

The Illustrative Designer - Creative Process

By Von R. Glitschka

Illustrative Design

Non-designers over the years have asked me "What do you do for a living." It's always been interesting how they respond when I tell them. Doesn't matter if I say 'Graphic Designer' or 'Illustrator' they tend to bake it down to a comment like "Oh, OK so you draw pictures."

I realize that may irritate some people, but I don't mind it at all. In a way it's accurate. At the very least it tells me they realize a level of craft and skill is needed to accomplish that task. Many continue on and often say "I can't draw anything if my life depended on it." or "I can't draw a stick figure." (Although I'd debate the latter)

Over the last ten years however I've seen this reply start to take a somewhat disturbing turn. I've now heard on several occasions after telling someone what I do comments like "Oh yeah. I can do that with the new computer I got." or "The computer makes that so easy doesn't it." Gone are the days when they recognized a level of craft and skill necessary to accomplish the task of creating design and artwork. In their folks minds creativity is replaced by a tool, the PC. And frankly our industry has allowed and facilitated this problem.

Ten years ago a level of craft and skill was needed to even get into this industry. You had to possess some form of ability to even make it as a production artist. The computer has removed virtually all of those factors now. Tool driven design is rampant everywhere, art schools teach it, companies demand it and many so-called design professionals feed the poor public perception by not utilizing a solid creative process themselves and thus rely on pull down menu effects and decoration rather than solid concept oriented design.

So now I no longer tell people I am a 'Graphic Designer' or an 'Illustrator'. I've coined my own phrase to describe what I do and I feel it fits better. I refer to myself as an 'Illustrative Designer'. This confuses both non-designers and designer alike and I enjoy that because it makes them think and ask the following question "What is an Illustrative Designer?"

What is an Illustrative Designer?

An 'Illustrative Designer' is a creative person who uses their brain as their primary tool of choice. They adhere to a systematic creative process that focuses on idea building and conceptual drawing to work out their design solutions. Birthing ideas, refining those ideas and locking in unique and original directions before they ever touch the computer to create their art.

Many designers tend to view 'Illustration' as an ala carte to 'Design'. They work on a project and then at some point think, "Hey maybe I could use illustration in this?" almost like it's a spice or flavoring they can add to their recipe for design, rather than it being part of the core ingredients in the creative process.

Pure illustration (Think Editorial) may be viewed as merely a commodity used by designers but 'Illustrative Design' should be a process all designers use. I am a firm believer that a designer should have a good grasp on basic drawing skills, they don't need to become full blown illustrators but if they have a solid grasp on drawing, no matter how basic, it will improve their design solutions. The art school I went to had figure drawing as part of the design course requirements, I think this is important. A designer should always be drawing even if it's nothing more than simple doodles. (See creative exercises at bottom)

I view illustration and design as equal partners in the creative process. I am making design decisions when I illustrate and I use illustrative solutions when I design. The two are fused together and one without the other suffers creatively. My designer eye tends to control my illustrative bent and my illustrative bent tends to leverage my design approach. There are many overlapping aspects of illustration and design and the more a designer can learn to capitalize on each and let them mingle together the more diverse their work will become.

It may feel awkward when you first start to use a systematic process to create your design and artwork but the more you do it over time the easier it will become, the more natural it will feel and eventually it will be second nature. You will by habit approach your work using the same process, adapting your own methods and style so it becomes your own customized work flow. When you get to that point your creative batting average will improve.

It's my hope the following creative process will help equip you to become the designer and artist you want to be.

1. Communication

After all we are in the 'Communication Arts' industry right? Learning to discuss, request information and quote projects with clients is essential in laying a foundation for success. In essence you need to know what you have to do before you set out to do it effectively.

Much of this up-front gathering of information and client insight can be accomplished through a simple creative brief. This is the clients opportunity to give you creative direction, share their expectation and other insightful and helpful bits of intel that you can use to leverage your design approach. It holds both parties accountable. The designer knows what directions are appropriate and what are not and the client knows the scope of what will be done and if they add more later it can be used to keep the project on track and focused.

You can never have too much information regarding a project but you can have too little. This is one of the least creative aspects of the creative process but it's one of the most important areas and if not done well, you run the risk of losing future projects with the client and spinning your wheels and wasting your time.

Don't worry about being overloaded with information. You can always condense it down into manageable amounts. But if you have too little you don't have enough to work with.

2. Research

Pre-project preparation such as collecting scrap material, reviewing inspiring work in the same genre as your headed in, gathering specs from vendors etc.

I teach so I often have students say "Is it necessary to gather reference material and scrap?" Yes it is. For sake of explanation we'll use a logo design project as an example.

A design firm has hired you to create a mark for a new wireless company called 'Wing'. They want you to create a bird logo they can use in their branding and identity. We can all draw a 'Bird' from memory in a general sense, but that drawing will be greatly improved when we research how 'Birds' look or act specifically and use these subtle characteristics and traits within our own approach. It doesn't matter what style you execute the illustrative design in, it will improve your work regardless of the style you deliver.

Like communication, you can never have too much reference, but you can certainly have too little reference.

3. Concepts

Great designers are great thinkers. At this stage the only computer you need to turn on is your brain.

This process can take hours and sometimes days of putting it aside, coming back later and sketching some more. Think of it as 'Slow Boiling'. Let the ideas start to form based on your research, sketches and client criteria etc. In general, you never want to go with your first thumbnail sketch just keep pushing yourself even when you think you have a great idea. Even if you don't use it for this project you will start to build an archive of good ideas you can pull from later for other projects that come up. (Train yourself to always be in the mode of harvesting your ideas. Keep a sketchbook with you at all times and save your thumbnails on every project you work on.)

How many thumbnail sketches should you do? Enough that you feel you have more ideas than what you need. You're looking for a total 'Brain Dump'. There is no bad idea at this stage of the game, anything goes. You will weed out the weak ones in the next step, just let the flood gates open and allow your creativity to ooze out on to your paper.

Too many designers by-pass this step and jump onto the computer and think they will find their design inside a drawing application. This is a sure fire way to produce marginal work and become what I like to call a 'Tooler'. Don't be a 'Tooler' be a 'Thinker'.

4. Refinement

Refining your work. What do you refine? Out of your concept stage you want to now isolate and pick the strongest creative ideas. I use the rule of '5'. I pick out what I feel are the '5' strongest concepts and designs and these are the ones I will refine and further develop. Don't throw away the others, put them in a folder and save them for another project. I personally have a file call 'Lost Ideas' that I keep old thumbnail sketches in. Archive your ideas whether they've been used or not.

Sketch it out, erase, redraw and repeat until your concept and art is exactly the way you want. Try to get your sketch to a point where it leaves little or no guess work moving into the digital realm.

Once you think you have it refined, put it aside for a few hours or a day. Then re-approach it with 'Fresh Eyes'. When you do this you're art directing your own work and will see areas that can be improved. If something isn't sitting well for you when you view it again then it's a good bet your not done refining it. It is always best to art direct yourself otherwise you run the risk of someone else doing it and you might not agree with their critic.

5. Fresh Eyes

Repeat this step as many times as necessary before you even think about touching the computer. If you're not absolutely sure about your approach or how something should look when you build it then you're not done drawing. You're looking to produce a finalized sketch that you can simply use to build your art from. Think of it as blueprints. A contractor wouldn't start building a house until the full blueprints were done and approved. Neither should you begin creating your design or artwork until you know exactly where you're headed both conceptually and aesthetically.

6. Execution

I've always thought the word 'Execution' was well chosen to describe the creation of artwork for a project. If you haven't done the proper prep work or developed a solid concept and you've become a 'Tooler' who immediately jumps on the computer to begin working on your projects, then frankly speaking you will be 'Executing' your creative process literally. Because it's D.O.A. already.

In terms of your artwork this is the only stage in which you even approach the computer in terms of 'Creating' your artwork and design. Everything up to this point has been preparing for this step, refining your ideas and laying a foundation to then use the computer as a tool in the execution of your project.

If you have spent your time refining the work so you know exactly how it should look already then all you need to do is scan it in and build it. The heavy lifting creatively speaking has already taken place outside the box.

Of course I am a die hard MAC user. I loathe PC's. I own one but it's a necessary evil. That said both are just tools and even though I love using my computer I realize I could pull off the same artwork on a PC if I was ever forced by gunpoint to do so.

7. Comps

Most of the work I do is with out of state clients. I deliver my comps as either jpeg images or pdf files depending on the project. Some are tight pencil sketches and some are full blown color mock-ups. Knowing your client and the type of project will determine what the expectation is at any given stage of the project. This should have all been clarified during the first step of the creative process when you gather all the upfront information.

If you send several options don't leave any room for the client to read into the design options anything other than what you intend them to see. Meaning if you do 3 logo design options don't just attach them and write an email that says "Here are the ideas I came up with let me know what you think." Your asking for trouble doing that.

Take the time to properly write out a description that is clear and distinct relaying your thoughts and reasoning behind each design approach. Explain your concept, color scheme etc. so the client thoroughly understands your vision. This will help them capture the same vision and build a base of trust. They'll know you have their best interest at heart and this will help you think through your work and design approach. When you present your work and fail to explain a clear and distinct reason for why you came to your solution, it's like running 99 yards with the football and then purposely stepping out of bounds on the one yard line. You have to take it all the way in to score. This will also help curb clients from wanting to mix and match your solutions and create their own. This isn't Geranimals™ you don't want them to do that. It also helps them to understand that you're more than a 'Decorator' there is serious 'Purpose' and 'Reason' behind your work and that will help them trust you more.

If you don't take the time to explain your approach and design to your client then they will feel obligated to 'Frankenstein' the project.

Frankensteining: *The process of collecting graphic parts from different design options presented and compiling them into one new option. What you end up with is a design solution worthy of a mob carrying torches and pitch forks and not good design.*

8. Final Art Delivery

Handing over appropriate final art in accordance with specs provided by client.

This might seem like a stupid step but it does no good to be creative and come up with a great idea, but when you send off your final art the client can't use it because it's not the right file format or doesn't align with the set of spec's they provided you upfront.

So once you have your artwork done walk through the file checking for unnecessary colors. Making sure all art is in the correct color mode for the specific project. CMYK for print, SPOT for limited printing and RGB for on-screen or web graphics etc. Even if you have the luxury of working in a larger firm which has production artists that do this for you it's still a good idea to build clean files and label layers etc. so three years down the road when you might need to open the file again you will be able to understand it.

9. Archiving

Because of our digital environment and the fast paced changing of design applications every six months or so it's a good idea to save out your work in a universal format that you can back up along with your original source files. I save an .eps of everything I do because in five years I have no idea if the software company will allow for five year old native files to work in the new application? But a universal format like .eps will.

10. Closure

Follow up on deliverables and procedures for invoicing.

After you send off your final art you'll want to follow up with the client and make sure they received it. Let them know you're available if they have any questions and inform them that you will be sending out an invoice for the work shortly. Ask them if it's ok to include them in your promo list. This way you build a growing list of potential clients that can see what you are doing via periodical promotional mailings.

Helpful Creative Exercises & Resources

Workout

Just like physical exercise, creative exercise will help you develop and strengthen your illustrative and design ability over time. If you make a habit of doing small simple daily exercises you'll see a remarkable improvement in your work as your progress through your entire career. Be curious, explore and try new approaches.

It doesn't have to be complex either. Keep it simple so it's fun. If it's not fun do you really think you'll stick with it? Why do most diets fail? Why do people stop working out physically? More times than not it's because there is no enjoyment in it. We want the end result but not the process to get there.

The Illustrative Designer - Creative Process

A systematic method for creating your artwork.

> [Download Illustrative Designer Creative Process](#)

Why Doodle?

This brief paper will touch on the practical reasons for being an avid doodler. The secondary link will show you simple methods and how you can use your doodle art as final art.

> [Download 'Why Doodle' Paper](#)

> [Download Simple Doodle Method Files](#)

Doodle As Final Artwork.

Your doodles can become your finished art. These tutorials show you how.

> [Download 'Demon Doodle' Tutorial](#)

> [Download 'St. Doodle' Tutorial](#)

> [Download 'Doodle Movie' Tutorial](#)

Doodle Sheets 1-3

Train your mind to see what isn't there but could be.

> [Download 'Doodle Sheet 1'](#)

> [Download 'Doodle Sheet 2'](#)

> [Download 'Doodle Sheet 3'](#)

What Do You See?

Train your mind to view negative shapes creatively.

> [Download 'What Do You See' Exercise](#)

Three Fold

A visual version of 'Mad Libs.' Great for a class environment.

> [Download 'Three Fold' Exercise](#)

Zing! by Sam Harrison

101 Tips for Creativity On Command.

> [View 'Zing!' at Amazon.com](#)