This Is For You

A handbook
for design students

Gabriel Drozdov

thisisforyou.
gabrieldrozdov.com

This book is a website

Right now, you're reading my graduate thesis as a book. However, my thesis is actually a website, and this book is just a snapshot of that website's contents at one point in time. The URLs and QR codes in this book will lead you to the live website, which will continue to grow beyond the scope of this static document and my time at RISD.

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Abstract

This Is For You is a handbook for design students. It is a collection of stories, projects, and conversations on the subjects of design, code, and teaching. The book's first part, "Learning," contains stories about the experiences that shaped me as a designer. The second part, "Making," summarizes the projects that taught me how to design. The third and final part, "Sharing," is a series of conversations with the people that helped me along the way. In collecting and publishing these resources, This Is For You is an attempt to create an open-source example of what a career in design can look like. Because that career is still in-progress, this thesis continues to grow, too.

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hello

Foreword
Hello!

A message for anyone starting this thesis

I'm writing this for future design students.

In fact, let's just assume that you are one of those future students. This is for you.

Hello! My name is Gabriel.

Right now I'm a student too, but I won't be by the time you're reading this. That's because this is my graduate thesis. By submitting this book, I will have fulfilled the requirements to receive my MFA. And by receiving my MFA, I will finally have my "terminal" degree. Practically speaking, that means I'll be done with school. And while I'll keep learning, I'll no longer be a student.

Right now, I'm also a teacher. Well, technically just an "instructor" since I don't have my MFA yet. I'm in this weird limbo

between teacher and student, where I teach college-level courses to the same people I take a class with the next day. It brings out some unique social hierarchies you don't typically see in school.

My life as a teacher-student has helped me learn a few things about learning. Moreover, it has helped me reflect on my experience as a student. What I've realized is that so many things that were hard to learn are actually pretty easy to teach. Also, many of these lessons don't fit neatly into the structure of a traditional course or program. Instead, these lessons are more like stories. These are stories like the ones you'd hear from someone who already took a course or went through a program, about what to do and what to avoid, that might help guide you to make the most of your fleeting time as a student.

That time is certainly fleeting. Most of these stories go unshared and unsaid, because once you learn them you stop being a student—you graduate. And once you graduate, you leave without the chance to pass down what you learned.

When I think about the ways to improve school, I think of this sort of unshared collective memory. How can we maintain and build on what came before instead of repeatedly starting over? In a way, that's essentially what a college program is—a formal structure with an institutional memory that theoretically improves over

time. But in another way, the college model prioritizes the institution over its teachers and students. Teachers and students are pretty important, and students are especially left out when it comes to passing down lessons to future generations.

What can we do about that? What are some ways to include student perspectives as part of this system?

At RISD, student perspectives come in the form of graduate theses. When I was an applicant trying to understand what grad school was, I was able to easily find these theses online. Within each thesis book was the full culmination of a graduate program in graphic design. So, without ever talking with a single RISD student, I found myself charting a course through the program. Now that I'm leaving the program, I can say that the lessons I learned from reading RISD theses helped me make the most of my time as a student. I owe a belated "thank you" to those past students I never met.

Now, it's my turn to write a thesis. What should I say?

Well, I know what I want to say. I want my thesis to be a guide for future students to help them make the most of their time as a student, just like how past theses guided me. I'd like to offer a broader perspective that could help anyone learning design—not just RISD students, and not just college students. And, I'd like to be as direct as possible. I think the most direct approach is

to be auto-biographical and share with you my experiences organized around the things I've learned—before, during, and after design school.

Hold up! After design school? That hasn't happened yet! Or at least, not yet as of when I'm writing this!

So that doesn't work—a thesis has to be a fixed thing. RISD theses are books—bound and finite. And I see three distinct challenges with that format.

The first challenge is that my work is primarily digital. I make websites. In fact, I love making websites! But websites and books don't really get along. Furthermore, what's the point of documenting a website in a book if I could just send you a link?

The second challenge is that my thesis has a hard deadline, at which point it is set in stone. I have to finish my book so that I can print it and have it ready for my final review. And then, I have to submit a PDF to the library, which I'm not able to update at any point in the future. So even if I have more I would like to say, I can't through this platform.

The third challenge is that a PDF is not a great reading experience. So even after all of that effort—of producing a physical book and submitting a PDF—you might not want to read this thesis simply because it's uncomfortable to do so.

I don't want you to be uncomfortable. I don't want you to only get part of the

story—and a rushed part at that. And I don't want you to get an imitation of a project when you can actually experience the project for yourself.

There's an easy solution: this thesis is a website.

I'm not really allowed to do that. I'm going to do it anyway.

If you're reading this thesis via a website, you're doing great. But if you're reading this thesis via a PDF or book, now's a great time to stop doing that. Instead, you should go to this website: thisisforyou.gabrieldrozdov.com.

That website is my thesis. I made that website for you. You can have it. It's yours.

On your website, you'll find ten chapters split across three parts.

The first part is called "Learning." In it, I share stories of the experiences that shaped me as a designer. These are the experiences that taught me how to design, code, teach, and run a studio.

The second part is called "Making." In it, I share almost every project I've made. You'll even find a full summary of every single course I took while studying at RISD. If that's all you're interested in, then skip ahead to Chapter 6.

The third and final part is called "Sharing." In it, I share a series of conversations with the people that helped me along the way, ranging from teachers, to peers, to students.

Since this thesis is a website, it will continue to grow. If you check back in a month, it might be different. And if you check back in a year, it'll almost certainly be different. I am still working on recounting all my past experiences, and my future experiences are obviously yet to come.

That's it for now!

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learning

Part One
Learning

Stories about the experiences that shaped me as a designer

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learning/design

Chapter 1
Learning how to design

What is design? That's a good question. It's the kind of question that can cause a designer to spiral into an existential crisis. It took me a long time—from elementary school to grad school—before I had my own definition. In a way, that's what it takes to develop a personal practice. For me, that meant trying out a whole slew of things—music, film, writing, computer science, theater—that would eventually inform a single creative discipline called "design." In this chapter, I'll share stories from this early period in my life—growing up alongside the Internet and video games, bearing unpaid theater internships, finding my footing as a freelancer, and choosing to go to design school.

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learning/design/
#childhood

How I stumbled into design

It was sort of an accident. At first, I was a songwriter. But I was bad, and I knew I was bad. I pivoted to film. But I hated studying film, so I switched to theater. Theater brought me right back to sound. All considered, there were a lot of things I wanted to do, and none of them were design. And yet somehow, I discovered that what people wanted from me was to design things for them.

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learning/design/
#college

The non-design jobs that taught me to design

In what started to feel like a cruel joke, I kept applying for non-design jobs that became design jobs. What I discovered was that every company needed a designer, especially the small ones that couldn't afford one. So, as an unpaid intern, I found myself relinquishing my original job description and assuming the role of art director, web designer, and everything in between.

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learning/design/
#early-career

What it's like to work without a job, aka freelancing

You can't get fired if you don't have a job. Well, I tried to get a job, and I couldn't—not in theater, not in computer science, and definitely not in design. What I did have was the start of a network made up of old bosses and coworkers in need of a one-off task here and there. So, having never had any real professional design experience or any serious training, I started freelancing.

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learning/design/
#grad-school

Why I ended my career and went back to school

I had a good thing going. Well, sometimes. I also had feelings of frustration, imposter syndrome, lack of direction, frequent bouts of anxiety, and a general aura of dissatisfaction. But those things helped me articulate why I wanted to go to grad school. And then the stars aligned, so I went. What I uncovered in grad school was a newfound purpose and a way to move forward.

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learning/code

Chapter 2
Learning how to design using code

What does a degree in computer science get you? In my case, a single technical interview that you'll absolutely and utterly fail. For a long time, code didn't seem like it was my thing. But once I began studying design, I realized that code was extremely useful even if I wasn't an expert in it. I could use code to make interactive and generative experiences—things that felt uniquely performative, sort of like theatrical performances on a computer screen. In this chapter, I'll share stories of how I finally learned to use code after struggling for years and make it a fundamental part of my creative practice.

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learning/code/
#early-coding-adventures

Loving, hating, then loving code

It was difficult to find any education in coding before college, but that didn't stop me from trying. I discovered a kind of kid-friendly, fake "code" that let me make games and animations. It was tons of fun. In college though, code wasn't just code—it was computer science. And computer science was not fun. It wouldn't be until grad school that I discovered how real-world code could be fun, too.

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learning/code/
#code-and-design

Developing a designer's concept of "coding"

The goals of a designer using code versus a coder using code are miles apart. That became clear studying code at RISD, and even more clear teaching code at RISD. Designers, for the most part, don't want to become developers. In practice, that means designers learn code in ways that are sometimes wrong or incomplete, but still useful. And to a designer, code just needs to be useful.

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A no-curriculum approach to a creative coding curriculum

Even now, there are enormous gaps in coding education at all levels of study. That means that to learn code, you have to be ferociously self-sufficient. At RISD, I took every project as an excuse to learn something new. I could even follow a train of thought through several completely unrelated projects in a row and mark how each skill led to the next, like an unofficial curriculum.

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learning/code/
#coding-professionally

Where code fits into the real world

When we create work in design school, we often end up creating work for the fabricated audience of our peers and teachers. And so, we create work that might look like it's for someone, but is really for nobody. While code can be just like this, code also lets us create things that demand an audience—things like interactive experiences. And interactive, easily-distributed experiences are extremely relevant to the outside world.

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learning/teaching

Chapter 3
Learning how to teach design and code

There are great teachers, and there are absolutely terrible ones. Both types inspired me to teach—I think the impact of a good teacher is just as resonant as that of a bad teacher. I felt I owed it to the good teachers to pass on the lessons they taught me, and also to the bad teachers to make right where they went wrong. What I discovered was that teaching was much harder than I expected, but also the clearest way to make a real impact as a designer. In this chapter, I'll share stories from my experiences as a teacher, as well as from my time spent making tools for teachers and students alike.

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learning/teaching/
#student-teacher

Lessons from a student about what it means to be a teacher

I think everyone should try teaching something they don't know well at least once. I mean, that's what I did the first time I taught code. From that terrifying experience, which involved at least one panic attack, I learned that knowledge is not simply passed down. Instead, learning happens between a teacher and their students. It's a collaboration. And it felt like the most impactful collaboration I could ever have.

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learning/teaching/
#technique-and-creativity

Whether to teach technique or creativity

I think my obligation as a teacher is to teach critical thinking. To me, critical thinking is a combination of creativity and technique. It's a constant loop between learning a skill and then interrogating that skill. By this logic, craft is all about dexterity, which deepens our ability to question technique. And so, it has always felt woefully insufficient to just give students a prompt and run with it—I owe them skills, too.

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learning/teaching/
#teaching-network

The world wide web of design education

Teaching can be lonely. Even in a single school, in a single department, there is often little to no communication between teachers sharing the same students. One consequence of this loneliness is that teaching is inefficient. Instead of building on the work of our peers, we frequently start from scratch when creating a course. But there is another way, and it requires looking beyond traditional institutional structures.

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learning/studio

Chapter 4
Learning how to run a studio

An all-too-common tragedy: you devote yourself to developing a creative practice only to discover that no job exists for what you do. This is especially frustrating if you've freelanced and know that there's a market for your skill set but not a matching job to apply for. Creative coding is a bit like this—agencies typically split design and code into two distinct jobs even though a single designer-developer can do a ton on their own. So, as a designer-developer facing this reality, I decided to start a studio. In this chapter, I'll share stories of how I found the confidence to make that jump and how it played out.

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learning/studio/
#starting-out

So you want to start a studio?

What is a studio? What responsibilities does it have to fulfill? Who can start one? And is it just a glamorized version of freelancing? These are some of the questions I asked myself as I graduated from design school and decided to start my own studio specializing in web and code.

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making

Part Two
Making

Projects that taught me
how to design

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making/before

Chapter 5
Everything I made before design school

Let's say design is about communication. In design school, you learn a lot about visual communication. But there are other kinds, too—aural, experiential, written, performative, and so on. I now realize that the years I wasted before design school—years spent fumbling through potential careers that didn't pan out—were actually years spent finessing my communication skills in other mediums. Once I had built that foundation, I was ready to hone in on visual communication, and that meant going to design school. In this chapter, I'll share the projects from my formative years that set me up to study and practice design later in life.

thisisforyou.gabrieldrozdov.com/making/before/#elementary-and-high-school

Elementary and High School

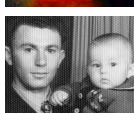
You have no idea what your life will become when you're young. Or at least, that's how it felt for me. I was a bit of a sad kid, and part of that sadness came from a feeling of unfulfillment in everything I did—I couldn't commit to any particular interest or career path. That wasn't for a lack of trying, though. I at least knew I loved music, movies, and video games, so I did my best to make music, movies, and video games. Much, much later, I realized that those amateur hobbies actually set the stage for the skills I would rely on as a designer.

Music

It's tough writing music when you hate the sound of your voice. That didn't stop me. My earliest creative experiences were as a songwriter, starting off with nonsensical songs that tried way too hard to be funny, leading into overly dramatic ones that tried way too hard to be serious and meaningful. The pivotal moments that stuck with me from this phase of my life were learning how to improvise on and compose for piano, and learning the basics of audio recording and production.

To Home

Something Happens



Dano

Granola

Movies

I distinctly remember declaring that I wanted to become a filmmaker. I don't know what compelled me, but maybe I was inspired by the onslaught of Flash animations and YouTube sketches at the time. For a few years, I tried to watch a classic movie everyday to see what I could learn. That passion drove me to create my own absolutely terrible YouTube videos, culminating in a stop motion animation that earned me a nomination (not a win) at a Tribeca award for young filmmakers. Looking back, I think losing that award really stung, and might've been the reason why I stopped making movies.

A Low-Hung Head

Video Games

My real passion—which continues to be my secret real passion—was for video games. I absolutely loved video games, particularly Nintendo and Flash games, but I never considered game development as a possible career path. Even so, I discovered that I could make my own using a sort of "coding" language called Scratch that MIT developed to teach kids code. So, with my extremely limited capabilities for thinking about computer science logic and algorithms, I became some lesser definition of a game developer.

Scratch Games

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making/before/
#college

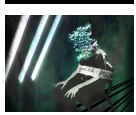
College

I went to Wesleyan University in 2015 thinking I would study film. I took one film course and quickly realized that it wasn't for me. At the same time, I took a theater course taught by Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento, and I fell in love with theater. Studying theater led to a slew of new opportunities: theatrical production, sound design, and—perhaps most importantly—poster design. I was also terrified of the career prospects working in theater, so I studied computer science too, which I nearly failed and absolutely despised. All considered, the combination of both majors was a surprisingly effective pairing of theories and skill sets.

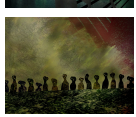
Theater Posters

College was the first place I encountered a seemingly endless demand for graphic designers. I had picked up some basic skills in high school by making games and album covers. It was enough experience that people in college frequently asked me to make posters for them. But I didn't know what made a good poster at the time, so I thought "good" design was complicated design, and I essentially tried to do as much as possible with every single project.

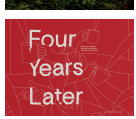
Second Stage



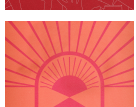
The Pillowman



(at)tend



Four Years Later

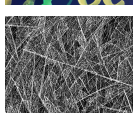


Heartbreak County

Sound Design

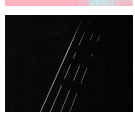
Really, my heart was in audio. My background in writing and producing music led to a couple of live audio gigs on student productions, which quickly led to my entire shtick as a theater major. Serving on the board of our student theater company, I was essentially the campus' resident sound designer—a title I had to grow into, since I was certainly not the most experienced composer or engineer in school. But I stuck with it, even going as far as to make a thesis in theatrical sound design.

Falling in Love to Voices



Time Passes

Moonbug

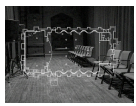


99 Histories

Rhinoceros

Eurydice

Karaoke Superstar

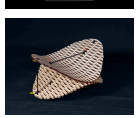


No Replica

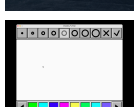
Creative Coding

I was also a computer science major. But of the courses I took in college, really only one or two actually helped me become a coder. The rest were far too advanced for my interests—things like automata theory, lambda calculus, and discrete mathematics that had me flabbergasted. It wasn't until my last year in school that I realized I could use code in creative ways, and by that point I was fully committed to theater anyway.

Personal Website



Kerfed Wood Sculpture



Processing Drawing Tool

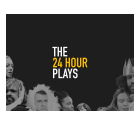
Discotheques 1+2

EVO: Eat. Swim. Evolve.

Monogram for Wesleyan University

Internships

The funny thing is that I desperately wanted to become a playwright. Except, I could never get into a playwriting course for one reason or another. In lieu of that, I pursued administrative theater internships during the summers thinking that would bring me closer to my dream. What really happened, though, is that these small non-profits just wanted me for my design experience. Once that was abundantly clear, I did my best to make the most of these opportunities. I took on far more responsibilities than I was paid for so that I could teach myself new skills and develop a portfolio.



The 24 Hour Plays

The Value of Membership

The New DG Resource Directory

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making/before/
#early-career

Early Career

I wanted to be a playwright, but I never had the chance to study or practice playwriting. So I ended up a sound designer, but all my internships were in graphic design, even if they were technically in the theater industry. Those realities led to a summer gig at Williamstown Theatre Festival as a lead graphic designer—a job I was woefully underprepared for, but ultimately kickstarted my career as a professional graphic designer. After that summer—and after failing to score any in-house jobs as a programmer or designer—I went full-time into freelance, finding clients through connections from prior internships or simply by word-of-mouth.

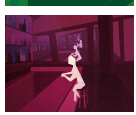
Williamstown Theatre Festival

My first summer at Williamstown was brutal. I worked for three months straight, leading a team of two other designers basically the same ages as me, taking only three days off the entire summer (weekends were workdays!). It was not unlike hazing. What I got out of it, though, was the ability to produce high-quality work under extreme conditions, and my first major freelance client. I would go on to work with Williamstown for several years, producing designs for their following galas and seasons.

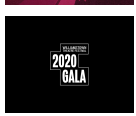
2019 Season Production Design

Tempo

Orlando



Something Happens for Joe



2020 Gala

2020 Season Visual Direction

Season on Audible Digital Program

2021 Gala

2021 Season Visual Direction

Lab/Shul

One of my coworkers at Williamstown ended up at a contemporary, experimental NYC-based synagogue named Lab/Shul. They had a freelance graphic designer drop out at the last minute, so she thought of me to replace them. That first job led to a multi-year relationship with the company, which included designing the identities for their flagship High Holy Days celebrations.

5780 High Holy Days

Shuvu: 5781 Days of Awe

Central Synagogue

From one synagogue to another I suppose! Central Synagogue saw my work for Lab/Shul and reached out to me for their first-ever virtual High Holy Days (a COVID byproduct). That led to a year full of collaborations spanning across publications, mailings, and microsites.

5781 High Holy Days

Acts of Loving Kindness

Sharing Our Stories

The Neighborhood @ Central Synagogue

5782 Clergy Card

Memory Book

5782 Yom Kippur Appeal

5784 Clergy Card

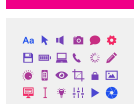
Branding and Motion Design

At this point, my specialities had become branding, motion, and small-scale websites that I primarily built using site building platforms. I worked with a variety of other clients with the odd job here and there, whether I was creating a visual identity, an animated logo, or a landing page.

Maddie Munchies

#KeepItInPlay

Jam-A-Palooza



Motion Experiments

Personal Branding and Website

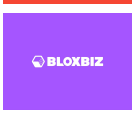
Earthlings

Artist's Strategy

Morgan & Kemp

CleverlyCo.

Hit Play



Bloxbiz

Cleverly Cutters

Music

In truth, I never felt like I was succeeding even in my modest success. Instead, I was constantly stressed, unable to predict how long a project would take. I didn't have any formal education in design, and I found myself struggling to understand what led to a "good" design and how I could reliably make successful design decisions. I found myself neglecting my hobbies, but I still managed to compose a song every now and then. At some point, I just decided to release this unfinished music all at once.

2018–21 pretty much everything

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Chapter 6
Everything I made during design school

For its size, Rhode Island has a lot going for it. That includes a major bridge at risk of collapse, drivers that don't understand the concept of right-of-way, and a little school of design. That was my school for three years as I was a graduate student studying graphic design. I spent those years creating close to a hundred projects and sleeping very little. Those projects—well, some of those projects—would go on to serve as the foundation for my professional practice. In this chapter, I'll share the projects I made while studying at RISD to reveal the ways in which the school helped me grow as a designer and start my career.

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#fall-2021

Fall 2021

My first semester at RISD was a whirlwind. I had learned a lot as a freelance designer already, but I found myself struggling at the basics—things like understanding what made a design "good" or successful. RISD's three-year MFA in Graphic Design offered me a chance to get on my feet before tackling headier projects. This meant taking courses structured more like an undergraduate curriculum covering history, form, and typography.

History of Graphic Design, taught by Doug Scott

Doug's course covered basically everything I needed to know for my entire time at RISD. By learning how different design aesthetics and practices emerged, I found myself able to analyze existing designs and make informed decisions in my own work. Besides listening to lectures, Doug had us learn by assigning projects that engaged with historical and contemporary references and figures.

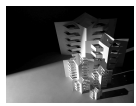
London Underground Map

Paul Schuitema and Matías Duarte

Graduate Form I, taught by Tom Wedell

Tom's approach to form was particularly cinematic and photographic. He had us working with our hands and with cameras, discovering form from real, physical objects instead of crafting it out of nothing. At first, I found this exceedingly difficult because we were designing without content to design for. But what Tom helped me realize was that there were formal aspects of design that made an image or composition compelling even without content to rely on.

Graphic Collages



Paper Sculptures

Invisible Cities: Aglaura

Graduate Type Studio I, taught by Nancy Skolos

Nancy's approach to typography was expressive and experimental. Tom was her husband, and the two of them had a long and impressive career creating poster designs together, with Tom primarily managing form and Nancy in charge of type. Nancy had us thinking deeply about the aesthetic qualities of letterforms, and then thinking about ways to create compositions out of just letters or combining type with image. We practiced these concepts through a series of exercises that culminated in a "process" zine showcasing our best outputs.

"This is not a show"

Graduate Seminar I, taught by Anther Kiley

Anther's course was a good foil to Doug's, in this case focusing more on contemporary theories and practices for graphic design than on historical examples. We read and discussed theories leading to (and then reacting to) Modernism, and then created work that had us dissecting what these big concepts meant to us. This was the first time I really questioned what "graphic design" was, which felt like an essential step toward finding my own creative voice.

"Image"

Collegiate Teaching: Preparation + Reflection, taught by Nancy Friese

I went to grad school in part to become a teacher, and Nancy's course was the first in a concentration on collegiate teaching. Her seminar was extremely practical and involved creating a teaching portfolio. That meant writing a teaching philosophy, diversity statement, several course descriptions, and a syllabus. This was my first time ever creating these kinds of materials, which was challenging in part because I didn't feel qualified to do so yet. But even so, this work served as the foundation of what I taught later on at RISD.

Teaching Portfolio

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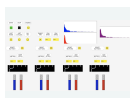
Winter 2022

RISD's curriculum includes mandatory wintersessions that offer students a chance to take an elective outside of their department. I was curious about the Digital + Media department, which seemed like a good match for my interests but wasn't on my radar when I was applying to grad schools. So, this was my chance to take a course in the department and see what it was all about.

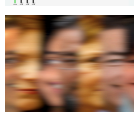
Of Sound and Vision, taught by Mark Cetilia

Mark taught a primer in the Max visual programming language that covered both generative audio and video using MSP and Jitter. If you're confused, just know that Max is basically an app that lets you plug sounds, images, and code together to see what comes out. I thought that this kind of process could be useful in my work, but discovered that our focus was primarily on experimentation and artistic output rather than on communication. That helped me realize I was in the right department—I wanted to be a designer, not an artist.

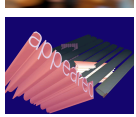


In Sync, and Out

"She broke up with me on Christmas Eve"



Real Human Drama



"Nothing matches the feeling of finding treasure

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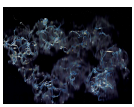
Spring 2022

If I spent my first semester developing a vocabulary for design, I spent my second semester putting that newfound knowledge into practice. My projects became more technical, shifting away from abstract exercises and moving toward tangible outputs. That meant making things like books, typefaces, and websites. More than any other semester at RISD, this semester (particularly Marie's Web Type course) exposed me to the topics and skills that would become key components of my creative practice.

Graduate Form II, taught by Olya Domoradova

Olya's course, which felt like my first real "graduate" course, followed in the footsteps of a syllabus written by Cem Eskinazi. Unlike Graduate Form I, which was about image and composition, Graduate Form II was about process. We had assignments that required us to do things like analyze work we liked, experiment with a tool for an extended period of time, set up conditional design scenarios, and develop a consistent design regimen.

Gift Fonts



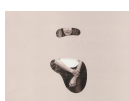
Hot Glue Experiments

Tag Team Calligraphers

Daily Practices

Graduate Type Studio II, taught by Lucy Hitchcock

Lucy guided us through several "real world" projects including the design for a magazine editorial, a music festival identity, and a full-length book. These prompts put an increased focus on craft, both in our designs but also in the physical production of our work. The challenge therein was finding how to insert our own voices into highly-polished outputs that fit specific formal requirements.



The Smutty Mystic

A Feminist Turn

That Then This

The Crying of Lot 49

Exhibit Design, taught by Doug Scott

Another class with Doug! This time, Doug had us create physical models spanning a series of exhibition scenarios. Even so, the emphasis was less on creating elaborate models and more on crafting unique experiences for potential audiences. This was particularly challenging for me because I felt more comfortable with software than with my hands. What I learned was that working physically brings you one step closer to the actual experience of someone walking through your exhibition.

Mariam Kamara Exhibition

Dugong Exhibition

Graduate Type Design, taught by Cyrus Highsmith

Cyrus' approach to type design focused on the rhythm created in and between the positive and negative spaces of letters. We went through a series of drawing exercises, building our own pens and looking closely at what gives a letterform its distinct voice and character. After that, we designed our first ever fonts—specifically, pixel fonts, made up of square units. Finally, we worked on original "body" fonts designed for typesetting paragraphs of text. I learned that I really enjoyed the process of analyzing pre-existing typefaces to see the secrets of their construction, and then incorporating these ideas with a personal twist in my own font.

PowerPack

Limkin

Web Type, taught by Marie Otsuka

Marie was a type designer and coder who worked with Cyrus at his type foundry, Occupant Fonts. Whereas Cyrus taught us what was essentially traditional type design, Marie taught us a more experimental form of typography that involved motion. We created things called “variable” fonts, which you could easily animate on websites. So, we also created digital web specimens for trying out our typefaces. But more than anything else, I learned about the wide range of creative uses for technical skills like type design and coding. After Marie’s course, I would continue to use these skills in virtually every project I made while at RISD.

Project Hub

.otf, .ttf

Mini Mochi

Wikipedia Township

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Summer 2022

At this point, I had never had a position at a design company. Fresh off of Doug's course in exhibition design, I got an internship on the Visual Experience Design team at the NYC-based exhibition design firm Local Projects. This would prove to help me understand what it's like to design in a more formal role, as well as to see how what I learned in school related to what designers were actually doing in the industry today.

Local Projects

Working with my supervisor Olivia Crosby, I was involved in three projects, each at different phases of completion. This was extremely convenient because it essentially gave me a crash course on every phase of exhibit design—concept/schematic design, design development, and final design. But unlike the exhibit design course I had just taken the prior semester, I worked exclusively digitally (although there were some physical models in our studio). My responsibilities consisted of fine-tuning slide decks and InDesign files (yes, exhibition design apparently happens in InDesign!), sketching ideas, organizing visual research, and mocking up wall designs on top of renders completed by the in-house 3D team. Besides those three projects, I also collaborated with the Creative Technologist intern Ekemini Nkanta on a prototype for an AR mirror concept.

Courage to Act: Rescue in Denmark

Scent Discovery

First Bank of the United States

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#fall-2022

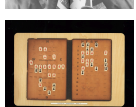
Fall 2022

Now in my second year at RISD, my cohort doubled in size to include the incoming students starting the 2-year MFA program. Working alongside seven new peers, we began working on things that were more in line with a graduate curriculum—open-ended projects that forced us to explore our values and develop a personal voice.

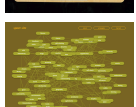
Graduate Studio I, taught by Bethany Johns and Ramon Tejada

Bethany and Ramon guided us through research-oriented projects that had us looking at places and objects to find deeper meanings and stories hidden within. Our first project was a collaborative publication about our identities, our unique perspectives, and our roles in the local community. The second project was a deep-dive into a specific artifact from the Providence Public Library. I selected a vintage whist playing board, which inspired me to think about games, rules, and what it means to play something. Additionally, this course marked the first time I began collaborating with my peers, developing websites that helped me sharpen and expand my skills as a coder.

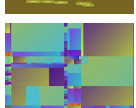
Atlas



Whist Plates



Spore Site



Pixel Weaver

Smile Through It

Graduate Type Studio III, taught by Doug Scott

One more course with Doug! Even though this course was the end of the graduate typography curriculum, it covered the fundamentals of typographic terminology, craft, and process. We started with an exercise in rearranging unorganized information into an accessible format, then moved on to typesetting a short book, creating several editorial typographic illustrations, and finally conceiving of a wide-ranging brand identity. Each project started with a practical prompt that emulated "real-world" design work, made even more realistic due to constantly overlapping deadlines.

Tokyo Olympics Schedule

Exactitude

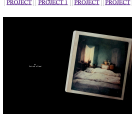
What Goes on a Sign?

Galápagos Islands

SOURCE, taught by Eric Li

At the time, RISD did not have a core curriculum in coding. This meant that there were frequently thematic coding courses, like Marie's from before and Eric's now, that popped up and offered their own take on an introductory web programming curriculum. Eric's perspective on coding was much more in line with a traditional computer science regimen, which I found helpful in determining best practices and setting a solid foundation to keep building on. This was the first time that I felt like I actually understood how web code worked, and wasn't just reusing pre-coded demos to create my own projects.

Project Hub



Breakfast (with Clinton Van Arnam)

Breakfast v2 (with Clinton Van Arnam)

Breaking News (You'll Never Hear About)

What Is Wikipedia?

UX Research & **Strategy**, taught by Aaron Simmons

Aaron's course exclusively focused on research, with no instruction on user interface design. Our objective was to understand a broad overview of the research that goes into professional user-centric projects. We accomplished this by proposing and completing our own research project over the course of the semester. At the time, I was growing increasingly interested in atypical user experiences, so I used this course as an opportunity to challenge assumptions about the layout of social media sites and propose my own design.

Design + Community Prototype

Web Programming Workshop, taught by me!

Each semester, RISD offers several four-week workshops that give students an opportunity to learn a specific technical skill. Grad students were occasionally allowed to teach a workshop, so I jumped on the opportunity as a chance to get into teaching. I discovered I was utterly and terribly unprepared to teach, but learned two important lessons: teaching is harder than it looks, especially teaching designers how to code, and; you don't have to be an expert in a topic to help students learn it. Teaching code actually helped me become a better coder. I was able for the first time to see how sharing my work and studies could help others learn, too.

Course Materials

Web Programming Workshop (2022)

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Winter 2023

I'm not sure about the case at other grad schools, but RISD has a bit of a reputation for stressed-out students. This wintersession was my most stressful term in my entire RISD experience. I taught my first full-semester course, which also required an evening seminar to complete the collegiate teaching certificate. But I was also preparing to teach a workshop in the spring, so I took an open research course to get guidance for making teaching materials. And, I had my first big professional web programming gig. In other words, I had a whole bunch of stuff going on.

Graduate Open Research, taught by Ryan Waller

Ryan's course let us propose topic we wanted to work on with the support of a weekly meeting. I planned to teach my own variable fonts course in the fall, so this was a chance to develop the materials ahead of time. What initially started as a basic website evolved into a full-fledged type testing tool with a distinctive musical personality. Every week, Ryan pushed my idea further, and it was up to me to figure out what the limits of my ability to code were. I ended up with a significantly more complex project than I thought I was capable of at the start.

Variable Fonts Workshop

Digital Form, taught by me!

This course marked my first time teaching an original semester-long curriculum. The curriculum covered what I considered the gamut of digital design practices: static design, motion design, and web design. Through teaching, I discovered the limits of what I could teach in a given set of time, but was equally amazed at what students could accomplish with just a basic set of tools at their disposal. The real challenges, though, were the weeks in which I had to teach my five-hour class meeting three days in a row. That's just an impossible thing to prepare for.

Course Materials

Collegiate Teaching Practicum, taught by Mairead Byrne

Right after teaching my own course, I had to attend a supportive seminar required for all graduates teaching during wintersession. At first, I was frustrated by the requirement, but luckily Mairead recognized our stress levels and used this meeting as an opportunity to work through the challenges we faced during our time teaching. It felt special to be in a room where everyone was a teacher, and I held on to that experience later on when I began developing resources for students and teachers alike.

Freelance Web Design and Development

With two web courses and some experience teaching code under my belt, I felt confident enough to take on some web-based freelance work. I worked with Design Observer to create a sibling site for their upcoming twentieth anniversary, which coincided with an award ceremony. Their team provided me with initial design mockups, which I implemented and expanded upon to include elements of motion and generative design. By the end, I realized that abstract and creative uses of code actually had a practical place and purpose in "traditional" sites like this one.

The Design Observer Twenty

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Spring 2023

Halfway through the program! This semester called on us to start thinking about our perspective on design in the context of our eventual theses, which we would start writing the following semester. By this point, I was starting to have fewer "first" experiences, and instead spending my time honing the design, coding, and teaching skills I had picked up in prior semesters.

Graduate Studio II, taught by Lucy Hitchcock and Paul Soulellis

Lucy and Paul's course followed in the prior semester's footsteps and featured open-ended projects about identity, place, and audience—really, about what it means to maintain a creative practice. I found myself struggling even from the first assignment, for which I created something I liked the idea of but couldn't fully commit to for some reason. In the end, I realized that the project was not consistent with my voice—it was too abstract in a way I simply couldn't relate to. So, the second project allowed me an opportunity to pivot toward something less abstract and more like me. From thereon, my values as a designer were rooted in accessibility through this lens of direct (and often deliberately educational) communication.

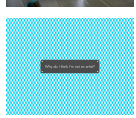
Notes from Neither Here nor There

Small Sites; Big Stories

Graduate Seminar II, taught by Paul Soulellis

Paul's seminar focused on discovering our individual approaches to design in preparation for our theses. We spent a vast majority of the semester working on our "thesis compendiums"—books that would essentially function as our thesis proposals. But I had just broken my wrist. So instead of making a book, I went full force on a digital-first approach that reckoned with the ideas of originality and authenticity. I called my web-based book "A Thesis Compendium" to acknowledge that my project was the framework for a book, but not an actual copy of the book itself. Instead, the website generated print-ready PDFs using a wide variety of design parameters.

Emerging Landscapes



Questions

Drafts

A Thesis Compendium

Techlands, taught by Shona Kitchen and Georgia Rhodes

Techlands was a research-oriented Digital + Media course in which we worked on personal projects that engaged with the environment around us. We conducted field research through several site visits that explored locations in Rhode Island as a means for collecting material and searching for inspiration. One of these endeavors resulted in the content for my first project in Graduate Studio I. Besides that, I continued to create work in the vein of the user experience investigations I had started in prior semesters.

Collage

Untitled (Digital Landscape)

Type Design Independent Study, taught by Richard Lipton

Now in my third type design course at RISD, I worked with Richard on expanding my font Limkin, which I had created in Cyrus' class. Richard's approach to type design focused on craft, with roots in hand lettering and some of the more "traditional" aspects of type design. With Richard's guidance, I designed a sans serif variant of Limkin, as well as hairline and heavyweight versions. And, using lessons from Marie's course, I was able to turn Limkin into a variable font, which meant that I could interpolate the in-between weights and even use the typeface as a flared, half-serif version. I would go on to use this typeface for many projects, including this thesis!

Limkin Limkin Sans and additional weights

Variable Fonts Workshop, taught by me!

I wanted to follow in Marie's footsteps, so I proposed my own workshop that gave students a chance to design variable fonts. Since most of our type design courses focused on craft and precision, I figured mine could focus on experimentation. In the course, I encouraged students to learn the technology, play with it, and see what forms it could result in. And, I was able to incorporate the tool/website that I had created during the winter as the class website and a showcase of student work.

Course Materials

Collaborations

I really enjoyed collaborating with my peers during the previous semester, so I kept that practice going! I designed and developed the website for our graduate biennial, as well as coded three final projects for peers in the grad and undergrad programs. With the first two of these projects, I was learning how to scale up a single design into a larger, generative system. That meant populating the website's contents from a spreadsheet instead of manually coding every element.

Highlights from the Impermanent Collection

Colors of Extinction (with Moritz Lónyay)

Wind Drawings (with Kaela Kennedy)

Audioflo (with Michelle Jieun Song)

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#summer-2023

Summer 2023

I had really enjoyed my last summer internship, but felt at this point I no longer wanted to be an intern. So, I instead decided to spend my summer working on my own projects, polishing everything I had made so far, and documenting my work. The work you've seen already throughout this thesis is in part the product of my time spent during this summer. Things like my studio projects from the spring semester were much rougher until I spent this summer fixing them up.

Freelance and Personal Projects

In terms of new work, I continued to create websites incorporating practices and ideas from prior semesters. One of these was a freelance project for a music school, whose website features a fully-functional piano keyboard. I also remade my project Pixel Weaver to incorporate more controls and a new user interface, as well as converted some code from my project Notes from Neither Here nor There into a musical toy of sorts. Lastly, I created a small save-the-date website to invite family members to my wedding!

The Talent House (with Clinton Van Arnam)

Pixel Weaver 2.0

Earworm

madgab4ever

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#fall-2023

Fall 2023

The final year of RISD's curriculum is mainly dedicated to our theses. A RISD thesis takes the form of a book, which includes research, essays, interviews, and projects. Of our two final semesters, we spent the first one creating new work, and the second one putting that work into a final book form.

Graduate Thesis I, taught by Bethany Johns and Anther Kiley

To formally propose our theses, we had to give short talks on what our research and work would look like for the following year. In my presentation, I talked about organizing my output into a few buckets: type design, education, and studio work. So, I ended up creating a website for my type foundry, which featured all the fonts I had made at RISD so far. After that, I worked on a variety of educational websites aimed at teaching code to designers. Besides those personal projects, I collaborated with my peers on several websites and also made a couple of smaller sites for presenting ideas pertaining to my thesis.

Feedback

Too Much Type

Baby Steps

DEMOLAND

test-project-1.html

This Is For You, a lecture

Data Narratives, taught by Reuben Fischer-Baum

Reuben's course taught the programming language R in the context of data visualization. I was Reuben's teaching assistant (but also taking the course). For my final project, I really wanted a challenge of working with "big" data, since that's what felt special about using R as opposed to simply working out of a spreadsheet. I discovered a massive dataset (more than one billion rows of data) archiving info from the defunct GeoCities community, and I created an interactive digital article collecting my findings.

GeoCities: Paradise Lost

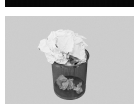
Newly Formed, taught by Christopher and Kathleen Sleboda

This course was a prime example of learning through the process of making. Each week, we had a new open-ended assignment and only the week in which to complete it. Therefore, we all ended up with a massive output spanning a wide range of concepts and forms. I used the course as a chance to tackle some projects and techniques that I felt I never had the time for, like a website that played the Animal Crossing soundtrack in real time (a personal love of mine).

Sylvania

Meal Kit

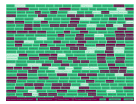
Music Box



Zig Not Zag

Zooooooom

Onomatopoeia

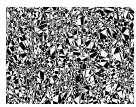


Does Not Exist

Picket Fence

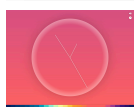
Nautical Maps (with Kaela Kennedy)

Zag



Gems

Ghost



Aurora

Web Programming Workshop, taught by me!

For my second time teaching the workshop, I used a new custom-coded website I had developed over the summer. This site featured an in-browser text editor, which I had learned how to implement while making my project Small Sites; Big Stories. In practice, this website proved to be way too complicated and large in scale that I couldn't maintain it, and I resorted back to using my original workshop website from the year before. That's the nature of user experience—you don't know if things will work unless you actually let people try to use them.

Course Materials

Web Programming Workshop (2023)

Collaborations

I continued to see collaborations as opportunities to focus on technical skills as opposed to design. In my own practice, I was coding individual webpages less frequently and instead finding ways to generate my code off of data from spreadsheets. At the same time, my peers were also moving away from smaller-scale projects and into things like publications that repeated designs across several pieces of content. It turned out that my newfound coding skills were a perfect fit for these kinds of design formats. The one drawback, though, was that I over-volunteered myself and had to eventually drop a project (a type foundry website for recent alums) that I didn't have time to complete.

Common Dimensions (with Rebecca Wilkinson)

Notes on Craft (with Lydia Chodosh)

Live Stream (with Berett Wilber)

Without Notice

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#winter-2024

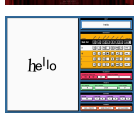
Winter 2024

In our last wintersession, we usually take a thesis-oriented workshop that lets us kickstart interviews and thesis writing. Instead, this year featured a different kind of required class as an opportunity to keep creating new work. On top of that, I taught another wintersession course, this time fulfilling one of the department's web programming slots instead of proposing a course of my own design.

Lights, Camera, Thesis, taught by Teddy Blanks and Jessica Helfand

Teddy and Jessica's course had us creating trailers and title sequences for our theses as a means for generating new work and figuring out what our theses were really about. At this point, I was fully dedicated to web-based practices and building tools and frameworks instead of complete, final projects. So, I made a variety of websites that could make these projects for me, and then edited screen recordings of my sites for our final critiques.

Welcome



Fontbox

Web Sites & **Stories**, taught by me!

Even though I had taught two full semesters of coding workshops already, I had never taught a full-semester coding course. For this class, I tried utilizing some of the tools I had made during my first thesis course. These projects featured prebuilt demos and organized resources that encouraged students to code creative outputs at any skill level. But like my experience with the workshop during the fall, I discovered some user experience issues that made teaching difficult. What ended up working was just spending as much one-on-one time as possible with each student to tackle their individual needs.

Course Materials

Tutorials

Freelance Web Design and Development

Working with my friend and peer Rebecca, I had another opportunity to put my graduate research into practice. In this case, I developed the website for a Toronto-based restaurant. While the website mostly features a typical user experience, the homepage incorporates a generative piece of art as a way of making the site stand out without disrupting its accessibility.

Sounds Good (with Rebecca Wilkinson)

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#spring-2024

Spring 2024

The end! (Almost.) Our final semester was a mad dash toward the finish line. We had to write our theses, design the books that the writing would go into, and then produce copies in time for our final reviews. On top of that, we still had to meet credit requirements, think about the digital components of our theses, and prepare for our lives after school. No big deal, right?

Graduate Thesis II, taught by Bethany Johns and Pouya Ahmadi

Bethany and Pouya guided us to the end of our experiences at RISD. We came up with plans for finishing our theses, and over several weeks I kept adjusting my concept until it arrived at what you're reading right now. I realized that what would be most helpful for my likely audience was a direct account of what grad school was and what it taught me. I also realized that to do so was not feasible in the time I had, and would not be fun to read in the format of a PDF of a book (as most people would encounter it). So, fully embodying my identity as a web designer, I made my thesis into a website first and a book second.

This Is For You

Color Workshop, taught by William Miller

Bill's course was a meditation on color theory in the context of gouache painting. Our weekly meetings were structured around color studies, each taking on the same dimensions but focusing on different topics pertaining to color theory. While my thesis endeavors were frantic and stressful, this course was not. As Bill put it on the first day of class, we would move at the same pace that paint moved at—not very fast. By the end of the course, I had a terminology and respect for color in a way I could not articulate beforehand.

Color Studies

RISD Grad Show 2024

The school chose me, along with my friend and peer Emily, to create the identity and website for our grad show. We really wanted the identity to be joyous, colorful, and most importantly to somehow incorporate student work. Using techniques I had picked up from making Pixel Weaver, we discovered that we could generate a field of color by zooming in closely on images of student projects. So, the resulting identity did not have a single color palette, but instead directly referenced the colors used in student work.

Grad Show Concepts

RISD Grad Show 2024 (with Emily Bluedorn)

Variable Fonts Workshop, taught by me!

My last time teaching as a student! I was treading old ground with the Variable Fonts Workshop. Usually, I used each section as an opportunity to switch things up and try to improve the course. This time, I took the opposite experiment and kept it almost identical each time. I discovered that I was previously overworking myself—the formula was working totally fine already. I also began developing a new version of the class website that made use of my improved coding and design skills.

Course Materials

Variable Fonts Workshop

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Chapter 7
Everything I made after design school

In design school, your audience is often very small—often just your teachers and peers. Meanwhile, your audience afterwards is quite a bit bigger—literally anyone and everyone. That change in audience means your work needs to change, too. Plus, it helps to create work that makes money, and that reality also changes the kind of work you create. So, what happened when I left design school? In this chapter, I'll share how my output evolved to meet these new challenges.

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making/after/
#plans

Planning for the future

What came next? Besides getting married, I had few concrete plans. Before coming to RISD, I had a relatively successful career as a freelance designer. Leaving RISD, I had developed a creative practice and discovered there was a market for it. But instead of seeking out positions in creative coding, I decided to strike out on my own to see if I could rekindle my business and turn it into something bigger.

Organizations

Why run one company when you can run four? I decided to start a studio called No Replica, which would primarily create websites and generative brand identities. I named it after my undergraduate thesis in theatrical sound design because my work connected technology and experience, which felt like theater to me. I figured the studio would be my one business that made money, and then the other three could serve as personal passions. GD with GD (Graphic Design with Gabriel Drozdov) would host my teaching projects, Too Much Type my fonts, and Barco Loudly my music (a passion I hoped to pick back up!). If nothing else, these "companies" helped me to organize my life since I was entering a world without the structures I had relied on for three years.

No Replica

GD with GD

Too Much Type

Barco Loudly

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sharing

Part Three
Sharing

Conversations with
the people that helped me
along the way

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Chapter 8
Talking with my teachers

Teachers teach you things. But how do they teach you things? I've had great hands-on teachers that kept a tight-knit circle of superfans. I've also had terrible teachers that instructed through counterexamples. I've even had teachers I've never met, whose work I tried to emulate. But over time, I've learned that the most effective teachers shared a common trait—instead of giving students information, they guided them to it. In this chapter, I'll share conversations I had with several teachers that I've seen as mentors and guides, leading me down my own path to become a designer (and a teacher, too).

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sharing/teachers/
#niklas-nygren

Nicklas Nygren

In design school, I felt pressure to have favorite designers. In reality, my influences were outside the world of graphic design and in the worlds of music, film, theater, and—most importantly—video games. Nicklas is a video game designer whose work I loved because it was similarly multi-disciplinary. He made games that were both cinematic and performative through the use of interactive audio, with nearly every player action coinciding with some sort of dynamic audio cue. I talked with Nicklas to hear how he arrived at this approach and what his thoughts were now that he's released several games using this technique.

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#damon-zucconi

Damon Zucconi

What was the first website you ever visited? While I don't remember exactly what mine was, I do have an earliest memory of the Internet. That experience was going to a weird, seemingly useless website called sometimesred sometimesblue.com. Its title gives away its appearance. For some reason, the site really stuck with me no matter how much time passed. Over ten years later, I would discover its designer Damon was still as productive as ever making websites, both artistically and professionally. I talked to Damon to hear what led to Sometimes Red, Sometimes Blue, and what he was up to these days.

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sharing/teachers/
#david-reinfurt

David Reinfurt

The main way teachers share design education outside of school is through books. David is the author of one of those books, spanning an entire design curriculum he conceived of and teaches at Princeton. As a new teacher, I was inspired by David's approach to lectures, which read more like stories. Instead of attempting to cover every single influence and idea, they provide one perspective on design and let students explore that topic through conceptually challenging projects. I talked with David to hear how he came up with his courses, how he wrote the corresponding book, and what his thoughts are now that he's taught the program numerous times.

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sharing/teachers/
#daniel-shiffman

Daniel Shiffman

Sometimes, if you're lucky, you find someone who embodies exactly what you want to become. For me, that person was Dan Shiffman. What I admire about Dan's approach to teaching is his endless positivity, his commitment to building communities, and his ability to make something as inaccessible as code actually inviting and fun. I talked with Dan to hear what connections he had found between in-person and online teaching, and if he had any advice for someone trying to follow in his footsteps.

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#claudia-tatinge-
nascimento

Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento

If you're going to develop a design practice, it helps to have a design philosophy you're committed to. My design philosophy comes from theater, which I studied before design. And the reason why I wanted to study theater was Cláudia. Cláudia was my first ever theater professor, teaching a wide range of practices and theories spanning from acting, to performance studies, to perfecting the essay format. Cláudia taught me how to write. In many ways, she also taught me how to teach. But she also taught me how to think critically about the meaning of art and communication. I talked with Cláudia to hear how she teaches students to think and to ask what her thoughts were on the role of a teacher.

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Bethany Johns and Doug Scott

How do you teach design? RISD has many faculty worth asking that question to, but of those professors I really wanted to talk with Doug and Bethany. Both of them have had outsized influences in the undergraduate and graduate design programs, whether through directly crafting curriculums or imparting a common way of thinking to students. I talked with Bethany and Doug together to hear what they learned from their tenure at RISD and how the undergraduate and graduate programs evolved over time.

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Chapter 9
Talking with my peers

School is a place to learn alongside other people. When you learn together, you also end up learning from each other—through the conversations you have, friendships you foster, projects you share, collaborations you, uh, collaborate, and the many successes and failures you see through (whether you want to or not). What you might not realize during this experience is that by studying, you become part of a new generation of designers that have the chance to push the discipline and industry forward. In this chapter, I'll share conversations I had with the peers I've studied and worked alongside.

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sharing/peers/
#alec

Alec Figuracion

There were twelve other designers in my cohort at RISD: Alec, Berett, Clinton, Emily, Glikeriya, Husna, Kaela, Lydia, Michelle, Rebecca, Shiyue, and Soo Min. I'm lucky to call all of them my friends. Some of these friends studied alongside me for three years, and some for two. In either case, that was enough time spent together such that it makes me sad to know we'll split up when this program ends. I don't know what they'll all do, but I want to know. And I want to know how our shared experience studying design affected each of their lives. So, after the dust has settled, we'll meet again.

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#berett

Berett Wilber

There were twelve other designers in my cohort at RISD: Alec, Berett, Clinton, Emily, Glikeriya, Husna, Kaela, Lydia, Michelle, Rebecca, Shiyue, and Soo Min. I'm lucky to call all of them my friends. Some of these friends studied alongside me for three years, and some for two. In either case, that was enough time spent together such that it makes me sad to know we'll split up when this program ends. I don't know what they'll all do, but I want to know. And I want to know how our shared experience studying design affected each of their lives. So, after the dust has settled, we'll meet again.

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#clinton

Clinton Van Arnam

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#emily

Emily Bluedorn

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#glikeriya

Glikeriya Shotanova

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#husna

Husna Abubakar

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sharing/peers/
#kaela

Kaela Kennedy

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#lydia

Lydia Chodosh

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#michelle

Michelle Belgrod

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sharing/peers/
#rebecca

Rebecca Wilkinson

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sharing/peers/
#shiyue

Shiyue Wang

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sharing/peers/
#soo-min

Soo Min Lee

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sharing/students

Chapter 10
Talking with my students

You learn from your students. That's a rule. You have to. If you're a teacher and you're not learning from your students, then I'm worried for you. It was bell hooks who helped me realize that teaching isn't the act of passing down knowledge. Instead, teaching happens somewhere between the teacher and the student. If all goes right, both parties grow in the process. In this chapter, I'll share conversations I had with my students about their experiences as students—the good, the bad, the ugly, the pretty, the things they'll never forget, and the things they wish they could forget.

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sharing/students/
#jackey-huang

Jackey Huang

The first time I ever taught an original, full-semester course was during RISD's 2023 wintersession. It was tough to teach. What made it worth it, though, was seeing my students succeed. Of those students, I thought Jackey performed particularly well. Teaching him reminded me of the relationships I had with former teachers, whose words I was now passing down. But Jackey was in the Illustration department, so I didn't get to see him often afterwards. I wanted to catch up and hear how he was doing, what he retained from the course, and his perspective on how I could have an impact as a teacher once I graduated.

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sharing/students/
#variable-fonts-workshop

Students of the Variable Fonts Workshop

While studying at RISD, I taught several workshops that were four-week mini-courses on specific, technical topics. The benefit of teaching workshops was that I met dozens of students in a short period of time. Because of that, I could also continuously revise and improve my courses since we essentially started over every four weeks. As I reached the end of my time as a grad student, I wanted to take one last opportunity to check in with a section of students taking my workshop to hear what was working and what wasn't with my course, my teaching, and the program as a whole.

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goodbye

Afterword
Goodbye!

A message for anyone finishing this thesis

OK, that's the end!

Sort of. If this were a book, this would be the end. But this is a website, and websites can change over time. So this is just the end for now.

As I've mentioned at least once, I'm writing this right before my time as a student is up. To be specific, it's currently April 22, 2024, and in just over a month I will have my diploma. I will also be turning in my thesis—this thesis—and in a way that means it's finished. Kaput.

But that doesn't mean it's done, or that I'm done. In fact, I'm not really leaving this program. I've fallen in love with this city—Providence, Rhode Island—and I'm sticking around. I'm even teaching in the fall. So

really, all that's changing is that I'm stepping out of one circle—the students—and into another—the faculty. Once that happens, I'll learn new things—new lessons—which will lead to new stories. At the same time, I will attempt to start my own studio, which will lead to a whole assortment of new projects. And throughout all of these changes, my community of teachers, peers, and students will continue to grow, so more conversations will be had. Altogether, this means that this thesis will stay in motion indefinitely.

I think that's also nice, because fixed objects tend to get lost in time. As I've watched the Internet grow, I've watched so many valuable things get lost in the past as new and shiny things emerged. It's hard to keep track of resources when everything changes so quickly and often. I'll do what I can to keep this one thing—this thesis—visible.

But I can't promise it'll always look this way. And I can't even promise it'll always be here. That's probably the greatest downside of a website's ability to change. A book may degrade or whither, but can't fully vanish without a great deal of effort. Websites, meanwhile, are fickle things. Web standards change. Web browsers change. It may be that in five years, my website no longer functions as intended. As its custodian, it's on me to maintain it for you.

I do have a solution for that, but it needs some help from you. If you want to lock this website in place—in a moment in time—then you can print it. That book will stay with you as you originally experienced it. In five, ten, fifteen years, you can rely on that book still being there as it originally was. If that's what you want, then I can lend you a hand. You can generate a print-ready PDF of this website's contents here: thisisforyou.gabrieldrozdov.com/print.

I'll be the first to lock things in place. Remember that it's April 22, 2024? In a couple of weeks, I'll generate a print-ready PDF of this website's contents and print several copies. And shortly after that, I'll submit that PDF as my thesis. If all else fails, there's at least that record of this one moment in time—the framework of something that might someday exist.

So, that's it. If this is truly the end—the last thing you read—then by now I have nothing else of value to share.

It was nice meeting you! As I tell my students:

Good luck! Have fun!

Sincerely, Gabriel

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index

Index

A list of all the URLs
used in this book

[0]	p. 1	thisisforyou.gabrieldrozdov.com
[1]	p. 8	thisisforyou.gabrieldrozdov.com/hello
[2]	p. 18	thisisforyou.gabrieldrozdov.com/learning
[3]	p. 20	thisisforyou.gabrieldrozdov.com/learning/design
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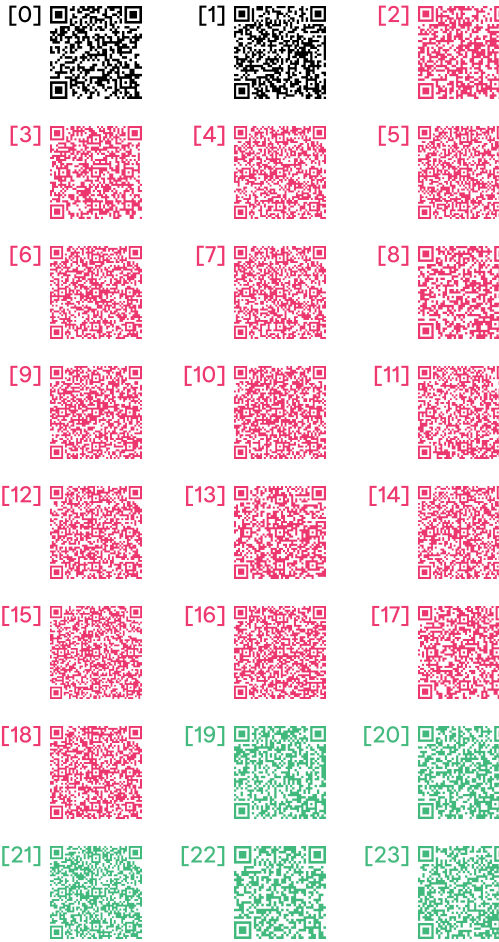
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This is for Maddie, my best friend and the love of my life. I can't wait for everything that comes next :)

This is for my parents and family, the people who have supported and cheered me on through every phase of my life.

This is for my teachers, peers, and students, the community that made this thesis a reality.

And this is for you, the reason why I do anything.

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This thesis is maintained as an open-source repository on GitHub. View or download the code at github.com/gabrieldrozdov/this-is-for-you.

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Graphic Design of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

By Gabriel Drozdov, 2024

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