A Designer Situation

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ABSTRACT

Designers are first and foremost members of society, sharing the same concerns around education, finance, career prospects, social status, and self-fulfilment as any other practitioners. The creative and humanistic nature of designer roles, however, often places them in an inferior position in meritocratic, progressivist systems. In a total of three sections, designers are contextualized in a scape of lived experiences, anecdotal evidence, statistics, investigative reports, and theoretical resources, interwoven to picture a specific contemporary designer situation. *The Human Capital* discussed the systemic occupational discrimination against designers made visible and measurable by the US and Canadian immigration offices, attributing this phenomenon to the awkward classification of academic disciplines, the poor understanding of designer roles at the administrative level, and the skewed emphasis on solving hard technical problems. It was argued that said skewed emphasis can be traced back to the setup of goals and incentives in the existing educational institutions, overshadowing the value of designers' ability to solve real-world problems and improve the wellbeing of many. *The (Great) Expectations* touched on the homogenous admission schemes in China and the profound implications of Eurocentric ideologies on Chinese design students' choice of postgrad education. These factors, combined with the disproportionate expansion of design schools in the UK and the less-than-transparent rankings that favored British schools, gave birth to a tutoring industry that aims at sending Chinese design students to the UK for higher education. The discrepancy between the expectations from the education systems and the requirements from the job market, however, contributed to a new norm where graduates from prestigious programs overseas went back to the sector where they once received tutoring, instead of working as designers in the field. *The Job* raised personal observations and reflections on graphic design jobs. Juxtaposed with David Graeber's bullshit jobs theory, the repetitive, substitutable, and nonautonomous aspects were brought up to question the meaningfulness and prospects of the very occupation, followed by a brief mention of emergent AI image generators both as opportunities to reduce workload and threats to the job security of graphic designers. Further, it was argued that because corporate design principles were postulated upon unsustainable business models, when designers are doing good in a contemporary corporate context, there is the danger of them causing more harm in the long run than their "average" counterparts. Stefan Sagmeister and Jaron Lanier were referenced to call for more justified specifications of "good design" versus "bad design", as well as more subversive transformations of corporate design principles and know-hows. As a semi-open closing mark, opportunities for improvement and reframing of the afore-mentioned situation were identified to evoke further discussions on the very status of designers.

Keywords: Designers' identity, Design education, Design pedagogy, Human capital, Graphic design, Design evaluation

THE HUMAN CAPITAL

Almost all the design classes I have attended started with this hard question:
What is design?

Debates would typically slide on an axis of art and science, and end up landing somewhere in between. With "interdisciplinary", "multidisciplinary", and "transdisciplinary" being the constant buzz in academia (I took "Cross-Disciplinary Studio" at the Communications Design, MFA program at Pratt, and now I am writing this piece for the "Interdisciplinary Design Development Seminar" course at Carleton), we have more axes to anchor our positions in the human realm, so congrats on lower chances of identity crises striking, fellow designers.

But, to claim "I design, therefore I am" is one thing, to be recognized by society—specifically put, to have our own occupational category listed on public service sites, or to have designer roles present at a table of decision-makers—is another. I can recall vividly the rejection of the proposal for a possible STEM-designation (The U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2020) for our program at Pratt Institute, and how by the end of the first year, we lost about ten classmates to the Information Experience Design, MS program in Manhattan campus. Because, quite frankly, international students don't care as much about what courses we take as how long the Immigration Office allows us to legally stay (The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2022).

One thing that can't be ignored is that, some "design" degrees are given preferential treatment compared to others. It seems that, if you are designing an information experience, you are likely more qualified than those designing a visual experience, you are closer to the "science" side of the axis, and though we're all on the same continuum, a line needs to be drawn somewhere. I remember the practices we went through in the program—Visual Language for qualitative coding and discourse analysis, Transformation Design for tackling complex problems in the community, Technology for reinventing a tool, Cross-Disciplinary Studio for Cartography and GIS data analysis…, not one course reads easy to me. And since graphic designers are expected to make things look good and communicate well, all deliverables need to be carefully put together and look aesthetically pleasing, so, extra workload.

Such confusing division of sub-sectors does not happen in other fields, if you think about it. It's very hard for us to imagine, say, an Aerospace Engineering student getting a three-year work visa while an Agricultural Engineering student getting one, because Agriculture is not "hard-core" enough to be considered deserving an equal chance of competing for that immigrant quota. I am not talking about the available positions on the market or the average pay grade—those are to be decided by supply & demand, and no one can argue with economic equilibrium. I am talking about the very foundation of fair competition.

If we take a closer look at the STEM list, there are some old friends with whom we are usually standing shoulder to shoulder in the designer sort: Textile, Industrial, Architectural—except that, they're followed by an "Engineering" suffix instead of "Design". And all of a sudden, they got a

higher ranking in the system, and we're left waiting in the crowd. Three years later, here in the oldest design program in Canada, sharing the same space with the Engineering fellows, we are unsurprisingly, again, ranked inferior to those enrolled in STEM programs—the Ontario Government doesn't use that word, but you get the drill. According to the "scoring factor" section under the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program, an engineering student gets ten points for what they study, a math and computer science student gets a nine, and an arts and humanities student gets a five (Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, 2019). At least two things are worth noting here: first, it's astonishing how the studies of artifacts overweigh the studies of humans everywhere on this globe and number two, although design is not listed here, we just know from experiences that we will be classified as "arts and humanities" and worth only half as human capitals.

"It's not rocket science," professors used to say when students whined about the assignments, and the heavy connotations baffled me—are we deemed of less value because we are not solving hard problems? Ben Khun, the CTO at Wave, indirectly answered my question in his blog post:

For some reason, a lot of smart college students end up with the idea that "solving hard technical problems" is the best thing they can do with their life… Why does this happen? Probably because that's the only thing they've been rewarded for over the past 15 years. School is a closed-world domain—you are solving crisply-defined puzzles (multiply these two numbers, implement this algorithm, write a book report by this rubric), your solution is evaluated on one dimension (letter grade), and the performance ceiling (an A+) is low… Rather than competing for an A+ on a hard problem, I could try to solve an easy problem as quickly as possible (like Wave's accounting), or find the easiest problem whose solution would be useful (like identifying Kenyan names), or hire a team to solve easy problems faster than I ever could myself. In fact, these turned out to be even more interesting! Why? Because "hard technical problems" wasn't my root goal—my root goal was to use my skills to get the most possible leverage on improving the world (Khun, 2020). I assume Ben has a say on this subject matter, given he is considered one of the smartest people out there, working at a company that improves the financial well-being of millions of people living in sub-Saharan Africa (Khun, 2021). The way he described solving real-world problems in a timely manner echoed Nigel Cross's view on "design students' abilities in tackling a particular kind of problem" in *Designerly Ways of Knowing*:

The designer is constrained to produce a practicable result within a specific time limit… design develops students' abilities in tackling a particular kind of problem. This kind of problem is characterised as ill-defined, or ill-structured, and is quite distinct from the kinds of well-structured problems that lie in the educational domains of the sciences and the humanities. We might even claim that our design problems are more 'real' than theirs, in that they are like the problems or issues or decisions that people are more usually faced with in everyday life (Cross, 1982, p. 225). Looking back, it's apparent that the immigration offices also knew that "hard" doesn't equal "important" or "meaningful", which is why there are no differences in treatment between those who study rocket science and those who work on wheat yields. But

things are not quite like that when there is a "Design" in the title—it starts to look tricky, wicked, complex, hard to measure, and if you are hard to measure, you lose value as human capital.

THE (GREAT) EXPECTATIONS

Naming is so important. It does not just affect the government and the employers' perceptions—they affect children and their parents when choosing career paths. In countries where design as a discipline is not very well defined and developed, design students and fine art students share the same path to enrolment in a post-secondary school, which is a combined assessment of one's artistic capability and standardized examination results. In a rigid, homogenous, and extremely competitive selection mechanism like the one in China, such paths are often considered a shortcut for those with less-than-ideal school performances, or a getaway for depressed teenagers who are granted a choice by their parents to steer away—and there you have the earliest seedbeds for systemic occupational discrimination.

While working in Shanghai as a design tutor, parents often come to me with questions like, "my kid draws really well, is design for them?" or, "how do the job prospects look like?" I personally found these questions hard to answer because, had working as a designer felt that great, I wouldn't be tutoring. The untold truth has partially been addressed in *The Human Capital*: it's highly probable that the kids would not be able to secure a job overseas with visa sponsorship, and therefore have to come back a few years later, to be swept up once again in a rigid, homogenous, and extremely competitive climate.

There is a tutoring industry that sends Chinese students to the United Kingdom for Master's studies, and I see that as a playout of the "complicity" between parents, educational institutions, and the British Government. To the parents, a shining postgrad degree from a renowned university in the UK has the following advantages: 1) it makes amends for a lackluster undergraduate background; 2) United Kingdom has a brand image in China, which is rich in culture, and safe to reside in; 3) the QS rankings of these universities are usually good; 4) the kids can have that once-in-a-lifetime studying abroad experience at relatively affordable cost—UK is by no means cheap compared to its Western European counterparts, but a path dependency has formed. The British government's abolishment of its cap on student numbers (Shaw, 2014) made it easier than ever for Chinese students to be physically living in the UK, but never needing to step out of the Chinese-speaking comfort zone.

On the schools' side, if we do a search on the website of the University of the Arts London ("UAL"), we'll find 123 courses/programs for postgrad studies, and 19 for Communication and Graphic Design alone. If your first response to that is "whoa isn't that a bit too many?" we're thinking the same thing. Here I can raise two examples from my undergrad classmates: Zhang got accepted into the Graphic Media Design ("GMD") program and Sun into the Graphic Branding and Identity ("Branding") program, both under the London College of Communication ("LCC"), one of the six colleges of UAL. Turns out the Branding program is just a redeployment place for students who were waitlisted by the GMD program—in a short span of three terms,

Sun shared the class with more than seventy students, instructed by a total of six faculty members. Because the students were from highly homogenous backgrounds—more than 90 percent Chinese—the atmosphere, discussions, as well as themes and contents of their course projects, demonstrated a severe lack of diversity and vitality a world-renowned university should afford. In the spring of 2020, Sun was hit with Covid-19 in her second term and had to fly back home to finish her studies. She spent 176 days in total in the UK, but paid a tuition of more than 20,000 Euros for the experience.

Last November, another prestigious art and design school, the Royal College of the Arts ("RCA"), shortened the length of nearly all postgrad programs to one year, including Interior Design, Information Experience Design, Jewellery Design, Fashion Design, Textile Design, Photography, Service Design, and Visual Communication. Without an official announcement, this decision of restructuring was ghostly posted with other admissions information on their website. Nevertheless, the RCA Branch of the University and College Union ("UCU") backfired with co-signed letters, public condemnation, and strike actions:

Members of the University and Union College (UCU) at the Royal College of Art (RCA) are currently on strike for 14 days in October and November 2021. They are demanding real contracts for casualised staff and protection for the terms and conditions of permanent staff under the impending arrival of a 45-week academic year that will completely restructure the College's teaching and learning model. This is a decision that striking staff take with heavy hearts and the branch is devastated that the College has forced this situation on students… With 95% of staff suffering from stress even before the pandemic, workload is set to rise as two-year Masters programmes will be stuffed into one 45-week year, damaging student experience and piling even more pressure on staff (RCA UCU, 2021).

Ironically, in terms of rankings, these two schools have not been affected by the unrestrained expansion and ensuing scandals. UAL has "ranked second in the world for Art and Design in the 2022 QS World University Rankings®" on their About page, whereas RCA "has been ranked as the world's number 1 art & design university in the QS World University subject rankings (2015-2022) for eight consecutive years" (Quacquarelli Symonds Limited, n.d.). One can only guess how transparent these rankings (conducted by a British company!) are, and how much they realistically reflect the educational quality and student experiences.

Chinese graduates of these programs face a particular type of dilemma when they enter the job market—almost nothing they have learned or created at school is instantly applicable to the employers' needs (imagine the discrepancy between, say, making delicate 3D-rendered visual experimentations, and being asked to beautify a balance sheet report made in Microsoft Office 2007). So they go back to the private tutoring sector where they once were, and teach the later coming students how to put together a portfolio that could get them into a postgrad program in the UK. Most of my colleagues went through this journey. I am no exception.

It is such a weird loop, an inner circulation that used to only happen in the shrinking sectors, much like how most classical singing students became

voice coaches, whereas only the very top-tier and lucky few get to sing in theaters or opera houses. If I were a parent consulting my kid's career choices, an important factor would be to see how many that graduated from related programs are working in the roles they once intended to be.

To wrap up the second section, I will quote Jamie Cavanaugh's astute observation on Interaction Design education, which in my opinion, is applicable to other sub-sectors of design:

For industry, education becomes a poor predictor of the success of a job candidate because it is unclear which skills are taught in Interaction Design programs. For the prospective students, it's unclear what they're getting when enrolling in an Interaction Design program (Cavanaugh, 2018).

THE JOB

The other day, one of my classmates from Pratt Institute, who is now working at the Tech Giant Tencent as a UI/UX designer, shared her experiments on MidJourney, an AI-powered image-generating tool released in July 2022: "AI is perfect for doing this kind of visuals. I've been working on the promotional graphics for an e-sports event, but couldn't find the background image on ArtStation, so I headed to MidJourney and produced one using prompts. The vibe was exactly what I was looking for—grandiose and spacious. I also used some free trial chances to generate elements to decorate the timeline." My feelings were mixed for a multitude of reasons that will be unfolded.

"Graphic laborers" is a word I use with my friends when talking about work. During undergrad years, we have worked at companies with titles like "graphic designer" or "digital designer". In most cases, what was required is using Photoshop to cook a hodgepodge of stock photos, vector graphics, and sans-serif text blocks, with a bit of touch-up from built-in filters and special effects. Under extreme circumstances, only four websites were needed for us to operate—Google Images, Pinterest, Shutterstock, and Freepik. Once approved, these hodgepodges would be passed on to fill up a web page or to be posted on social media. To me, "graphic laborer" sums up that experience way better than "graphic designer"—when one has no autonomy and no creative freedom whatsoever, one becomes a laborer of ready-to-cook graphic junks.

Of course, the market is rolling and customers expect higher and higher levels of visual stimuli to cease their scrolling hands. Compared to five years ago, graphic laborers are facing ridiculous entry requirements: mastery of a 3D program is a must (Cinema 4D was once the go-to, but soon was replaced by the more all-encompassing Blender), basic knowledge of HTML and CSS is common, experiences of motion graphics would be a huge plus, and surely you'll need to be excellent at illustration, too, because isn't that a default skill of all graphic designers? But once they got hired, the cooking process went back to the same old same old, the difference is where to go graphic hunting—a number of platforms are providing stock 3D images, including Freepik. Not to mention there are now MidJourneys, DALL-Es and Stable Diffusions to generate whatever we ask of them—until they completely take over and put tens of thousands out of work.

What the Tencent friend's doing to pay her food and rent is more or less all my graphic laborer friends are doing—Zhang's thesis at GMD is a photographic study on the homogenization of cityscape, and her current job is making illustrative posters for in-house events using the cartoon characters from their company's IP multiverse. Sun is working at a state-owned multichannel network in Shanghai, and she makes a living out of filling billboards with propagandist slogans. Some friends are doing freelance work for the freedom of choosing customers and projects—that would lead to three scenarios, A) you're doing great in one of the megalopolises because that's where all clients are, and working 24/7; B) you don't have clients and retreat to your hometown because the income of working freelance fluctuates and does not cover your living expenses; C) you're living double lives of freelancing and tutoring, and working 24/7.

Mike Essl, dean and associate professor at Cooper Union, once commented on his experiences as a working graphic designer:

I love making design. I don't so much love being beholden to my clients… I don't know if I would have been excited about design as a kid if I knew it was so service-related. On occasion I really do feel like a digital janitor, I feel the assets that arise from some of these jobs are troublesome and make the job not worth—they take my life out of it, that kind of work. What I struggled with was that, am I really gonna teach something to somebody that makes me miserable (Essl & Fuller, 2021)?

Essl is one of the founders of design studio The Chopping Blocks. Within one year after graduating from Cooper, he and another grad expanded the studio to more than twenty employees, occupying a whole floor of a building in Chelsea, New York. If that commercial success didn't stop him from feeling like a digital janitor, it's quite plain what the general situation is for graphic designers.

In the book *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, anthropologist David Graeber postulated five types of "bullshit jobs"—flunkies, who serve to make their superiors feel important; goons, who act to harm or deceive others on behalf of their employer, or to prevent other goons from doing so; duct tapers, who temporarily fix problems that could be fixed permanently; box tickers, who create the appearance that something useful is being done when it is not; taskmasters, who create extra work for those who do not need it (Duncan, 2018). Designers, though hard to be categorized into any one of the five, do fit a lot of the descriptions of "bullshit jobs". Like duct tapers and box tickers, meaningless repetitions and fooling around can be a major part of daily routines, but even that, I would argue, is not the worst scenario. The worst is when a designer is doing good, too good actually, that they become goons.

In the section "what goons do", Graeber raised an example of an employee of a postproduction company, who considered his job bullshit: "More recently, however, a growing percentage of our customers are advertising agencies… we use visual effects trickery to make it seem like these products actually work. We also work on TV shows and music videos. We reduce bags under the eyes of women, make hair shinier, teeth whiter, make pop stars and film stars look thinner, etc…. We essentially make viewers feel

inadequate whilst they're watching the main programs and then exagge-rate the effectiveness of the 'solutions' provided in the commercial breaks" (2018, 55). To which Graeber commented:

He objected because he saw his "beauty work," as he called it, as inherently coercive and manipulative. He was drawing a distinction between what might be called honest illusions and dishonest ones. When you make dinosaurs attack spaceships, no one actually thinks that's real. Much as with a stage magician, half the fun is that everyone knows a trick is being played—they just don't know exactly how it's done. When you subtly enhance the appeara-nce of celebrities, in contrast, you are trying to change viewers' unconscious assumptions about what everyday reality—in this case, of men's and women's bodies—ought to be like, so as to create an uncomfortable feeling that their lived reality is itself an inadequate substitute for the real thing. Where honest illusions add joy into the world, dishonest ones are intentionally aimed tow-ard convincing people their worlds are a tawdry and miserable sort of place (56). Designers have done some bitter self-reflections on the deceptive, mani-pulative nature of our jobs. In *How Good is Good?*, Stefan Sagmeister brought up an equation:

$$Good\ design + bad\ cause = bad$$

To further interrogate "what we do and for whom we are doing it", he quo-ted the exact same saying from Victor Papanek's *Design for the Real World* as Michael W. Meyer and Don Norman famously did in *Changing Design Education for the 21st Century*:

There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them. And possibly only one profession is phonier. Advertising design, in persuading people to buy things they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, is probably the phoniest field in existence today (Papanek, 1972, 21).

With the book published in 1972 and the article in 2004, some upda-tes are needed to justify the current situation. For one, those who work on visuals—the designers of the outermost skin of this human-made world, took on too much blame because of the "visible" nature of their work. For a very relevant example, the advertising industry, and the attention economy that it's providing for, have designed a digital infrastructure that decides for us what's rewarded (click-baiting, attention-seeking, dopamine-inducing interfaces and contents) and what's discouraged (constructive discussions, investigative journalism, tolerance and patience for others), except that these rules were translated into another language when being applied to specific usage scenarios, and packaged as a set of principles when passed down on to the "designer" designers: convenient, engaging, smart, instant… lots of us simply followed (Jaron Lanier made extensive expositions on these topics in his book *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Account Right Now*). To go back to my points on scoring and naming—if we give the non-designer designers proper names: incentive designer, addictive mechanism designer, algorithmic behavior modification designer… consider how scien-tific and effective their designs are, I'm positive they will easily qualify for

a spot on the STEM list, or get ten out of ten in any immigration scoring systems.

For two, a plus sign doesn't seem to justify what harm a "good design" can do if it's done with a deceptive, manipulative mindset. If mass production had made the correlation a multiplicative one, the internet—the ultimate accelerator and amplifier, exponentialized it. On the bright side, however, the combination of good design and good cause, has the potential to benefit the well-being of a much larger population, expressed in the following equations:

$$Good\ design \times good\ cause = ?$$
$$Good\ design^{good\ cause} = ?$$

THE CLOSING MARK

Governments, educational institutions, and corporations, with their drastically different agendas and goals, set the stage for designers' everlasting identity precariousness; individually, what one can do is to reframe complexity as an incubation for possibilities—of continuous exploration, reflection, recalibration, and iteration, much like the work itself; at a macro level, the addressed parties each have their liabilities in helping design students realize their compatibility with a designer career and the entailed circumstances at an earlier stage, through demystification of heroic narratives, mindful policy-making, and striving for a context-sensitive synergy.

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