KHOI Hey Amy - do you remember what the internet used to look like, like back in the early 2000s?

AMY Yeah I remember a lot of black backgrounds with repeating patterns. I think there was a lot of clip art, right? It was really ugly is my memory of it. But, I mean, it’s hard to generalize, because you really never knew what you were going to find, you know. It was unpredictable.

KHOI Yeah it was definitely ugly… partly because the technology was very raw. But I think they key difference was that word that you used, “unpredictable.” It was surprising; you never knew what you were gonna get from one site to the next. No two websites looked alike…And that is what we’re gonna talk about today:

**CHIPTUNE THEME IN**

*How the internet evolved* into what it looks like in 2019. And whether designers, in our efforts to establish guidelines and best practices -- whether we’ve actually made a world where *everything looks the same*.

**REGULAR THEME DROP**

KHOI Welcome to Wireframe from Adobe and Gimlet Creative. A podcast about good user experience design: how we shape technology to fit into our lives. I'm Khoi Vinh. I’m principal designer at Adobe. Today, I’m here with producer Amy Standen.

**THEME OUT**

AMY Hi Khoi. So this is an episode about a very visual phenomenon that we are talking about on a podcast. Which could get a little abstract, right?

KHOI Right - but we’re gonna make it work. We’ll be putting some examples online. You can find them at adobe.ly/wireframe… So, I want to start by talking about the OLD internet -- like, back in the early 2000s. Amy, do you remember Cliff Kuang from the first episode of our last season.

AMY I do!

KHOI So Cliff is the author of a book called *User Friendly*.¹ Here’s how he describes those early days.

¹ [https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/110/1107939/user-friendly/9780753556641.html](https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/110/1107939/user-friendly/9780753556641.html)
CLIFF KUANG When that first cohort of designers was entering the world, they were very much creating things that couldn't be done in any other medium. And it felt like a, you know, it felt like freedom. There is very much this idea that like you could do anything, especially in the era of Flash, which you know was a, really, blank canvas onto which you could project a lot of things, like animation, and color, and things that you couldn't do on the printed page²...There was this sense that the rules as you know them had been dropped, or potentially were up for negotiation. At the time everybody was just drunk on possibility. I mean, It just felt like you could do anything.

MUSIC IN

AMY Is that how you remember it Khoi?

KHOI I definitely remember the everybody being drunk part.

AMY Ha ha. Was there this idea that you could, you know, that it was just a blank slate?

KHOI Yeah, very much so. For me, one of the things that really drew me to it was the fact that we were practically reinventing everything, every six months or so. It was a bit unruly, but constant reinvention was the name of the game.

AMY Had you always been a quote-unquote digital designer?

KHOI No. I started my career in traditional graphic design, doing logos, identities, brochures, that sort of thing. But like a lot of designers at that time, I was pretty quickly drawn into the world of technology. And, it was exciting. Everyone was trying to figure out what exactly would work online. And a natural way to start figuring that out was by taking what we knew already—about how design worked in print and in analog—and applying it to these new problems.

MUSIC OUT

That's what Cliff observed, too.

CLIFF They were bringing an unconscious culture of aesthetics, reference points, influences, and all this kind of stuff that they were carrying with them, right? Which I think is radically different today. Because ultimately, those reference points, they were inherited from an offline world, not an online world.

²https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/ppxm3b/the-life-and-death-of-the-flash-cartoon-456 In 1996 Macromedia (now Adobe) acquired FutureSplash and rebranded it as "Macromedia Flash 1.0." By the early 2000s, Flash was installed on practically every computer to load interactive web pages and power early audio and video players. It was a fundamental part of the early internet experience.
KHOI I think that’s very common with new kinds of media—I think one of the cliches we’ve all learned is that when a new medium comes along it spends a certain amount of time emulating what came before it, and that was a natural part of the internet at that time.

CLIFF And that is just different today. I don’t think your starting point is a bunch of like record albums you saw, it’s not like a cafe or a collage your friend made you. The center point of where culture is happening is not in the offline world anymore.

AMY And it’s not just culture that’s more rooted in the online world today, right? I mean, its commerce too. That’s what a lot of the modern internet is really for.

KHOI Right, today everything has a clear purpose, and it’s largely to sell you something, or to get you to transact in some way. And that wasn’t the case before; there was e-commerce back then, for sure, but there was just a ton of experimentation, or personal expression online. Now today, if you want to build a website today, you can turn to any number of hosted services—like a Squarespace or a Wix—and you’ll get a really beautiful, out of the box solution. But the purpose is pretty clear and pretty consistent: its to build a business, and to sell you something. Back in the day, you’d go to something like Geocities, and the purpose was much more open—the idea was you could build anything you want, whether it’s a page for your cat, or some weird art experiment.

AMY Yeah when I look at the Internet today, it is such a far cry from that. It’s so much more professional. And this is something you’ve written about, right? That we seem to be in kind of a rut, aesthetically.

KHOI Yes, I’ve written about it and I’ve complained about it.

MUSIC IN

I first started noticing this four or five years ago. But I’m far from the only one, I think a lot of people have remarked that a lot of websites basically have the same layout where everything’s centered, and in sans serif, and you scroll in the same way. And a lot of apps are very very

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3 https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-05-18/how-kindles-e-ink-system-works  That first-generation Kindle used a technology called microencapsulated electrophoretic display, colloquially known as electronic ink, or e-ink. Amazon has since sold millions of Kindles, and the concept of e-reading has become ubiquitous. But back in the mid-1990s, creating an electronic book was a “dream,” according to Barrett Comiskey. That was when Comiskey, then an undergraduate at MIT, and his classmate JD Albert were recruited by MIT Media Lab professor Joseph Jacobson to create a technology that mimicked pages in a book. Jacobson envisioned a screen that wouldn’t give off light, and that you could tilt while still being able to see the text. He also wanted to make something that required little power to use — just like a real book.

4 https://thewirecutter.com/reviews/best-website-builder-for-small-businesses/


6 https://www.subtraction.com/2017/08/24/startup-minimalism/
similar to one another too, to the point where sometimes people get confused what app they’re using.

So there’s definitely a samey-ness that has pervaded in digital products for a while now. If there was a rebellious or artistic or pioneering spirit from a long time ago, what we have to today is just very sophisticated, very intentional and very… very transactional, in a way. That feeling of being drunk on possibility that Cliff talked about, the idea that the rules are up for negotiation? I worry that, to some degree... we’ve lost this.

But I wanted to hear another perspective on this too. So I turned to a friend of mine, someone who’s not just a designer, but a well respected critic of design. This is Jessica Helfand.

MUSIC OUT

KHOI Jessica, when you surf the web... I don't know, do people say that anymore?
JESSICA HELFAND ha ha
KHOI Can I ask you to characterize what you see?
JESSICA it’s very white. It’s very sans serif. It’s very uninteresting. And who decided that all the photos have to be cropped in circles? I’d like to talk to that person.
KHOI: Yeah, now it’s mandatory.
JESSICA: And they look terrible can we just talk about that - that’s not the geometric principle.. Squares would be so much much more dynamic.
KHOI Yes.

KHOI Jessica is a designer, and she also teaches design at Yale and other places.7 And I wanted her on this show because I think she’s exceptionally good at questioning things that a lot of us working designers don’t have the time, or the perspective, to question.

KHOI This episode, the premise is that there’s kind of a monoculture and a great sameness in branding and in the way apps look, websites look and just the overall approach to aesthetics. Do you agree with that?

JESSICA I agree with that. And your premise is why I sometimes tell people I’m a recovering designer. I have great antipathy about the direction design is going.

KHOI When I look at the brands growing up on the internet exclusively or growing up on mobile exclusively, they almost all look like they’re just departments of a single holding company. I just wonder why do you think that we’ve landed on this particular aesthetic?

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7 https://designobserver.com/profile/jessicahelfand/45 Jessica received both her BA and MFA from Yale University where she has taught since 1994.
JESSICA The thing that comes to mind which is analogous but it’s not about brands per se, but I think it speaks to the question you’re asking which is - how a look becomes a look, how a visual vernacular becomes what it is. And the thing that comes to mind for me is the fact that people who design book jackets are availing themselves of the biggest fonts possible because they know these books need to sell on Amazon. So the fact that postage stamp size book interpretations are actually what moves the publishing industry... I wonder if there are people sitting around saying, well if this works than I’m gonna copy it.

MUSIC IN

AMY So in other words, basically: One style or look works for one company, for some reason, online, and then everyone else says: well then I’ll do that too. Is that what she’s saying?

KHOI Yeah that’s exactly what she’s saying. And I think she’s right. Someone solves a problem in a particularly effective way, on the Internet or in an app, people rush to copy it. Because they see that that solves a problem that they have too. And that particular solution proliferates very quickly.

AMY Khoi is that a bad thing? Are we giving sameness a bad rap?

KHOI: That's what we're gonna tackle after the break. We'll be right back.

MUSIC FADE OUT

BREAK

THEME STINGER

AMY So before the break Khoi I was asking you if having a lot of sameness online was a bad thing.

KHOI It’s not a bad thing to have a certain amount of predictability, reliability. You want to help orient people. You want to be able to accomplish their goals -- and, to be honest, they're not there to experience your artistic vision. They’re there to actually get something done in their lives. That’s what best practices are for. They exist in order to make things easy to use, from the user standpoint, but they can get stagnant.

Jessica Helfand -- the critic and designer we heard from earlier -- she told me we should be able to have a baseline of predictability that makes things easier to use -- without losing the beautiful unpredictability of the early Internet. It seems to me, that should be our goal.

JESSICA I’m thinking of like a beautiful grid. You know where things are. I wonder if this same equation can exist and whether we don’t give up on the chaos right
away. Because the chaos is what makes us human. That’s my concern. The flatland of erasure for me is about sameness where we’re giving something up.

AMY So in other words, we need to leave space for designers, right, to explore, or add a little visual chaos to their work. That’s what keeps visual design dynamic and, she would say, human, right?

KHOI Exactly. But this isn’t always happening. Jessica said the problem is that a lot of times, designers aren’t given that space to insert their own voice — or chaos, to use her word.

Instead, they’re told to bring this very particular, established aesthetic — this idea of what quote unquote “good taste,” or “good design” is supposed to look like.

And meanwhile ... we’re all drawing from basically the same Apple products and the same Instagram feeds. So design isn’t this remote thing anymore. Everyone has an opinion about what it should look like.

JESSICA And so it’s a wonderful thing because you don’t have to explain design to people anymore. Everybody has an Instagram feed. Everybody thinks they have taste. In the old days, you called someone who had better taste than you and maybe they helped your taste be better. I mean I sound like somebody whose you know from 300 years ago. But I think it’s actually important. We’re all you know more visually sophisticated. Our appetite for beautiful things or better things or more well functional things is better. It’s a fantastic time to be a designer but then you ask the question that brings us here today, why does everything look the same. I think it’s related.

MUSIC IN

AMY What do you think of that, Khoi?

KHOI Yeah I don’t 100% agree with her perspective there, because I think it can sound a bit like only some people should be entrusted to have good taste. And I don’t agree with that. But I do think that she’s right in that a lot more people have opinions about design than they ever did before. Design is much more present in their lives, and they are touching it, like literally touching it on their phones in a way they never did in the past. And so that’s really fundamentally changed the equation for how designers work, because we no longer have a monopoly over good taste, I mean if we ever did. You have to contend with everybody’s opinions now, in a way you didn’t before.

<pause>

And one thing I’ve wondered.... is whether this aesthetic that we see a lot today has served another function, too: Which is making technology, in general, seem like this friendly non-
threatening force in our lives…. When, in fact, there’s a lot to be worried about when it comes to technology.

We talked about this just a couple of episodes ago when we had our privacy roundtable: Tech is really on the defensive these days.

So I ran this idea by Jessica.

**MUSIC FADE OUT**

_KHOI_ These companies, their aesthetic is getting friendlier and less threatening at the same time as there’s greater and greater scrutiny about their business practices, about whether they’re actually net positive or net negative for society as a whole. And is that a coincidence?

_JESSICA_ Wow that’s a question. I want you to define friendly.

_KHOI_ OK that’s fair. I think friendly in this case is a lack of sharp corners. A lack of texture.

_JESSICA_ When you talk about friendly design, it is a kind of don’t rock the boat thing. The rounded corner doesn’t upset anybody. The circular photograph looks like every other circular photograph. Email looks like email... And I think your, your idea about scrutiny and trust and access is a fascinating one. And I think there's some, there's some real merit to it.

_AMY_: I’m not sure she really answered that question

_KHOI_: Yeah, you’re right. But... to be fair, I don’t think anybody could answer that question with a simple YES or NO. Sometimes it’s really hard to identify the intent in design, and certainly in branding.

I mean -- I don’t think anybody’s sitting around saying “we’re gonna solve our problems by making our brand look a little bit friendlier.” But I do think at some level, these brands these companies they really want us to be comfortable with them. And so they’ve chosen designs that look friendly and unthreatening. They really want to reassure us that they are trustworthy partners in modern life.

_AMY_: So where does that leave designers?

_KHOI_: Well, a point we keep coming back to is that designers have a huge role to play in all of this. They have to keep pushing. And they have to keep trying to break the mold and to push back against sameness.
EMILY I've certainly heard this, this critique…

This is Emily Heyward, from a design company called Red Antler. She’s one of the founders and also the Chief Brand Officer.⁸

EMILY: And our focus is on startups

Amy, Red Antler is a really hot design company right now. They did the branding for Casper mattress, for All Birds, for Prose skincare line⁹ -- a lot of brands that you would recognize. And that kind of get lumped together into this label of “millennial brands.”

EMILY So I think that there are absolutely some design trends at play. And you know, I've seen people on Twitter who will sort of pull a bunch of screen grabs and say everything looks the same. And I've also had people say to me, you know, why is everything sans serif? which I'm like, how do people even know the word “sans serif.” Like when did that become part of just public vernacular?

KHOI Well it's surprising, isn't it yeah

EMILY So one of my responses is, well, there's really only two choices. There's serif and sans serif! Like if you actually look at typeface decisions that are being made.

KHOI Well there's block letter, there's …calligraphy

EMILY Sure that's, that's true. Good point Fair enough. I think that it would be naive to say that there aren't themes that are driving a lot of the design choices of these businesses. Maybe there's a certain color palette and a certain kind of font that's being chosen more frequently, but do those brands make you feel the same way? Is their tone of voice the same? Is there purpose the same? And I think more often than not, the answer is no. Which is why you see some businesses that are runaway successes and others that are just sort of, oh yeah, that startup launched and then faded just as fast.

KHOI Can you go into that a little bit? Because I think some people might argue that if the aesthetics are similar or consistent or maybe repetitive, um, then the outcomes of the feeling that you're going for might be the same.

EMILY So aesthetics are obviously a key driver of the feeling. But I think if aesthetics are not being driven by a larger strategy than they are just that. They're just aesthetics and I don't think they're going to make you ultimately feel much of anything. You know, I, I don't think that the conversation can start with aesthetics. I think there a tool in the toolbox that they're essential., but i think that they're one part of the story.

⁸ https://www.linkedin.com/in/emily-heyward-5465253/
⁹ https://redantler.com/work
AMY Khoi when I hear this when I listen to this what I hear her saying is that, in other words, we’re getting hung up on the wrong thing. Right like she’s saying, of course, there are visual trends on the internet -- like anywhere else. But the web -- at least these businesses -- are still all trying to do very different and interesting things.

KHOI Yes -- I hear that too. But that doesn’t mean the visual trends themselves aren’t important, or worth looking at. They say really specific things about the world we live in and how we feel about it.

So I asked Emily…

KHOI When you look at the, the themes that we’re in right now, we may be exiting them, as you suggest, but could you venture a guess as to what, what these themes mean?

EMILY: I can try. So I think that from a business perspective, a lot of these disruptive direct-to-consumer businesses are looking at categories that were not in service of the customer. You know, there were usually multiple middlemen and there was a lot of sort of obfuscating layers between the people buying the thing and the people making the thing.

I think that what these businesses are all aiming to do is literally create a direct relationship, but emotionally create a sense of camaraderie between them and the people they're serving and saying: hey, look, you know, we've cut out the middlemen. We're going to give you something that's much better at a more affordable cost. And we're all in this together. We're on the same side here.

And I think a lot of the design choices that accompanied that wave are about approachability, simplicity, just making it easy for people. and we're not going to have a bunch of bursts and swirls and, like, all sorts of ways to try to catch your attention with a shiny object. We're just going to tell you what you need to know.

AMY That’s so interesting to me. Because you were saying earlier that maybe the soft, friendly aesthetic is a response to cultural fears about technology, right?

MUSIC IN

But I think what Emily's saying is pretty different than that. She’s saying that a lot of these companies are trying to do something that is better, they're trying to be more transparent, more responsible. And that’s what their friendly aesthetic is trying to communicate. Do you buy it?

KHOI Both things can be true. And I think for consumers, it’s worth paying attention to what that friendliness is trying to communicate.
But, getting back to the critique of aesthetic sameness -- I asked Emily... how she deals with this problem in her own studio.

MUSIC OUT

EMILY We'll even walk around the studio and like everybody's using the same color and I'm like, “well, I guess this color is hot right now, guys! Pick a different one!” You know? You'll see things happen from one project to another where it's a completely different team and they're making similar choices and you realize like, this is a trend right now. And it's nobody's fault again, we're all influenced by our environment.

But I think it's about getting off our computers, getting out of the world of branding altogether. You know, people always ask me, “what business books do you read?” And I'm like “I read novels. Those are my business books.”

KHOI What about hiring new talent? Maybe young designers who want to work in red antler they seen, the amazing things that you guys have done. Are they showing up and saying, “I can do your style.” And is that what you want from them?

EMILY So I think that some of our best, most exciting talent are people who are fresh out of school. It's not even just about trying to fit into a certain idea of what Red Antler is.

I think its they haven't been in the industry altogether, like they haven't kind of learned the rules and therefore they're better at breaking them.

KHOI Yeah so I think it's interesting that Emily lands basically where Jessica landed, which is: It comes down to individual designers. You need to have people who are willing to take a risk, or be bold enough to break out of these trends. And I think it's also important to understand these trends, understand why they exist, where they come from, and what they mean.

MUSIC FADE IN

It's absolutely true that -- as Emily suggested -- we're all sort of influenced by the same things, and you can't help but be of your time.

But if you're more aware of the prevailing trends, and what they may or may not imply about the state of our world? I think... you're going to be better positioned to break out of that mold. And. To push on. To something new.

MUSIC POST
Next time on Wireframe,

you’ve been hacked!
system breach!
access denied!

Computers in TV and film scream messages like this all the time. But who designs them? And HOW?

GEMMA: if you sit there and you dont question whats going on on that screen...it means I've done a good job

In our next episode, we’re looking into the design of Fantasy User Interfaces.

Wireframe is produced by Amy Standen, James T Green, Laura Morris, Mathilde Ur-falino and Abbie Ruzicka. Rachel Ward is our editor. Mixed and sound designed by Catherine Anderson additional mixing by Jonathon Roberts and Sam Bair. Original music composed by Billy Libby. Theme music by Peter Leonard.

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I’m Khoi Vinh. Thanks for listening.
CUTS

KV I wonder if those designers you do see breaking the mold -- are they doing something in particular that allows them to think differently?

JH I see a lot of designers doing miraculous work bc they're relying on other muscle groups... models from other disciplines and bringing them in...
understanding the role coding plays. understanding the role history plays.

KHOI - BEST PRACTICES, NECESSITY OF RULES, ETXC...

JH I'm very resistant to rules. I think like an abstract expressionate...so I'm resistant to best practices. But the example is... door on the roots. So the challenge is to appreciate what we gain but not give up too much, along the way.

JH designers invent the future... keep our jobs. Economic thing at the core.
(idea i'm editing out - can bring back: there's a trend of designers doing their “creative” stuff on the side. Painting, etc. e.g. Facebook has its analog lab. But should designers be letting this [compartmentalization] happen?

(idea I'm editing out: the flip side of sameness is belonging: basically -- sameness makes us think we’re part of a community, when (?) in fact we’re all really lonely and isolated

    JH well I think it’s much more image intensive. And that’s because of Instagram and Pintrest.

    I think your idea about scrutiny and trust and access is a fascinating one. JH The concern is where do we go from here. How do we differentiate? Differentiation is a really important visual conceit.