

CAN WE ADD A DRAWING MY DAUGHTER DID?

I DONT KNOW WHAT A SERIF IS BUT IT NEEDS ONE

JUST WHY??

WHY...x5

WHY DESIGN

I LIKE it but DO IT DIFFERENT

NO IS NO

Too Hard to implement - Engineering

~~HARD HARD HARD~~

I'm NOT A DESIGNER BUT I THINK I KNOW BETTER

HUH??? SEEMS EASY TO ME?

Too SMALL

OK but move to the RIGHT

THIS WAS NOT MY DECISION I HATE it

SCOTT BERKUN & BRYAN ZUG

these two are OK But MAKE it BIGGER!

Can WE MONETIZE this with an AD???

Why Design Is Hard

SCOTT BERKUN & BRYAN ZUG

A Schrödinger's Polyp Production
Berkun Media

▪ PART 1 ▪

The Ego Trap

A GOOD PLACE to start a book about why design is hard is with the story of Paula Scher and her \$1.5 million napkin sketch. Back in 1998, two giants in the banking industry, Citicorp and Travelers Group, were preparing for a merger. With a combined valuation of \$140 billion, they were set to become the largest bank in the world.¹ Scher's firm, Pentagram, was hired to develop a new logo that would unify the brands for consumers. In one legendary meeting, while passively listening to banking executives complain about their concerns, she sketched a simple drawing on a napkin and said, "This is your logo." And she was right. Scher became a design legend.

1 Mitchell Martin, "Citicorp and Travelers Group Plan to Merge in Record \$70 Billion Deal," *New York Times*, April 7, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/07/news/citicorp-and-travelers-plan-to-merge-in-record-70-billion-deal-a-new-no.html>.



That rough, hand-drawn concept would lead to one of the most successful design transformations in history. Pentagram was paid \$10 million for the project, and \$1.5 million for the logo alone. This story is well known, as most legends are, because it's dramatic, memorable, and inspiring. However, the more important facts for designers are rarely told.

It's only the full story that expresses Scher's lesson on why design is hard. She knew the idea in the sketch, as good as it was, was just a fraction of her job. She explained that "the design...is never really the hard part.... It is persuading...people to use it."² Scher faced months of presentations, meetings, and iterations for dozens of different use cases to deliver that seemingly simple idea to the world. Scher knew that no matter how brilliant her idea was, the work of shepherding the idea through the organization remained. She offered, "The job was to try to get either an individual, a group of people, or

2 *Abstract: The Art of Design*, season 1, episode 6, "Paula Scher: Graphic Design," created by Scott Dadich, aired February 10, 2017, Netflix.



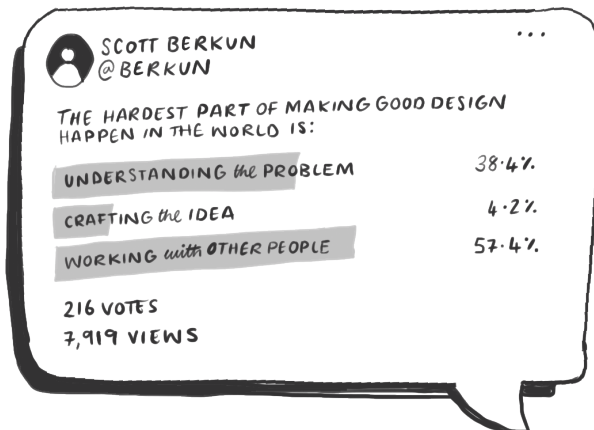
a whole corporation to be able to see...there were a million meetings trying to get buy-in.” If no one did that work, the sketch would never have earned its place in design history because it would have been rejected like countless others and thrown away.

When designers look at these two images, a sketch of an idea and a finished logo actually used by a Fortune 50 company, it’s easy to overlook the years of effort between them. It’s understandable to look at that sketch and think, “I could make that, so what’s the big deal?” As designers, we’re drawn (pun intended) to surface aesthetics. However, success is rarely defined by surfaces. More often, the measure of success is the number of people convinced, the complex details resolved, or the organizational constraints overcome. History proves that the brilliance of an idea does not translate into adoption unless someone convinces people to do so.

Remember that it took a century for most of us to agree with Copernicus that the Earth orbits the sun, and not the other way around. Even today, there are still holdouts like flat-Earthers who refute these well-proven ideas. Often, the better an idea is, the harder it is to get people

to accept it, since it requires them to change.³ One of the most dangerous myths creative people have is that good ideas speak for themselves, but history proves they rarely do. Ideas challenge people's beliefs, their identities, and their habits, and they will instinctively fight hard to protect them.

In a 2023 Twitter poll (posted days before Elon Musk inexplicably dumped 17 years of brand equity by renaming it X), over 200 designers responded to our poll about what's the hardest part of making good design happen.⁴ In first place, with 57.4% of votes, was working with other people. In second place, with 38.4%, was understanding problems, which emphasizes the importance of good user and customer research. In last place, with an astoundingly low 4.2% of votes, was crafting the ideas. We don't take this to mean that crafting ideas is easy, because we know sometimes it's hard. Instead, we take this result to signify that crafting ideas can be a solitary process, but bringing ideas to the world requires relationships and organizations where designers are not in control (we'll discuss this in depth in Part 3).



3 Scott Berkun, *The Myths of Innovation* (Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Media, 2010).

4 Scott Berkun (@berkun), Twitter, July 17, 2023, <https://x.com/berkun/status/1681039529745199104>.

Yet design culture and education focus on crafting ideas. This creates a profound, and frustrating, gap between where our attention is trained to go, and how important decisions actually get made. Even if you aren't frustrated by your career, or the state of the working world at large, we're sure you know many designers who are. These frustrations are more common for design school graduates than for people who learn on their own, but they are common nonetheless. The common reasons designers feel this way include:

- Having your ideas ignored and misunderstood
- Being involved late in important decisions
- Feeling undervalued in your organization
- Needing to explain or justify your role
- Feeling frustrated that powerful people are ignorant about design
- Feeling defeated that nothing ever changes

The first lesson of this book is that these problems are not your fault. You entered this career expecting something better, but you've been disappointed. You may have already experienced shock, burnout, and despair. Perhaps you feel limited, held back, and that few coworkers understand you. We call the cause of these feelings the *ego trap*: the belief that because you are a designer, you should be the creative hero in the story of your organization. If you feel stuck, or you know other designers who feel this way, this trap explains why. This book will teach you how to escape the trap and learn to thrive.

Many designers are in the trap now, or they've been in it before. The problem is past generations of designers failed to see the trap and failed to teach us all how to get out of it. We're sorry this happened. We wish we didn't have to write this book, but we do. We're convinced the trap is rampant and self-reinforcing, and it will continue to hurt future generations.

We admit it's possible we're wrong about this. Perhaps all designers are flourishing and throwing secret dance parties celebrating their role in late-stage capitalism, and the problem is just that we haven't been invited. We don't think so, but if we're wrong, please invite us! We promise not to redesign your home (unless you ask us to).

But if we're right, then the **second lesson of this book is that you must now change something**. Expecting the world to change to suit us is not realistic. Instead, we need to have a better mental model for how our work fits into the world. We are designers who create metaphors for our customers, but we desperately need better metaphors for ourselves.

There are three approaches to consider:⁵

- A. Seek power.** Being undervalued means you do not have the power you need. Who makes decisions you think you should be making? Who doesn't listen to your advice but really should? Designers need power to design. There's no way around it. Decisions are really about power, and you need to increase how much power you have.
- B. Become influential.** If you don't want the responsibilities that come with power, that's OK. Instead, become an influencer. Think of your job as a consultant or an advisor, and draw from the rich heritage of skills those roles have always had. If the powerful people you work with listened to you 30% or 50% more often, and gave you more credit, would you enjoy your career more? If yes, then influence is the way.

5 These approaches were explored first on Twitter in 2019, and there is some interesting commentary around these ideas. Scott Berkun (@berkun), Twitter, June 24, 2019, <https://x.com/berkun/status/1143221872638586880>.

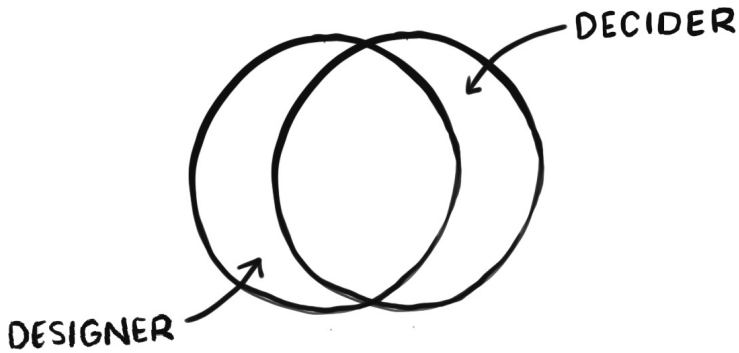
C. Be self-aware. Even without wanting more power or influence, if you can mature your beliefs about design and escape the ego trap, you'll become a healthier person. Your career will have more flow and be more fulfilling. You'll get smarter at identifying healthy places to work, or perhaps you'll realize you want to be your own boss. By becoming self-aware, you'll be less reactive to the messy reality of human nature in organizations.

This list may scare you. Much of design culture rewards pretending there's a safer way. We've searched, and we don't think there's an alternative. Scher's story about how ideas don't advocate for themselves illuminates the necessity and purpose of this book.

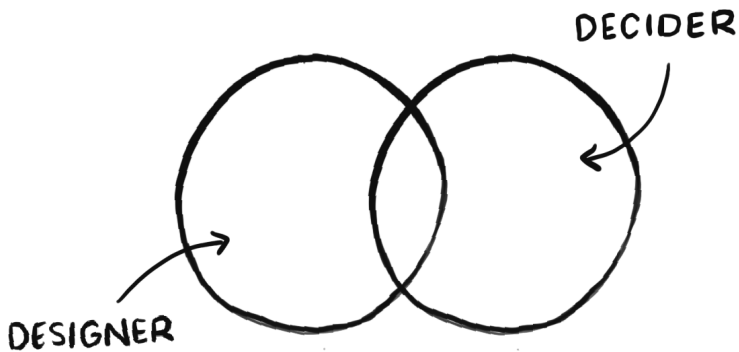
If you don't like these options and prefer to wait for the world to conform to you, we wish you luck, but this book won't help you. As Anaïs Nin wrote, "It was not the truth they wanted, but an illusion they could bear to live with." We do not have to accept a *bearable* life. We are designers, gifted with creative powers few people have. It's time to use these skills to our advantage and make design easier.

Designer or Decider?

When you play a game like *Minecraft*, *Stardew Valley*, or even *Solitaire*, you are in complete control. You don't have to negotiate with anyone else. Except for the rules of the game, you have complete power and freedom, which is why video games are fun. When things go well, you get all the credit, and if things go poorly, at least all of the mistakes were yours too. Essentially, you get to design and decide almost everything. Most design education puts students in this role, where the student works alone and makes all of the design decisions.



How does this compare to the average professional designer? If your job title has the word *design* in it, what do you actually decide? What can you choose to do without having to convince someone else first? Probably not many things, if any at all. While you're free to conceive ideas, you're often almost the *opposite* of free in how those ideas are manifested into the world. You may frequently feel like a victim, perhaps of politics, bureaucracy, ignorance, or short-term thinking. While you can conceive anything you want in Photoshop, Figma, or on a sketchpad, it is the powerful who decide whether it gets created (unless perhaps you're an entrepreneur⁶).



6 Designer Fund provides one model for how designers can be organizational leaders or company founders. See <https://www.designerfund.com/>.

Somehow we've forgotten that we often define *designing* as separate from the act of *deciding*. What we call designing is mostly *advising*. We make things as suggestions for other powerful people, clients, executives, and project teams, and they make the decisions. We often get to decide only small and inconsequential details. We work hard to offer good advice but that advice is often ignored. This means the true designers of a product are not the people with the job title *designer*, but the leaders who decide goals, staffing, and budgets. As designer Maxim Leyzerovich cynically described, "Being a designer is mostly just making people feel good about decisions that have already been made."⁷ But what would it mean to be a designer who is also the *decider*? What would have to change?

This situation is not what you expected when you started your career. You likely imagined teams of people, minions perhaps, who'd joyfully work to bring your ideas to life. You did not expect to be treated like a minor character, spending your time making bad products pretty (which can be impossible to do), or watching people with little design knowledge define entire products, strategies, and platforms while ignoring your talents. This shock is compounded by the fact that no one else in the organization seems to notice this problem, and when you try to point it out, they're confused or defensive. How could the world be this way? It's a common question for talented designers to ask, but it's the wrong question. A better question is: why would it be any different than it is?

It helps to take a wider view: we just don't think our species is all that wise. Humans aren't that good at civilization, much less running organizations. We're very self-involved, and we don't learn from history,

7 Maxim Leyzerovich (@round), Twitter, February 10, 2022, <https://x.com/round/status/1491809762614431747>.

repeating the same mistakes, like starting foolish wars or squandering resources. Just look at how we're (not) handling the climate crisis we've created on our planet, something all 8 billion of us should agree to prioritize. Taking a step back, it's easier to see that people in large groups often do foolish things. Many companies go out of business or aren't run very well. Maybe this is just the best we've been able to do so far?

Part of the ego trap for designers is assuming any problem we face is targeted at us. It makes more sense that we're just along for the ride, and the frustrations we feel are collateral damage in a bigger story. In writing this book, we believe there's much to be proud of and hopeful for: it's better to be alive now than 100 or 500 years ago. But at the same time, it helps to realize some things are broken and unfair on a large scale. Plenty of other professions, including school teachers, healthcare workers, and other underpaid but critical roles, have pressing complaints too.

It's also true that the ego trap isn't just for designers. Most people suffer from it to a degree, as each of us is the central character in our own mind. Cognitive biases like the **egocentric bias** and the fundamental attribution error prove that we're all prone to feeling special and privileged, especially in cultures that favor individualism, like the U.S.⁸ However, the role designers play in most workplaces, combined with our tendency to see our work not only as a job but also as our identity, makes the trap more dangerous for us.

The root of this problem for designers is a failure of expectations. The ego trap is perpetuated in design school, culture, and media by always making the designer the hero. Designers are presented as the star

8 "Egocentric bias," Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egocentric_bias.

of every course, book, lecture, documentary film, or article about a famous project. At events, invited speakers are usually designers or people who are design-friendly, admiring and understanding the profession. And designers are often portrayed as solitary visionary artists, like Frank Lloyd Wright, rather than collaborative leaders on interdependent projects, which is far more common. Early on, the expectation is set that we will, by default, be the center of attention.

When designers make diagrams about how design decisions or UX processes should fit into an organization, design work is usually at the center, much to the dismay of project leaders, engineers, executives, and sometimes even customers. In most organizational cultures, the natural stars are the jobs that have been there longest and have played a central role, like business or engineering. Design often begins on the periphery of organizations, which is not a surprise to anyone except us designers.

The raw numbers tell us that designers are a professional minority. There are roughly 400,000 professional UX, web, and graphic designers in the United States.⁹ With a working-age population of 130 million, we are a mere .03%. These numbers make it obvious that designers should be trained early on to be comfortable and confident working with people who know little about design, since that's almost everyone. Yet design culture and the ego trap have taught us the opposite: we're easily frustrated when people don't instantly see our value or speak our language.

9 The most reliable data we found was from the U.S. Department of Labor, which lists 110k UX Designers and 212k Graphic Designers in 2023. We've rounded up because we believe these numbers underrepresent the profession. See <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes151255.htm> and <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes271024.htm>.

Many of us claim to be experts at psychology and empathy, but we fail to realize how often our behavior works against us with coworkers. It's not as if our well-earned stereotypes of black clothing, intimidating obsessions with style, and furtive glances in meetings have helped us gain influence. To be clear, we feel strongly that no one should be judged because of their appearance, background, or other reasonable preferences while at work. However, that doesn't mean we aren't judged or that our choices don't affect others.

Some of our self-involvement is an understandable defense against the abuses we've experienced in our families and workplaces. When you've done the right thing in previous jobs and had your trust broken, it's hard to forget. It's also clear that the personality traits that lead to earning the label "creative" have unfortunate consequences, since human nature is fearful of people with different ideas. But defenses are also a kind of mask: they help us feel safer, but they come with a cost. As Gordon MacKenzie explained in *Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool's Guide to Surviving with Grace*:

Masks have real social value in that they allow you privacy and space in an often brutal world. But there is a price you pay for wearing a mask. Masks cause little deaths—little soul deaths. When you wear a mask, nobody (not even you) gets to find out who you really are. When you wear a mask, nobody (not even you) gets to find out what you really need. And when you wear a mask, nobody (not even you) gets to find out what you really have to offer.¹⁰

10 Gordon MacKenzie, *Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool's Guide to Surviving with Grace* (New York: Viking, 1998).

Believing we are creative heroes encourages us to wear masks. Think about how many superheroes wear disguises. Masks seem cool in movies, but even in fictional worlds these heroes are usually miserable and conflicted, and the mask only separates them from who they're trying to save and protect. The masks, so poorly designed that the audience is never fooled, are mostly effective at keeping something hidden from the wearer, often a profound and terrifying truth (typically unresolved childhood trauma¹¹).

For designers, the ego trap often fuels a self-serving attitude (much like a mask). We expect that somehow, magically, the majority of leaders will have knowledge only designers have, despite how they've successfully done their jobs for years before our arrival. When we encounter people who don't appreciate our skills, we passively blame them for their ignorance, often in backchannels where they can't even ask questions. We might be afraid to behave differently, but we have to admit we're contributing to patterns that limit us.

To get to the point, we've cultivated unrealistic, unspoken, and incorrect expectations about most workplaces, including:

- Design skill is already valued and leaders know how to leverage it
- Everyone knows the basics of good design principles
- There is a healthy process for making project-level decisions
- The organization is free from chronic cultural and political tensions
- People will readily give up the favorite parts of their jobs to us
- People will readily give up their sense of heroism and its rewards

11 Robin Rosenberg, "The Psychology Behind Superhero Origin Stories," *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 2013, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-psychology-behind-superhero-origin-stories-4015776/>.

- Leaders will quickly trust us with strategic decisions
- Old, self-reinforcing, and biased systems of incentives will change upon our arrival

There is no workplace that meets this standard. Yet design culture pretends this list is universal because we aren't trained for how to do our work when they're absent. As Erika Hall, co-founder of Mule Design, wrote, "The work is so much about building relationships, analyzing power dynamics, and having the right fights. I'm not sure people are being taught this in the design schools and bootcamps."¹²

For example, Lisa deBettencourt, founder of the design firm Forge Harmonic and co-founder of IxDA, faced this situation early in her career. As a designer at a consumer electronics company, she was shocked by how much resistance there was to using her skills. The VP of Engineering consistently challenged her in meetings over the most basic design principles. deBettencourt later learned, after struggling to understand what she was doing wrong, that it wasn't her fault: product design was his favorite part of the job, and he didn't want to give it away.

It's no surprise that powerful people can be self-involved, or that workplaces are often dysfunctional, with childish politics, stupid group-think, sexism, racism, or passive-aggressive factionalism. We watch shows like *Succession*, *Game of Thrones*, or *Yellowstone* and are well-versed in how complicated workplace drama can be. But the ego trap perpetuates the illusion that when we arrive, our design mojo will surround us in a magic bubble of butterflies and unicorns, transforming our coworkers into the best versions of themselves, specifically in ways that are the most convenient for us. This is a self-destructive

12 Erika Hall, LinkedIn, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/erikahall_the-entire-field-of-ux-needs-to-be-rethought-activity-7056639902469259265-zemw/.

fantasy that is rarely challenged. deBettencourt learned a critical lesson: to first investigate what it is that powerful people really care about and why. She learned it the hard way, and we don't want you to have to do that too.

Among its many sweet poisons, the trap assumes that all organizations have healthy, collaborative cultures by default. It is never explained that most organizations, like families, are dysfunctional in at least one major way, and that design—as a planning discipline that requires another role like engineering to actually build its ideas—is directly impacted by these dysfunctions. If we don't prepare for them, we're prone to learned helplessness: we'll be unable to do our work until someone else creates the conditions listed above for us, conditions we won't be comfortable identifying, mitigating, or solving on our own. To make design easier, we have to see these as solvable problems. Other professions have solved them, and we can too.

Talent Is a Distraction

We know that many designers feel underutilized at work. We also know we love to complain and see the flaws all around us. We rant about the confusing UX in the apps and websites we use, and the failings in our public transportation, school systems, and governments. We critique the bad typography on city streets and on restaurant menus. Yet we rarely ask, why is this the state of things?

This leads to two questions:

- Why aren't designers better utilized in the world?
- What are we doing to change this?

Thank you for reading this excerpt from *Why Design Is Hard*.

To buy the book, or learn more, go now to **designishard.com**.

