SEASON 3

EPISODE 05

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:00.2] AK: Welcome to this season of the Unfinished Business Podcast. Over the next few weeks and months I'll be discussing art directing for the web with my guests who are some of the most experienced art directors and designers working on the web today. I'm your host, Andy Clarke, and I'm writing a hardboiled web design book about art directing for the web, and you can find out more about that at stuffandnonsense.co.uk/books.

Now, this season of Unfinished Business is proudly sponsored CoffeeCup Software, and in particular, their new CSS Grid Builder. If you're the type of designer or developer that likes tools to do their dirty work for them, CSS Grid Builder might just be the thing for you. Now, you might have used what you see is what you get editors before, so you're probably remembering just how lousy the code they spat out was. Let me stop you there. CSS Grid Builder outputs excellent code.

Browser's developer tools are getting better at inspecting grids, but CSS Grid Builder helps you build them, obviously. At its core, CSS Grid Builder is a Chromium-based browser that's wrapped in the use of interface so it runs on macOS and Windows. This means that if the browser can render can it, CSS Grid Builder can write it. In fact, CSS Grid Builder builds more than just grids and you can use it to create styles for backgrounds, including gradients, which is really handy — Borders and typography. It even handles Flexbox and multi-column layouts.

But designing a grid is the app's biggest draw, because when you're new to CSS Grid, visualizing how its columns and rows combine to form a layout can be one of the hardest parts of learning how it works. You create a grid, use sliders to preview the results at various breakpoints, and if you're one of those people who is worried about other people using incapable browsers, CSS Grid Builder also offers settings where you can configure fallbacks. Then just copy and paste CSS styles into somewhere else in your project or you can export the whole kit and caboodle.

Best of all, CSS Grid Builder is currently free. Yes, you heard that right. It's free while CoffeeCup Software developer, and if you like what they're doing, you can throw the few dollars their way to help fund its development. You can find out more and download CSS Grid Builder at cssgrid.cc.

On with the show.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:02:34.9] AK: Joining me on this week show is David Sleight. Now, what is your job title today?

[0:02:41.0] DS: Today I am the new design director as a newsroom called ProPublica here in the states. For those who aren't familiar with us, we're a nonprofit investigative journalism newsroom. We do stories in the public interest, something we refer to as stories with moral force. I've been around for actually about a decade this year and I've been there for almost half of it, coming up on four years now.

[0:03:03.8] AK: It's interesting isn't it what people kind of call — I don't know whether I would say seeing level design roles. We talk about maybe the difference between being like a head of design, or a creative director, or a design director. I wonder what the difference is between if indeed there is one between like a creative director role or a design director. Is there one? What's the difference between creative and design?

[0:03:30.9] DS: I don't know. Actually, it's really relevant to what I do, because when I first joined there, I was literally the first one. When they started, it was a smaller organization and one day they decided, "Hey, we want to get somebody in charge of doing editorial design and platform design," and there was a discussion about, "Well, what do call you?" At one point we actually — We're batting around the idea of maybe I would be the design editor, because I'm part of the senior editor group, because we sort of — We set things up so that we want to be participating how stories come together and we wanted to be tied very closely to that. So maybe we identify it so that it's much more explicitly clear to people that it's an editorial role.

Creative director, I see that in a lot of product shops. Art director, you see that in places in New York, which is very like marketing town. You see that in a lot of marketing shops. So we just sort of landed on the design director as the one that we thought was the best overall one, but it was definitely a conversation of like what do we call this new thing?

[0:04:28.4] AK: I wonder whether the difference is more that perhaps a creative director is more concerned about the — I don't know, maybe I'm wrong or maybe I'm right, but maybe concerned more about the kind of the creative aspects of it, messaging and overall kind of brand communication. Whereas somebody that is involved in sort of a design role or a design in the title is more about possibly kind of leading teams.

[0:04:58.8] DS: I think that's probably right. I think creative director generally for a lot of startups is somebody you might actually be more product design, more business design. I mean, I just kind of do whatever I think is right. To be honest, I really don't let the title sort of stop me from — I participate in a little bit of a product. I participate in platform, stories, the whole thing, but I think you're more apt to see creative directors at product-y type shops that might have strategy stuff or like business process stuff.

In my case, there's that notion whatever people think of as designs. So it explicitly says design. It doesn't necessarily say like creative officer or something like that, which could be I'm the creative officer in charge of accounting practices for this firm or something like that.

[0:05:44.0] AK: How many people have you got working under you now?

[0:05:47.5] DS: Right now? It's always influx. When I started it was one, and I think we're at about six or so people. It was a shop of about 40 people overall. We've actually grown quite a bit recently. We're now over hundred people overall. So it's not a bad growth curve. One of which is Rob Weychert, who's the editorial experience designer, and a set of producers as well, who are the people sort of keep the trains running on time.

[0:06:11.4] AK: I can't imagine Rob keeping any trains running on time. I'm thinking of his alter ego.

[0:06:18.4] DS: Windhammer? Is this —

[0:06:20.1] AK: Windhammer, the Windhammer alter ego. I'll put a link in the show notes to a Windhammer video.

[0:06:26.0] DS: For those that do not know. Yes, we have — One of the team is a great editorial interactive designer who also happens to have another life that is rather colorful and creative. But he is great and we've worked on a lot of stuff together. It's been a little more than two years for him and we've cranked out a bunch of stories. We cranked out last year, basically, a whole site redesign and a complete placement of our CMS, all of which he was a huge player in.

[0:06:53.8] AK: What does Rob's day today design job look like? I mean, I'm very, very interested in this whole subject of collaboration. I mean, I think is fascinating. Let's wind back a little bit actually, because something that you said a minute ago kind of stuck in my brain, which is a very dangerous place to be especially at this time in the morning. You talked us about sitting on the editorial team, and I think that that is in an interesting place to maybe start [inaudible 0:07:29.9] at the conversation, because I think in the past or certainly in different areas of design, particularly possibly in digital, there tends to be silos. We'll have designers and developers or content strategists or UX designers or interaction designers or whatever that will quite often work separately. I'm really interested in the fact that you're crafting these stories and you, as a you design director, are right there on the editorial team presumably sitting alongside people that are crafting the words or crafting the narrative. How does that work? What does that look like? Tell me the process from, "We have this story," and what the process of putting that together looks like.

[0:08:22.1] DS: Yeah, it works in as messy a way as possible. I kid. But it's born in the fact that it was a small shop when it started and it was supposed to be really multidisciplinary. So some of the first people to arrive there who did work on the web were what we call these news apps developers who are data journalists, multipurpose web geeks. They know how to program. They know how to make webpages. They know how to do reporting stuff. Everybody was doing a little bit of everything. When there're only a dozen of you, you can't have specializations of labor. You have to span across what might be silos in another place.

So we take that as kind of a virtue that a designer or a developer should be working on multiple things. In the case of someone like Rob or like my team, I usually talk about it as it's design in three tracks for us because we still carry such a broad mandate that goes from very, very tactical to very strategic. On the most tactical side is like the daily production. Like we literally are the people who commission photography and illustration to go with daily stories and put them into the CMS. So not only did we design the page, but we're actually the ones who are making the selections about what goes into stories every day.

In the middle are what we sort of enterprise stories or big feature stories, which is where you apply a lot of the most custom art direction. Then all the way on the most strategic side is the site itself, the design UX art direction of the site itself. The way it works for someone like Rob is we tend to keep the team member in two of those tracks at any given time. Three is too many things. You sort of subdivide your brain until you go crazy, but the idea that you would spend like two thirds or maybe half your time working on the site, and then I'll switch you out for a little while and you'll work on like a big story for a bit. Keeps you fresh, takes a different angle on things. You learn different technical skills. You have a different angle on it. Then you flip back over, or you strut a little a little bit of the same time.

Again, that comes out of some necessity, but also that we want people to be exposed to multiple parts of it. So like when we went to redo our CMS, rather than like take an outside perspective on it, like I knew a lot of what we needed for the CMS, because I'm sitting right next to the producers who actually flip the buttons and hit the switches and do everything so I know all the pain points are, and I know from the strategic side of the designer to like what outcome I want to see.

Our discovery phase for that was really, really compressed. We knew our list like right off the bat. But bringing it back to your like how does it work? Where does it come from? It's literally — It's what you said. It's like, "Hey, we have a story." So there's a small group of senior editors, and I'm part of that team, and I just have coffee with them. I talk to them. I see them every day. We talk online and they let me know, "Hey, so and so is working on something or has this idea." This could be really interesting or an unusual story and maybe there's an opportunity here for something unorthodox and how we present it, or maybe there's something we need to keep in mind when we go report it out, that like maybe we need something for photography. Maybe we

need something for illustration or in our activity or data or audio or something like that. We talk with them throughout that whole process and see which way it's going to turn.

[0:11:34.8] AK: That's really interesting. One of the things that you sort of you mentioned there was about there are these particular kind of — I don't know what we really call them. Kind of like headline stories or heroes stories or something like that. How do you make the distinction between that and something which is every day?

[0:11:55.8] DS: So meaning like how do editors identify like this is our "big story"? When does the cigar chopping editor kind of lean across the table and like, "This is going to be big, kid. You got to make this one big," or is it just how do we signal that when we design it?

[0:12:08.2] AK: Do you have somebody like Jay Jonah Jameson?

[0:12:12.0] DS: No. We have a terrific editor-in-chief and managing editor and a whole set of senior editors, like we have colorful characters. I can't say we have anyone that colorful, but we definitely have discussions about, "Hey, this is —" There's about a dozen, to maybe 15, sometimes even 20 stories that you're like, "Well, this is bit. This is something new. This is something important. We need you to do something with this in terms of design that's going to signal to the audience in really clear terms. This is something they need to sit up and pay attention to."

[0:12:45.7] AK: Now, that's a really interesting point, because I think that that cuts across what many companies, even outside of editorial should consider. There's sort of a running joke, I think. Isn't there? About kind of corporate blocks, and it's where kind of press releases go to die. The last comment was 2007. I think that this kind of these conversations about whether something is a big story. Not just like we bought a new fan.

[0:13:18.7] DS: I would love that we would have — It'd be sort of like the mystery. What's the one from Scooby Doo? We just drive around and [inaudible 0:13:23.7].

[0:13:23.9] AK: Scooby Doo, the mystery machine.

[0:13:26.3] DS: Yup, exactly.

[0:13:27.3] AK: Yeah. That would be fabulous. Would you be Shaggy, or would you be Scooby?

[0:13:30.4] DS: I don't know. I just like the idea that we would have a talking dog. That would be great. I'd be super into that.

[0:13:35.8] AK: Our friend Brad Frost, I think, has a talking dog.

[0:13:40.9] DS: That's [inaudible 0:13:40.7] Ziggy, right?

[0:13:42.3] AK: Yes, Ziggy. Yeah, Ziggy the talking dog. He actually speaks with a Queen's accent. Anyway, we digress slightly. What a professional podcast this is.

[0:13:53.9] DS: Yeah, it works. It totally works.

[0:13:56.0] AK: We get on to Scooby Doo and then my mind goes completely blank. All I've got in my head right now is I'd have got away with this if it wasn't for you, meddling kids.

[0:14:06.1] DS: I mean, there's a lot of stories we have that could end that way. It's like we would've gotten away with this if weren't for you meddling investigative journalist. If I can rip a mask off of somebody at the end of a story, that might be a life goal for us.

[0:14:17.6] AK: That's actually a really, really good way of putting it. So you've identified that — Hang on. This is going to be a big story. So, typically, when there is a big story, I'm thinking of the one day you published a couple of years ago about El Chapo.

[0:14:36.9] DS: Oh, yeah.

[0:14:37.6] AK: Which was one of the kind of examples that always kind of sticks in my mind. How long does a story like that take from kind of conception to publication?

[0:14:49.2] DS: It really depends. I believe the one you're talking about is Devils and the DEA. That was a David Epstein's story, and that's probably standout features. We had U.K. illustrator, Tim McDonough, who is fabulously talented. Just give us some really bonkers opening art for that one. As far as how long they take, that's actually something that's kind of special to us. The reason that we're a nonprofit, the reason we exist is this idea to sort of preserve investigative journalism in newsrooms in the U.S. I don't know if you've noticed, journalism is kind of having a hard time with advertising in the internet. One of the first thing that usually goes away is investigative journalism, because it's usually very long-term stuff. You need to gather a lot of information to do this work. You need to literally investigate stuff.

I think that story — I mean, we're talking — it's multiple months. We've had stories that had taken multiple years to do. That is why we are a nonprofit. We gathered up fundraising to support this, because that's really tough to do in and add supportive environment of like, well, you got one reporter or a couple reporters working on something and they're not going to produce a story for eight months. That's kind of scary for most places.

It also means that we have a really ripe opportunity to do great art direction on pieces, because they're there. They're hanging around. They're cooking. We know about them. It's funny, even there, you always want more time than what you wind up having. It's no matter what. In a newsrooms, somehow it always feels like a little bit of a rush at the end. You're like, "Wait a minute. What's happening? We worked on this for 12 months. What's going on here?" But we still have time leading up to it to go like — We talked to David, who is the reporter on that, and he was giving us details of the story. Most of them were like, "Holy jeepers! This is guns and shootouts and just crazy shit, and it's completely serious shit, but it's just off the wall." I mean, there are melting people in barrels of acid. They're having shootouts at airports. It was one of those like, "Well, are you going to — What part of your story are you going to elevate? Is that coming out?" He's like, "Yes. This is insane thing and I need to show that it's this insane world." I'm like, "Okay. We're going to get you insane art. We're going to get you something a couple clicks over the top that's just going to reach out and grab somebody by the lapels and go, "This is a bonkers thing. It's outrageous. It's crazy," and you get to tone right off the bat with something as simple as a well-matched illustration for the piece.

[0:17:17.8] AK: At what point do those conversations happen? On a scale of kind of like one being the beginning and 10 being the, “Right. We’re going to hit publish.” At what point do you start having those conversations about what elements of a story get to be elevated?”

[0:17:35.9] DS: I’m going to say like, ideally, it's like two or three. We've done all of the above. We've known art direction almost from the moment of conception of a story all the way to the other end, which is like, “Whoa! Hey, it's almost fully baked,” and put things together. Some of that is because when you do the long-term story writing or reporting, stories take different terms. You wind up sometimes with something of the end that you didn't expect. It’s just not what you thought I was and it’s like, “Hey, it turns out like the villain is over in this corner, not over there, or there're five of them. We didn't expect that. It’s not the story I want,” or the story has turned into three stories, or it's something else entirely. That’s why we have to stay in touch with them.

Ideally, it's in that two to three range, because we want to give the reporter where everything kind of starts from a couple beats to sort survey their landscape and tell us if there's anything there, which we call — The slang for the is [inaudible 0:18:32.9] gathering string. You’re out, looking around, they’re getting records. They’re seeing like they have a notion. They have a lead. They have a thing. Is it really there? We sort of say like, “Okay. Well, keep this in mind. This might be good if you do this, but just tell us. Come back in a week or two. Is there anything there?”

That's when we really, really start to try to get rolling. We try to like make assignments for art. We try to think like is there going to be an opportunity for this to be an interactive thing? But that’s where we want to be ideally, but we can do — We’re a full service shop. We can do any point on the spectrum, really.

[0:19:06.6] AK: So what is that process of collaboration look like practically? I’m thinking of the design process. Obviously, you have your CMS. So there are certain limitations to a small or large extent. I don't know what CMS you chose, but presumably you designed it with the kind of flexibility in mind to be able to breakout of the confines when you need it to. What is the process look like? I mean, does somebody like — We’ll keep referring to Rob, even though he's in the room. It might have been more polite if I’d have actually invited Rob on the show. That would have been — I may well do that with your permission over the next few weeks.

[0:19:48.2] DS: All right. I got to go send a memo to Rob now. Okay. Here we go.

[0:19:51.5] AK: Yes. Now that I know that you have a recording studio in the office.

[0:19:55.5] DS: Yes.

[0:19:56.4] AK: But what is that process look like? Does somebody literally sit down there with sketches and with pieces of paper and scissors and large sharpies and sketch this thing out? How do you evolve the idea for the art direction?

[0:20:16.7] DS: For us, everything starts as words, so a lot of email and a lot of talking. We're also kind of known for our length. So there is a running gag that Publica is a unit of measure that means 5,000 words or more. We do the long form a lot.

So when you work with people like that, they write a lot, and that actually carries over to how they communicate So we send a lot of email and we do a lot of description. We do a lot of one-on-one meetings where we're just trying to suss out tone town and opportunities just by talking to people, like, "I know. This sounds a really interesting story. Tell me more about it." Sort of our role is like group psychologists, like, "Tell me what you're thinking about this story."

When we have time, it's definitely — It's actually the classic design process of like open your paper notebook and start sketching some stuff out. If you're thinking about layout, like, "Okay. Here's what I our opener might look like. Here's a couple of things I'm thinking about. Here's a couple screenshots from some things that might be similar to it," and just following that down to the path. Most of our mockups, we don't do as many actually as I would like, just because we're doing a lot of stories. So we generally go from sketching to code pretty quickly.

[0:21:30.9] AK: Now, that's interesting. Is it the designers that know how to code? I know this is an old conversation that everybody is going round and round and round on.

[0:21:40.4] DS: Can we have this bar fight? I totally want to have this bar fight. No.

[0:21:44.2] AK: Go on. Let's have this bar fight.

[0:21:45.6] DS: Okay. Yes, our designer's code. Absolutely. 100%. Given when I said too about being a small shop, like we can't afford to have folks who — I guess the joking term that I use is basically you have to kill what you eat, or vice versa here of like. Rob is — We've reference Rob a couple of times. Wherever he is right now, his ears are really burning. He's a brilliant [inaudible 0:22:12.1] CSS web standards coder. So when he does a layout, he is also the one to implement it. As much as possible that's what we want people doing. That's we want our developers doing our news apps folks and our designers. So I can see there's opportunities for some designers who don't, but the versatility of it, we have to have it in our shop.

[0:22:33.9] AK: I'm covering the microphone, because you said early on that you're going to battle apartment noise. It sounds like that there is actually a bar fight outside my window, but it turns out to be the refuse collectors who are emptying recycling bins full of bottles.

[0:22:52.1] DS: [inaudible 0:22:52.2] they get started really early there.

[0:22:54.8] AK: Apologies to the listeners if they think that somebody's throwing bottles in the background to this podcast, but that just adds — It just adds to the authenticity.

[0:23:04.6] DS: I thought you had a really good folly. It was like, "Wow! That's great." It's got like the sound effects board for going on.

I don't know — It's funny, because in my own little world I don't know that saying that is actually controversial. I know that sometimes — Like you can sort of set your watch by the 18 month cycle of — Somebody will write a blog post about same designers absolutely should or absolutely shouldn't code. Then Twitter will explode. I know where I come down on it, we need that sort of versatility. Occasionally, there would be opportunities for folks who don't. We are of the web, and the web code is our paintbrush to a certain extent.

[0:23:42.7] AK: These stories are likely to evolve right out until the last minute, I would imagine, right up until the point when you press publish. Somebody is always crafting words. In a process like yours where certain things will have to be commissioned in advance. If we're looking at

original photography or we're looking at original illustration, once those things are delivered, they're kind of pretty much set in stone. The layout decisions that you might make or the way in which you draw certain elements of a story out to elevate them, maximize them. That is also something which kind of I would assume has to become of locked in fairly early in a journey.

So I'm wondering about this kind of relationship between designers and editorial, or writers, and in what point, if you design something that is going to run until 10,000 words and then it runs to 20,000 words using a ridiculous example. How does that relationship work? How do you — In a design process, how do you kind of accommodate that?

[0:24:58.3] DS: Well, I mean this is the $64 million question for newsrooms for sure, for doing design. I'm laughing, because we — One of the first major story assignments I did at Republica, this firestone and the warlords thing, was a 20,000 word story. It was a novella length story and it was — We were doing stuff on that up right up until like the morning of — I have photos like three in the morning of us there with the editor just hammering away at the last bits of it.

It's a combination. So we generally tell people like the more complex, the more custom fitted, the more like hand and glove the art or the interactive is going to work, the more lead time we must have. On the other side, I sort of talk out of both sides of my mouth there, because I tell them that, but the tools that we develop, we try to make them as flexible as possible. Our CMS and the customer story rig that we built for it, we set that up to make it —It's not completely pain free, but as painless as possible to make fast changes to things. Trying to make tools that accommodate iterative story design, we'll also accommodate edits. Sometimes minor, sometimes major.

Then you sort of get a little bit adept at the sleight-of-hand of judging, like I can think of two stories right now, two different story meetings that I just had like 48 hours ago back-to-back, and one I know the course for the story is pretty set. The reporter knows it. They're far down the path. They can get the material. They know it cold. It's not really going to be filled with too many surprises, and that one you can sort a commission like even the photography. Like I know exactly where the puck is going on that one. They can be right there, and like it's a low risk.

The other one right after was on the other end of the spectrum. It was — We don't know. We don't think we can get this. This is going to be really difficult. The direction of it, the tone, whether it's going to be two stories or one. Like there's combative participants in it and how is that going to be. So in terms of like putting the art direction I had on that, I was like, "Okay. Well, this is going to be metaphorical and abstract illustrations. You're going to need to tell us more about tone than specific incidences." It's less about like getting the photo of the particular victim or purp or depicting specific scene than it is like, "Give me items from the story that are evocative of its theme and I will give you the most wiggle room to write this up until the last minute, because you won't be making me spike in illustration."

[0:27:28.2] AK: I like that phrase evocative of the theme, because I imagine that a very large percentage of the six people that are listening to this podcast right now.

[0:27:40.3] DS: Hello to all six of you. Yeah.

[0:27:42.1] AK: All six of them. I can name them on just under two hands; my mother, your mother, [inaudible 0:27:51.5]. That's three.

[0:27:53.6] DS: Perhaps definitely not listening.

[0:27:55.6] AK: The person that is editing this podcast, that's four. Then some random guy from Bolivia.

[0:28:01.9] DS: Yeah, and your editor needs to — We need to send them a baked ham as a thank you.

[0:28:06.4] AK: Yes. Yes, and he's listened twice. He counts as two people. There's a good deal, a very large percentage of people that are listings to this show that will be thinking, "This is really interesting, but I don't work in a newsroom. I work in a corporate where we publish information about the products," or maybe they work in a software company, for example, and they need to tell stories about their users and the benefits of the products that they're making. They're working in a very different kind of area of the industry to what you do.

So I'm wondering about this, this kind of process of collaboration, because I'm thinking of some of the places that I've had experience of working with where these kind of almost like editorial conversations don't necessarily happen. For example, a marketing lead might have said, "Right. Our theme for this coming month is going to be — I don't know productivity, which sounds very boring and probably is."

[0:29:21.6] DS: I like being productive sometimes.

[0:29:23.2] AK: But there are ways in which you make a story even if it's a story about a user of a product and how it's made them more productive. There are ways in which that you can make that much more engaging by, as you said before, kind of elevating the meaning of what you're trying to convey.

I wonder about whether or not those kind of editorial style discussions happen typically inside that scenario. I don't know whether they do.

[0:29:54.5] DS: I think they probably don't happen very often, but I can think the hallmark of it would be — Like if I was going to go back into — I was a consultant for a lot of years, and if I was going to go back to doing product stuff, I would definitely ask more often, "What do you want somebody to feel?" as supposed to, "What do you want this page to say?" because there's this strange literalism that spills out of it, and I think — I do feel bad because editorial design has had a resurgence in art direction, but I don't think that that has happening as much on the product side, because people think, "Oh! It's less obvious and it's easier for me to get a big hero image of a laughing businessman eating a salad kind of thing. That's what we'll n our mind, the cliché of like, "Look! It's happy people having a meeting."

[0:30:43.0] AK: Ethnically diverse people enjoying a spreadsheet.

[0:30:46.5] DS: Yeah, which seems you are not likely to see. So that weird pat literalism follows from it and it's because of like, "We wanted to say this. We wanted to say it's productive." It's like, "Do you want them to feel like they're that?" There's other ways to do that. There's exercises and abstract thematic thinking that probably don't happen as often inside of, well, any shop for that matter including editorial.

I'll give you a really interesting example that I don't know is quite working just yet; Dropbox. Has anybody noticed this like they picked up like editorial illustrations in Dropbox. They have this sort of weird and dissonant transition going on from being like, "Here's a straight ahead webby product, very Silicon Valley, and it's picking up these sort of interesting paper cut." Like it's trying the pickup a kind of personality. It hasn't fully transitioned just yet, but there's an example of like they're actually trying to art direct a "platform", and it's interesting.

[0:31:51.6] AK: That's very, very interesting, because that is actually some of the work that I'm doing right now. But I'm thinking back to some of the kind of common things that go out of something like a product company. I'm particularly in the context of marketing where, really, we want people to feel a certain way in order to get them to press the button. So if you think about, for example, a landing page that comes from an email campaign. Something lands in your inbox and you think, "Ah! Right. Okay. This is worthy of my click." Then then they land on the website landing page that involves 400 tracking script so that we know what people are doing. That to me is a perfect opportunity to direct how somebody feels so that we could more effectively kind of draw them down towards the cultural action. Download the software, download the e-book, sign up for the free trial or whatever that thing needs to be. I think that those kind of areas absolutely ripe for good art direction.

[0:33:05.3] DS: That's interesting too, because it also highlights the other thing that despite the fact that a lot of people listening to this are probably web designers. I think that we still approach art direction as like a one-dimensional thing, and on the web it's also like we have the element of time and interaction. So like how do things unfold? How do they reveal themselves? That's really relevant to a product and that actually should be considered part of like directing the experience and directing the art direction as opposed to thinking in terms of static layout. We still don't have really great tools for doing this. Like there's some prototyping tools and they're stuff we do encode and there's stuff we do to try to [inaudible 0:33:47.4] or demonstrate it, and that also includes like a terribly dry term to describe a wonderful thing, like a user flow, like how does somebody get around inside of your product, inside of your house, your site, your articles, whatever it is you're building online, because there is more than one moment in it.

[0:34:07.4] AK: That aspects of time I think is really fascinating. I did a talk — Oh! A good few years ago now, which was kind of inspired by Scott McLeod. If anybody's not read *Understanding Comics* by Scott McLeod, you should just get on to — Go to your favorite bookstore, preferably a real-world bookstore and go and dig this book out. The whole kind of premise of his talk was about pace and about how you would slow people down and speed people up at various moments to kind of enhance that aspect of the narrative even if it was done very, very literally,]less comic books do with kind of panel size, for example, all repetition of shapes just to kind of create that rhythm.

But that's still very one-dimensional. That's still thinking about flat pixels on a screen, this idea of unfolding a folding a message. I'm going to stop calling them stories, because I think that that could actually be quite a — I don't know, a divisive term for a lot of people. They think, "I don't tell stories," but, in fact, everybody does.

But that aspect of kind of time and interaction and the unfolding of a story possibly across different media, how you kind of tell that story how that story — I have said bloody story now.

[0:35:41.8] DS: Seven times. It's funny that that particular word, when I got to the current gig, bothered me for a little bit, because I'm like I'm in a newsroom, I'm in this great investigative journalism thing and the term there is we refer to them as stories. I was like, "No! They're articles." The stories are things you tell people or you make up that, "Oh, wait a minute. That's something you tell someone." That was the beginning of like accepting the term of going like, "All right. This is something that unfolds over the experience of reading it or interacting with it," and I kind of accepted it.

But I would definitely — Coming in from the outside, it was a like, "What? They're not articles? They're what? They're stories? Okay." Then realizing that that sort of brought a little bit more depth to it and a little bit more of an implication about what they're supposed to be and do. So I learned to embrace it.

[0:36:31.5] AK: This aspect of — Here we go, storytelling across different media. When I think about the different channels that people will engage with a brand on, for example, or a publication, it's going to be everything from kind of social media posts through to potentially you

subscribe to the newsletter, the email newsletter or you then go on the web, and even to the extent of kind of video within those kind of channels as well. There's a lot of very kind of different skills, different experience involved in all of those areas to make the social post effective or to make the email clickable or whatever.

So I'm fascinated by this kind of idea of collaboration and how art direction can sort of sit almost in the middle of that team just to make sure that the message doesn't get lost in the gaps when people move from one thing to the next.

[0:37:42.3] DS: I definitely have — I mean, I could think of a couple examples from my own work in a newsroom. The one that I can think of that sort of like are, a, number one example, was a story that we did. Oh God! It's now two years ago, I think, that actually won the Pulitzer that year. It's a fairly serious story. It was called an *Unbelievable Story of Rape*, and we co-published it with the Marshall Project, which was another — It's a criminal justice, nonprofit newsroom here in New York, and art direction played a huge, huge role in how that story came together and was structured even though looking at it, it doesn't call attention to itself in a huge way.

The way the story unfolded was that there were two reporters on it. There was one in our newsroom and one at theirs. The story is, is this woman was assaulted by this criminal and she went to the police. They convinced her that she had made up her story and they socked her with criminal charges. Years later somebody else investigating assaults in another state managed to track down this guy who was assaulting women, and when they finally arrested him, they found photos of the original victim that he had taken when he had assaulted her. So it turns out she was telling the truth all along.

Their reporter happened upon the story with the victim in Washington State, and our reporter happened upon it with the police in another state and literally at one moment they said [inaudible 0:39:10.0] was calling like a cop something to say, "Hey, I want to ask you some questions about this story," and they're like, "I don't know why you want to talk to me about this. That reporter at that other newsroom just talked to me about it."

It's the classic newsroom moment of slam down the receiver and go like, “Holy shit! Someone’s scooping me out my story.” But because we’re both like nonprofits and we want to collaborate, we called call them up and said, “Hey, rather than competing on this, why don't we just go in together on this? You’ve got a great angle over there and you’ve got one over there.”

So we decided to throw in together on this story with like two reporters and both design groups. It was Gabe Dance and Andy Rossback back over at Marshall Project. Me and Rob on our side, and at least I've [inaudible 0:39:49.8] who was one of their art directors, and we had this problem right off the bat, which is two different reporters were already really far down the line of reporting out and writing the story in their own style. We actually had a meeting and we’re like, “Well, the first thing that most newspapers would do is they’d take both your drafts, mash them together into one edit and like obliterate the voice differences between you.”

I sort of said, “Well, hey, wait a minute. Why don't we just embrace that? Why don't we art direct the story so that it is told in two parts or interns from two perspectives?” So the one reporter covering the cops, you will tell your narrative and we will alternate between that and the narrative of the victim and we’ll literally art direct them in different ways. So when you are with the victim and talking to her about her world, it's literally all figurative illustrations. When you are on the cop’s side, it is all evidentiary photography. That was a case where art direction literally set the editorial structure for the piece and it was all done through collaboration with the reporters and across two different newsrooms were sharing like a repo in GitHub for pulling this altogether. That is a case where, literally, art direction went so far as actually set storytelling structure and further. So that's like my A, number one, textbook example of when it really works.

[0:41:10.2] AK: But I we've actually maybe even talked about this story on a previous edition of this podcast.

[0:41:15.9] DS: Oh, damn! I’ve repeated myself.

[0:41:18.5] AK: Well, no. It is the kind of A, number one, example that a lot of people cite because of the nature of the story itself, but because of how well that collaboration worked. The way in which that story was presented adds a huge amount of weight to the feeling that people take away when they read it, even down to I think I'm right in thinking that from the victim's point

of view, that story was always told through illustration, whereas from the police side of things, it was always told through photography.

so that is a very kind of almost everything that we think about or I think about in terms of encapsulating art direction in stories of that kind of nature is evident in that post, is evident in that story.

[0:42:13.1] DS: Yeah. I mean, I like to say that not to like toot our own horn or anything, only because I think sometimes art direction doesn't get a seat at the table because people would think of it, I mean, in newsrooms as like window dressing, and that's actually evidence of like we actually edited a story through art direction, which is just not how a lot of people probably from the outside think about it of like, “Oh, you put some pretty pictures on it and you do some things.” It’s like, “No. It can be much, much more than that and much more effective and deeper.”

[0:42:43.1] AK: This really is the numb of it, and I think if I was to kind of try to summarize this portion of our conversation, it would be that whether we want to call them art directors or creative directs or whatever, it's about having somebody who is thinking about the essence of the story. They’re thinking about how the organization wants somebody to feel, [inaudible 0:43:13.3] or horror or whatever it might be when they read the story, and that person having not just a seat at the table, but being almost pivotal in the team that kind of puts that story together. I don’t think that that’s something that necessarily happens other — Well, it may not happen in other kind of web newsrooms, at least not every day, and I certainly don't think that it's the case in a lot of organizations.

[0:43:46.3] DS: Yeah, I think, and that's like I would — This is where sort of I pat myself in the shoulder and just say that like, “That’s where think —” When things work at their best for us, that's one of things we think that sets us apart and one of things we try to talk to — When we talk to other newsrooms, we try to impart as well. It’s like, “Hey, there’s this way of doing things. It’s actually really great and anyone can do it.” If you have predispositions or biases against it, you should really reevaluate it, because it can do this amazing thing for you.

The one — It's funny. I used to work in newsrooms before Republica, then I sort of left and became a consultant and I sort of said, “Oh! I’m never going back to newsroom.” When they came to me, one of the reasons I was like, “I'm definitely going back to a newsroom,” was I was really struck by the other editors where they all knew this sort of intuitively. They knew that it could make stories work better. They were eager to do that. There was no like fighting to get a “seat at the table” as the designer. So I knew that the place was special in that way, and it's not as common as any of us would like it to be or no — Like we all know it could be extremely effective, but it's tough, and something that hopefully folks like yourself writing books and doing this podcast can help teach people that it's an incredibly useful tool. It's not just window dressing.

[0:45:06.4] AK: You and I were laughing before we hit record on this episode about the wiggly worm in Skype. First of all, Skype changes its design probably more often than you publish articles or you publish stories. Every time I open Skype I have to hunt around to try to find the furniture. In this particular case — And I don’t know. Maybe it's been there for a while. I don't know. Maybe I just haven't noticed it because I’ve been trying to find the record button. This wiggly worm, when you type something I can see that you type something and I can see that you're typing something, because it is like the wiggly blue worm. Is that direction?

[0:45:51.4] DS: I would say yes. Now, the question is who is it for? What it's supposed to say? Is it effective? Like those are all open-ended things. I mean, maybe it's extremely effective, because we’re totally talking about it. Did it surprise into life? Did it infuriate? Did it confuse the heck out of me? From this side of the Skype panel too, I also I’m like, “What is that?” I’ll give it this. They're actually thinking about it.

[0:46:20.4] AK: I don't know whether this was a live example or just a concept, but a couple of weeks ago I saw this login screen being tweeted about a lot, and it was very simple and I can't remember what the [inaudible 0:46:33.9] the top of the page was now, but I'm going to say it’s a bear. There’s an [inaudible 0:46:39.3] bear at the top of the login screen, and underneath there’s the usual kind of email and password and submit buttons.

So I think as you focused in, as you as you put your cursor into one of those input fields, the bear would move his eyes down to what you're doing, and if you got the password wrong or the

email address wrong, as well as the usual kind of do this again warning, the bear would pull a face, which I thought was a very, very sweet execution. I need to dig that up again actually. I need to ask Twister where I can find that again, because it's a great example, I think, of surprise and delight.

[0:47:21.5] DS: Yeah, absolutely, and I love those kinds of things, because — Number one, you can start to feel the people who put it together. Somebody cared enough to do that thing, But if they don't overplay their hand, it can be brilliant, because like most — Like crass marketing is everything as it at 10. The bear will leap out of the screen and grab you by your eyeballs and make you click, as opposed to, "Hey, it's just thing. Don't worry. People will notice it when they start to engage with or maybe they want, but the ones who do will find it really — It will be fun. It will be clever. It will be okay. We could play it cool and it will reveal itself over time and it will be wonderful." I really appreciate those moments, because somebody thought about that, like actually thought.

[0:48:07.8] AK: Yeah, I really do need to dig up that example, because that will be a really nice kind of talking point for the book. I suppose the decision about how far you take that depends on design principles. It depends on kind of your brand values as well. May be that sort of thing is not as appropriate when you're logging in to file a tax return.

[0:48:33.5] DS: Or is it?

[0:48:35.9] AK: Or is it? Well, that's a very good question. Would I be more likely to want to go through the 480 questions if there was a bear that got progressively happier as I did it? These are the aspects of design in art direction that really fascinate me. What I'm wrestling with is how you really kind of align that to a brand, and I suppose it comes down to possibly kind of deciding on what that brand personality is. I suppose it goes along with toner of voice as well. But I think that's where the art comes in.

[0:49:24.6] DS: Yeah, I would agree with that. In some ways, I would say that product shops have it a little bit harder than newsrooms do, because even if a newsroom doesn't really know it's overall quote on "editorial voice or position", you can always focus in on the story itself and like what that particular story has to say as kind of a cheat, because otherwise it's really hard, a

lot of startups, a lot of product shops to get everybody in a room and get them to focus and get them to be concise and really drag them to the answer of like, “Who are you? What do you want to say? What do you want to be? What is your voice and what is your tone?” We can always fall back on, “Well, this article needs to do this,” and like it's clearly crazy or it’s clearly they’re very serious and let’s just support this one thing on its own, as supposed to, say, your Skype and you’ve got a whole design system and like that should be coherent. Getting everyone to agree on what that is, that's tough.

[0:50:25.0] AK: Can you think of any good examples of art direction in product? I picked up my phone right now and I'm just kind of flicking through my 1,800 home screens.

[0:50:37.3] DS: Oh, I'm actually going to do the same thing.

[0:50:38.3] AK: Because I think that this is of interest to a lot of people. The thing that I can kind of pick up on kind of right now, I suppose, is Slack, which I suppose they've constructed a personality. It's not obvious. They’re not trying too hard necessarily. It’s a very, very difficult one, because it does kind of get into that whole line, blurry area of, “Well, isn’t that just interaction design?”

[0:51:09.6] DS: Yeah. It's funny because I sort of abstain from that argument, because I don't find the distinctions terribly useful in some ways, which is like it's — This is where I sort of retreat back to just capital Design. We all are at some level designers, and it's good to have a notion of like what kind of design you're doing, but if it gets so messy or so semantic that it's something that’s still inarguably like a good design, like I'm going to accept good design, I guess. Maybe I'm like just punting on the argument.

One I’m going to get, I'm totally going to hang myself out here [inaudible 0:51:49.5] I would actually say the Twitter app my phone. It is in that space of interaction design, but like it has a consistently applied graphical style that borders on a little bit of art direction. There are motion elements that are consistent in how they’re presented. Now whether or not you agree with them or you don't, like that’s — I don't know that I necessarily do, but like it's cohesive in some way. It might be cohesive in the way that it makes errors and how it applies some of these things. But I would say that that has what would qualify as art direction.

[0:52:25.2] AK: Well, here's my final question, which I think kind of neatly. I hope neatly. You're probably going to tell me that I'm talking out of my pants, but which people often do. I've been thinking very hard about this term art direction, not necessarily so much in terms of what it does or practically how we achieve it, although I've been thinking about those things too. We started this conversation by talking about what somebody's job title is. Are you an art director? Are you a creative director? Are you a designer? Are you head of design? Or whatever that might be. I'm beginning to wonder whether in the part an art director would have a defined role.

If we go back before the 1960s, an art director would literally put the art to a story or an art to an ad, be thrown over the wall from a copywriting department in [inaudible 0:53:33.3], for example. That role did change and it became much more about crafting ideas and telling stories visually both in kind of advertising and editorial at the same time, and I'm beginning to wonder whether art direction is not job with a job title, but whether it is something that it's an activity that lots of the people involved in writing and design will do.

An interaction design whose thinking about what the bear, what the expression on the bear's face is going to be is performing art direction, that doesn't mean that necessarily they are an art director. Somebody that's choosing illustrations for a corporate brochure is performing art direction, but they're not necessarily an art director. Am I talking out of my hat here? This is how I'm thinking this is how it works.

[0:54:41.4] DS: I think that you have it. I mean, again, we're a smaller shop. So maybe if someday by the grace of whatever we get so big that we have to have divisions of labor because there's too much work to do and you actually hire somebody explicitly like, "Okay. It's your job to communicate this idea of like art direction, and that is what you will do all the time." I do it a lot, but I do other things too, and maybe we would do that. But in the absence of that, and we're much more I think every other newsroom or every product shop, we are all performing that function if we are doing a lot of the design things that we do. It is a skill for us rather than an explicit job role, or title I should say. I think you have it

[0:55:25.8] AK: Well, goodness gracious me. It's the first time that we've, A, either come in exactly on the hour; or B, our guest agrees with me, which it doesn't happen very often.

[0:55:37.2] DS: That's it. We've solved it. We've solved the question of art direction. It happened right now, listeners. That's it. It's done. We're over. It's all fixed.

[0:55:44.8] AK: Excellent. Well, listen. I cannot thank you enough for spending an hour talking about this stuff when you could be out there playing in the snow.

[0:55:55.2] DS: It's either that or I'm shoveling. It's was a lot more fun.

[0:55:57.4] AK: Listen. Thank you, David. This has been fabulous.

[0:56:00.7] DS: My pleasure.

[END]