SEASON 3

EPISODE 07

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:00.2] AC: 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]

[0:02:34.6] AC: Now you see, this is the part of the podcast where you and me, Rob Weychert, we pretends to the six people that are listening that we haven't been chatting for like the last 15 minutes. We had to make it sound right. We have to make it sound as if we're just meeting for the first time, maybe even across a crowded room.

[0:02:59.7] RB: Is that you Andy Clarke?

[0:03:01.6] AC: That sounds a bit weird actually. [inaudible 0:03:07.7] I can't even get my words out. Our eyes met across the crowded room and there, there was this moment, this spark of recognition. No, it's not going to work, is it? People are not going to fall for this.

[0:03:25.6] RB: I defer to you, podcast master, Andy Clarke.

[0:03:28.5] AC: Nobody see. Actually, the audience is a bit stupid, so they could have fallen for that, but they probably didn't. Anyway, I'm really glad that you could spend an hour with me talking about what I think is going to be a really interesting conversation about art direction. I've been recording this series of podcasts over the last few weeks, and one of the people that I spoke to on the subject of art direction was somebody that — Well, apparently you've met him a few times. You came up in conversation, you and your alter ego when we recorded this show a few weeks ago, which was David Slate. I think you know David.

[0:04:08.4] RB: I'm vaguely familiar with David Slate.

[0:04:11.1] AC: He seems like a weight guy.

[0:04:12.7] RB: A weird guy? Why would you say that?

[0:04:14.8] AC: Yeah. Well, no. I mean, he just sounded like he hadn't put his teeth in before the podcast. No. I'm kidding, David, if you're listening. You sounded very eloquent. But no, your name came up in conversation quite a few times when we were talking about ProPublica. We kept referencing you. I just thought, "Bloody hell! I'd rather hear it from the horse's mouth," and we haven't [inaudible 0:04:38.9]. I think the last time I saw you was in Chicago about — It must've been about eight years ago.

[0:04:50.9] RW: Yeah, or maybe 10. Yeah, it's been a while.

[0:04:55.3] AC: I don't like to think of it being that long.

[0:04:57.6] RB: Well, let's just let's say it was a year ago.

[0:05:01.7] AC: That makes me happy.

[0:05:02.5] RB: Yeah, we're just catching up from about a year ago.

[0:05:05.5] AC: So for those people that don't know you as well as I do — He says not having seen you for 10 years. You're currently working with David Slate at ProPublica. What is it that you do there? What do they call you these days?

[0:05:23.1] RB: So my official title is editorial experience designer, which sounds maybe a little made up, but actually I think it's pretty descriptive about what I do, because on the editorial side of things it's s got to do with storytelling and doing design that is in service to storytelling and I can be very specific and intentional about it. Then the experience designer part is user experience. It's dealing with the site-wide user experience platform level stuff. Figuring out how best to make our site do what it needs to do for the many different kinds of people that read it.

[0:06:02.8] AC: The last time I saw you, I think you were working at Rock Band.

[0:06:08.6] RB: Maybe. Yeah.

[0:06:09.9] AC: It could well have been. What interested me, because I don't stalk you, not every day, but I like to keep tabs on handsome men with impressive beards. I was fascinated, I think we lost track for a little while. I certainly lost track of what you were doing, and then all of a sudden as I became much, much more interested in editorial, because I've been doing a bunch work with people like Mark Porter and various other people much more on that kind of side. At that point I can't remember exactly where, but I became aware of ProPublica, and lo and behold there's a byline on a story that I'm reading and it's you. How did you get from Rock Band to an editorial experience designer?

[0:07:03.5] RB: Yeah, the game company I worked for for about a year and a half was Harmonic. They're famous for creating Guitar Hero, and then Rock Band and a number of other music oriented games, and that was an interesting departure from working on the web because it was a very proprietary software, a very secretive. Also, from an interaction design perspective, it was a really crazy challenge. For a game like Rock Band, I was designing interfaces that needed to be manipulated by people who, number one, probably weren't like gamers and weren't used to navigating around game interfaces. They had to do it with plastic instruments often for people at a time and while they were drunk.

That turned into — That was a very interesting, but ultimately very frustrating challenge for me. So when we finished up Rock Band 3, I decided I was going to move on and try working for myself in New York. So that's what i did. I moved to Brooklyn and just started doing freelance work. This was right when responsive web design had begun, when Ethan Marcotte's A List Apart Article kind of started the whole thing in 2010.

It was exciting to be getting back into web design at that time, but as my freelance career continued, I found that I had a hard time with the hustle, just the fact that you needed to have like six — Be working like six jobs at once essentially to keep all these projects going and other various components of the projects going. I was losing my enthusiasm for the work and I had sort of stopped learning new things right at a time when everything was getting a lot more complex. The different tool chains were really ramping up. Everything was just getting crazy and I just felt like I was perpetually behind.

So I found out that ProPublicc was looking for a designer and I applied and I got it, and since then it's been pretty amazing. My enthusiasm for the work basically just sort of took a 180 and I've been learning a ton since I've been there. Just in a couple of years — So David Slate who you mentioned is the design director of ProPublica and he just sort of like threw me in the deep end with, "All right. We got to get up to speed on git and going to learn Jekyll," and we're using SaaS and all these other stuff that I had wanted to learn but just sort of hadn't found a way in prior to being there.

Yes, I've learned a ton in the couple years since I've have been there. As you mentioned, I've had a couple of bylines, which is really exciting, especially among such an incredible bunch of reporters and editors that ProPublica has. It's been pretty amazing. I feel really thankful to be there.

[0:09:54.6] AC: Did you have an interest in editorial before?

[0:09:57.9] RB: Absolutely. Yeah. When I went to school for design, when I finished school, editorial was kind of what I was most interested in, and at this time too, like my education was all in print. Web design was sort of just starting to happen. We had some — Our curriculum had some sort of interactive electives, but for the most part I was self-taught in web design. So when I first got out of school, I was really interested in working for magazine. I was really inspired by David Carson and that sort of thing, which was happening then.

Yeah, I think I've always been interested in that kind of storytelling. So I was really interested in doing some editorial stuff, and I did a little bit, but especially getting into web design or editorial design at the time really wasn't a thing. That just kind of fell by the wayside. So it's really only recently that I've gotten back into it in a meaningful way working for ProPublica.

[0:10:55.5] AC: I've been working in a product company, and part of what they do is they publish guides for financial institutions and that kind of stuff and things — Sort of insight into how deals are done and markets and that kind of thing. Sitting in a meeting a few weeks ago, we were sort of kicking off a design principles workshop, and I started off — There's bunch of designers from product to marketing in there and I kind of kicked off this session really by

saying, "These are my principles for design. These are the four things that I think are really important." I went through that kind of stuff.

One of the things that I said along the way was, "And what I'm really interested in doing guys is I'm interested in bringing much more of an editorial approach to how we present the content." One of the people that was in the meeting said, "What exactly do you mean by editorial?" I thought, "That's a really good question. What does it actually mean to you? What's the difference between working on something like what we would consider a classic kind of editorial new story for ProPublica versus — I don't know. How somebody presents their about page on their website?" What is editorial mean to you?"

[0:12:27.4] RB: It's a good question. I think in both cases you're talking about storytelling. That's always a component. The design needs to help people understand where this information is coming from, who is conveying the information. But I think when you talk about editorial design in a journalistic sense, it becomes a lot more specific and a lot more in depth, I guess. The about page example that you gave is — I don't know.

[0:12:59.5] AC: I was reading. I was doing a lot of research the other night and I was reading a case study. Forgive me if you're listening, whoever it was that wrote this case study, but I tweeted a link to it, and it was a designer's s portfolio case study about work that he done while at Uber. I got to say, this was the most in depth website portfolio case study I ever seen. I mean, there was a ton of information in there, but it was beautifully thought out, beautifully illustrated. Everything made sense. I was sitting there thinking, "This is an editorial approach." It just wasn't the kind of a dump of words and pictures on the screen.

[0:13:46.6] RB: Sure. I guess the difference comes in when more people get their hands on it, right? On one hand, you can run into a kind of committee thinking situation that we often see in big companies, which nobody likes. It's where everybody's needs are met on the stakeholder's side, but nobody's needs are met on the user's side.

Whereas I think what's fascinated me about working in journalism is all of the effort and attention, and thought that goes into all these little details and that's brought in by multiple people. So when you talk about somebody putting together a case study, I love that sort of

thing. I love when people do deep dives on their work, in their process and trying to explain themselves. I finally love it even more, and this is a luxury, especially when people are doing independent work. I love it even more when they bring in somebody else to offer their perspective and to edit them and to help distill the essence of what they're trying to say and help tease out the different parts of it that maybe they weren't going to be able to express as well on their own. That's the part I think that that's where the difference comes in, where there are multiple people bringing their specific expertise to bear on how the story is being told.

[0:15:02.9] AC: What does your day-to-day look like? Are you in the office of ProPublica or are you working remotely?

[0:15:09.8] RB: I am in the office, yeah. It's getting crowded. We've grown a lot in the last couple of years. Yeah, day-to-day, it varies quite a bit, because — So a lot of last year, for example, was spent working on our new site, and I hesitate to call it a redesign because it's not really. Basically, we moved to the new CMS and build a whole new frontend while we're at it and that sort of thing, but a lot of last year was spent doing that kind of platform level stuff. Now that we've got it in place, we're able to spend more time — Well, for one, slowly tweaking what we've built to kind of bring it even further into the modern era. But on the other hand, we want to get back to doing some more of these custom design, art directed stories. It's usually somewhere between those two kind of poles of doing the system-wide platform level, user experience design, and then the more bespoke custom design of specific stories.

[0:16:10.9] AC: So on the custom design of specific stories, walk me through something like Lost Mothers, which is something that you mentioned to me would be a good example of a piece of work to talk about. What was your first touch? What was your first exposure to that story?

[0:16:35.4] RB: Okay. So Lost Mothers, for anyone is not familiar, is basically a series that we've been doing about maternal mortality in the United States and the rates of women having complications due to pregnancy or were dying due to pregnancy related complications. It's just staggeringly high for the developed world far beyond any other country in the developed world. Our reporter, Nina Martin, wanted to dig into that and try to figure out what was going on.

So we had done one initial story on this topic about a specific woman and that sort of like introduce the concept and showed how this was something of an epidemic. Then the next story which will be called Lost Mothers was meant to try to find more specific stories of women affected by this and tell those stories in a series of vignettes, but also show the broader scope of it and see how much information we could find about all of the women that have been affected by this. There is an estimated 700 to 900 women in the U.S. who died in the year 2016 from pregnancy-related causes. So Nina and her team of researchers wanted to find out about who these women actually are. Find out what their specific stories were.

I came into the process. It had been underway for months already, but I came in and basically — They had this idea for a gallery of like all of these women that we've been able to find out about and information about them, and just to give people a sense of the scope of this at the macro level, but then at the micro level, to get a sense of who these people actually are so that you could really put a human face on this problem.

It was an interesting challenge because, while there were a few different parts that made it challenging. Number one, the gallery idea which I was sort of — I didn't push back on it as much as David did at first. David was really concerned that it was really just going to be something that nobody wanted to look through this page full of unfamiliar faces and there had to be something more interesting we could do with the information that we had and to relate it to the story. There was that part of it.

The other part was that the information we had was so varied and incomplete. They were able to identify about 130 of the 700 and 900 women and speaking to their families, and for those that we couldn't speak to families we're able to get information about date of death and maybe an obituary and that sort of thing. But for some women we had photos. Some women we didn't. We just had — It was sort of a mishmash of information. Also, there is the fact that we only had about 130 out of what may have been as many as 900 women.

The idea that we hit upon was what if we designed this thing to emphasize how little information we were actually able to find even after all this dedicated research time over months? So we built this sort of grid of, "Here is 800 slots in this thing that represents all of the people, and look how few we were actually able to flush out." Then from there, you can dig and find the individual

stories of each person. Then for maybe about 15 of them, we were able to do some more sort of in-depth vignettes about the women. It was a really interesting project.

[0:19:57.4] AC: I mean, it's this fascinating example, a really good example of telling a story, but without being explicit. Does that kind of implicit story, which is this 700 to 900 women and we've only identified currently — I'm looking at the site here, 134. So you get a couple of things from that gallery. You gave a different word a minute ago, but the grid, which shows you the scope of the number of women. But then you can very, very easily see just how few have been identified. It's kind of telling a story within a story.

[0:20:41.7] RB: Yeah, for sure. I mean, this this grid. I mean, the vast majority of it is empty and that sort of the point. The fact that this data is simply unavailable, which means it doesn't bode well for this problem being solved anytime soon, which is like shocking. So that was the idea behind the design was not to shock people necessarily, but just to give you a sense of like how little is really known or understood about what's going on here.

[0:21:09.5] AC: David mentioned when I spoke to him a couple of weeks ago that you move very quickly from sketches into code. So when you're liaising or working with the editors or the writers in this particular case, how much are you sharing with them on a kind of a sketch ideas level? At what point do you think that that's right enough to start moving into code?

[0:21:39.2] RB: That definitely varies from project to project, and actually lately I've been getting into a bad habit of just diving into code way too early and am trying to step back from that and really be more disciplined about doing sketches and iterating rapidly in that fashion before getting into the more slow-moving code part of things.

for this projects, we were able to work with the reporter and editors just to sort of — Almost like a client relationship, where we showed some initial concepts and talked through the benefits and drawbacks and then just iterated through a few possibilities just in like some very basic wire framey mockups. Once we really started moving, the basic concept, what it wound up being, came together fairly quickly over the course of maybe a week or so if I remember correctly. Yeah, in this case, yeah, we did a bunch of mockups and then moved into a basic prototype and then just slowly started building up what it was actually going to be from there.

[0:22:48.2] AC: Do you do high fidelity mockups for anything? Do you dig out sketch once in a while?

[0:22:53.2] RB: I rarely do that sort of thing anymore. Again, I'm trying to find my way back to it. Not necessarily back to doing these sort of like pixel perfect Photoshop mockups like we always used to do, but finding some kind of middle ground between wireframe and the finished piece and code. I'm still sort of figuring out how best to adapt my process in that way. In the kind of work that we do, which often has to move really fast, it's an interesting challenge. Yeah, I'm still trying to figure that out.

[0:23:25.8] AC: I mean, it's interesting that you just said those fateful words; pixel perfect.

[0:23:32.1] RB: Yeah. Remember that?

[0:23:33.0] AC: Yeah. You see, I do remember that, but then I do know a lot of people, particularly since sketches become such a phenomenon where there's almost being this kind of resurgence in people doing pixel perfect mockups. Particularly even on what are sort of so cold agile teams. There's a hell of a lot of kind of waterfall effort that goes into making high fidelity sketch comps.

[0:24:01.2] RB: I get what you're talking about there. I guess I hadn't thought of it in that way, because sketch in particular, I have not yet taken to very well. Part of it is just that I've been using my illustrator and Photoshop and whatever forever and sketch has, in some ways, a fundamentally different way of thinking about things, but i still have a really hard time working with type and sketch, and type is so core to what I do that that's been a real stumbling block for me with sketch. I'm still trying to find my way with it. Everybody seems to love it and it seems to be this de facto standard now, but I have not found my into sketch just yet.

[0:24:42.7] AC: You talked about pixel perfect and then in pretty much the same sentence talked about typography. One of the things that kind of interests me about the likes of you and me who worked on the web when pixel perfection was something to strive for, and I suppose

over the last — I don't know how many years it's been since Ethan's' article, eight or so? A little bit longer since the iPhone came out.

One of the things that we've learned is that we should have all listened to John Allsopp and his DAO of web design back in the dawn of time and kind of respected this kind fluidity. One of the things that I find sort of interesting about this whole kind of art direction topic, particularly when it's used in respect to layout, is how do we balance those two demands? How do we balance the needs for flexibility, but still have control enough to convey the message that we want to convey?

[0:25:59.3] RB: Yeah, it's sort of been the defining question of responsive design, I guess, right? Or to your point, if we want to take it all the way back to John Allsopp's A list Apart Article from — I don't know, 2000 was it?

[0:26:14.3] AC: 2000. It was. No, it's 2000. I know.

[0:26:16.8] RB: Yeah. I mean, I'm really glad that we finally come around to that. I think for years we didn't really have the tools to reconcile that flexibility that he talked about with a lot of the — Particularly, typographic design principles that we've always wanted to maintain, particularly things like line length and that kind of thing.

So it was exciting when responsive web design came around and offered a way to reconcile that flexibility and also that level of — I don't know, just maintaining these important design principles. I really come to like it. In some ways, I miss being able to just create a web design much in the way that I would a print design, just a very sort of static fixed kind of situation. What I love about the web is that people can take it in however they want to, and so I love building things and thinking about, "Well, how is this going to — What is this going to look like in an RSS feed," or if somebody brings it in InstantPaper or Pocket or something like that? Are they going to be able to still have a good experience taking in this information?

I think a lot of people find that sort of thing really frustrating and I definitely do to, because it's a lot more time consuming and it takes a lot more effort than it used to. But I think it's also sort of fulfilling, as the promise of the web always had of coming to people on their terms and letting

them take in information the way that they want to and the way that they need to. I think we're getting better at it. I think we're finding ways to build these design systems that can work across these different platforms and on different screens and everything else. Let me think of an example.

[0:28:07.8] AC: I'm beginning to wonder whether really precise control of layout for — I don't know. I'm just going to say kind of large screens. It's kind of almost like another layer of progressive enhancement, I suppose, if you want to look at it that way. When you get to a screen that is big enough to display this stuff, then you can have the fancy grid layout.

[0:28:32.7] RB: Yeah. It's funny how I think a lot of people still sort of fetishized this big-screen layout thing, and I'm not exempt from that. Even though the vast, vast, vast majority of people looking at your stuff is almost certainly looking at it on a tiny little screen that they keep in their pocket. That's been really interesting too, because the disparity in screen real estate definitely offers its own interesting challenges in terms of making something that's unique and memorable, because that's one thing that I'll be really curious to see where we go in the next few years. What we're able to do from a storytelling perspective on a small screen, because it's still very much this just tall stacked thin layout, and I'm sure there more interesting things we can be doing there that we just haven't figured out yet.

[0:29:26.4] AC: Quite often when people start to talk about art direction for the web, it's very, very often kind entwined with new layout technologies, like CSS Grid, for example. I've seen talks about real art direction for the web, which is essentially, "Let's make this magazine layout in CSS," in ways that we weren't able to do that before. I think that's great and it's a really good kind of technical demonstration of what these things can do.

To me anyway, the layout is only one facet of the tools that we would use for art direction even on the tiniest screens. We may not have layout in the broad sense to the columns, but we still got mood. We still got feeling. We still got great typography. Yeah, there is this kind of extra level. I wouldn't say that it's like a third dimension, but there is this whole — I don't know, interactive set of metaphors that, yeah, you don't really see people exploring that much.

[0:30:38.4] RB: Yeah. I go back and forth about those things. I'm a big believer in simplicity, so I tend to try to distill things down and just get rid of any extra stuff that doesn't need to be there. For what I do, a lot of that tends to just boiling things down past like fancy interactivity. It's just like, "Here's the stuff. Here's the imagery. Here are the colors and the shapes and the type and everything else." I tend to be less interested in doing anything that's — I don't know. They would be very sort of superficially forward thinking, if that makes sense.

[0:31:20.5] AC: Bells and whistles.

[0:31:22.8] RB: Yeah. Yeah, that's a good way to put it. But I do worry that that kind of thinking that I miss out on opportunities. I guess what I want to try to find the balance between really going for it with just trying super crazy experimental stuff, but also maintaining this fundamental base layer of like, "Here is the thing, unadorned. Take it as it is." Yeah, it's an interesting balance to try to find.

[0:31:55.3] AC: Because on a superficial level, if you look at many of the kind of famous examples. I don't know whether we're recording at this point, but you mentioned David Carlson a little bit earlier. I'll see your David Carlson, and I'll raise you Neville Brody, where really what we — When we look at magazine work, we think about those things in terms of, yes, there was a lot of kind of experimental what. There was a lot of deconstruction, but at the same time there was a lot of control, because you were looking at a print publication. When we work in this medium, we really all giving up control. We don't have the ability to control what size somebody sees the type or what layout is, or even if they can see the screen all.

There is this kind of dichotomy, which is kind of interesting to me, because I'm thinking if that's what people will traditionally think that art direct action is, in this modern context we need to redefine it. What is that redefinition?

[0:33:10.3] RB: That's a fair point. Yeah, I mean we had talked a little bit earlier about this idea of art direction as a component of user experience, or if it's really just a synonym for user experience. We talked a little bit about how I think part of this is bound up in how nomenclature of our industry has changed over the last decade or so where you or I just used to call ourselves

web designers. I don't think that term even exists anymore, because you're either — You're a product designer, or a UX designer, UI designer or whatever it is.

I think as the web's capabilities have from a traditional design perspective started to catch up to what we've been able to do in print for so long. Yeah, the term art direction needs to be more accommodating, because as you said, it used to be so much about this particular level of control, and in some sense sort of self-expression. Whereas as now it's available in this context that is much more fluid and needs to accommodate, in fact, its strength is it is able to accommodate all different kinds of people who might be — As you said, might not be able to even see what we're designing for them.

[0:34:26.0] AC: I mean, I don't want to take a trip down memory lane, but I will anyway. When I was at art school back in the 50s, I think, I like to think that I'm a mid-century kind of guy. It always amuses me when I see some kind of a restoration program or antique show on the TV and they talk about stuff from the 70s being mid-century and I'm like, Oh, yeah. That's me."

Anyway, but back at art school, I studied fine art. I didn't study graphic design, and a lot of this stuff that I'm interested in now I didn't know anything about back at that point. I find it interesting as I've done much more research on this kind of thing, that when we talk about some of those — I'm not going to call them classical, but some of those kind of often cited art directors from the print world. Going back to the 1940s and slightly beyond, is that one of the things that they had, and I suppose this is to do with the self-expression thing that you mentioned, but one of the things that they all kind of seem to have in common was that they had a really broad interests in other forms of art. They would be either — It was Alexey Brodovitch I learned actually beat Picasso to the first prize of a poster competition, which is staggering, and [inaudible 0:36:01.4] and other people, they had a massive kind of interest in photography and that really kind of influenced their work. I think that a lot of those people kind of intuitively knew how to combine imagery with the written word, even to a layout extent.

I wonder sometimes — And we're sort of slightly drifting off topic, but I do wonder sometimes that when we get hyper focused on things like product design, that we're just putting the blinkers on just a little bit.

[0:36:35.5] RB: Yeah, I don't know. That's interesting. It sounds to me like you're talking about design practitioners used to have more of a footing in the art world in tandem with their design work. Is that what you're saying?

[0:36:50.0] AC: Yeah, it was, and that foot in the art world, and I think my modern day equivalent of that might be somebody like Brendan Doors, for example. It was that foot in the art world that would give them the different perspective on things.

[0:37:07.0] RB: Sure. Yeah, and I can see that. I think that we do have more of a tendency to have sort of tunnel vision about what we do now and things can get a bit mannered. We see that with sort of how the web was taken over by bootstrap layouts and that sort of thing over the last several years.

I hesitate too. I'm not sure that — It's hard for me to really have a sense of how the industry at large brings other influences into its work now with regard to being influenced by the art world and finding interesting ideas there that can happen in their design work.

[0:37:49.7] AC: I suppose the big question — And this just come to mind, but I suppose what I'm trying to get to is do you want directors need to have that broader perspective and that broader interest to be able to really understand how to do things like you've done with the grid on the Lost Mothers, so that it's not just a kind of a web convention, but it's something that may be informed by — I don't know, Damien Hirst painting.

[0:38:26.0] RB: I mean, I think what you're talking about is visual thinking, right? It's being able to make associations between things that aren't obvious and that most people would not make. Not to suggest that this is any particularly striking example, but The Lost Mothers gallery visually was partly inspired by the floor of the elevator in ProPublica's building, which has dot grid. I see it every single day, and one day I was like, "Oh! That could be an interface."

I think whether or not somebody is — Wherever somebody is pulling these ideas from, it's this idea of looking outside of the specific discipline that you're working in and finding ideas from other places that can be valuable in what you're doing. Whether that's the art world, whether it's just seeing things in the city, on your commute that you see every day, nature, all these sorts of

things. I'm not so concerned that people have a specific kind of cultural literacy that they can bring to their work as much as they have a certain visual thinking acumen and they're able to just make interesting connections that will push their work forward into new and valuable and interesting places.

[0:39:44.2] AC: Well, here's the million dollar question then, everybody, the world and his mother is talking about design systems right now and those things mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people. You touched on bootstrap as — I suppose we still call it a framework, but what that turned out to be ultimately was, "Oh! That's layout sorted then," or "Oh! There's my typographic scale," or "Oh! Yes. So I'll just change the background color on a button and viola!"

There's being this massive interest in basically turning web design into patents, repeatable patents. I wonder sometimes what the relationship is between not repeating yourself. It was Josh Clark that talked about design systems must be boring, because nobody wants to design a search interface 15 times." But I do wonder about the connection between art direction and patent libraries or design systems and how those two things kind of work together.

[0:40:58.8] RB: I think the way that I have approached these sorts of things for a long time, really, has been what is the problem that we're trying to solve? Start there obviously. What is the most conventional way of solving that problem? Once we have applied that convention, how is that convention insufficient and how can we build on it and how can we move away from it and what can we do to make this design and this work respond more directly to the very specific problem to be solved as opposed to the category of problem to be solved?

If I'm laying in on an article, the first thing you do; flow text into sort of a standard layout. Maybe throw some images in there. Okay. Great. So I'm reading through this story. I am hearing what it has to say. How might I hear it better? What if this happened? What if this happened? Just finding ways to take the foundation of that convention and add or subtract things that will allow it to respond more directly to the specific problem to be solved.

I think when you talk about frameworks and frameworks in particular, but design systems and pattern libraries that are meant to be generic, that's just sort of outsourcing the work and

outsourcing it to somebody who doesn't know the specifics of the precise problem that you're trying to solve. That's where people get into trouble.

For me, it's not so much about this tragedy that like everything looks the same and is approached the same way. It's that people are bothering to figure out what makes the thing that they're working on unique and special and how to attend to that. I think that's the thing that people really need to be thinking about.

[0:42:54.0] AC: Well, I've been giving this a lot of thought recently, and one of the things that is often troubled me is when people take something like bootstrap and tweak a few colors and that's it, that designed is solved, and I think we've seen a similar thing in the product world with material design over the last couple of years or so. But when I look at something like material design, it's very well designed. The interactions are very thoughtfully done and there's lots of stuff which has been kind of taken care off. But the personality that's kind of embodied in those design choices is Google's design personality or design choices.

I think that it's actually okay to develop what I've been calling in the book foundation styles. Not to do with the foundation framework, but kind of foundation styles around color and typography and insurrection patents and that kind of stuff as long as what they're reflecting is the goals of the particular publication, or product company, or the distinctive brand, or personality, or whatever. So I think it's okay to have a boring design system as long as it's your boring design system and not somebody else's.

[0:44:28.1] RB: Yeah, I would agree with that. Yeah, it's about specificity, right? Is this speaking to your audience specifically or is it speaking to whoever might happen to be listening.

[0:44:40.4] AC: Yeah. It is an interesting one, because again I think it was Josh in this article was talking about design system should kind of cleared the way for people to be inventive. I'm just going to actually look up his quote. Let me research through my manuscript. What a fabulous podcast this is. Here we go. Andy does a search. He said crafting a design system is about clearing the way for others to invent and imagine. I thought, "That's a lovely way of putting it."

[0:45:14.0] RB: Mm-hmm. I agree. I like the idea of making tools that are not prescriptive. So for example, we build a tool at ProPublica called column setter, and this was coming together around the same time that CSS Grid suddenly was adopted in all the major browsers over the course of like a week. So it might not have happened otherwise, but basically it's a SaaS tool that allows you to create custom grid-based layouts that are sort of traditional float-based layouts, or maybe flex box-based layouts, and one thing that was really important to me — Well, two things were really important to me in making this, was number one, didn't wanted to touch your HTML in the way that a lot of frameworks do. It's not a system where you give a div a class of like six col or whatever. It wouldn't touch your html.

Also, it wouldn't be prescriptive. So it wasn't like, "Here is the grid," like 960 grid or something, "go ahead and shoehorn your stuff into it." It was more like, "No. You can define the parameters of this grid within some certain constraints and you can make it be precisely what you need it to be." Then this will just make it easier for you to write the code to build the layout. That's I think in line with Josh's idea that like we're making something that will help you make the thing that you need to make, not make the thing that you need to make within our existing parameters. That sort of thing. Yeah, I think that's an important distinction and a great way to look at it.

[0:46:53.0] AC: Yeah. I mean this is, I think, one of the biggest kind of challenges I think facing us at the moment is this idea that we need to standardize around certain patents and where does this kind of — I don't know, flexibility kind of coming in. I do find this kind of thing fascinating, because I feel having spoken to a lot of product designers over that last bunch of weeks that they almost feel like art direction kind of comes at the end. You design the user experience. You designed all the flows and yet art direction is something which is — It's the bells and whistles, I suppose.

As we kind of talk much more about products rather than — Remember when we used to call them web apps?

[0:47:49.5] RB: Indeed.

[0:47:51.1] AC: That was about the time I think that we handcrafted digital experiences. A lot of people did that for a while. I just built websites.

[0:48:02.5] RB: Express it as breathlessly as you can.

[0:48:06.0] AC: Handcrafted.

[0:48:07.3] RB: I handcraft bespoke artisanal experiences.

[0:48:10.7] AC: That's right. Yes. Actually, I don't write my HTML in a text editor. I actually use a calligraphy pen, and I —

[0:48:21.7] RB: I like the idea of writing HTLM on paper and then like OCRing it.

[0:48:28.6] AC: Well, yeah. I have the most beautiful parenthesis that you can possibly imagine.

[0:48:39.4] RB: I'm imagining it now.

[0:48:40.6] AC: Yes. Well, I don't think you should. I think this is a really kind of interesting time. You mentioned earlier on about kind of losing enthusiasm or feeling kind of left behind for a certain time, and coming to ProPublica, your enthusiasm for the design was kind of reignited, and I think that I know that you don't subscribe to this whole kind of all websites is a boring scenario, but I do think that we've been through a pretty drier patch over the last three or four years, and a lot of that I think has got to do with tooling. I think a lot of that has got to do with our approach to kind of responsive design. We had a lot of things to figure out and maybe we just left the art direction side to one side for a little while. Now I think it's a really interesting time to be doing this kind of stuff. Not just in editorial, but in product, or marketing or all kinds of stuff.

[0:49:40.2] RB: Yeah, I would agree. I mean, the main challenge to be overcome for my perspective is finding a way to strengthen the open web again and get away from this whole — I mean, a lot of people don't feel like they need to have a website anymore, because they can have a Facebook page or whatever. I think that's been damaging in its own way.

I don't know if the way that new tools are evolving and public attitudes are shifting and everything else, how that will affect what design on the web is going to become over the next

few years, but I am optimistic. I'm seeing people get excited about things like CSS Grid and ways that they haven't been excited about stuff in a long time. Yeah, I think there's a lot of potential. I think there's a lot of smart, talented people out there. I think there's going to be some good things to come.

[0:50:30.8] AC: I cannot think of a better way of ending the show than without no quote.

[0:50:38.1] RB: It's so optimistic.

[0:50:38.7] AC: Yes, it was. What a happy notes to end on. Before we do end though, I mean I've got to ask you, what happened to Windhammer? For the three people who are listening. I think maybe [inaudible 0:50:49.9] to start off by explaining who Windhammer is or was.

[0:50:54.0] RB: The three uninitiated listeners. So Windhammer is my competitive air guitar alter ego, and it's funny you should bring him up, because this year is Windhammer's 10th anniversary, and I can't say for sure, but I heard a rumor that after a couple years of retirement I heard a rumor that Windhammer might be returning to the competition stage this summer. We'll just have to wait and see.

[0:51:24.0] AC: Can he still do the moves? I mean, he must be knocking on a bit now, the fella.

[0:51:29.7] RB: Wind hammer is ageless, Andy.

[0:51:34.2] AC: That really is a great place to end it.

[END]