

Foundations of Experience Design

For the last couple of years, I've been working on a book about experience design through the lens of phenomenology, a never-ending project that's taken me into ever-more-surprising corners of where those ideas come together. I've reached the point where I realize that one whole pile of that probably isn't destined to end up in the book: the part that is really about the introduction to experience design as the craft that accompanies phenomenology's philosophy. Instead, I realize I actually have two half-finished projects instead of one.

Over the next couple of months, I'd like to share with you the affirmative argument for experience design's role in the changing landscape of design thinking, explore the principles of the new questions it grapples with (that other designers should grapple with as well), and detail a system for developing practical toolboxes of techniques. More than half of it is material I've been polishing for more than a year, now structured in a way that I hope is modular and practical while still tackling the big questions that beg exploration by more practitioners. It is one of the most complete documentations of the processes I've been honing for 19 years, and it is doing no one any good just sitting on my hard drive.

Your dialogue and commentary on these posts are both invited and appreciated, as I hope to include parts of that commentary in some e-book version of the result to expand it as a resource for others. I'll be updating this post as new segments go up to serve as a table of contents.

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1. Why Experience Design?

Obscured by Dot Com

In the mid-90s, the Web wasn't particularly good for anything yet. In 1996, when working with bands like King Crimson, we could only imagine hard-core fans downloading songs as MP2s (MP3 hadn't been invented yet) when a 28.8K modem wouldn't pull it down for more than an hour. At the Sundance Film Festival in 1997, I remember telling the couple dozen people who bothered to show up for a panel called The Internet for Filmmakers that, one day, people might actually watch movies delivered by the Internet, but that that day was a long way off, even with brand new 56K modems that were twice the speed.

Because the Web wasn't a tremendous solution on its own to any challenge, I was always focused on how it might enhance the other kinds of experiences people had, and how it could connect them together through those shared experiences. We developed clumsy metaphors to describe this that became key tenants for how we grew our own projects. We were on the ground and in the ether. We were more interested in connecting people to each other than connecting them to data or media. We were using the Web as a prop not an actor.

Many of my dearest collaborators that emerged from that era shared this perspective. How might the Web

enhance the experience of a television broadcast? How could we cement a community that traveled from film festival to film festival with the Web? What would it mean to create a story with the audience and use the Web as a form of performance? The limitations of the Web forced us to ask more interesting questions of our work.

Because of the exuberance and novelty of the first Dot Com Boom, the birth of the modern era of experience design was largely ignored. By the time one of the movements key figures, [Nathan Shedroff](#), managed to actually pen a book about this emergence in 2001 ([Experience Design 1](#)), the first tech bubble had burst and the idea of digital's role in experience design seemed obscure and academic.

But an interesting thing happened as the space continued to mature: digital technology became more and more intertwined with everything, and more people started asking the questions some of us agonized over obscurely for decades. You began to see more practitioners choose to label themselves as experience designers, many of them veterans of modern forms of storytelling like alternate reality gaming and transmedia. Corporations began to think of customer experience as a key differentiator, and in recent years you even see titles like Chief Experience Officer emerging among Fortune 500 companies. Innovators, from advertising to live events, began to frame their arguments more and more around the experience of audiences and customers.

As an advocate for experience design thinking, I'm often asked for resources and reading suggestions, and always pained at knowing how few I have to suggest. As a community of practice, we're diffuse (with no specific professional gatherings or publications of our own) and have done a poor job of documenting our processes and methods.

Temporary Definitions

I've always been unsatisfied with the new terms that have emerged over the years that were applied to my work, because they were always pre-occupied with the objects that craftspeople make as their starting point, rather than the audience. And there have been a lot of these phrases, including multimedia, viral, interactive, alternate reality game, transmedia, and content marketing. I've come to realize that these are just predictable cycles, terms that come to represent both a technique and a time period.

When a term is aging past its zenith, practitioners often become embroiled in debates about definitions. Too often, that experience leaves them suspicious of any discussion of terminology and definition, even though these are important constructs for dialog among creators. Less talking, more doing, is a frequent refrain, as if these were mutually exclusive activities. Definitions are temporary ... and then mutate. And that's okay.

The definition of experience design is no different. In 2001, the most influential expression of experience design for me personally came from Nathan Shedroff, whose work included both the perspective of an academic and the experience of a practitioner ... one who should probably get credit for pioneering [alternate reality gaming](#) and [transmedia](#) in 1995, the same year I founded [GMD Studios](#).

Nathan, in fact, offered up a [glossary of terms](#) and that's still useful more than a decade later, but the core of how he saw experience design at the dawn of the 21st century was this:

"Experience Design is an approach to creating successful experiences for people in any medium. This approach includes consideration and design in all 3 spatial dimensions, over time, all 5 common senses, and interactivity, as well as customer value, personal meaning, and emotional context. Experience Design is not merely the design of Web pages or other interactive media or on-screen digital content. Designed experiences can be in any medium, including spatial/environmental installations, print products, hard products, services, broadcast images and sounds, live performances and events, digital and online media, etc."

Today, I can look at that definition and realize the limitations and how much it had to argue that digital experiences could be as meaningful as physical ones. Such were the times. Because Nathan and I have

talked on and off over the years, I also appreciate that my perspective is more based on phenomenology than his and that this accounts for most of our (slight) differences in expressing experience design.

So for the purpose of our exploration together, I offer up this new, simpler, but just as temporary definition of experience design: **a system for examining peoples diverse, real experiences with designed objects and a process for letting those insights influence how you might design them differently.**

Lets see how far that can get us.

Designing for Experiences

As an experience designer, I don't believe you can actually design experiences, at least not the experiences of others. Then why is experience design important? Because experiences are the only way we know anything about the world, about each other or about ourselves.

You actually have a lot of design control over your own experiences. You can choose to get back up on that horse you fell off. You can decide to take a risk or speak to a stranger. You can set for yourself an outrageous goal and pursue it despite every barrier reality throws at you. You can choose not to watch that show, or go to that party, or even finish reading this page. Those choices do far more than just shape the experience you have with life. They shape you into the person that you're in the process of becoming.

If you design anything – absolutely anything – that other people experience, you become a participant in their process. If you design razorblades into the case of a cellphone, you're shaping the kinds of experiences people are more likely to have with your design. If the line leading into your theme park ride has all the charm and engagement of a cattle processing center, you're also shaping the potential experiences that people will have. If your customer support services are frustrating, you're creating more potential to be experienced as a frustrating company.

But, at the very best, you are just creating a potential, what Brian Eno calls ["triggers for experiences."](#) You have some control over which experiences are more universal than others, but every customer and audience member is the protagonist of their own story of experience. The things we design always sit in the context of the broader life experiences that people have that include those things we design ... and what they are in the process of becoming.

Those with a background in performance arts have more comfortable metaphors to grapple with this than those with backgrounds in the media arts –there is a difference between the script and the play. Shakespeare might have written that script 400 years ago, but the play is emerging right here, right now, and responding subtly to the audiences feedback, individual actors performances and a hundred other random factors. Historically, media objects have lacked that feedback cycle and the ability to adapt as they come into being: interactive media is the discipline that tries to bridge that gap.

Companies and product designers have an even tougher time. ["The Cluetrain Manifesto"](#) tried to explain that markets are conversations and participation in a networked market changes people fundamentally in 1999. Like many of the other experience design arguments of that era, the extra burden of having to justify digital's impact in the face of a dot com bubble obscured the important lesson of the emergent properties of human experiences and how they are magnified when we can share them with each other. Instead, brands behaving badly in social media has become a familiar trope.

Experience design is a way of thinking about all these emergent properties while you are still designing something specific, and influencing those design choices to help create triggers for more meaningful experiences.

The Skill and the Specialty

Every design discipline has some experience design thinking built into its presumptions, best practices, standards and criticism. Many have theories, approaches and movements that place this kind of thinking central to their craft. This is true for a huge variety of design disciplines both formal (like film, sculpture, and advertising) and informal (like street art, black markets, and sideshow circuses). Learning any design discipline gives you access to skills based on how people experience the kind of thing you're designing that can also be generalized to think about how people experience anything.

There are also disciplines that specialize in these questions about the nature of human experience, memory, and meaning. In philosophy, this school of thinking is called **phenomenology**, a 20th century innovation in thinking associated with the work of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Instead of thinking about the world the way René Descartes did (as a series of objects acting and reacting to each other), they approach the questions of philosophy that emerged from Immanuel Kant, that consciousness and the phenomena that enter consciousness are the most basic stuff of knowledge. As the Cartesian method helped drive the innovations of the 18th and 19th century, phenomenology has shaped the 20th and 21st.

This origin of phenomenology overlaps with the invention of what we now call the Internet. Heidegger was **particularly fascinated** by what it represented, and wrote extensively in the 1960s about cybernetics, the relationship between poetry and technology, and how the Internet would be the death of philosophy:

"No prophecy is necessary to recognize that the sciences now establishing themselves will soon be determined and regulated by the new fundamental science that is called cybernetics. This science corresponds to the determination of man as an acting social being. Cybernetics transforms language into an exchange of news. The arts become regulated-regulating instruments of information. The development of philosophy into independent sciences that, however, interdependently communicate among themselves ever more markedly, is the legitimate completion of philosophy. Philosophy is ending in the present age."

Experience design is the practical application of phenomenology in the age of the network, one that wasn't really possible until Heidegger's independently communicate among themselves potential came into place across so many disciplines. Surprisingly, though, the language of design in the age of the network is still surprisingly Cartesian: we talk about pages as if they were material things, likes as if they were a commodity to be hoarded, and users as if they were objects that interact with other objects. The Internet unlocks the ability, as a designer, to see the phenomena that emerge from peoples experience with everything. The most phenomenological medium ever invented has, surprisingly, the least phenomenological approach of any design system.

Impact on Story & Meaning

If experience design theory at the dawn of this century was burdened by having to also argue about the nature of digital experiences, the experience design theory of today must carry the burden of the changing nature of story. Not because stories have actually changed, mind you, but because the nature of the Cartesian method of story is exposed as threadbare. Lets look at some examples.

In the narrative theory space, **Henry Jenkins'** work often focuses on the relationship between fans and the stories they find meaningful, describing it as a "**participatory culture**" as if culture had been largely non-participatory in the past. The broader transmedia community has embraced the phrase "**storyworld**" to describe a broader narrative universe involving multiple stories. Meanwhile, some brand theorists are more directly assaulting the phrase storytelling with alternates, including **Ty Montague's "story-doing"** and **Gaston Legorburu's "storyscaping,"** to remove part of the implications of a passive audience.

Experience design and phenomenology, as related practice and theory, offer up a different solution to this

apparent quandary of the nature of story, because they do not start with the presumptions of the Cartesian method. Story isn't something that you pour into an object and then pour from the object into a person's mind. Instead, the things we design are triggers for experiences, and stories emerge from the audience's minds in reaction to those triggers. This is particularly true for meaning, which is the interaction of a person's lived experience with the story in their mind that you triggered.

If this seems untrue to you, go back and re-read *Moby Dick* and tell me that it means the same thing to you today as it did when you read it in high school. The words on the page haven't changed, but you have, so the meaning of the story changed. *Moby Dick* exists as a story not because it is printed in a book on a shelf somewhere, but because we carry around in our heads the story of having experienced reading it. Stories are the way we understand our memories and, thus, our experiences.

Understanding this as an artist and craftsman is a powerful insight, one that you can utilize to practical effect in whatever (or whichever) forms you practice. . French New Wave filmmaker **Robert Bresson** described it this way: My movie is born first in my head, dies on paper; is resuscitated by the living persons and real objects I use, which are killed on film but, placed in a certain order and projected on to a screen, come to life again like flowers in water.

This is more practical than you might expect.

2. Paths to Experience Design

Phenomenal Systems

Over the last two decades, I've had to develop a simple, practical approach for bringing experience designing thinking to a huge variety of teams with innovation challenges. Sometimes, I'm expected to help supplement the strategies of an existing team. Other times, I need to coordinate the activities of a diverse collection of creators aimed at a new kind of goal. Often, I'm also trying to push my own thinking, looking for ways to expand the effectiveness of my own projects. Since each design discipline has their own language for discussing design, I need to not only learn speak their language, but also be able push the boundaries of what they think about without forcing them to speak the language of experience design.

I've settled on a system that thinks of the insights of phenomenology as something that is additive to each design discipline, instead of thinking that experience design replaces or supplants it. Writers, business executives, filmmakers, software engineers, museum curators, game designers, start-up entrepreneurs, theater producers – each of these fields (and more) can be enhanced by thinking about the phenomenal version of that field and, in the process, absorb a bit more experience designing thinking into their work.

It starts by thinking about how that design discipline (or client, or project) uses language to describe three big buckets that make up any experience: objects, people and context.

DESIGNED EXPERIENCES



have three major elements:

CONTEXT

the world where people
encounter our designs

PEOPLE

the customers & audiences
that experience our designs

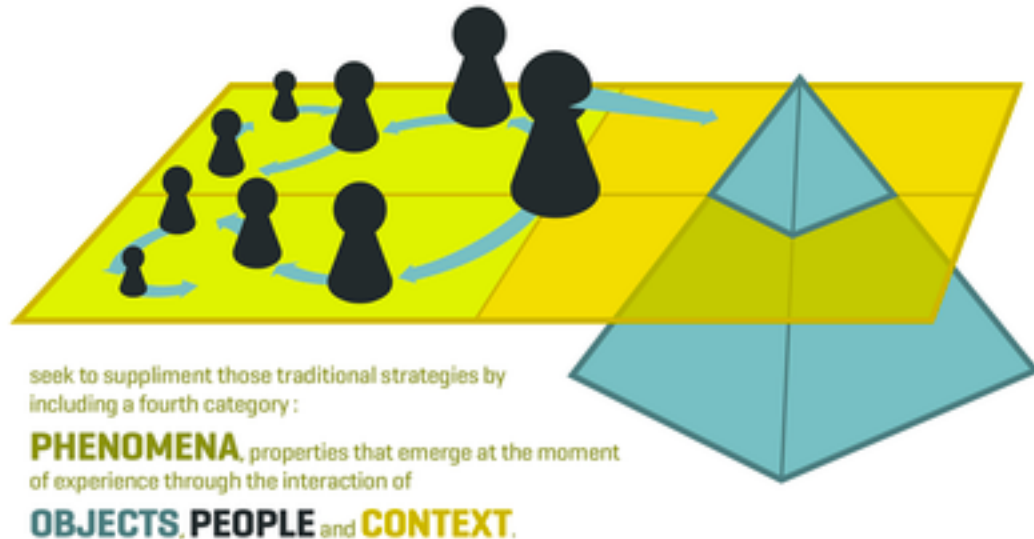
OBJECTS

the things we make for
people to experience

Objects are the traditional focus of most design disciplines: the film, the advertising campaign, the game, the exhibit. These are all things that can actually be experienced by people, and craftsmanship is poured into them. **People** are the customers, the audience, and the people who are experiencing our work. **Context** is the world where people encounter these objects, both the context surrounding the object (like the theater to a film, or the gallery to a painting) and the context surrounding the people (like their prior experience with your brand, or what they are already engaged with when they encounter your design.)

Very often, that's also the hierarchy of thinking of the design discipline – a lot of nuanced language about the objects of design, some about the people experiencing them, and a little about the context that is happening in. Experience design thinking inverts this by introducing a fourth category: phenomena.

EXPERIENCE STRATEGIES



Phenomena are the properties that emerge at the moment of experience through the interaction of objects, people and context. Some phenomena emerge at that very instant, such as emotional responses or customer behaviors. Others materialize later, such as sharing something they found meaningful or the testimonial of a happy customer. These emergent properties of experience are the primary focus of experience design, which helps envision what kinds of objects, people and context can serve to help more reliably or richly produce them.

This simple, flexible framework hides a tremendous amount of depth. It can be used implicitly, to organize what you learn about a design challenge without having to impose that framework of thinking on anyone else – this is indistinguishable from creativity for the rest of the team. It can be used explicitly, as a way of helping teams expand the way they think about the problem to unlock that same creativity in them. It can also be used reflexively, as a way to switch from thinking about the craftsmanship of an object back up to the phenomena and then back down into a different school of craftsmanship for another kind of object, helping to integrate experiences with designs.

Experience Mapping

One of the techniques for exploring experience design is to illuminate and interrogate the connections between these four categories of forces that create experiences (objects, people, context and phenomena) to help map their interconnectedness.

EXPERIENCE MAPPING

Our goal is to understand how our collaborators and clients talk about these aspects, not to dictate that language.

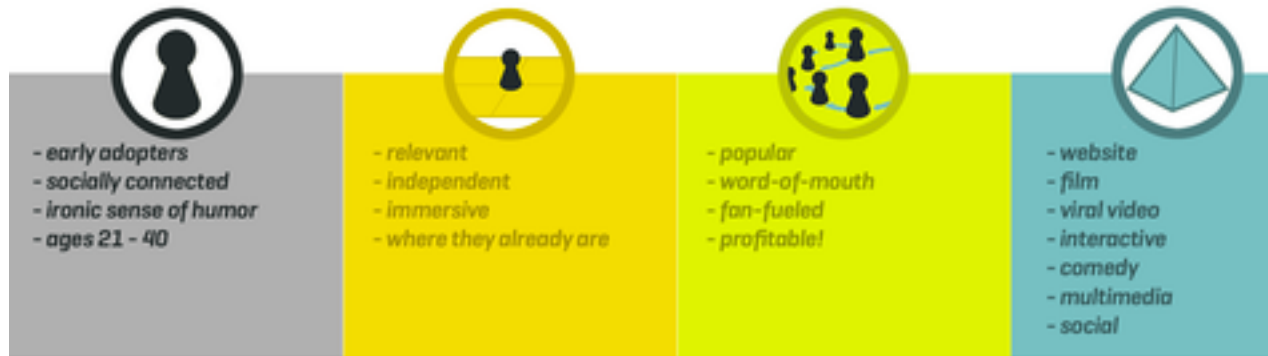


Lets imagine were using this technique reflexively, as a way of expanding our own thinking about something were designing. Pick any word or concept that describes any aspect of your design, and then ask yourself which of these four categories it belongs in. Perhaps were filmmakers, so the first word that comes to mind is the form of the output, film. It doesn't take much reflection to decide thats an object, a word about the product were crafting.

Experience mapping suggests you now have four follow-up questions you can ask yourself. Asking what kind of film lets you focus even more on the object. To explore the connection to people, you might ask yourself, Who sees this film? Or, you could explore the relationship with context and ask yourself, Whats the context of the film? You could also ask yourself a question about the phenomena that combines the other three with a question like, How have they changed because of seeing this kind of film in that context?

WORDS ABOUT YOUR PROJECT

specific or inspecific, nouns or adjectives, it doesn't matter



When unclear, we'll ask questions that draw connections to other piles:

"This viral video ... who would viralize it? In what context?"

"When and why would they do that? What might it mean to them?"

The answer to each of those questions becomes the starting point for more questions to reflect on. Perhaps we chose to explore people in the last phase, and decided that the audience for our film is fans of action films. Now, we can map back in another direction by asking ourselves what kind of action films are they fans of to explore objects again, or what's the broader context of action films to explore the context. The answers can be as specific (tells a friend to see it too), general (entertained), or philosophical (social commentary on the surveillance state) as you might feel at the moment, because the next round of questions (in what context do they tell a friend to see it too) can broaden or focus that prior thought.

With this kind of exercise, it is common to hit two kinds of road bumps. The first happens with complex answers, such as interactive film is it an object? What makes the object interactive? If someone didn't interact with it, was it still interactive? Is interactivity even the trait of an object, or is it a phenomena that occurs when a person interacts with an object? Experience design thinking often challenges the assumptions baked into the language of a design discipline. Some of those challenges are common enough that we'll dive into them in depth in the next chapter.

The second kind of road bump you're likely to encounter is introduced by metaphor, when the limits of the design language you're using require you to describe something as like something of an entirely different category. For example, perhaps we decided that our interactive film unfolds like a video game were now referencing a new design discipline via metaphor. Experience design thinking encourages interdisciplinary language because we're exploring context and phenomena, which aren't contained by the design language we started with. Some of these bridges across design disciplines are also common enough that we'll devote another chapter to exploring them.

Just remember that even in its messiest state, an experience map helps you identify a more fully realized version of an idea, even as it raises more questions to explore.

Time & Context

Up to this point, we've been looking at experiences as discrete moments in time that come into being as phenomena the experience of a thing as a way of exploring and complimenting the crafting of a thing. Each moment of experience, though, sets the context for the next moment, a concept that most design disciplines embrace, whether they are talking about pacing, tempo, difficulty curves or customer journeys. Time is interwoven with context, which means you can explore context in both immediate and historical aspects.

Immediate context is the idea of the surrounding world sharing the now: the impact of the gallery on the experience of the painting, the theater on the viewing of the film, and the operating system on the experience of the app. Immediate context is the difference between seeing a piece of Banksy art displayed in a gallery versus seeing it as piece of graffiti that appeared on a public building overnight. Every design disciplines work sits in a context designed, at least in part, by designers practicing an entirely different discipline.

We can explore immediate context by asking both what surrounds this and what does this surround to reveal the broader landscape of the experiences of things were creating. My television commercial is surrounded by other commercials, which in turn is surrounded by a television show, which in turn is surrounded by a television network, etc. Or, viewed from another point in the chain, my television show surrounds commercials and is surrounded by a television network. As the Banksy example shows, you can choose to work with or against the surrounding context (or both) to success, even to the point of rejecting one context (galleries) in favor of another (guerilla street art).

Historical context is far more personal and complex, as our experience of time as human beings happens through the messy medium of memory. Five minutes into rock concert, were no longer actually experiencing the beginning of the show, but our memory of it (and whether it was great or shaky) colors our experience of this moment. This unfolding of experience over time is a familiar aspect of nearly every field of design, but only between specific start and end points. We can extend that thinking like we did with surrounding context, but now by asking what came before and what comes after.

What came before the rock concert? Driving to the stadium, parking there, working my way through security, finding my seat, maybe snapping an Instagram photo and sharing it with my friends. What came before that? Well, you can imagine a number of scenarios maybe I just heard of the band, maybe my mother is making me go, maybe my friends are dragging me along, maybe Ive been a fan since I was twelve.

Historical context becomes more diverse, individual and personal the further back or the farther forward you go down the chain from now, where it can only be described metaphorically through concepts like the power of myth, symbols and business projections. What I do next because of seeing that rock show begins to unfold just as complex a chain of experiences as what got me there. And yet, right now, five minutes into the rock show, were all having an experience that is more similar than not.

Experience design provides a framework to expand the time horizons where context can be meaningfully designed, but not without limits created by increasing complexity the further forward or back in time you try to go.

Embracing Complexity

Experience design thinking can, at first blush, appear to make everything hopelessly complex for a designer to influence, with an ever increasing nesting of context that includes everything in the world that is also uniquely personal to each person experiencing it. It can produce the kind of shocking epiphany that William S. Burroughs tried to express with *Naked Lunch* (a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of the fork), but it also suggests solutions for managing the complexity that it acknowledges.

A related field to experience design, **service design**, offers a good example of how integration underlies some of those solutions. Emerging from the pioneering efforts of **Dr. Michael Erlhoff** in 1991, service design is a broad field of academic and practical study. Birgit Mager, the President of the **Service Design Network**, defines the discipline as focused on the application of design thinking and design methodology to immaterial products. Nathan Shedroff saw service design as an important aspect of experience design thinking, especially the concept of **service ecologies** a system of interactions and actors that, together, create a sustainable and successful service.

This exchange of ideas between design and business is one of the most important driving forces in the advancement of experience design thinking, because businesses pressures have forced it to be so. The service economy already represents more than 70% of the global economy, but inherited business and management theories largely perfected for the manufacturing economy. In **2008**, in the book *Branding Only Works on Cattle*, brand theorist **Jonathan Salem Baskin** explored whether a gameplan might be a more appropriate metaphor for brand development, echoing this gap:

"While branding was busy defining itself through all of the media it could control (and charging for creating and placing), people in the real world continued developing and reaching decisions the way they always did: they talk, share, converse, debate, argue, test, sample, change, whatever. The gameplan takes these steps into account in terms of designing the narrative, and then frees you to develop branding tools across the enterprise."

In their **2013 book** *Experience Design: A Framework for Integrating Brand, Experience and Value*, Method Designs **Patrick Newberry** and **Kevin Farnham** encourage experience designers to seek out that complexity without worrying about being complete:

"You cant truly adhere to the principles of experience design or work with its core components unless you have the right amount and kind of information. You don't need to have all the answers at the very beginning, but you have to be increasing your area of consideration and making informed decisions. Deciding that you don't need some information or that you are comfortable making subjective decisions or leaving issues for later consideration can compromise the effectiveness of an experience design approach."

Not surprisingly, experience designers who work with this climate of business change look to the social sciences for tools to cut through this complexity (including anthropology, sociology, social psychology and ethnography) even as they look to the Internet as a way to increase the complexity.

Digital People

While our tools are changing rapidly, we as people aren't. We continue to be bound to each other through stories in ways that are biological and sociological. Structural psychologists now know, through the **magic of MRI**, that our brains light up very similarly when were having an experience, when were telling a story about that experience, and when were hearing someone else tell us that story. Social psychologists have been able to explain for decades how this sharing of experience and story triggers **reward** and **bonding**. Anthropologists can demonstrate the role this plays in culture, and thus why civilizations devote energy of invention to storytelling technologies, from cave paintings to the cellphone.

My colleague Michael Monello, one of the producers of *The Blair Witch Project*, has argued for decades that digital technology and the interactive storytelling it enables is a return to something ancient, as ancient as the bedtime story or the heroic myth told around a campfire (the origin, and point, of the name of his marketing agency, **Campfire**). Technology can finally enable storytelling that is far more natural, a blossoming of the oral traditions baked into us as humanity.

To support that, the key question becomes, How do we use the Web to extend the reach of our ears? In my many collaborations with Mike, the amount of information that we wanted to listen to as a storyteller standing around that campfire grew exponentially. In the late 1990s, reading all the posts from fans and participants in a couple of discussion boards was something you could synergize intuitively and find

remarkable opportunities to create storytelling ecologies similar to the service ecologies that Nathan Shedroff described. Those ecologies continued to become more and more complex with the emergence of blogging and then social media: now, the meaningful stories from our audience about the experiences we were triggering were spread across the entire Internet at scale.

Fortunately, there were brilliant people working on that challenge since the end of the last millennium, including another colleague of mine, Pete Snyder, whose background was as a political pollster and became one of the true pioneers of social listening. His company, **New Media Strategies**, didn't focus on measurement but on actionable intelligence, exactly the kind of listening that people like Mike and I were most focused on scaling as phenomenally vital input. Imagine receiving every morning a concise email narrative, rich with pull quotes and hyperlinks, of everything that had been said in the last day online about your brand. Now imagine that brand is Ford and these reports encompass hundreds of issues with different emotional sentiment, some expanding in volume and others not ... and that report will drive decisions being made today.

Experience design thinking encourages you to learn to love data (but only when it can bring you what Newberry & Farnham called the right amount and kind of information), because the challenges of a brand are remarkably similar to the challenges of an interactive story or a political campaign. They are all phenomena. You can only really see them in the reactions of the people who are experiencing them.