

Design Notes Episode 14 - Ryan Snelson

Google Design Podcast Transcript

Published October 30, 2018

Liam Spradlin: Design Notes is a show about creative work and what it teaches us. I'm your host, Liam Spradlin. Each episode, we talk with people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice. In this episode, I spoke with designer Ryan Snelson, about his experience redesigning Myspace, and the nature of self expression in social media.

Ryan Snelson: If you remember when you were in high school, if you were customizing Myspace profiles, you could pretty much do whatever you wanted. You could get into the code and make your own page with Glitter Graphics and- and whatever you wanted, but you can't really do that, and there is restraints on systems today. The expression comes through in the form of content, not really so much the system anymore.

Liam: In the interview, we also unpacked Ryan's gritty, experimental, and highly expressive visual aesthetic and the importance of understanding technical constraints. Let's get started.

Liam: Ryan, welcome.

Ryan: Hi.

Liam: So, just to get started, like I always do, I want to ask about your journey. So, I'd like to know what you're doing now, and what it was like to get there?

Ryan: Right now, I'm working for myself pursuing my own projects, contracting here and there. The journey has been kind of weird, I'm still trying to figure it out. I started as a graphic designer. I went to art school. Uh, this is like the late '90s, when the web was kind of coming about. I had previously, like, played around on GeoCities, making websites. And I thought it was interesting, but it- it didn't really seem like a field at the time.

Fast forward, in like 1999, I got a job at a start-up in New York, and I didn't really know what a start-up was, and then it went out of business. And then the next start-up went out of business, and I didn't really understand what was going on. Because the design stuff was cool, but the technology and the business model really hadn't worked properly. And- and that just was like a re- recurring theme, early in the late '90s.

And then I worked at some digital agencies for a little bit, and doing a lot of marketing stuff, marketing websites, and I realized I didn't like marketing websites. And I was very interested in what was happening with Web 2.0 and social media, and this idea of like building a web app was interesting.

And then mobile came about, and I did a lot of native mobile. And then, I'm experimenting a little bit with AR, and then I just made a really cool sticker app.

So that's like the nutshell of things. We can unpack a little bit, all of that.

Liam: You describe yourself as focusing on product strategy and design.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: And I want to get into the relationship between those two. How do those two blend together, the product strategy versus actually executing something?

Ryan: It's a great question, I love that question. I'm still trying to figure that out as well. But I would say that where the design and the strategy are separate is that, typically in organizations, whether they're big or small, the idea of the product is owned a little bit more by product management.

And even though design has a seat at the table and they have a say in vision and aesthetics and potential, when it comes down to like the nitty gritty of what the product is going to be and that definition, I think that's where the product strategy comes into play.

Where design takes over is in that tangible documentation, whereas product is still kind of doing the same stuff as UX, uh, but they're diving a little deeper, more into analytics and usage and trends and optimizing in that way, which I think is really, really fascinating.

So I've tried to balance that a little bit more with my design practice. I've learned a lot through that. I wasn't always like that. I always thought, like, oh, this is a cool design, so that means everything's great, and that's really not the case.

Liam: Yeah, I think of some of my experiences working on smaller design projects and seeing that potential, like you mentioned, and it's really easy to lead that into suggesting new features, or like one thing builds on top of the other as you dig into the design.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: So product strategy might actually be reigning that in a little bit-

Ryan: It is.

Liam: ... and actually putting constraints on that.

Ryan: And- and I think the big constraint is m- matching the blue sky potential, with what is really possible. And seeing how developers work, and working closely with developers, has really opened my eyes to, you know, what is possible versus, oh, check out this really cool design. Oh, it can't really be built and it's not really possible, but let's do it anyway. Like, that's just setting yourself up for failure.

So the product is like, you know, thinking of the product strategy and- and seeing what's the potential with developers, what's the potential with design, and then where's the vision and the- and the business goals and the user goals, and trying to match that a little bit.

Liam: Right.

Ryan: That's how I think about it. Whereas, talking about, to answer your question, the breakdown of the execution part, the other side of this is, you know, inheriting a set of requirements and executing in a very siloed manner, even though you're collaborating and solving little interaction problems and user problems, you know, to have more understanding and voice in the product, helps, I think, at the end of the day, make that product a little bit better.

Liam: Absolutely.

Ryan: Yeah. It makes the design better, I think.

Liam: I want to dig in, specifically, to one project you've done which is Flashback Sticker Attack.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: What was the motivation behind creating a sticker pack?

Ryan:

So I originally set out to create an augmented reality prototype, and I sat down and I taught myself how to use Unity. And I was playing around with it and I finally got my web camera to show a floating box, and I was like, this is cool. Like wow, this is really cool. And I realized, yeah, it's cool, but it's not doing anything. It's not really a product. It's not something I would use every day. It's just like a gimmicky, wow factor for now, and I wasn't happy with that as like building something.

And, uh, what I realized is that, I had been doing that a lot in the last couple of years. I'd been playing with prototyping tools, and I'd been getting things that are just close enough, but they needed to be built.

So what I wanted to do is build something that I could handle end to end, from content to deployment to updates to marketing. And then I came up with this sticker pack, because I had tried to teach myself Xcode last summer and I totally bombed at it. I was like, this is ... I'm not- I'm not messing with this.

But then when I was looking at the different options within Xcode, the sticker pack was something that I could do. And they say, well, there's no coding with sticker packs, and that's technically correct. Like, you're not sitting there writing lines of code, but there's this weird protocol with getting your, you know, developer license and getting your keys right and sending your builds out through TestFlight, and just going through everything that you would normally do with like a native app, besides having to write millions of lines of code.

I'm having a lot of fun with it. It's the most fun thing I've done in a really long time, and I think mostly because I just get to do whatever I want to do and see what happens with it. And so far, it's been, you know, it's been good.

Liam: I'm especially interested in, like, the potential of sticker packs, because I see them coming to like more and more apps.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: And even things like Google's keyboard enables stickers now. So I'm interested, like, what do you think are the broad possibilities of communicating that way?

Ryan: Well, you know, using emojis have been a lot of fun, but emojis are getting really boring. And people are using emojis in really fun creative ways, um, but every time like Apple or Google come up with the next set of emojis, they're kind of limited, and they're very, very static.

And when I started looking at stickers, I found that all of the stickers were just really, really cute and quote unquote "delightful", and there were so boring. And I was like, you know what? Why aren't they animating? Why aren't they- why don't they look like crazy gifts? Why aren't they a little bit more random? Why aren't they a little brighter? Why aren't they a little bit more lo-fi and flashy? And that's kind of where I was thinking, well maybe I'll- maybe I'll do that. Maybe I'll make a sticker that- that moves a lot. So all of them are animating.

My requirements for building one is that they have to be blinking, they have to be animating, they have to be moving, even if they're a very limited amount of frames, because I think that they're fun when you layer them on top of each other.

So in iOS, you can pull them from the tray and then you can add another one on top of each other. So, if you create them with transparencies, that creates a- another effect when you combine a couple of them. So that's been fun. I'm trying to make them not boring and cute.

Liam: I want to dig even further into that.

Ryan: Let's do it.

Liam: Into the aesthetic of the Flashback Sticker Attack.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: You're kind of like cutting together a lot of visual styles, and like animations and stuff, and I also kind of get a similar vibe from the way that you present your work online, and I want to get into where that aesthetic comes from.

Ryan: Yeah, it's a great question. I've been thinking about this a lot as we were coming up to this, like how to start describing what you've just asked. And in retrospect, I attribute it to learning Flash, the application Flash back in the late '90s.

So if you remember, if you've worked on the web back then, you had html and then you had Flash. And html was just the static tables, you know, very, very boring aesthetics. And then you had Flash, which was just like ... I don't even know how to describe it anymore, but it was animation. It was intros, outros, it was sounds, it was everything that motion is, and everything that native animation kind of is today, but it was unregulated. Like people were just experimenting.

And what's happened, I think, stylistically to answer your question, is that there has been a wash of style over the web and over apps. Everything's quote unquote "clean". Everything's delightful, everything's safe, and everything's not rocking the boat a little bit. Not to say that style rocks the boat, but like when you're a little bit sloppy and a little grittier with it, I think there's a little bit more of an emotion that comes through. Now that's, you know, specifically related to the content of the stickers, right?

Obviously, if I was building a system, I'd want it to be very, very usable.

But when the opportunity arises to like make something fun or to make something boring or clean or not boring, it's like, you- you have that option as a designer. And I forget where I heard it but, one of the biggest things a designer has is their ability to be creative. And I think that product design and user experience design has, in a sense, like, muddled that a little bit because it's all about following the standard, right? And it's not about, you know, rocking what the user's going to come into a little bit.

And this is where the experimentation comes into play, and that's really all this is. It's experimenting, you know, if there's a ton of designs that look one way, I want to try to go the other way. And I think that that's always a good way to reinvent aesthetics, because aesthetics are like trends that are here and then they're gone. Which is I think why, you know, a lot of companies are saying like, let's just be really, really clean and un-style, you know?

It's no frills, like the design of today's native apps are just no frills. It's like walking down a cereal aisle and being like, those are just the Chex.

There's no brand, there's no nothing, you know?

Liam: Yeah. Although, I could also see extending that grocery analogy. Like, we could get to a point where the aesthetic is so overloaded that nothing stands out in the opposite direction.

Ryan: Well, that the problem, right? And I think at one point that was good, because the web early on, it wasn't regulated in usability, it was just like a free fall. People are just putting buttons all over the place. You know, you couldn't read tech sizes, there was loading, splash screens, and I mean it was just wild, uh, and it was interesting.

Ryan: Whereas now, it's not interesting enough, I think. And it doesn't mean that it's bad, it's just not as interesting.

Liam: Yeah.

Ryan: So, I'm trying to stylistically be interesting, and hopefully- hopefully (laughs) it's interesting. Maybe people don't think so, but I don't know.

Liam: Yeah, I think speaking of the early web, it reminds me of where I learned html, which is Myspace.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: And I saw on your website, that you actually worked on kind of a redesign of Myspace-

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: ... a while ago, so I'm interested to talk about that. What was the background for that project, first of all?

Ryan: This was going back, I think, like 2009-ish. I was on the UX team there, and the mandate was to stop the bleeding of users leaving Myspace and going to Facebook. What was interesting about it is that we were the underdog. No one really cared about it, I think, from the generation that had migrated over to (laughs) Facebook.

So it wasn't about like getting them to come back, as much as it was to stop the bleeding of users, clean up the site in the sense that we could make it more usable. Some of the restraints were, editing tools were difficult from a back end to redesign. The music player, we couldn't really get into that a lot early on. Like, I don't know if you remember, but it was all in Flash, and we couldn't really edit a lot of that.

So there were political reasons for design changes, and then there were things that we could control, like changing the navigation, grouping things a little bit better. We did a lot of AB tests on streams and profiles, and then we released very small changes over time, until the big redesign, and then it got redesigned again.

But the press wasn't very nice to Myspace. I remember reading articles, like who cares? All the big blogs would be like, what are they wasting time for? And it was fun because being in that space, you could just experiment a little bit and try things a little bit more, and I learned a lot there. I ended up running the mobile team and I learned a lot from people that were on that mobile team, and this was iOS 3, iOS 4.

And there wasn't really a place to go to get all these design patterns. So you couldn't go read the HIG, like you could today. So it was learning through the engineers, and they would say like, no, this is what we can do with the navigation. This is how we would use the back buttons.

And so a lot of that stuff was kind of coming through where the developers were building this stuff. And then I would be able to say, well, could we try this, could we try that? And then some of it worked, some of it didn't work. But I was really proud of the work we did there, despite, you know, the fact that people wrote it off and they were like, we're going to Facebook, Facebook's better.

But, you know, Myspace was the biggest social network at one time, and then it wasn't. And you see that pattern happens a lot, right? Look at what happened to G+. It was there, and then it was gone, and it was supposed to be something. And socials weird, right? Like people didn't leave Facebook to go to G+. The behavior of crowds in social, it's just like why would I want to move all my stuff again?

So, I think that's what we're seeing with social. Like, with Instagram and Snapchat, it's like, they- they do it a little bit differently. They're like sliced off from the bigger networks.

Liam: Yeah. I think that migration aspect is really interesting, especially thinking specifically about Myspace and Facebook.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: Because I remember probably in the early years of high school is when I was on Myspace, and that was the social network.

Ryan: Were you catfished? (laughs)

Liam: (laughs) Luckily, no, I was not. But it had like all of these things that Myspace established.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: Like, customizing your profile template. Like, that became an entire industry unto itself.

Ryan: It- it did.

Liam: Selecting songs to play automatically on your profile, which now we like shudder at the thought, but.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: It's interesting to me that it kind of set up all of these things that users were used to and love doing, and yet they still went to a network that did not have those things.

Ryan: And I think that the CEO of Myspace at the time, Mike Jones, wrote a lot about, like, wh- what does he think happened? And one of the focuses was on utility. Like Facebook had a really good utility. Things would work when you submitted the button, right? You didn't have to wait a lot of time to upload something. The usability was just really right on. So I think users were willing to sacrifice that customization at that time.

But, you know, when you think about today, the idea of customizing a profile, you can't do that. If you remember when you were in high school, if you were customizing Myspace profiles, you could pretty much do whatever you wanted. You could get into the code and make your own page with Glitter Graphics and- and whatever you wanted, you know, but you can't really do that, and there is restraints on systems today. They don't want you to do that for whatever reason. And I think that there's just something to be said for, you know, that level of expression.

So that's the types of restraint I think that the web and native mobile has, is that the expression comes through in the form of content, not really so much the system anymore.

Liam: So do you think that social media has uncovered a way that we wish to express ourselves, that wasn't present in previous iterations, or do you think that it's actually influenced that?

Ryan: I think a little bit of both. Like, the first thing that comes to mind is the camera access, right? Like having access to the camera and taking photos, is probably the fastest, quickest way to express, or to show what you're all about.

So it's less about, oh, I want to change the color of my profile, than it is saying, hey, check it out. I'm at this podcast with Liam, and I- look at this crazy set. And to have the tools to be able to do that really, really fast, and then to share them out quickly with whoever you intend to see, I think is

really, really important. So there's that utility of it.

But I don't know, it's tough to say where the pendulum will swing back. I think that removing the barriers of the UI within social, is always going to happen. But, you know, you see this now with kids, they're using Snapchat, and then they're using Instagram Stories, and then they're not using Snapchat as much, and it's just like, well that's what happened with Myspace.

And as cluttered as Myspace was at the time, you know, Facebook is going through those clutter problems. And, you know, that's why they- they- they seem to like white label a lot of these other types of apps, to test them and to see if they would work to get those users that don't want to use the main site. They just want to do like snippets of things like messenger, you know, which is a cool way to break off and segment.

Liam: Yeah. I think I'm seeing like a parallel to our earlier conversation about how aesthetics move from-

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: ... clean to gritty and experimental.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: And the same way, we see something like Snapchat, that removes all abstraction between you and self expression, because it's literally just you expressing directly-

Ryan: Right.

Liam: ... versus something that's more produced-

Ryan: Right.

Liam: ... like an Instagram or something like that.

Ryan: Yeah, I mean, since Instagram released the Stories, there's that conflict I have, which is, do I post a story or do I post and curate the perfect photo? And what I found is that, by posting the photo, you get to look back on it in time.

At that present time where you're posting that photo, maybe it's not like the greatest, right? Or that the story is exactly the same. But like if you go to look back on it in like a year or six months, and that story is gone, but you have that history there, I think that that's validation for a traditional social newsfeed or stream, versus this ephemeral, like it shows up and then it disappears. I think it's cool. I really don't know which one is going to win at the end of the day.

Liam: Do you save your Instagram Stories?

Ryan: Not really, no. (laughs)

Liam: I would be interested to know how many people save the video clips from their stories.

Ryan: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: I just think there's something interesting there about the psychology of like, which thing you would rather consume later.

Ryan: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I don't know. I think it's interesting, I think it's fun. We're talking about stickers, you see Instagram using stickers, and they're pumping out all different kinds. They're ... it just seems like every time you open it up, there's like a new sticker.

But it's all the same stuff. It's like dog face filters and fluttery stars. And yeah, it's cool and it's gimmicky, but I- I don't know. You know, like those are the trends that are happening now. With AR it's like, put your face in front of the camera and we'll do something to it, and that's- that's cool, I guess.

Liam: I want to switch gears from talking about user experience to talking about teaching user experience. Um, you're teaching a course at General Assembly, and as a designer, um, a lot of my job is also talking about design, whether it's with stakeholders or other designers or developers or what have you, but that's different from actually instructing someone on UX.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: And I'm interested to explore that difference.

Ryan: As a practitioner in the field, you get to a point where you know the basics, and you- you've had some wins, you've had some losses. Then you look at like curriculums and teaching that stuff, and I think it's a very humbling thing to be standing there with people that are excited to learn something new, and to try to guide them and try to show them, hey, this is what works, this is what doesn't work. I think learning anything is always challenging.

So what I've learned through the teaching experience is that there's two types of mindsets. There's a fixed mindset and there's a growth mindset. And the fixed mindset says, this is the way it is. There's no changing it. This is what I believe. And then the growth mindset says, well, even though this is new, I'm going to be open to seeing what could happen with it. And students come in with one of those mindsets, and that's always, I think, the challenge in teaching design, right?

Because design is- is ... There's so many different niches within design these days, that I often time meet a lot of traditional designers. Like, I started as a traditional graphic designer, right? But they're still practicing this today, and they're getting into digital and they're getting into product, and it's a little alien. And sometimes they're like, I don't believe in design thinking, or, what do you mean, iterations? Like of course, I'm just coming up with stuff.

And- and it's like, well, what we try to talk and- and expose is that, you're not the only one coming up with it, that you're working with product, and you're working with developers, and you're working with stakeholders, and you're trying to find that balance.

So there's two parts to it. There's the skill that the designer learns through the methods, and then there's the soft skills to make the decisions around those methods. That's how I look at it.

Liam: I'm also interested in those like methods and tactical things.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: I feel like a lot of times when working as a designer, you come up with rationale and reasons for doing things that are based on this institutional knowledge of all of these things you've accumulated over the years.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: What is it like to try to translate that?

Ryan: I think that one of the great things about GA is that people come in from different backgrounds to teach that stuff.

So, to give you an example, like maybe like a couple of years ago, people were talking a lot about research, and one of the gripes that I've always heard and I've experienced this myself, is that there's not a lot of time to research in the real world, right? People aren't paying for the quote unquote "research" directly, front and forward, and research becomes like an insurance play, in a sense.

So how do you get around that? And it's always like, well, you just do it. Because I think a lot of times, new designers will look for permission constantly to figure things out, or they think that there's a magic button that'll just tell me what the experience is going to be, right? And it's like, no, you got to go and you got to talk to people and you got to try things.

But I think the biggest thing is like getting new UX and product designers to have a point of view about something. Whether it's just the fact that they like it for some reason, is not good enough. They have to like unpack it a little bit, and show that this is working because it makes this flow easier, or this is a design pattern that is emerging or- or has been killed, and we should or shouldn't use it. You know, so it's defending through that type of validation versus just like, oh I've seen this before in the past, and so this is what you have to do.

You know, a more specific example is when we go over mobile and we talk about the human interface guidelines and material design and, you know, I'm always like, here are the components. You want to use a keyboard on iOS, it's the light one or the dark one, you know. And trying to get people to understand that those patterns and those UI elements have been thoughtfully designed and put into that system, and if you learn how to use them, it's like going into like Home Depot and picking a bunch of door knobs or, you know. Those are the materials, right?

Are you going to use like the right door for the house, or are you going to

use like a garage door opener to open your bedroom door? It's like, it's about what's the most appropriate element.

Liam: I'm interested in that point about developing a point of view in design-

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: ... and working through validation. Do the methods of validating and thinking about design decisions that way, become the point of view itself?

Ryan: I think it could be a little bit of both. I like to work with designers that have point of views, even if I think that they're wrong. I'm just like, they believe in this thing and then let's find out why or why not. I think that the problem with new designers is that they're too timid. They're too afraid to speak up about what is good or what feels right or, you know, what has worked in the past. And I don't know why that is, and I think that maybe there's this timidness in teams, where they don't want to say the wrong thing or the teams are too big, or.

I mean, I've certainly been in positions where I thought something was the way it should be and it wasn't, and I- I was like, oh, maybe I shouldn't say that. I don't want to get in trouble, you know. (laughs)

So having like that point of view and that vision for how something could be, even if it's in the slightest, I think people identify that, and you can always vet it, right? You can try it, and that's the best thing about product.

Liam: But also kind of balancing your point of view with like not falling into a fixed mindset, right?

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: Like establishing like a set of beliefs about design that don't keep you from evolving those beliefs?

Ryan: I guess to rephrase it, I would rather have a designer start and be on the wrong path, than to wait around and be like, I need more information. I don't know what to do.

Liam: Yeah.

Ryan: But I don't have this, you know. It's like, no, just start with every information you have, that's like the point of view. Like, you know, people talk about like self-starting. Like that's it, right? It's like, out of all the things that I know and of all the information that I have, I'm going to take this and try to do something with it, not just sit around, and be like, I don't know what to do.

Liam: I can relate to that feeling. And I think something that helps is just keeping in mind, ask for forgiveness, not permission.

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: If you're trying to make a decision about something.

Ryan: Yeah, and I think trusting your team, right? I've been lucky to have good mentors in my design career, where I could watch them and try to emulate them, or if I didn't know something, feel like it's okay that I don't know it and I'll get to that answer.

I don't know if it's just like the state of design teams these days, but they think they're expected to know everything and, you know, even when I go through the workshops and the design challenges at GA, it's like sometimes I don't use all the methods professionally.

Like, I wasn't using user journeys for years. I was going through them and talking about them, and I would say, you know, full disclosure, I don't make these, but some people do. You know, I make storyboards and here's a storyboard.

So there's not one method that's better, that'll get you what you need to do. It's just like, you're just communicating what you intend to happen, but you can't rely on the process alone, you have to have the output of something. There's a lot of like design people that are just process junkies. It's like, this is what we're going to do, and we're going to brainstorm this way, and we're going to use these sticky notes, and we're going to come to this like massive consensus.

And you spend all day in this process, and it's like, well, if it doesn't work for you, you know, you don't have to do that.

Liam: Yeah.

Ryan: It's the ... The whole point is the output. The process and the methods are just there to get you on the rails, so that you can get to that output, to that deliverable, to that prototype, to that test, whatever.

Liam: Right. So putting a hammer and a screwdriver and a saw, like in the same room, doesn't build you a house, I guess. (laughs)

Ryan: Yeah, exactly. That's exactly right.

Liam: So to wrap up, I want to talk about how you see your creative process changing, how it's changed over time, and I'll say where it's going in the future.

Ryan: I don't even know how to answer that. I think that I'm trying to be a little bit more risky with the type of work that I try to take on. I'm not saying yes to

a lot of projects, I'm starting to say no more because I'm getting to the point where, how much time is it worth investing in these projects? And I don't know, right? But I'm learning.

Ryan: I want to be working with teams that have that point of view, that I can have those conversations with and just figure out like, do we have a ... like an alignment on things? Could we come together, create an album and sell a bunch of records, and then be done with it? Or is this going to be just this uphill, figuring it out constantly?

So I think for me now, the creative process is about alignment with the right teams versus thinking that I alone, and my process, will get me to that next thing.

Liam: Right.

Ryan: I think what I can control is my own personal output, but I can't control the development on a lot of things, or sometimes the financial situation of some projects or some start-ups.

Liam: Yeah. I think that's a good answer. (laughs)

Ryan: Yeah.

Liam: All right. Uh, well thank you again for joining me on Design Notes.

Ryan: Yeah, thanks for having me. It's fun.

Liam: Yeah.

Ryan: Cool studio.

Liam:

Keep an eye on [designnotegoogle/podcast](https://designnotegoogle.com/podcast) so you don't miss our next episode with Jesse Reed, a co-founder of Brooklyn based Standards Manual. In the episode, Reed explores his experiences working at Pentagram, and the nature, purpose and temporality of identity design.

You can subscribe to Design Notes on Google Podcasts, iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts.

Until next time.