✷ BUSINESS

KEEPING THE CREATIVE TAP ON

Words by Hannah Donovan **Illustration by** Ben Mounsey

The tech industry is perversely adept at stifling personal expression – it's important to recognise what triggers burnout and develop strategies to keep yourself evolving

The tropical birds who were also sleeping on the 34th floor of my apartment building – though outside, of course – had woken me up again. The soggy heat of Hong Kong already enveloped the morning, and my phone buzzed. "Hate to bother you while you're away, but any chance you could help me with a project?"

My long-time collaborator, Matthew Ogle, needed a designer. But being a designer was the very thing I'd run away from months before.

I'd burned out. I'd show up to work, try and turn on that creative tap, and nothing would come out. Not just for a day, but for weeks. So, a couple of months into 2011, I quit my job at Last.fm and packed everything in, with no real plans ahead of me. Design – the only plan I'd ever had, and the only way I knew to make a living – had just … dried up.

As 'makers' (us who make for a living – whether it be in design, development, product design, writing or whatever), you'd think one of our most important skills would be taking care of our ability to make things. Yet here I was, staring at this message about a gig, my mind blocked, wondering not just how to reply, but what the hell I'd do next.

"Yes," I replied. "What is it?"

It was then that I realised there was only one way out – to keep making. I'd have to find new ways, of course, but that's what commitment to a creative life is. Since then, I've not just fixed what was broken, but redesigned my whole approach to making. What follows are the methods that I found worked best.

LEARN WHEN TO STOP

It's much easier to learn when to stop if you're working in physical mediums. Because if you keep drawing or painting past the point that the picture is 'finished', it's ruined. It's a mistake that costs you so much in time and materials, you're not likely to forget it.

But digital is much more forgiving in this respect: the temptation to keep tweaking is strong. It's easy to become undisciplined about finishing.

Finishing things creates space for new things. In my head, things get pretty crowded if I don't regularly 'finish' with an idea. It breaks the cycle of 'idea in – make something – idea out'. If you're feeling stuck, maybe you actually have too many ideas kicking around.

ALLOW YOUR IDEAS TO BE UGLY

I used to apologise for rough-looking sketches. There's an expectation of beauty from designers. Of course, the reality is a whole lot of ugly between an idea and beauty. Last year I heard Jason Santa Maria declare at New Adventures that "ideas want to be ugly" – they invite participation and collaboration.

I don't apologise for roughness now. I ask my peers to look past the ugliness to the core concept, assuring them the beauty will come.

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High expectations (for anything) early on in a project make it extremely difficult to start. It's the dreaded blank canvas feeling. Even though I've kept sketchbooks my entire life, I'm always intimidated by a fresh one, so I messily mark the first page to lower my expectations, turn it over, and get down to business.

If you're having trouble getting started, don't worry about your first attempt being ugly. In fact, expect that it probably is going to be ugly. The sooner you get it out, the sooner you or your peers will have an idea for how to make it better, and the more motivated you'll be.

TAKE AN ACTION, ANY ACTION

A common misconception seems to be that 'making' is some magical process in which, all of a sudden, an idea strikes out of nowhere, motivating you. That's about as realistic as design pixie dust. A few times now, I've had to explain to a disappointed looking journalist that, counter to a dramatic story of Matt and I suddenly coming

More so than anything else, the thing that really got me excited about making again was taking a step out of my usual channels of creativity. Even though I was working full time, I took on many side projects. Of print work. A medium I hadn't worked in for six years.

The projects had little to do with my main stream of work, and of course, it was exactly this 'unrelated' medium that got me excited about work again. Try taking the skills you have and shifting them to a different paradigm or language, and see what happens.

EXPRESS YOURSELF

While these techniques helped me dig myself out of burnout, what environment propelled it in the first place? The tech industry – and startups in particular – is very good for creating the exact conditions that are toxic to creativity. Sure, there are the obvious long hours and high-pressure workloads, but the things that had the biggest negative impact on me were thinking I was

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up with the idea for our current project, This Is My Jam, we spent more than five years soaking up the music industry at Last.fm, experimenting with and debating ideas that would later fuse together to make Jam.

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EMBRACE SERENDIPITY

Rightly so, our industry places a lot of importance on processes – best habits that help us make and ship great products. There's something wonderfully dull about the rhythm of these patterns. Agile, long runs, a certain morning coffee – whatever. These patterns are a bit boring, and that's OK. Creativity isn't, so we need routine to keep us anchored.

But creative work also needs unusual inputs – we need the unexpected in our lives. It's easy to fall into step with patterns for process and forget about patterns for serendipity. When was the last time you gave yourself a pocket of time for the unanticipated to happen? Either alone or with your team? Both patterns for routine and for serendipity are important, and everyone has a different balancing point between them.

working for myself when I wasn't, and succumbing to the homogenous culture of the tech industry.

Unlike working for an agency, where everyone knows they're creating for someone else, the startup mentality can be a bit blind to this fact. As soon as people are using your product, you're creating for someone else. You might be super passionate about what you do, but responsibility makes it impossible to follow your whims. You still need purely personal projects and hacks.

The homogenous culture I was working in led me to stifle a lot of personal expression (fashion, for example – an important personal visual input), and instead try to fit in. Responding in this way was probably the worst thing I could do. Expressing myself makes me inspired. Inspiration makes me want to express. I stifled a virtuous cycle.

If this all sounds familiar, be aware of who you're creating for; embrace diversity in the industry; codify tactics for avoiding and overcoming burnout, and talk about them. If we don't, we're just self-reinforcing. ∩

PROFILE

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