

UX Designer as Flaneur

Let the Mind Wander

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Why is this talk important?

The creative process is one we are deeply dependent upon to produce the kinds of work our organizations expect from us, but more importantly, to bring us joy.

Yes, joy.

We initially engaged in UX work because it gives us joy. But, in this modern age of deadlines, conflicting needs, and personal agendas, it can be hard to find that joy. This talk is meant to help you find some ways to bring back that joy.

The Flaneur

Matt Belge

A flaneur is a person, who comes from a philosophy that originates in the mid-1800s in France. Flaneurs were rebels, rebelling against an increasingly cold society in the dawn of the Industrial Era. Flaneurs embraced the philosophy of walking about in the world, particularly in cities, without any pre-conceived agenda, to observe and engage with their surroundings in a way that is both detached and yet engaged. The idea is to be open to whatever might happen, to drink it in, and to enjoy the process of exploration. Edmund White wrote a wonderful book called “The Flaneur” which uses a flaneur approach to the city of Paris.

For UX Designers and Researchers, this Flaneur mindset can be very helpful as we try to produce innovative results from our research and our designs. During the research process we might try to be both engaged and yet detached. Engaged in that we are open to whatever happens once we start observing our users. They may do unexpected things. We should be open to observing that and being deeply curious about what is going on without judging it or filtering it.

This also applies as we move into the design phase, as we explore different solutions to create a great user experience. By being both engaged and yet detached, we are more open to innovation and ideas that might not have occurred to us otherwise. With a great flaneur mindset, we can remember something a user might have said weeks ago, something that seemed not too relevant at the time, and yet now is helping us shape the design of the final outcome.

There is science research to back this up. Google these terms “Research on Mind Wandering and Creativity” and you will find papers published in respected science journals that have been studying the problem of how to maximize creativity and concluding that mind wandering helps.

How to:

1 When meeting with team mates, feel free to start the meeting with relaxing and maybe inspiring conversations about topics like philosophy, or art, or something you read that inspires you, or even casual topics like what you did last weekend. This will put minds at rest and help people engage in a more open and creative way.

2. With yourself, be more gentle and kind with your mind. Let it wander from time to time. In the beginning or middle of a design solution, let your mind wander to unrelated topics. Come back to the problem at hand and add a bit more to your solution. Repeat as long as needed.

3. When observing users, learn to relax and just take it in. Don't rush to judgements too fast. Keep the filters wide open and the attention engaged. Later on you can use what you observed to help you make decisions, but initially, just take it all in.

Key take away:

Let the mindset of the Flaneur guide you to be more creative and more open. Be engaged and yet detached. Let your mind wander when it needs a break.

Philosophy as a Creative Catalyst

Vanita Verma

It is easy to get to a mental place where you feel tired and uninspired. But our work as UX designers requires us to be creative sparks.

What to do when our creative spark has gone dull?

One answer is what is called the "Proustian Moment"

Proust was a philosopher from 19th Century France.

He described how at times he felt dull and lifeless.

And one time when he was feeling this way, his mother brought him some tea and madeleine cakes. When Proust bit into the cake, it brought back a flood of happy moments from his childhood, how he felt loved and alive. And in doing so his dull, lifeless feeling left him.

When we feel dull as UX designers, we need to seek out the things that bring us joy.

I find solace and joy in reading philosophy. It embraces deep questions about the nature of our existence and engages our critical thinking capabilities. In doing so, it brings me back to the things I really care about and take joy in.

In fact, I keep a book of writings in philosophy on my desk and when I am feeling a bit down, I flip to a random page and look for inspiration. And often I find it. And sometimes I share this with others and they feel inspired too.

For you, it does not need to be reading philosophy.

Find your own "Proustian Moments". Maybe it's photographs of flowers, maybe it's petting your

cat. Or going for a walk. Whatever it is, make sure to do it often to keep your spark alive. And do it for others too.

How to

1. Consider philosophy as a source of inspiration. Find a philosopher who engages your creative spirit and read a bit of their writings to get your mind energized when you feel dull. Keep a book nearby and handy to read a few pages whenever the need appears.
2. Find whatever kindles your Proustian Moment and then find ways to bring them into your everyday life. Even before or during meetings, during design sessions, or whenever you need to be more joyful and open to creative work.

Key take away

Let the Proustian moment, whatever it is that brings you little moments of joy, back into your life. Find ways to activate these moments at times when you need them, such as at the beginning of a team meeting, a design session, or some research you are involved with.

Embracing Ambiguity

Aleksandra Oliinyk

Early in my career, I felt that ambiguity was something to be avoided. My job was to get everything boiled down to clear, explicit requirements so that I knew exactly what to do.

Then I interviewed for a job where they asked “How comfortable are you with ambiguity?”

I wanted the job so I said “I’m very comfortable with ambiguity”. But it wasn’t really true.

As I progressed in my career I realized there are two types of ambiguity and one of them is very helpful and the other is not.

The not helpful kind are the things that instill general chaos and confusion. Things such as who owns this problem, or what is our goal, or what is our deadline. These should not be ambiguous.

But other topics, such as what is the best solution for our users, these can be ambiguous in the early going and it’s great. Because in this case, ambiguity is the space I get to work in to be creative and innovative. It gives me the chance to open my mind and look wide for ideas. And as I progressed from entry level to mid-level designer I learned to embrace ambiguity and to love it.

Along the way I learned another lesson. Not only did I not need to know all the answers, and to eliminate all ambiguity, I could be vulnerable, and let others know I did not know all the answers. I could even admit I did not know all the questions.

By being vulnerable like this, I allowed others to express their fears and their unanswered questions. And in so doing, the whole team became more open with each other, less driven by

fear, and more driven by curiosity. And this resulted both in a happier team, and one that helped each other find optimal solutions.

How to

1. When problems arrive ask yourself does this feel like one that will cause chaos and confusion, or is it one that helps create an open space for ambiguity. If it's the first, strive to bring down the confusion. If it's the second, embrace it and swim in it for a while. Use it as your space to come up with new and innovative ideas.
2. Be willing to be vulnerable. Ask the questions everyone wants to ask but everyone is afraid to say. Be comfortable adopting the mindset of a child - "I don't get it" and let others help you understand.

Key Take Aways

Certain kinds of ambiguity are important for our growth. If they lead to chaos and confusion, help get them better understood. If they create space for innovation and creativity, let them be and enjoy playing in the space they have created for you.

Creating Space for the Wandering Mind

Michelle Albert

When I began my work as Head of Product Design at Imprivata, it happened just a few months before COVID hit. Suddenly team members were quitting their jobs. Others were wrapped up in confusion and fear, not knowing how to go forward. What was I to do?

I decided that the core of the problem was to foster a sense of psychological safety within my group. If they felt safe and cared for, their ability to be happy in their work and create great work would be greatly enhanced.

But how to do it?

I encouraged partnering with other team mates on any given task so that they had someone to talk to on a regular basis. Someone who would support them while they were supporting the other.

I encouraged a mindset of curiosity. Studies published in Harvard Business Review by Reynolds and Lewis showed that high performing teams treated mistakes with curiosity, trying to understand what happened so they could stop it from happening again. They did not seek to create blame. Blame induces fear and is the opposite of psychological safety. By creating open and engaging dialog, teams became more innovative and more likely to produce great work.

But this only works if you have the right people in the first place. People who have skills that compliment other skills on the team and are willing to share their skills happily with others. People who have a curious and open ended mindset that leaves lots of space for others to contribute their ideas. So I focused on replacing the team members who left with people who had broad creative

backgrounds, demonstrated skills in an area where we needed it, and an openness to helping others.

I also created plans to help them succeed. A team can only succeed if they have the needed time and resources to do the work required of them. So, collectively as a team, we created schedules that met our business objectives and yet the team felt it could work with. We built in milestones with clear objectives. And we pushed back when the constraints were so burdensome that success was doubtful.

I also created a way for each team member to share their work so that they could all learn from each other, ask questions, and grow. Based on the scrum idea of a standup, we had weekly Visual Standups, where people took turns sharing drawings from their work while explaining what they were engaged in.

How to

1. Create a psychological safe space to work in. Read the studies in HBR by Reynolds and Clark. Pair team members up to share work and ideas.
2. Hire the right people who know how to engage in a curiosity mindset.
3. Create clear goals that gets buy-in from the team. Do not impose them, work on them together. Make sure the resources and constraints are reasonable for the team to succeed.

Key Take away

Experiment with ways to create a psychologically safe environment for your team. A curious mindset allows us to move outside our comfort zones to become better problem solvers and build stronger relationships with our colleagues.