

BEFORE AND AFTER

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In a daring thought experiment, Jim Anderson shares his musings on AI, both pre- and post-editing by AI software.

Author's email:

Attached is my draft titled "AI Musings – JA" for your thoughts, feedback, input or disposal as you see fit. For fun I ran it through ChatGPT and asked for edits for "readability and clarity," and it got a lot shorter. Interesting. There are some good revisions to syntax. That version is attached as "AI Musings – GPT." What I'm trying to get at is one part call to action and one part supportive perspective/advice. Since our meeting in La Jolla, I've been provoking many conversations with design practice leaders and finding a mixed bag of reactions. While there is much awareness about AI, there seems to be little understanding of how, or even if, to engage in the conversation as a leader. Hopefully my musings can help illuminate this.

AI Musings – JA (Original Draft)

When asked if I would consider writing a brief article for this issue of DesignIntelligence Quarterly, I initially gravitated to the general theme of *Leadership – The Business of Design*. It's a topic well within my comfort zone and a concern that has kept me up at night for much of the past two and a half decades. However, as I pondered the assignment, attempting to more specifically define a topic, thesis title or other such construct necessary to focus some one thousand words, I felt a gravity-like pull to the bottom of the email I received from DesignIntelligence's editorial staff. There at the bottom of the list of suggested themes or topics was "technology."

Me, attracted to the thought of writing about technology? There are many reasons this thought might make very little sense. However, the simple fact that many of us seem unable to ignore the unrelenting litany of opinions about how artificial intelligence (AI) will be a “game changer” for – *insert noun here as required to achieve desired dramatic effect* – almost makes this seemingly nonsensical thought an inevitability.

To be clear, I would not dare engage in an explanation of AI at any level, nor do I feel qualified to add my voice to the chorus of clairvoyants predicting the future that AI will deliver to the design profession. I write these musings simply to assist those of us feeling overwhelmed by it all – did I just admit that? – in an effort to help navigate to a positive, productive and exciting place for the design profession.

For those of you already fully engaged in thoughtful AI conversations, I applaud you. Please share your energy. However, from my observations and discussions with many design firm leaders, there remains a broad spectrum of lesser postures, including apathy, willful ignorance, confusion, avoidance, tentative engagement – mostly hoping that the “technology team” will deal with it.

The AI winds of change are blowing! We must fully engage. As design practice leaders and design practitioners we must lash ourselves to the helm rather than scurry below deck.

To navigate my way through the current maelstrom of AI information, I am working hard to be deliberate about adopting three particular mindsets. I say “working hard” because these mindsets don’t necessarily come naturally to my way of thinking, especially when thinking about technology.

Mindset 1: Stay at the centre of the conversation.

Ask what we want AI to do for us. Don’t simply wait to see what it offers. There are numerous apps, add-ons and tools using AI that are being rolled out for our daily use to sort our email, take our meeting minutes and the like. Adopt the ones that make sense for you. This will become table stakes for all well-run businesses. However, in our design processes, we can go even further. The design profession is well positioned to go far beyond the out-of-the box solutions, but we must *challenge* the tools to work for us rather than simply *allowing* them to work for us. The difference is subtle but important and tremendously exciting. We are at what may prove to be a VERY exciting time in the development of some very exciting tools. Let’s design the

manner in which these tools are used, which then influences how they are developed. This is not simply about learning and adopting new software. Leaders need to stay at the centre of this conversation, ask questions, challenge, interrogate ... design.

Mindset 2: Support, support, support in the design practice.

Don’t leave this to your technology teams to develop off to the side as “special projects.” Deploy and test in practice, on real projects, with design practitioners as much as possible. Set ground rules. This is not playtime, but it can be playful. Understand that incremental progress is still progress. Success does not always have to come in the form of radical innovation. Reinforce the impact of experimentation by creating platforms for sharing experiences across teams. Most importantly, be patient and be persistent.

Mindset 3: Be optimistic.

While I fully acknowledge the seriousness of some concerns around AI, I believe that optimism breeds progress. Deal with concerns head-on. They are real and there are many, such as responsible control, intellectual property, privacy, etc. However, remain optimistic, always working towards a way of finding how to make things work rather than reasons why they will not.

All three mindsets are inextricably linked. Nothing will become of your desire for AI to do something unless you support and test it in your practice and persist to find a way to make it work. These are early days, embrace that.

Overarching all these mindsets, an approach of humility is required.

Humility does not mean passivity. All three mindsets I have expressed are meant to be foundations for ACTION. Humility is simply a perspective meant here to position oneself within the AI technological evolution underway, not outside of it. Do not seek to control, seek to influence.

Describing our engagement of AI is akin to navigating a ship through a storm. Recognizing and respecting the storm’s unrelenting force of nature may at first appear a paradoxical comparison, yet it rings true for me.

Artificial Intelligence is a human construct. Let’s not abdicate our central position in its evolution just as it’s beginning to show real promise.

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While hearing from Sheldon Glashow and Edward Feigenbaum at the recent Design Futures Council Leadership Summit on the Future of Technology and Applied Innovation in La Jolla, California, I was struck by the fact that both these individuals have both been working in the field of AI for more than half a century – both are in their eighties. Foundational thinking and technical advancements of AI began before my lifetime! Despite all the hype and hubris surrounding the release of ChatGPT, Midjourney, DALL-E and other such applications, the AI revolution is a long game. There will undoubtedly be more fits and starts, steep inclines and plateaus, raging storms and calm days.

In a recent interview by the Economist in Davos, Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI (parent company of ChatGPT) appeared steadfast in his position that we must dial back our expectation for one societal-norm-changing development after another and expand the timescale used to assess meaningful change well beyond the cycle of app version updates.

As leaders of design practices, let us not be lulled into inaction by periods of incremental developments. Let us also not be redirected or scared off entirely by sudden and fierce thunderclaps of development.

“While the task is daunting, it is also filled with hope. We have the opportunity, in fact the obligation, to react creatively to our changing conditions.” – “A New Reality” by Jonas Salk and Jonathan Salk.

Editor’s Postscript: At the author’s initiative, the above article was reviewed by the ChatGPT AI application. All the application’s suggestions were incorporated into the final draft, which follows. For transparency, the author has vulnerably agreed to share both version his original and the AI edited draft in hopes this inside view of the process might inform still-timid, AI-averse or unfamiliar readers and advance them on their journey to AI discovery and understanding. We include the AI edited version intact, unedited below.

AI Musings – GPT (AI Edited Version / Draft #2)

When tasked with contributing an article for this edition of DI, I initially leaned towards discussing Leadership in the context of Design Business—a subject I’m quite familiar with and one that has occupied my thoughts for over twenty-five years. However, after much contemplation, I found myself drawn to a different topic listed in the email from Design Intelligence’s editorial team: Technology.

The idea of me, writing about technology, might seem odd at first glance. Yet, the overwhelming buzz around how Artificial Intelligence (AI) will revolutionize various sectors makes it almost inevitable to ignore. I want to clarify that I’m not here to delve into the complexities of AI or predict its impact on the design industry. Instead, I aim to offer some guidance for those feeling swamped by the rapid advancements in AI, helping them find a way to embrace these changes positively and productively.

Many in the design industry are already engaging in meaningful discussions about AI, and I commend their efforts. Nonetheless, there’s a wide range of engagement levels among design firm leaders, from apathy to active exploration, with many hoping their technology teams will handle the transition. It’s crucial, however, that we all actively participate in this shift. As leaders and practitioners in design, we must steer the conversation rather than hide from it.

To navigate through the whirlwind of information on AI, I’ve been focusing on three specific mindsets. These don’t come naturally to me, especially in the context of technology, but they are vital for our adaptation and growth.

1. Be at the Forefront of the Conversation:

We should define what we want AI to do for us, not just wait to see what it offers. While adopting AI tools for mundane tasks is beneficial,

the design industry has the potential to push these tools beyond their standard applications. We need to be proactive, questioning and shaping how these tools evolve to suit our unique needs.

2. Encourage Experimentation within Design Practices:

Don't sideline AI development as a 'special project' for the tech team. Integrate and test AI tools in real projects as much as possible. It's not about playing around; it's about making incremental progress and sharing learnings across teams. Patience and persistence are key.

3. Maintain Optimism:

Despite legitimate concerns around AI, such as ethical considerations and privacy, it's crucial to remain optimistic. Tackling issues head-on while focusing on solutions fosters progress.

These mindsets are interconnected; you can't fully explore AI's potential without actively supporting experimentation and maintaining a positive outlook. Embrace the early stages of AI integration with humility—not as a passive observer but as an active participant looking to influence its evolution.

Comparing our journey with AI to navigating a ship through a storm might seem dramatic, but it's an apt metaphor. AI, much like a storm, is a force of nature within the human domain. It's crucial that we maintain our position at the helm of this evolution.

Reflecting on insights from pioneers in AI at a recent leadership summit, it's clear that AI's development is a marathon, not a sprint. Despite the hype around new applications, this field has a long history and will continue to evolve through ups and downs.

Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, recently emphasized the need to temper our expectations for rapid, groundbreaking advancements in AI. This long-term perspective is crucial for meaningful progress.

As leaders in design, we must not be deterred by incremental advancements or overwhelmed by sudden breakthroughs. The journey ahead is daunting yet hopeful. We have a duty to respond creatively to these changes, as highlighted in "A New Reality" by Jonas Salk and Jonathan Salk.

Jim Anderson is an architect, partner and past chair at DIALOG in Toronto.