

Wireframe, Season 3, Episode 1:
Covid-19 is changing how designers think

Khoi Vinh ([00:00](#)):

Hi, I'm Khoi Vinh, senior director of design at Adobe. And this is Wireframe season three. When we first started working on this new season, the world was really in a different place. The coronavirus hadn't yet locked down the planet, caused so much death and so much social and economic disruption. And then came massive national and global protests. Protests motivated by the systemic killing of black people at the hands of law enforcement in the United States.

Adobe stands with the black community. We join those speaking out against social inequality and intolerance. And we support changes to laws and policies that address injustices faced by black people every day.

Wireframe is a podcast about how design helps technology fit into our lives. This season launches, as we all reflect on how our lives are changing. We're anxious and we're stressed. We worry about our jobs and making ends meet. We crave human connection and we seek distraction and diversion. And we're all thinking about our elected leaders and about this fall's US presidential election.

These are the themes that we've chosen to explore in our new season. My hope is that our stories will entertain you and educate you, and inspire your own ideas about how we might design a better world. So, thank you for joining us. On with the show.

Doug Collins ([01:40](#)):

Welcome to my 2016 Jeep Renegade. Uh, which seemed like a roomy car when I bought it and is not as roomy, now that I'm working from it, uh, 80 hours this week.

Khoi Vinh ([01:51](#)):

This is Doug Collins. He's a UX researcher in Denver, Colorado. And when the pandemic started, his work situation became really as unusual as it gets. His new office is the back of his Jeep.

Doug Collins ([02:06](#)):

It is a five seater car. So, there's three seats in the back, two seats in the front, a good trunk. I have a 31,000milliamp power bank to keep my laptop going throughout the day and provide the power that I need.

Khoi Vinh ([02:19](#)):

He's basically camping with Wi-Fi in an office parking lot.

Doug Collins ([02:23](#)):

I do have a folding chair, I have a cooler with some food. I have a bucket, don't ask what the bucket is for, but it's back there. (laughs)

Khoi Vinh ([02:32](#)):

He had to do this because the company that he works for handles a lot of sensitive government information.

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Doug Collins ([02:40](#)):

We're prohibited from doing any sort of work from home based off of our current government contract. So, we can't work remotely, we can't check email remotely. We can't do phone calls, remotely. Everything has to be done on site.

Khoi Vinh ([02:50](#)):

This way, he's onsite and on the network, but he's away from the building, which helps them feel safer.

Doug Collins ([02:57](#)):

I'm not in the space where I can afford to expose myself at all to any potential virus risk with , uh, a pregnant wife, uh, my young son.

Khoi Vinh ([03:08](#)):

It's not perfect, obviously. For one thing, the view is terrible.

Doug Collins ([03:13](#)):

Our office is wonderful in that we normally have a 10th floor office, and I can see all the way to downtown and out from the mountains. And it's a really gorgeous view. From the parking lot, not so much. I can see, uh, the trash compactor.

Khoi Vinh ([03:26](#)):

But on the other hand, it's giving him extra time to think about a designer's place in this crisis.

Doug Collins ([03:31](#)):

This experience makes me think about all of the decisions I make as a UX professional. Because it is a reminder that you really need to take the time to understand what users are going through. There are problems that are entirely based around a user's environment, that you can't understand without being able to go there and actually see and experience those pieces.

Khoi Vinh ([04:02](#)):

You know, I really connect with what Doug is saying there, because since the start of the outbreak, I've been working from home here in Brooklyn, New York. And our three kids have been at home. And my wife, Laura is also at home. And actually back in early May, Laura started feeling ill. She was showing symptoms that could have been COVID-19. And so she had to self isolate away from me, and away from the kids. So, one day with a bedroom door shut between us, we decided to record one of the conversations that we had.

Laura ([04:37](#)):

It was kind of hard for the reality of the need to isolate within our home of isolation to further isolate within a bedroom. I have to say the room service here is excellent.

Khoi Vinh ([04:54](#)):

(laughs)

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Laura ([04:54](#)):

You've gotten really good at making tea with cream and honey on the side.

Khoi Vinh ([04:59](#)):

So, I'm finding that every moment I have to make a decision, whether I'm going to basically blow off something for my work or for the kids' school. One day, this week, I woke up at 5:30 and I went to bed at like something like midnight or something. Just 'cause there was so much to do.

Laura ([05:21](#)):

I feel really bad about that.

Khoi Vinh ([05:23](#)):

I just want you to get better.

Making things better is really the definition of what a designer does for a living. We identify problems and we create solutions to solve those problems. But how do you fix a problem as massive as a global pandemic? And how do you solve it against a backdrop of social unrest and demands for change? Designers question what role they can play in all of this, even as they cope with how their lives and their jobs have changed. And this is where we begin our season.

Welcome to season three of Wireframe, An original podcast from Adobe XD.

We're spending a lot of time online these days. We're searching for answers, looking for distraction and hoping for connection. And we're also endlessly scrolling for news that isn't exactly uplifting.

Erika Hall ([06:23](#)):

Doomscrolling, have you heard that phrase? That's when you obsessively refresh your feed, looking at news of the pandemic.

Khoi Vinh ([06:30](#)):

The woman talking about doom scrolling is Erika Hall. She's the co-founder of Mule Design in San Francisco.

Erika Hall ([06:37](#)):

It's especially something that you might find yourself doing at three o'clock in the morning, in bed on your phone. You're just like mainlining all the worst news about everything bad that's going on in the world.

Khoi Vinh ([06:48](#)):

It's easy to fall into the doom scrolling trap. Every day feels like it's delivering one more round of bad news. And like everyone else, designers worry about how this affects their lives.

Doug Collins ([07:02](#)):

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It feels like every week is just, we got through another one. Yeah, just sort of barely kind of making it through.

Paola Mendoza-Yu ([07:11](#)):

Getting information about what was happening was so anxiety-inducing that I couldn't handle it. Um, and so I had to just try and step away.

Jessica Gaddis ([07:20](#)):

When all this started, it felt like, okay, two weeks, two weeks, two weeks. In two weeks, we'll reconvene.

Erika Hall ([07:26](#)):

I've had days where like, I feel depressed and you know, like trapped in my apartment. I think I feel more upset about like what's happening in the world.

Deroy Peraza ([07:40](#)):

The real worry that we all share though, is what's going to happen in the second half of the year.

Erika Hall ([07:45](#)):

Now it's just question mark, question, mark question mark.

Kevin Twohy ([07:49](#)):

But I think everyone is going through loss right now, and a kind of slow motion trauma.

Khoi Vinh ([07:59](#)):

That slow motion trauma is being felt across the industry. AIGA, the professional association for design, surveyed their members in May about how they're all coping. Half of the respondents say their income is down. And the number who say they're unemployed is five times higher than what it was a year ago. And many of them are just genuinely worried about the future.

Deroy Peraza ([08:27](#)):

When one of our team members started, you know, hinting at the fact that they had COVID symptoms, you know, of course like it worried all of us.

Khoi Vinh ([08:39](#)):

This is Deroy Peraza. He runs a design studio here in Brooklyn called Hyperakt.

Deroy Peraza ([08:44](#)):

It's just like a thing that you have in the back of your mind throughout the day, as you're doing your work, that you can't get rid of.

Khoi Vinh ([08:52](#)):

How are you holding up?

Deroy Peraza ([08:54](#)):

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It's just been a matter of sort of coping with the anxiety around all the news, all of the unknowns, all of the ambulance sounds that are penetrating a quiet neighborhood.

Khoi Vinh ([09:08](#)):

Deroy and I don't live far from each other, actually. And as you've probably seen on the news, our city has been flooded with the sound of emergency sirens and the cries of protest. But Deroy has to block out some of that noise and some of that anxiety just so that he can take care of his team.

Deroy Peraza ([09:27](#)):

One of the general sentiments I'm getting is that people kind of want to keep their minds busy. They want to keep working, they want to keep making things. They want to keep focused on something, so that they're not focused on, on everything that's going on around. And then the other side of it as a studio leader is just the unknowns of how everything will affect the studio from a leadership standpoint, from a culture standpoint, from a financial standpoint, all of those things.

Khoi Vinh ([09:54](#)):

And how has your team been adjusting to working from home?

Deroy Peraza ([09:58](#)):

Um, I think for us as a studio, the biggest change has been not being able to just have those casual interactions, that happen when you're in the same open space. And you randomly walk by somebody's screen and see something awesome, and you start a conversation and that, that, you know, those are the things that I love about being in the same space with everybody.

Khoi Vinh ([10:24](#)):

Obviously, Deroy is worried about how his team is managing through all of this. But so far he hasn't had to let anyone go. Others aren't so lucky. Like Sarah Foster. She was laid off from her design job early on in the pandemic.

Sarah Foster ([10:41](#)):

Maybe we are on like a downward trajectory forever. (laughs) And this is the beginning of the end of the world.

Khoi Vinh ([10:47](#)):

It would make sense for her to hate the world, hate everything, but she doesn't.

Sarah Foster ([10:52](#)):

I think there's a lot of pressure to like use all this time to be productive and like clean out your closet and like read 8,000 books and update your portfolio website. I was like, no, I'd rather walk around in the woods for six hours today. Things have crashed before, things have been terrible before, and they come back. It's not, it's not the end of the world.

Khoi Vinh ([11:18](#)):

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No, it's not the end of the world. I mean, some days it may feel like it, but there are signs of recovery. Little by little communities are starting to reopen. Though there is a sense that the old way we did things, some of that might be gone forever.

Erika Hall ([11:39](#)):

I think that I was talking to a friend, I said, the old... I've decided the old way is over.

Khoi Vinh ([11:44](#)):

That's Erika Hall again, from Mule Design.

Erika Hall ([11:47](#)):

So once I accepted that, I had to kind of say goodbye to all that. And say okay, we have to focus on thinking more long term. What does it mean for my work? What does it mean for staying connected to people? And so I think we have to consider that we're at ground zero for the new way of working. We don't know what the new way is yet, 'cause right now we're in total like white knuckle crisis mode.

Khoi Vinh ([12:13](#)):

Erika says that this moment is really an opportunity for designers to start rethinking why things work the way they do. And also why they break the way that they do.

Erika Hall ([12:23](#)):

You can't depend on anything surviving this period, which is maybe a dark way to frame it, but it's also an opportunity. Because maybe, maybe some of the bad things also won't make it out. Like this has become clear: everything's broken. There's immense, inequity and injustice. I think there's a point where it's like, okay, you just, you have to face that and step out of any complacency. And so it really, it is an opportunity to really face just how bad things are and look at a system level.

Khoi Vinh ([13:03](#)):

When we spoke to Erika, the protests against racism and police brutality had not yet happened. That movement for justice is now part of a broad conversation that we're all having. A conversation about the state of the world, and how we need to change. And all of this is hard work.

Paola Mendoza-Yu ([13:22](#)):

I mean, exhausted doesn't even begin to cover it. (laughs)

Khoi Vinh ([13:25](#)):

This is Paola Mendoza-Yu. She's a designer in Los Angeles.

Paola Mendoza-Yu ([13:31](#)):

As a designer, I think living through this and it, it makes it very hard to be productive. It makes it very hard to focus on much other than what's going on outside of work. Um, but you still have to show up to work, and you still have to go to meetings, and you have to be professional. Whatever that means in a setting.

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Khoi Vinh ([13:56](#)):

Paola tries to work through the pandemic, and through her exhaustion. And she thinks about how unfair this virus is. Like, how it kills three and a half times more black people than white people. It's a stark statistic.

Paola Mendoza-Yu ([14:10](#)):

I think that the fact that it's affecting African-American communities, just black and brown communities more so than anything in terms of COVID. It's, I, I think it's unfortunately not a surprising thing. I'm happy people are calling it out because it's easier not to, not to think about those things, or there's just simply a given for us adding in the protests and everything that's happened in the past two weeks. There's this combination of anger and sadness and hope at the same time that these conversations are happening.

Khoi Vinh ([14:48](#)):

There are simple but terrible reasons why black people are affected by COVID-19 more than others. For instance, people of color face racial and economic discrimination that really limits access to health services. And people of color disproportionately work many frontline jobs that increase their risk of exposure to the virus. These realities predate the pandemic. So, among the anger and the sadness, Paola looks for hope. Hope that all this upheaval will bring positive lasting change. But as a designer, she hasn't quite figured out the best way that she can help.

Paola Mendoza-Yu ([15:29](#)):

Trust me, that is something that crosses every black designer's mind, every black engineer's mind. You know, we're constantly questioning whether we are actually good enough or if there's a different problem. And since the other problem is so hard to prove or left to kind of wrestle with in ourselves, whether it's our skillset or, you know, the system holding us back.

My silver lining, I guess is knowing that the world won't ever be the same, and focusing on that and understanding it, and trying to figure out what that means for me, what that means for my community, and where I fit in. And I haven't totally figured that out yet, but I think I'm, I'm on a path that makes me feel better about being able to contribute eventually.

Khoi Vinh ([16:11](#)):

What we're hearing from Paola is that she's still navigating her role in this moment, which is really understandable. This pandemic may be the biggest crisis facing designers in a generation. But for Deroy Peraza, and Hyperakt, it's not the first. He and his partner, Julia, they launched their design studio back on September 8th, 2001. Three days later, terrorists destroyed the World Trade Center in New York.

Deroy Peraza ([16:44](#)):

History changed obviously, and for the next three or four months, there was nothing happening. Everything just froze. And so we just took it as an opportunity to really try to work on a portfolio, get ourselves ready, get it together.

Khoi Vinh ([17:00](#)):

It wasn't until the following year that his studio finally started to see work start rolling in.

Deroy Peraza ([17:06](#)):

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You know, they say ignorance is bliss, uh, we didn't have business degrees, we didn't have any money. We were just kind of, you know, innocent and ignorant. And we just went for it.

Khoi Vinh ([17:14](#)):

Over the next few years, they really start to build some momentum. And then the 2008 global recession hit.

Deroy Peraza ([17:21](#)):

And that was also, uh, a pretty severe. Just crickets. You know, like the last two quarters of that year, our phone's dead, nobody paying their bills. It was just radio silence. I remember we went like 50K into the red. We didn't really know how to run a business yet, and made really no business sense to keep going, but we just loved what we were doing so much that we just hung in there.

Khoi Vinh ([17:49](#)):

That moment to reflect... that came for Deroy and his partner, Julia, after that recession. And it's why today their studio works primarily with nonprofits.

Deroy Peraza ([18:01](#)):

I mean, these have just been always transformative moments for us. And, uh, that was over 10 years ago. And it was really the sort of opening of the second chapter of, of Hyperakt, which has been constantly evolving.

Khoi Vinh ([18:14](#)):

And it's lessons from those previous crises that keep Hyperakt pushing through at this moment.

Deroy Peraza ([18:21](#)):

I think our purpose is as aligned as it can be with this pandemic because our purpose as a studio is improving people's lives. We care about how design affects issues of equity, issues of opportunity, confronting things like racism, mass incarceration, things like this. All of that is going to continue happening regardless of what's happening right now.

Khoi Vinh ([18:48](#)):

Because of his company's history and its mission, Deroy believes he can respond to and support those who need his help.

Then there are designers like Kevin Twohy. He runs Mercer Studios in New York. For him, this is a time to question what it means to be a designer.

Kevin Twohy ([19:06](#)):

This is just sort of a personal framing, but when you have less control and some choices are taken away from you, I think it starts to put into perspective the choices you do have, and the choices that you're making despite living your life in, in the kind of default normal world. And so for me and, and my work, I'm definitely thinking about how am I spending my time and what am I putting my energy into? And then zooming out just thinking about what you're putting out into the world and what you're helping to enable. And is that something that's worthwhile or good?

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Khoi Vinh ([19:42](#)):

Kevin, Deroy, Erika and Paola, they're all trying to understand their role in this crisis. It's that designer's instinct, right? To identify the problem and try to solve it. But Jessica Gaddis wants designers to think differently about this moment.

Jessica Gaddis ([20:00](#)):

I think that design needs to take a step back. I think what people, us as designers and makers, we feel like we have to make something. We have to design something. And I think that's a, a knee jerk reaction because it feels like if we're not designing something, if we're not building something that we're not being productive, we're not contributing.

Khoi Vinh ([20:20](#)):

Jessica lives in Dallas, Texas. She's a designer at Twitter.

Jessica Gaddis ([20:25](#)):

And this is not saying that we should not continue to make things, but without doing that self reflection and understanding that, am I adding to noise or am I helping to make things more clear for people?

Khoi Vinh ([20:38](#)):

If anything, Jessica thinks this is a moment where designers can help other people lead.

Jessica Gaddis ([20:44](#)):

We don't have to be in front. We don't have to be the ones that are leading. We don't have to be the ones that are on the microphone. Like how do we pass the mic to someone else who's already doing this work? There are already things that exist that may need our help. Like they may need our design resources, our expertise in social media. It doesn't have to be us that builds it. We can go and be on someone's team.

Khoi Vinh ([21:03](#)):

And in her thinking, Jessica sees a connection between the protest movement and the pandemic itself.

Jessica Gaddis ([21:11](#)):

With everything slowed down, there are things that you just, you can't ignore anymore. There are terms that you'll see on all these different social media platforms in different news articles that now you do have an extra minute to, to Google it and see what that means, and really be curious about it.

And I would encourage, you know, any non-black designers or otherwise to really dig into that curiosity. Not because you're gonna build something, not because you're gonna go tell the world about it, but because it's gonna change your perspective on the world, which will eventually hopefully change your perspective on design and the work that you do every day.

Khoi Vinh ([21:52](#)):

Back at my house in Brooklyn, Laura and I both got tested for COVID. The test came back, uh, two nights ago.

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Laura ([22:01](#)):

I, I, what is time?

Khoi Vinh ([22:03](#)):

Yeah.

Laura ([22:04](#)):

Yeah. Maybe, a couple of days ago.

Khoi Vinh ([22:06](#)):

Results?

Laura ([22:07](#)):

Under the COVID-19 tested, it said, COVID-19 not detected. That's how they declare it.

Khoi Vinh ([22:16](#)):

Everyone in my family is fine. We're healthy, we're together, we're working, and really, we don't have much to worry about. We also know how lucky we are, and really how privileged we are too. We know that there are a lot of people out there suffering, and that the pandemic has affected poor communities and communities of color far more than others. Again, because of systemic and entrenched racial bias in our society.

So, as designers and really as citizens, we all have a responsibility to drive change, to work, to ensure that our workplace and our country is one where everyone feels not only included, but also empowered. And I think that the pandemic and the protests, they both have a lot to tell us about how we must change. In this moment, designers have an opportunity to listen and what we hear now that can shape the role that design can play next. It's how we'll all build a healthier, safer, and more inclusive future together.

Thanks for listening to this first episode of our brand new season. Let's talk about what's coming up next. And to do that, I've got one of Wireframes' producers, Miriam Johnson, joining me here to talk about it. Hey, Miriam.

Miriam Johnson ([23:46](#)):

Hey, Khoi.

Khoi Vinh ([23:47](#)):

So you're going to be joining me for a bunch of these episodes coming up. What do we have on deck?

Miriam Johnson ([23:52](#)):

Well, we're going to step away from the pandemic as much as we can, but we want to talk about things that relate to it. So things that we've all been going through because of it. We'll be talking about things like the role UX design can play in helping us sleep and anxiety.

Khoi Vinh ([24:05](#)):

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That's a good one.

Miriam Johnson (24:06):

Yeah. I mean, it's something we've all been going through. Right? And we'll also be talking about, uh, online video streaming, since we've all been bingeing more than ever before.

Khoi Vinh (24:14):

Uh, some of us. (laughing)

Miriam Johnson (24:17):

And then we're going to look at, uh, how Crowdfunding is designed to make us give. And we'll finally wrap up the season by asking what is so hard about designing an election.

Khoi Vinh (24:30):

That's going to be a really good one, especially with the US election coming up in November.

Miriam Johnson (24:31):

Exactly. And the next time we connect, we will be talking about design and family tech support.

Khoi Vinh (24:37):

Right. This is basically why it's so hard for some of our family members to unmute themselves on Zoom.

Miriam Johnson (24:43):

Or to appear fully in frame.

Khoi Vinh (24:45):

Yeah. I've got a great story for that.

Miriam Johnson (24:49):

Oh, okay. Me too. Okay, Khoi, I'll talk to you soon.

Khoi Vinh (24:51):

Okay. See you soon, Miriam. I'm Khoi Vinh and this is Wireframe. An original podcast from Adobe XD. Learn how you can design with XD by visiting adobe.ly/tryxd.