

Review

Experience Design 1

[Peter Esmonde](#) Sapient

By *Nathan Shedroff*
New Riders Press, 2001.
304 pp.

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At long last, design has broken out of Flatland. Confronted by the increasingly sophisticated commodification of everyday experience via any number of media, graphic designers have come to recognize that visual representation need not be bound by borders of the page or PC screen. The design community's current fascination with both temporal media and narrative represents more than a passing fad. Rather, it indicates profound change for the profession, an underlying recognition that, in an age where branded experiences from Disney, Nike and their ilk are ubiquitous, expertise with static visual elements alone is no longer adequate. Contemporary design demands a command of multiple media, in various configurations.

In current parlance, this creation and organization of useful representation in multiple media, in multiple ways, across various user situations, is termed "experience design."

With *Experience Design 1*, veteran designer Nathan Shedroff makes an ambitious foray toward meeting the need for a clear, succinct guide to this fascinating and challenging terrain. Taking a pragmatic, user-centered approach, he defines experience design as "the deliberate, careful creation of a total experience for an audience." Such vague and tautological parameters allow the author to draw broadly from the fine and applied arts for illustrative examples, and he takes full advantage of the opportunity.

Subtitled a "manifesto for the creation of experiences," Shedroff's book is a high-gloss, candy-colored grab-bag of mini-essays, heuristics, musings and pointers for novice designers working in interactive, time-based media. The volume's floppy, full-color spreads invite easy visual consumption and repeated browsing. Breezy text is superimposed over the illustrative images, synthesizing and extending the designer's previous writings. Taking a cue from Richard Saul Wurman's seminal *Information Architects*, the author uses a tripartite foldout cover to define his terms and provide a simple taxonomy of contents.

Of course, no simple taxonomy could adequately organize the range of this author's musings. Everything from Abstraction, Ambiguity and Architecture to Wisdom and Writing falls under his purview. Subjects run the gamut from page and product design (the IRS' 1040EZ tax form, snap-on cellphone covers) to interface design (exemplified, somehow, by the behaviors of the wait staff at celebrity chef Emeril's Delmonico) and include a carnival of recent cultural phenomena (*The Lion King*, the Webby Awards, Burning Man, etc.). Airport lounges and alt.support.alzheimers; Yahoo! Clubs and Zagat restaurant guides: *Experience Design* encompasses it all, in 304 pages of brightly colored eye candy.

Shedroff spins his eclectic compendium in a way that will appeal to general readers and novice designers alike. The author is nothing if not a keen



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observer and a savvy guide; more than a dozen years of information and interface design work have informed his views and sharpened his critical acumen. Contemporary design issues are deftly and succinctly introduced and explicated from the perspective of everyday practice.

Taken in bite-size, two-page chunks, Shedroff's writing is entertaining and often incisive, displaying a lively intellect and an appreciative eye for outstanding design in whatever form. Not surprisingly, the designer's comments on interaction, navigation, wayfinding, categorization and information visualization are particularly insightful. Readers will find a plethora of concise and eminently useful guidelines, and a surfeit of lush visuals. Some of the spreads are wonderfully succinct: Facing photographs of a matchbox and a lit match make a case for design usability in a way that is clear, forceful and visually striking.

To better make his case, the author cites works by a panoply of contemporary designers. Expanding the pantheon of usual suspects (the Eameses, Tibor Kalman, Maya Lin, IDEO), he invites to the party notable digerati (Brenda Laurel, Abbe Don, Rebecca Allen, et al.), as well as undeservedly obscure achievers (egomedia.com, audium, Picture-Projects.com).

Organizing these discrete elements into a compelling, cogent argument proves no small task. *Experience Design's* modular structure and surface gloss effectively mask its shortcomings. Consumed in its entirety—that is, read as a book, from cover to cover—Shedroff's arguments for experience design come across as thin and inconsistent, even fragmentary. At times, the author seems content to play the role of visual flaneur, pointing at the passing multimedia parade, and spilling bon mots and multicolored ink. Heady concepts may be reduced to glib heuristics: We learn that metaphors “are not required and can be crutches for poor ideas and design.”

Shedroff identifies many of the fundamental issues around experience design without adequately exploring the dilemmas they raise. For example, *Experience Design 1* cites a wealth of time-based media—an understanding of which is central to effective experience design—yet glosses over questions around narrative ambiguity, shifting signification, characterization and temporal metaphor.

Similarly, the book's exegesis of systems design tends to be cursory and superficial. Hence, pages on feedback and adaptivity, but not a word on cybernetics; an explication of signage and cognitive models makes no reference to semiotics; somehow, passages on Actimates and Joseph Weizenbaum's Eliza fail to mention the term Artificial Intelligence.

Perhaps this is only by way of saying that Shedroff knows his limits, and works well within them. After all, this is a book designed for a general audience; too much high-falutin' verbiage would not help the author gain readers, much less converts. Still, one cannot help but hold this designer to a higher standard. Over the years, Nathan Shedroff's essays and online ruminations have proven invaluable to communities of designers worldwide; one therefore approaches *Experience Design 1* with expectations that it will be more than a simple primer. This author possesses the intelligence, experience and insight to take his ruminations much further. One hopes forthcoming volumes will see a deepening (rather than broadening) of the effort to define and design mediated experiences.

Aldous Huxley once characterized experience as “a matter of sensibility and intuition, of seeing and hearing the significant things, of paying attention at the right moments, of understanding and coordinating.” Nathan Shedroff's

attentiveness is exemplary, and he understands what it means to design experiences; yet he has not coordinated his thoughts into a unified, compelling argument. Design may have finally broken out of Flatland, but it still lacks a comprehensive map to the new terrain.



⤴ **Peter Esmonde** is vice president of Experience Design for Sapient, a leading business and technology consultancy. Trained as a filmmaker at Yale, Esmonde spent more than a dozen years in film and television production before helping inaugurate and develop Discovery Channel Online in 1995; subsequently, he served as vice president of digital media for Encyclopaedia Britannica. At Sapient, he has focused on design processes, modeling and rapid prototyping, and knowledge management issues. Esmonde has taught digital media and information design at Columbia University, New York University and the School of Visual Arts, and written for *I.D.*, *Civilization* and *The Washington Post*.