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Is the design profession at risk thanks to globalised hordes of Web-savvy amateurs?

by Florian
Schmidt

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Volkssport design – live and let live?

'Volkssport' the title of a recent conference held at Berlin's Museum for Communication in October 2009, conjured up a new world where design has become a kind of 'people's sport'. With professional designers competing against amateurs in an open arena driven by market forces and the Web, the conference asked some timely questions. Where does this leave the professionals? And what is the role of design education in all of this? The event was organised by the Berlin School of Arts Weissensee and the Alliance of German Designers, and the professionals – practitioners, professors and researchers – brought a range of perspectives, sometimes at odds with each other, to the table.

When Michael Kubens, co-founder of the crowdsourcing platform designenlassen.de stepped into this lion's den, the atmosphere was tense. Kubens said that he was glad for once to be invited to take part in a discussion about his service rather than being regarded as a source of controversy. Despite his open attitude, Kubens was later called a 'parasite' and a 'nasty character' by design professor Torsten Stapelkamp. For many of the 400 designers present, Kubens' business practice is a wholesale attack on the quality and value of design and a threat to the entire profession. So what are designers getting so upset about?

Crowdsourcing = free pitching?

Kubens' website hosts design competitions that are based on a simple mechanism: a client offers a small fee, say €200, for a new company logo and a few dozen designers produce and upload hundreds of logos for free. Only one of them gets paid. The client can view all the proposals at any time. He decides which logo to take. He can even choose not to pay anyone at all. The provider of the platform gets a standard fee for every competition.

From a designer's perspective, crowdsourcing or spec-work is tantamount to slave-driving, a highly unethical way to raid the market. These services are especially controversial when they involve design agencies crowdsourcing jobs to resell the results to their clients. For a huge brainstorming exercise, €200 is a bargain. Mark Harbottle co-founder of the site 99designs.com that served as a template for designenlassen.de describes the concept as follows: 'It is a business model that depends on lower-paid amateurs using spare time to solve problems.'

From an entrepreneur's perspective, this is a great innovation that obviously meets a demand. Recently, designenlassen.de was given an award by the German Ministry of Economic Affairs for its innovative business model. In February 2009 Forbes Magazine CrowdSpring.com, another site of this kind, as follows: 'CrowdSpring aims to slash the cost of graphic design work – and democratise a snooty business,' and pointed to the Chicago-based company's proud assertion that 'CrowdSpring makes geography and title irrelevant', because designers from developing countries are given an opportunity.

However, designers everywhere should think twice before participating in these design contests. As Sabine Zentek, a



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lawyer in media law, warned: by participating in such competitions, the users are usually agreeing to a total buyout of their rights of use. With her association Fidius e.V., Zentek is fighting for fair design competitions in Germany. On an international level, associations such as the AIGA and activist groups such as No Spec and Spec Watch are standing up against uncompensated, and therefore unethical, work in graphic design.

But the opposition to crowdsourcing amateurs is just the tip of the iceberg. The whole media landscape is changing rapidly and it is not only the music industry and journalism that are heavily affected. The shock that everybody can now produce and publish on their own has reached graphic design, and an overdue discussion is now taking place. The impact of Web 2.0 on the work of professional designers is manifold. Most elements in graphic design production have become faster, more accessible and easier to use than ever before – think image research. But this is not only true for professional designers. The essence of Web 2.0 is equal access for everyone and participation on a level playing field.

Design literacy has become a basic skill needed to present and express oneself on the Web and elsewhere – be it with a PowerPoint presentation at the office, on myspace.com, or with a personal avatar in one of the numerous virtual worlds. We are currently witnessing a great clash of ideologies regarding the amateur revolution online. For some, the amateur is the passionate hobbyist doing something for the love of it. For others, they are talentless dabblers devaluing a craft. There is a cascade of publications praising the endless possibilities that the networked masses on the Web can unfold together. Wikipedia and the achievements of the open-source-movement are the most shining examples of amateurs and pros collaboratively creating something for free that is of high value to all users. Now business consultants are eagerly searching for strategies to convert the wisdom of the crowds into a tangible reward.

As a counter-reaction to the vibrant amateur activities on the Web, the old elites of cultural production are pleading for regulations and a return to the high-entry barriers that once protected their professions.

Monkeys and mediocrity

One of the loudest voices in the debate is that of the British / American author Andrew Keen who in his book *The Cult of the Amateur – How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture* calls for readers to stand up against the triumphal march of the hobbyist culture online. Using the infinite monkey theorem (that if you give an infinite number of monkeys access to typewriters and an infinite amount of time, one of them will eventually write out a Shakespeare play), he says '[...] instead of creating masterpieces, these millions and millions of exuberant monkeys – many with no more talent in the creative arts than our primate cousins – are creating an endless digital forest of mediocrity.' And he continues: 'Instead of developing technology, I believe that our real moral responsibility is to protect mainstream media against the cult of the amateur.'

Stefan Koppelkamm, Professor at the Berlin School of Arts Weissensee, tried to allay fears about design crowdsourcing by pointing out that there has always been a discount segment in the graphic design market; it has just become more visible. For Koppelkamm, the good thing about the contemporary challenges from crowdsourcing is that they are forcing designers to focus on their strengths and core competences rather than trying to compete with amateurs.

In Koppelkamm's view, rather than hastily adapting to the changing market, design education should concentrate on the fundamental design competences that are not affected by technical or economical changes. His ideal is the designer as a reflective partner who can work both systematically and intuitively. This requires a strong connection between theory and practice. An academic design institution should not produce well adapted service providers and software operators but autonomous unconventional thinkers. For Koppelkamm, radical personal subjectivity is key to meaningful design.

Bringing wisdom to the crowds

Dr Gesche Joost, head of the Design Research Lab of Deutsche Telekom and Professor at the Technical University Berlin, stood up for the special capabilities of designers as researchers. Designers are trained to come up with solutions for the complex problems of daily life and are therefore vitally needed in scientific contexts. That is why research through design is a method of growing importance. In contrast to the concept of the designer as individualistic author, Joost declared the necessity for designers to work in interdisciplinary teams of researchers, engineers and users. In product design, she observed, over the past ten years the paradigm has shifted from user-centred design to participatory design. Today, users are becoming part of the development process as co-designers on a level with professional designers since they know best about their own needs and wishes. For Joost, there is no need to be afraid of these co-designers: it is useful to bring the wisdom of crowds to the innovation process. Professional designers have to take on the role of mediator, able to conduct abstract scientific research while at the same time being grounded in day-to-day problem-solving tasks.

One thing is for sure: the amateurs on the Web are here to stay. The fear of a downward spiral, leading the whole design business into decay, might be exaggerated, but there is a growing discount segment of the market that professional designers cannot compete with. For example, an important issue for graphic designers today is to devise solutions that bring the exponentially growing amount of complex information we are confronted with into order, and develop interfaces that make it accessible and manoeuvrable. That's more rewarding than designing another logo. There are many new and challenging tasks where professionally trained designers are desperately needed.