pursuit of my Associate’s degree allowed me to develop my “eye” as a designer, it also taught me that for any design to be successful, the designer must be able to brainstorm by creating sketches by hand *before* moving on to the computer and firming up the idea(s) that make the cut. Yet, there are some things that I learned that could now be considered obsolete. For example, the last time I recall seeing a stat camera or copy camera to create artwork for “burning” on a printing plate was in my first job shortly after graduation. Technology continues to change and evolve as time moves on, and we all have to evolve with the changes, or we face the risk of becoming obsolete as designers. When this line of thinking is paired with the “real-world” experience that I have accrued, I find that I am an anomaly within not only this class, but at other times as I was moving through the overall curriculum. I found that this placed me into a conundrum: do I speak up and challenge what I feel to be no longer applicable in the real world, or am I better served to keep my thoughts to myself for the sake of not wanting to appear to be trying to correct the instructor? After giving the matter considerable thought, I chose to keep my thoughts to myself and try to complete the projects as assigned within the “spirit” of the guidelines written in the overall curriculum and the rubrics within each module. But while doing this, I could not help but be reminded of a quote from one of my creative heroes, George Lois, who has said that in order to unleash one’s creative potential, one must make their presence felt (Lois, 2012).

However, there is one thing that everyone within this program will learn, and hopefully they will learn it sooner rather than later. In order to survive not only in the realm of graphic design, but also in the business world in general, one cannot always come out and say exactly what is on their mind. At times, we must hold back and go along with the plan in place for the overall good of the project. An example of this for me came in Module One of this class, in the request to create a “set” of branded elements that would be used as an ancillary piece to display in the final portfolio project (beyond the minimum ten pieces that were required). It is my personal opinion that a project such as this would have been better suited as part of the Advanced Digital Imaging class as a project to be explored once the student’s personal brand had been solidified. As it is currently part of the curriculum for GRA-491, perhaps it could be expanded upon by instructing the students to create the layout and submit a print-ready file instead of merely requesting that they find a template to “place” an image of their design into. While I am not against the idea of creating a mockup in order to help “sell” a concept (this is a theory that I rely upon on a daily basis in my own work), I think that young designers should still be trained in working beyond the concept stage and have an understanding of how to take the concept and turn it into the necessary production art that is required to bring the concept to life.

While many of the students in the class may have had a limited amount of work to draw from to determine the final ten pieces for their portfolio, I found myself in the exact opposite situation as I had many different pieces that I could choose from. Instead of having to use most of the work I created in the classes leading up to this one, I was able to fill my portfolio with selected works that I designed were actually produced for clients and employers. After combing through various portfolio books, folders, previous website designs, and CD-ROMs, I was able to curate a list that would demonstrate the skills that I have built and honed through the years.

But I would be remiss if I did not also draw on my experiences with my classes to help round out my portfolio. For example, the idea for my personal brand started as part of the collage project for my class in Basic Design and Color Theory. It was here while being tasked with creating a brand for a fictional design firm that the idea for Creative Hitman was born. In fact, the photo that is used on the cover of the print portfolio as well as the homepage of the portfolio site is taken directly from the final collage. The name of the firm was initially branded as “Creative Muscle” with the logo mark bearing a similar look to the final version that I am using now to brand myself. But as I went along, I decided that using the name Creative Muscle could be too confusing and make people think that I was in the physical fitness business instead of graphic design. After taking some time away from the idea, I found myself looking at the collage again and focusing on the image of myself. Looking at how I was dressed in the photo, I began to realize that I looked like type of mafia gunman who was using a tablet stylus as his weapon of choice. At that moment, I realized that the answer was directly in front of me. From here, Creative Muscle was reborn as Creative Hitman. The brand displays a character that can be brought in to work on a project when his creative skills are needed, and then moves on to the next client until his services are needed again. The execution of this brand has allowed me to come full circle in my journey as a designer, as I started on the path at about age 12 when I thought that I wanted to be a comic book artist and create stories based on the ideas that I saw in other comics as well as the TV shows that were re-packaging story ideas that had been successful overseas. Yet within a year or two, I realized that the odds of breaking into this line of work were quite minimal, and that I’d better start thinking of a new plan unless I truly wanted to live out the life of the proverbial “starving artist”. I soon discovered an occupation called “Commercial Artist” (a mainstream name at the time for Graphic Designer) and realized that this could be a more tangible and lucrative career path. From here, my mind was set on becoming successful in this field. Looking back, I’m reminded of a quote by another of my design heroes, Paul Rand, who offered this advice to design students everywhere: “Don't try to be original; just try to be good.” (Goodreads, 2022).

Collaboration can be a major help in refining a design, but at times, it can also be counter-productive. While I was able to get feedback that was beneficial in my other classes, in this class, I felt that I was more on my own and left to my own devices to find the best solution while working towards the final project. Although we live in a society that views lack of online “social interaction” as a trigger for anxiety and depression, I choose not to view it as such. I’m uncertain as to why my fellow students chose not to provide much in the way of feedback, but I’ve found that this can also happen in the real world with both colleagues and clients. They may have ideas, but are afraid to speak up for fear of offending. Or as I have found in other classes with discussion boards, many do not want to read through a long post and comment. I will admit that my posts are usually longer than others, but I do that in order to impart as much information as needed to paint a clear picture. In either case, I have found the best option is to continue forward and believe in the work that I’m doing. By using this line of thinking, I’ve found that I can continually produce quality work.

On the other hand, there are times when advice is given, and it suggests taking the work in a direction that can obscure the vision behind the design thinking. Among the feedback I did receive on the identity that I had created was to remove the brain within the logo. After reading this in a response, I felt that the suggestion was completely out of the question, as it would eliminate the focal point of the logo design. Without the brain, how could the viewer understand the concept of a creative hitman? All they would see is a face with no context to tie in the title name below it. As mentioned earlier, the brain is the one of the largest muscles in the body (along with the heart) and it is the engine that drives the processes that lead to creativity. These mental processes are what lead the designer to the careful study and observation in order to solve the problem with an idea (Rand, 2014). To sum up this example, the suggestion was not applied, but instead a compromise could be reached at a later date by exploring whether or not the representation of the brain can be simplified without losing sight of what it is and confusing the viewer.

In other examples, it was suggested that bocks of type did not have enough of a margin from the edge of the page. While many still subscribe to the theory that there should be a minimum of three-eighths of an inch from the edge of the page, through experience I have learned that most printed pieces can have a margin of one-quarter inch from the edge without running the risk of losing copy in production (business cards can have a margin of one-eighth of an inch), and also keeping adequate space around the copy in the overall design. For the printed pieces in question, I had utilized the one-quarter margin, but decided to honor the suggestion to increase the margin space, as it would not make a glaring change in the layout. As I’ve learned in years of working with clients, sometimes design has to have a certain amount of give and take between the client and the designer. We must always remember that at the end of the day, it is the client who is paying for the work, and they can easily walk away from a professional relationship with one designer and strike up a relationship with a new designer. A quick search of the internet will reveal a nearly infinite list of designers located across the globe who are ready and willing to work remotely on any project as long as the client is willing to pay their price.

As I write this, I find myself nearing the end of my second journey in college (upon completion of this class, I will have two more academic classes remaining with completion scheduled for the end of the next term). Looking back at what I have learned, I find that much of what I have done in the classes related to my major have served more as an opportunity to remember and reinforce what I have learned both in college and in the field. But I can say that with the advances in technology, it created opportunities to experiment with new ways to create works that may not have been possible while pursuing my Associate’s degree). Two examples that immediately come to mind are the collage project that I undertook in the Basic Design and Color Theory class; and the typographic portrait design for the final project in the Typography class. While I’m never been one to fully promote my skills as an illustrator, I found the challenge of creating a portrait using only typography to be quite enjoyable, and it allowed me to add a new piece with a unique dynamic to my portfolio.

Over time, I started to ask myself if I should have minored in website design, as it has been my major weakness in my skill strengths, and potentially something that has held me back from reaching the next level in my career along with a higher salary. Looking at the work I’ve done on building websites in my classes, I’ve seen my work improve by leaps and bounds. I’ve always known that it was possible to obtain a template and modify it to make it my own I still believed that I should know how to build one from scratch. While I now have a little more experience to build a small site in such a way, it is more effective in terms of time and cost (from a project standpoint) to find a template and modify it, and come up with a final product that is much better. Thankfully, I was able to draw on my previous experience in HTML coding and gain new experience in CSS to build a site that I’m happy with. By no means am I now an expert in this, but I now have experience that I can build upon by more work in the field and more training on my own. Overall, I can use all that I’ve been through in the overall curriculum to apply to my daily work as a designer now, and as I decide whether to continue pursuing a higher level position within an in-house art department, or create my own one-person design firm.

Where will I go from here? When I enrolled at SNHU, my plan was to finally eliminate what I saw as the biggest roadblock that was keeping me from returning to the level of work that I had been doing before the pandemic. At that time, I had been running an in-house art department for a company that manufactured cranes primarily for the construction industry along with certain military uses. Once the pandemic took hold, most companies took the predictable route and made cuts, with the first being in advertising and marketing, with my employer being no exception. I was able to quickly find work in a large-format graphics shop (which I’ve had experience with producing), only to find that the owner and I fundamentally disagreed on almost every aspect of the work. After finding myself the target of negativity on an almost daily basis (including being told how many people he could hire for less money to do my job), it began to take a mental toll on me and created a sense of self-doubt that no one should ever have to experience. After being driven to the point where I was nearly ready take my own life, I made the decision to walk away from the job in the hopes of regaining my confidence as a designer, and find a position that gave me more satisfaction. I spent the rest of 2020 working on occasional freelance jobs for a few clients while applying for other jobs. While I was getting interviews, they were few and far between, and were not resulting in job offers. It was at this point that I chose to explore a return to college. I soon discovered the Graphic Design and Media Arts program at SNHU and was excited to learn that my credits from my Associate’s degree would transfer over; cutting the number of credits I would need for a Bachelor’s degree almost in half. At this point, it made sense to return to college, and the fact that I could do it all online made things so much easier.

While in pursuit of my degree, I knew that I needed to find some type of work to start bringing in money to help with paying the bills. With no solid prospects at the time, I felt that I had no choice but to find a job in retail. I spent the end of 2020 and all of 2021 working in two local Macy’s stores (helping to close one, and being transferred to another). After a couple of months in the second store, I had gone from selling menswear to housewares, when I was approached about interviewing for position selling furniture and mattresses. I jumped at the opportunity and soon found myself making a higher wage and commission on what I sold. I now had to budget my time to make sure that I could still concentrate on being a full-time student while working, but I found that I was still able to dedicate the time needed to focus on my studies and maintain high grades.

While I was still applying to jobs within my chosen field, I was finding once again that the opportunities were drying up again, which led me to think that I would not be able to return to my chosen profession until I had completed my degree. But in the final weeks of 2021, I found myself being pursued by two different companies that wanted to interview me for positions as a senior graphic designer. In the last week of 2021, the second company interviewed me on a day off from my sales job, asked me if I could sit in to clear off the current workload, and then presented an offer sheet to me, all within the span of three hours. After consulting with my wife, I promptly accepted the offer and began working for them in January of this year.

I enjoy the position and that fact that the office is only four miles from my home, but I must admit that I’m not completely satisfied with it, as I spend most of my time checking over artwork that is submitted by the client to make sure that it will print correctly, and much less time getting to design for customers. When I do have the opportunity it’s usually a small project, and while I’m certainly grateful for the opportunity, I long to be back working on larger projects, and being able to once again lead a team of designers.

This leads me to yet another crossroads in my career. Do I stay where I am at to build up my credibility once again and then look to move up, or do I finally work to start building a larger pool of clients for freelance work? My employer has given me permission to freelance (as long as it does not involve the company’s client base), so I am leaning towards staying on for now and begin marketing myself as freelancer once the remaining coursework is completed and more time is available.

Most of my fellow students would need to immediately begin looking for entry-level jobs to start building their experience in the field. Since I already have an extensive work background in the field, there are other areas that I would need to focus on in order to get to where I want to be. The greatest of these is self-promotion, which is an area that I have struggled with from time to time. While the textbook for the course gives the usual suggestions for self –promotion (networking, social media platforms, blogging, podcasting, etc) (Myers, 2014), I would have to fundamentally disagree with some of the ideas that are presented in the textbook.

The field of graphic design is one of that requires a constant reinforcement of one’s capabilities by demanding that we keep the world updated on what we have just completed as a way to generate more opportunities for more work. In theory it would seem that the use of social media to showcase work is a perfect use of the various social media platforms, yet research shows that when designers obtain success and attention by posting their work on social media, it can lead to spending more time promoting past work and less time creating new work (Elmer, 2011). The question is also raised as to which platforms would be best to use. While platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn present the ability to display images along with text explaining the project, each platform is geared towards different audiences. Where Facebook is open to nearly everyone, LinkedIn prides itself on catering to professionals, and is regularly used to promote and pursue potential job openings. Based on this information, LinkedIn would appear to be the best choice for a social media platform if one is looking to showcase my work for the purpose of finding more opportunities to produce more designs, as one can ask for recommendations from the network that a user has created (Bartholomew, 2018).

The idea of using Twitter to promote a designer’s work has been found to have mixed results (McCorkle, Payan, 2017) While it has shown to be useful in communicating short thoughts, from a personal standpoint I have found Twitter to be less useful (beyond another place to post a link to a project that can be viewed on another site). Once again, by looking to the thoughts of George Lois, we find the best line of thought: “Twitter less. Think more. Or better yet, stop tweeting your life away and do something productive: Learn to draw!” (Lois, 2012)

To sum up the thoughts on networking and social media, while Myers is merely repeating what many other writers and blogs will suggest, it is imperative to find a balance between constant self-promotion and leaving enough time to create more work. I find in such a situation, I am reminded of a song lyric that says ‘Show me, don’t tell me”.

To be a successful graphic designer, it is not enough anymore to be just a good designer. In my career, I’ve found that the designer also has to be a good salesperson in order to sell their services and the design concept to the client, along with a psychologist in order to understand what the client is thinking along with their customers. These days, we have to add the role of sociologist which is now needed to make sure that the designs that are created are not tone deaf to current trends and social demographics. While any design has the possibility of offending someone in society, the goal must be to offend the least number possible, with the ultimate goal being not to offend anyone at all (which is virtually impossible, as it would seem that everyone will find offense in everything if they look hard enough for it). What would have been considered funny in the past could now be considered offensive now. To illustrate this, I present a classic advertisement as seen below.   
  


(Bhasin and Laya, 2011)

The ad above was created in the 1950’s when the man was still considered the head of the household, and was expected to maintain discipline among the members of his family. While this would have gotten a laugh back then, looking at through a modern lens shows us an example of domestic abuse along with treating the wife as a subservient to the male. Needless to say an ad such as this would never see publication, much less even make it beyond a brainstorm session.

What other skills must a designer employ in their career? I have found that a calm disposition goes a long way in making a successful career. While one doesn’t want to appear as a proverbial doormat, it does not help to appear as someone who is difficult to work with. The designer must be open and receptive to other points of view and opinions, but still willing to defend their design choices when they know that they are correct. When dealing with a client it is imperative to maintain a professional demeanor, regardless of how unprofessional the client may act.

One final thing that would seem to not unnecessary to mention, but I will take the time to mention it here: Respect the deadline. When you commit to have a project ready at a certain date and time, you must have it ready at that time, unless there is a reason that will keep you from making that deadline, and it has been communicated to the client, and all involved parties are willing to accept an adjusted deadline. Missing a deadline is one of the quickest ways to destroy a designer’s reputation, and then requires a lot of time to build it back.

To close, I’ll refer to a quote from legendary designer Massimo Vignelli, and paraphrased by George Lois at a TEDx talk in 2014. To me, it is a standard that every designer should strive for: “If you do it right, it, and you, will live forever.” We must all remember this every day that we are fortunate enough to be able to create and get paid for it.

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