

SEASON 3**EPISODE 06****[INTRODUCTION]**

[0:00:00.6] 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 user interface so it runs on Mac OS 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 this development. You can find out more and download CSS Grid Builder at cssgrid.cc.

On with the show.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:02:34.9] AK: Hey, welcome to the show. Steven, hey.

[0:02:37.6] SH: Thank you. Good to be here.

[0:02:39.6] AK: This is the part of the podcast where we try to convince that we just started talking. It's like, how are you?

[0:02:45.9] SH: I'm very well. Thank you.

[0:02:47.8] AK: We haven't just been chuntering about other stuff about the last 10 minutes.

[0:02:52.0] SH: No. Definitely not.

[0:02:55.3] AK: Well, now we need to present a profession outlook. We need people to think that we are masters of our craft, that we know what we're talking about. We do. I know that this is all the [inaudible 0:03:07.3]. Yeah, so smoking mirrors. We don't want people to know that. We want them to look up to us, and well actually maybe not. Hey.

[0:03:16.9] SH: No, that would be dangerous, I think.

[0:03:19.9] AK: Hey, I'll tell you what we do need to do just before we start talking about the important stuff, because we're going to talk about art direction, because this is part of a series

about direction. Before we get onto the important stuff Steven, I just wanted to tell you about my coffee mug.

[0:03:36.3] SH: This again. All right, go ahead. Tell me about it.

[0:03:40.4] AK: Well, it can keep a cup of coffee hot for – well, you guess, you guess how long it can keep a cup of coffee hot full.

[0:03:48.3] SH: Probably like a whole day, right? Eight hours.

[0:03:52.2] AK: No. You don't remember anything of that last podcast, where we talked about my coffee cup for like 45 minutes, do you?

[0:03:58.0] SH: I do. I just don't remember the exact amount of hours that it could keep your coffee hot.

[0:04:03.1] AK: Well, you obviously didn't buy one on my recommendation, which I am deeply hurtful.

[0:04:07.5] SH: No, I didn't. I was trying to be polite. Really, I don't want to say that I don't care, but whenever I want coffee, I have fresh coffee. I go get fresh coffee. If I don't have fresh coffee, then I just don't have coffee. I can't see you right now, but I know that you're thinking, "This guy is crazy." Yeah, I just don't want to carry one of those things around with me the whole time. I did look at it on Amazon, because you sent me the link. I looked and I thought, "It looks pretty interesting for people who like that thing."

[0:04:43.4] AK: People who like that sort of thing. What, like Anarex and those trousers that turn into shorts when you unzip the legs.

[0:04:55.0] SH: Yeah, exactly, exactly.

[0:04:56.6] AK: Do you have those?

[0:04:57.7] SH: No, no. I don't.

[0:04:59.4] AK: No. Okay. You don't have much then, do you?

[0:05:01.4] SH: No, no. I'm just a pretty plain and simple person. I have normal pants. They don't do anything special. I have normal coffee mugs.

[0:05:13.5] AK: I like a product that has a certain embellishment to it.

[0:05:18.3] SH: Okay. Well, that is interesting. Because a lot of people in our industry talk about reducing things down to the simplest form. Yeah, I like that. I actually think I have too much stuff in general. I'd like to get rid of a lot of stuff. There's something about the whole minimalist thing that really appeals to me in some kind of way.

I mean, not the minimalist fetishes, you know what I mean, who are counting how many pieces of – how many articles they have in their home. I mean, just the idea of physical stuff clutters your mind as well, that kind of thing. If there are less embellishments – it was like you have the most basic form, but that form is really beautiful in some way, I like that. Call me weird. Call me weird.

[0:06:09.4] AK: What? You are weird. I mean, there's no doubt about it. You invited it. I like stuff, and I'm not saying that I like my house to look like it comes from one of those terrible hoarders programs on the television. I do like stuff.

[0:06:26.5] SH: You know it does doesn't it? It does.

[0:06:29.0] AK: No, it doesn't. I mean, I'm buried in the heat.

[0:06:31.5] SH: Those pictures you put online of your studio and you specifically model those, right? You set that up for the shot and then on a normal day, does it look like that on a normal day?

[0:06:43.3] AK: Well, no. It does look like that on a normal day, because I do like a clean desk. Because a clean tidy desk is a tidy mind. I like stuff around me. I'm sitting here with King Kong posters around the place. I've got my collection of Godzilla action figures. I like stuff, because stuff is stimulating. I don't know what's stimulating about Godzilla, but I like having stuff around. Anyway, we digress. People they're going to start tuning out. They're going to start complaining again.

[0:07:13.9] SH: Well, you know, compared to the last time that we talked, I think people won't complain as much. It's 45 minutes about a coffee mug is pretty heavy duty stuff. We're not doing anything like that.

[0:07:26.3] AK: It's a brilliant coffee mug and it can keep a cup of coffee hot for about four hours.

[0:07:31.9] SH: Four hours. All right.

[0:07:33.6] AK: Yes.

[0:07:34.9] SH: I gave it too much credit basically.

[0:07:37.4] AK: Yeah, yeah. You were begging it up. Anyway, so since the last time I spoke to you, I think you've got a job, an actual job, not a pretend job, but an actual job, where they pay you money to turn up every day.

[0:07:52.5] SH: Yes. Yeah. I considered the job I had before an actual job as well. Yes, I have an employer. I'm a full time employee. That's right. I work at an online marketplace called Catawiki, which started as a platform for collectors. One of the founders collected comic books, and he wanted a place to keep track of his collection.

A lot of people who collect things like to keep track of their collection. It started as this platform for collectors to keep track and share their collections with other people, other enthusiasts and then there was some interest I guess in selling and buying from each other. They chose an auction-like model. You could bid on things.

Then the bidding started in 2011, I think that auction model. It's not an auction house. It's an online marketplace that uses an auction model for you to bid on things and buy them and you could sell them as well.

The idea is that these objects are somehow special. It's not only for collectors, but they're generally not things that you could just find anywhere. It's not auctioning Christie's or Sotheby's and it's also not you could just put anything on there like eBay. We've got over 200 category experts who curate what goes into these auctions. The auctions are weekly.

You have say an affordable art auction. You have a modern art auction for – art from the Netherlands and Belgium and you have from other different parts of the world as well. There is jewelry auction, watches. Then you're thinking about more watches that you just can't find everywhere, that might not be available to you otherwise. Design, furniture, old books, comic books, posters.

[0:09:53.3] AK: Godzilla action figures perhaps.

[0:09:56.2] SH: I think there might be some Godzilla action figures in there. If they're rare or hard to find somehow, or somehow special then you could probably find them in there. We had for example one of the – I'm not sure if it was the very first edition of Tintin, of the comic which got sold for I believe around 10,000 Euro or something.

That's an exception. Things are not going weekly for 10,000 Euro or 50,000. We have classic cars on there. It's actually one of the things that attracted me to the platform is I thought it was just a fun thing to do. I mean, normally I wouldn't be able to buy a painting. I wouldn't know where to go. I'd have to go to Christie's before to feel what that experience is like. That's crazy. Your paintings are selling for like a 100,000.

That's just totally out of my reach. When you go to a platform like this and you can find something that interest you, or that reminds you of something that you had years ago, or whatever special means to you in whatever way then you could find something interesting on there. I think there's something for everybody on there and it's just a fun way to buy these things as well.

[0:11:18.5] AK: How would you classify this then? Would you say that this is a transactional website? Would you call it a product?

[0:11:27.3] SH: Yeah, it's a marketplace. It's a product, it's a marketplace product. I mean, if you want to categorize it then it would be in the same transactional space as eBay, for example. Even though the whole idea of eBay doesn't curate and eBay has – you can put pretty much whatever you want on eBay. The transactions that happen except for the auction part – well the auction part is a little bit different, but there are pretty similar transactionally otherwise.

[0:11:58.5] AK: Okay. Because I'm always, always interested in this distinction between a transactional website and a product. I suppose if you're bidding on Christie's website for example, does that mean that Christie's have a product, or is it a transactional website? I'm never ever sure about what the distinction is.

[0:12:19.5] SH: Well, yeah. I don't know if we need to create a distinction. We like to do that within the industry. We love to classify as much as possible, but why can't transactional website be a product? Is it a product once you have a native app? You know what I mean?

[0:12:36.8] AK: Well, there you go.

[0:12:39.1] SH: I don't know. I don't know that we need it.

[0:12:41.9] AK: The reason that I ask is that – as I think I've told you, I'm writing this short book on art direction. Got a couple of chapters. In part two, which about art directing for marketing and transactions. Then there's another chapter, which I've made the distinction, which is art directing for digital products.

You're making me wonder whether or not those things are two separate chapters, or whether they should be grouped together really under, I don't know, interactions, user experiences?

[0:13:20.9] SH: Yeah, again I'm not quite sure what the value is of that kind of classification. I think if you interact with something, you could say it's a product. What is a product? Yeah, if I go

to the store and I buy an object, you could say that's a product. If I buy shampoo, that's a product.

If the thing that people use that's your business, in this case people use the platform. The platform is we have native apps, we have a website, it doesn't matter which you choose to use, but that is really our product. It's not the objects that are sold that's our product. It's actually the platform that enables this buying and selling that is the product. You could probably say it's a product. Then we call it a product in any case.

The fact that it's transactional in nature, or that you interact with it in a certain way, that just happens to be a characteristic of the product. I'm not even really sure. I think Netflix is a product, right? Or is it just a – you know what I mean? This is a weird definition rabbit hole.

[0:14:36.8] AK: Yeah. I think sometimes, we enforce possibly false dichotomies on things. There's a couple of things that you just said, which I think we should talk about at more length. I don't know in order, but there's a couple of things that you talked about. I'll preface it by saying that you and I have had many conversations online and off about art direction. You've written articles about art direction in the past, which you are often referenced. When people talk about art direction on the web, they talk about posts that you've written and posts that Dan Mole has written for example.

This series of podcast is all about art direction and what it means and how it affects the work that we do, whether it's in product or on the web, if you want to make that classification. What's interesting about what you just said there, maybe we can tackle this in a couple of different orders is one is where art direction fits into product design.

The other thing which actually just came to mind as you were talking just then, is about the fact that many businesses operate on different channels, be it a native app, or a mobile website, or a desktop app, or a TV interface or whatever. You think about Netflix. Their promise is basically you can watch anything on anything whenever.

I really want to talk about art direction in the context of possibly the gaining or creating a unified experience that goes right the way across all of these channels. Does that sound like a plan?

[0:16:22.4] SH: Sure. Yeah.

[0:16:23.4] AK: Good. I'm glad we agree on something. I don't know where you want to start. I mean, let's talk about the second part first. Let's talk about art direction in digital products, because of works in the past with people who consider themselves to be product designers that have skills that go far deeper, far beyond what I consider my skills to be in terms of really designing things like user flows. Focusing in on making it very simple for somebody to carry out whatever task is that they want to carry out. Upload a PDF, download a PDF, do whatever they want to do.

I've never ever considered myself a product designer. I've always wanted to be involved in communication more than anything else. I work with people that consider themselves product designers. Often when we have conversations about art direction, I use the term art direction. It isn't something that resonates commonly with people that design digital products. I find that interesting.

[0:17:39.3] SH: Yeah. That is interesting. The whole enterprise is interesting as far as product design goes. Even just the word product design in general, within the context of the web is – I even feel like the term product designer was a backlash from the people who were rebelling against the term UX designer, which is UX is so vague.

I'm head of UX. That says nothing to 98% of people. Those other 2% that do understand it, they still need a little bit of clarity about what the hell does that mean within your context. UX, because it's such an umbrella term of sometimes it's about actual skills you have, but it's sometimes it's just about the t-shape designer who's focused deeply in one area and has also dabbles in behavioral psychology and information architecture and that kind of thing.

You have the problems you don't know where the vertical part of the T is. You always have to ask. I think that people have the idea that product designer, I don't know. I think some people think it just sounds better, sounds more important. You're making that thing as opposed to you are sketching wire frames and doing a lot of – hanging up a lot of posted notes about that thing.

I've never met a product designer who is doing anything different than the people that I know who call themselves UX designers. They do essentially the same thing, and I'm sure that's not the case everywhere, but literally everyone that I've ever seen who call themselves UX designer and people who call themselves product designer, they do essentially the same things.

I think the term is just awkward. I think the attempt was to get a term that's a little bit clearer and it failed. I mean, that's just my opinion. When someone says product designer, I still have no idea what they mean. I have to ask them, "What does your day look like? What do you touch? How do you work with people within various teams? How do you deal with stakeholders?" The whole thing I have to ask.

With product design, art direction is a little bit hard to give what is that within the context of product design. I think that it overlaps with this idea of user experience, at least in the Dan Norman sense, I think we've talked about this before, user experience being the entire thing from A to Z, right?

[0:20:14.6] AK: Yeah. It's interesting. I in preparation for this conversation and bloody hell, people aren't going to believe that I actually do prepare sometimes for these conversations.

[0:20:24.6] SH: I'm surprised. I'm surprised.

[0:20:28.9] AK: No, I actually asked a question off Twitter yesterday. I asked, "Does art direction have a place when making digital products?" I've got two of the first replies here. One from David Parrel. Hey, David. Who says, "Once the user experience has been designed, then I think there's a place for art direction."

Then literally next to that in my timeline is a reply from Marco Pisani. Hi, Marco. He said, "Art direction is fundamental to UX. It's about the art of setting the right expectations and supporting the product with meaningful visual communication and messages. How the user feels by using a product makes the difference between good experiences and great experiences."

[0:21:20.4] SH: I think that's really well formulated. Yeah.

[0:21:23.0] AK: We have two tweets, both with a very different view. I wonder as we get deeper in this UX, or product design era, whether or not art direction is something that we need to clarify, because to me if we're thinking about the sort of stuff that I would talk about with Mark Porter, or you normally, or Dan Mole, it's all about extracting meaning and making somebody feel a certain way when they read a piece of editorial, or they see an ad for example.

I'm wondering part of the pondering that I'm doing for this series of podcast and for the book is trying to find ways of actually clarifying this idea that what we're doing is we're making feel in a certain way often.

[0:22:15.7] SH: Yeah, it's a combination I think of trying to elicit a certain feeling, but there's a goal behind it as well. Generally in print art direction, you're trying to find a way to communicate more effectively by opening that door to the feelings. When you do that, people can relate to something, your message a lot better, a lot easier.

They recognize something in there. There is some kind of recognition that happens when you – or not, but the thing is that you'll appeal to people by creating something that matches some part of their experience that they can relate to and that is much stronger than just say, here is a product.

[0:22:59.4] AK: Yeah. I mean, it's interesting. Sorry listeners, but this podcast is not just Andy reading out people's tweets in his timeline, but there is some real gems here. Marco, I mentioned a minute ago goes on to say, "Airbnb is the best example of this. After the rebranding, they focused on being consistent with the message and every single pixel of their digital products screens with us, you'll have the best time of your life. Thanks to art direction they sell experiences and not rooms." This guy is good.

[0:23:34.9] SH: Yeah. That's a good description as well. I think –

[0:23:37.4] AK: I really like that.

[0:23:39.1] SH: Yeah. Actually the tweets you had before I think as well, especially the second one that hit home for me. I think Airbnb – okay, so now you get into this thing where digital

products are hard, complex, big things. You've got companies with lots and lots of people. It's really hard to get something done well like that.

I think Netflix does a lot of things really well. I think Spotify does a lot of things really well. I can't say that there is necessarily a story behind each of these, but I know that good art direction always has a story. Even if you can't see what the story is not literally brought to you, like here we're going to explain to you the story. It's an undertone. It's like subtext. You feel it somehow.

I think that that's what makes one product completely different than another product. You have a lot of products that are the same. I don't just mean visually, but they just feel the same. You have that with playing all the informational websites, blogs, whatever. You can see what things have a story behind them, where people were actually thinking about that, and which don't.

What we don't see unfortunately is the struggles that people have and there might be some good stories to build a complete experience on that for technical reasons, for political reasons, money reasons, whatever reasons you might have that these are able to come to fruition, or they take a long time to do so.

I think that any designer that you talk to on any product that's trying to do something, achieve something with our direction, probably doesn't feel like they're done yet. They feel like they're only getting started.

[0:25:33.7] AK: No, it's really coincidental that Marco brought this up on Twitter, this Airbnb example, because only this week I've been working on some visual identity positioning for the company that I'm working with now. Airbnb was one of our top examples.

The reason for that was because whereas for example does this – I think Kevin talked about this recently, this mono-culture or visual identities in tech products, where all of the illustration tends to look the same. One of the things that I found inspiring about Airbnb and I think Uber is another great example of this, is that they are selling the weekend in San Francisco, or they're selling the festival or whatever.

They're not selling just a room. It's about kind of nailing that promise and communicating that, but the trick, the trick I think and I'm trying to get my head around this is how you then take that message all the way down into the small aspects of design, be it the style of an icon, or possibly the language that you use on a label; the tone of voice for example. I find these bigger examples of product to be really fascinating.

[0:27:06.6] SH: Yeah. What's even more fascinating is how they've been able to do it. Generally, it's because of the importance that the organizations places on design. When I say design, I mean that in the broadest sense, which would include art direction in this case. That Airbnb, I mean it's no secret that design is super important from the founders down, you see at Netflix. I believe they have a design engineer ration of one to three.

There are companies that find design to be very important. Those companies tend to be the ones that other companies, or product designers will look at and say – I mean, how many people have you met who use Airbnb as an example of something? That, I mean even if doesn't apply, they're using Airbnb as an example. The Airbnb is the go-to look what they did, and they're doing lots of great things. That's because design is so important in the organization. That's a big thing as well.

[0:28:09.6] AK: My final tweet read comes from, gosh and I've not seen this guy for probably a decade, but Keith Robinson, who is now – I don't know whether you have met D. Keith Robinson, but he's now a designer over at Atlassian in the states. They're a Sydney-based company, but he's actually working for them in the states.

His reply to my question was yes, I think art direction is especially important for things like sign-ups and onboarding. The handoff between marketing and product. I'd also add empathy and intro states visual feedback and animation, moments of delight and even aero messaging.

This is one of the things I've been wrestling with work-wise is where we can do two things. One way we can inject the brand personality. We can art direct that brand personality and get that into the product. Then the second part I want to talk about in a minute, which is those moments of delight or micro-interactions or whatever. Do you think he's right? I mean, does the art direction stop at the onboarding, or at the product at all? Or does it go deeper than that?

[0:29:31.8] SH: Well, I think it often does stop there. I think it should go deeper than that. I think it should permeate through everything. There should be a completely congruent experience. It's awkward to have this well art directed onboarding and then come into the product and think this is a – what the hell is going on here? That happens a lot and there are many reasons for it, but if you really –

[0:29:56.7] AK: Well, give me an example of what that disconnect might look like.

[0:30:00.6] SH: Okay. Well, I don't have right now at the top of my mind an actual real-world example, but there are sometimes you have these great marketing campaigns. It's like you use this product. You see all these images and they give you the visually well-designed this is a great platform and you can – it will change your life or whatever. Then you login and it ends up being this – like it was built by a completely different company.

Then you really know there is this disconnect between marketing and that the marketing design, or the onboarding design and what happens beyond that, which looks like it was built by engineers. That thing I've seen before and I don't really have an example that top of mind, but I'm sure you've seen things like that, where you felt this disconnect. It felt like the outside of the house was very pretty. It looked beautiful and then you go inside and it's all old and ripped up. I don't know.

I've seen that thing before. That's where you can feel that within the organization they feel like the actual meat of the product, that's a developer thing. The marketing stuff making it look pretty – it's like what I've talked about for many years that idea that many people that designers are there to make things look pretty and don't touch our part of the product or whatever. It doesn't feel right. Yeah, there is just this disconnect. It's almost like two products in a sense.

[0:31:35.6] AK: I can think of a couple of almost like visual examples. I don't know whether we think of these as being design examples, or art direction examples, but I'm always very fastidious about balancing really simple things. Really simple things like the weight or thickness of a line, I often will take as either a mirror or a proportion of for example the stroke in a tight face.

I would look at for example the style or the color of shadows, or something like that being echoed in things like illustrations that we might use in other places. I suppose it also comes down to even those small things, those small animations, or transitions that you might commonly see on the marketing side of a business, but may or may not have been translated into product. I think there are sort of very simple low-hanging fruit there that can help people create much more of a unified feel to it.

[0:32:51.6] SH: Yeah. You know what, I'm going to ask you to Google something. If you Google my name in design funnel, then you'll probably come across an article that I wrote, a little bit that I wrote many years ago, which has a funnel. The idea of sales people have a funnel, so we designers should also have a funnel.

It describes that process of going from a – these values, these vague abstract values and goals that you might have as an organization, and then moving down this funnel to form individual language, which leads to what people call the design. I've talked with Jeremy Keith about that, because he saw one of the presentations where I talked about that funnel. I'm actually thinking of changing the last thing, the last part of the funnel from design to define – I thought that was an interesting suggestion of his.

This idea that the visual language is pretty far down the funnel, so before you get there, you have these values and goals and then you can come up with metaphors or stories, or things that you feel reflect those values and goals. Then you would have same moods. Then you'd have metaphors or stories that would reflect those moods, that would in turn reflect the values and goals.

Only then would you start working on the visual language, which reflects those metaphors or stories, which in turn reflects etc., etc. Once you have that visual language, you're putting something together that has that feeling that you want trickling down through all the little bits of it. I think that a lot of designers today, they jump right in at the visual language part and they grasp onto things like, the little tricks we have. You mentioned a couple of those little tricks, like taking a proportion of the typeface.

Then which typeface are you using and why are using it? How do you come to that conclusion? Those things are sometimes done really, really well, and sometimes they're done in a very surface level. It's a fun side. It's fun and happy and fluffy. Let's use comic sans, or which has mark pulling the set. It's not a bad typeface. People get down on comic sans, but how did you reach these conclusions?

The same questions that you would ask yourself about larger questions about a project in general, these are questions that you can ask about all these little decisions that you've made about your visual language. You'll find that many designers don't either have the opportunity within their work environment, or just don't do those important steps beforehand of – I think that's the difference between an art director and a designer in that sense is that the art director is really focusing on what comes before that visual language, what's got to be the life blood that runs through every limb of this product. I think that's really important.

I know storytelling is like a trendy thing now. It's like the floating buttons of 2000. I hesitate to call it storytelling, because it's not always a story. Sometimes it's more abstract than that. Sometimes it's just a feeling. When I talk, work about what I like to do and anything in a larger organization that's growing pretty quick, it takes a long time to realize and I haven't been here all that long. When I talk about the relationship between people and things and what makes an object special, what makes a thing special.

Well, you could tell me why your King Kong poster is special to you, but I can't use that particular thing as a blanket story to tell everybody. I can collect a bunch of these stories and then figure out a way to put that story throughout the product, so when you go through the website or the app that you get this feeling, like I can find something that gives me that special feeling that that King Kong poster has.

Storytelling is that trendy term, but I feel that sometimes it's about a story, sometimes it's about a feeling. These things are really hard to get across. You almost have to test all your metaphors, all your little ways that you can think of of describing this or portraying this idea that you have and then test it and say, "Okay, if I show these colors, or these –" Well, you know what Dan Mole does, with his – what does he call them again? Where he has a little –

[0:37:38.6] AK: They're not style tiles, or they're –

[0:37:40.3] SH: No, they're not style tiles but he's got –

[0:37:41.4] AK: A similar ilk.

[0:37:43.3] SH: Yeah. I forget the name. I forget what calls them. That's the thing, what you'll do – you'll start trying things out. It's almost like you'll gravitate from the larger mood board type things down to these things where you're showing the elements in your testing to see if they elicit the same type of feeling that you want to have.

I think when you carry that through, that's good art direction. It does like one of your Twitters had mentioned, that's what makes the difference between a good product and a great product. A good product can look good. It's formally well-designed from a visual standpoint, but a great product will have this – it will elicit these feelings that they want you to have, or that attract you to the product in the first place, and that will carry through the entire experience.

I think there's a company here that – do you know Cool Blue?

[0:38:36.0] AK: No, I don't.

[0:38:36.8] SH: Okay. There's a company called Cool Blue, and that you can buy household appliances and computers and that kind of thing, electronics or whatever. They've made this thing about customer support, that's like their big thing. We were totally there for the customer and it's all about people in that sense.

You get a real person come in the house and they'll install your washing machine for you. You have to be completely happy with everything. You open a box and you get this little thank you note. They do that really, really well. They're well-known for the service. The people and how that relates to service, that's the way they decided to – that's the main thing that they decided to run with. They seem to do that pretty well and that's their main driver is customer service.

[0:39:27.1] AK: It's interesting, the I cannot believe that I've known you all these years and we've spoken so many times and yet, I have not come across this design funnel article that you wrote goodness knows when.

[0:39:43.5] SH: Yeah. When I was a lot younger.

[0:39:45.5] AK: Yes, well that happens to all of us darling. I think I'm looking at the third section down of the introduction of this article. I think that you have inadvertently nailed the answer to the question that perhaps I loosely post earlier on, about creating these well-considered, well-art directed experiences that cross different channels, or different products, or different formats or whatever.

It's interesting, you're talking about jumping straight into that creating a visual language level. Looking at your steps here, define values and goals, discover moods and metaphors through association. Generate ideas, define a concept. Then you create the visual language. Once you've done that then you can get on with the actual job of design.

As I think Dan said in his article, do the fonts and the colors match? Does it feel like a balanced layout, the design aspects of it? Looking at this list, I think that it's this definition of defining the values and goals and then expressing those through the feeling that you want to convey to somebody.

You put here discovering and metaphors, but actually that section could actually be about how you want somebody to feel. That could be the glue that sticks all of these different or formats, or channels together. Because having those values and that goal, that's going to inform every aspect of design.

That means that the design of what you put on a small screen or a mobile screen, or in a native app or on a TV, or whatever, it's not going to be superficial. Everything is going to come back to those values and those goals.

[0:41:51.2] SH: Do you know Stripe, the payment provider?

[0:41:53.9] AK: Yes. Yes, I do a. I've never used it, but obviously now over it.

[0:41:59.1] SH: Yeah. We use Stripe and since very recently. One of the things that I personally like about Stripe is they don't have the story, this lofty story. But that you can tell that their whole premise is making payment easy, easy. There were articles about this. Well, there were a lot of tweets about this article where you saw little bits of really bad HTML and that was the seven lines of code that they once wrote and then turned into a billion dollar company or whatever.

What they did was they wanted to make it easy in the first place to include payments, like to make payment possible in your website by adding seven lines of code. They weren't seven lines of bad HTML, by the way. Literally, you could put these lines of code in your sight and now you have payment in your site.

The idea was let's make payment really, really easy. That one thing trickles down to everything they have. Since we've had – we're using them, so I at times had to go into their documentation. It trickles through their documentation. It trickles through to the people that we have contact with at Stripe who actually were helping us out. It trickles through everything, this idea of we're making payment really easy.

The micro-interactions that you referred to, Valhed has talked about in several of her talks where you – these little delightful things that happen and they're tiny little sliding things and whatever, they don't bother you. You don't think about them, but they contribute to this idea of this is really easy. It's going really quickly. It feels nice. Just the subtle colors, the size of the fields, everything they do seems to lead back up to that idea of making payment really easy. I think they do a really good job of that.

To me, that's the type of art direction that really works well on a product. It doesn't need to be some story. I don't have to start crying, because I'm using Stripe. It doesn't need to elicit all these emotions, but I need to have that feeling that this feels right. It feels easy to use and they're true to their statements about making payment easier. I think that's good art direction.

[0:44:22.7] AK: One of the things that came up when we run a design principles workshop recently was that one of those principles was going to be bold. That means that we can often be

provocative for example in messaging and perhaps in some of the ways in which you visualize something. One of the other design principles was reassuring.

I haven't actually really seen that come up, there's a lot of the examples of design principles knocking around, and I thought that that was a very interesting one. That was almost quite difficult to visualize from a design point of view. You can talk about softer colors or lower contrast or something like that.

Actually, the reassurance I think in the context that you're talking about comes through, I can see these things, secure things are moving quickly. My file uploaded very quickly. I can see the preview. There's an empty state that gets filled in progressively, or however that might work.

I mean, I was actually noodling with YouTube earlier on. I was on a 3G connection. There were no videos loading at that point, but the background, which was that Greeked out rectangles and Greeked out text was very, very subtly pulsating, as if I'm just telling you that something is happening.

I'm not setting the wrong expectations by giving you a loading screen that tells you that it's going to be loaded in 15 minutes, but I'm just telling you very subtly that the screen has not crashed. You don't need to restart YouTube app to make sure this thing is working. That's where the reassurance thing comes in, and that's I think when if we're thinking about defining what these goals are, then I think that's – unless, I'm mistaken, that's the design principles level, would you say?

[0:46:22.3] SH: Yeah. I do. I think reassurance is, or any term that you have reassurance and you can come up with any number of terms that you feel are relevant to your product. Something like reassurance to take your example, it's different depending on what your platform is right? When you go to Netflix, what does reassurance mean to you as a customer within the context of Netflix?

[0:46:46.6] AK: Well, I don't use Netflix.

[0:46:48.1] SH: Okay. Well, but do you use any kind of video watching thing service product?

[0:46:53.9] AK: Yeah, well I watch Amazon prime video occasionally. Does the same thing apply to music? Does it apply to my Apple music subscription?

[0:47:02.7] SH: Yeah, or does it apply – is it the same type of reassurance when you're booking a flight or hotel? It's completely different.

[0:47:08.1] AK: No, it's completely different.

[0:47:09.6] SH: Yeah. The tactics you would use at a lower level to provide that reassurance would differ completely. That's also part of that real thinking, where you're not just trying to - you didn't just see something about making nice little micro interactions and the animations and you're trying to apply that to your product. You're actually thinking about what's important to the customer at this point in time.

If I'm booking a flight, other things are very important to me that I need to be reassured about and that's where all your effort could go, into making those things as reassuring as possible. That would be completely different for Netflix and completely different for your music collection, whatever that might be, Spotify or wherever you listen to music. When I'm watching something, I'm worried about is this going to – am I going to be able to watch this thing – is the connection going to be okay? Am I going to be able to watch it without constantly buffering?

[0:48:09.5] AK: Yeah, am I going to be able to watch this all the way through? Exactly.

[0:48:11.3] SH: Right. Is it going to cut out? That's not a real serious problem. If I'm making a payment, booking a flight to say Australia, it's going to cost me a lot of money and then I need to know something is happening. I need to know the payment is secure. I need to feel like I can trust the site. How do you communicate all these things? At many, many different levels.

All the things that we've always talked about and heard about in articles, books, conferences, performance, but also these little tiny design things. Where are you telling someone that the payment is secure? How are you telling them that? How are you making them feel that? That's

what makes it a fun feel to work in, I think is when you can at least work toward that kind of thing.

Because I think we're ever really there. I envy the companies that at least everyone thinks they are there, like Airbnb. I can guarantee you, even though I know at this point right now I don't know anyone I think personally who works at Airbnb, but I can almost guarantee you that they don't feel like they're there yet and the designers is talented as they are, are probably looking for ways to make it even better. That's just my assumption in general, but most designers that I know or have met, always think they can do a better job and they're just constantly working to improve things. Maybe what we all aspire to do is more toward real art direction, which makes design meaningful, I think.

[0:49:45.8] AK: I cannot think of a better place to end it. Thanks. Thanks so much for spending this last hour with me.

[0:49:55.5] SH: Yeah, well thank you for having me.

[END]