

CONCEIVE

MAKE

SELL

From toys to socially-minded apps, 8 design entrepreneurs prove that capitalizing on passion is the best way to forge your creative path.

by Steven Heller and Lita Talarico



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esign entrepreneurial ventures don't necessarily follow typical *modus operandi*. As many of the entrepreneurs sampled here note, their ideas derive from personal interests that are then universalized. Many products are finding space in the virtual world, but the ideas are concrete, if sometimes ethereal at first glance. The overarching concern isn't if it will make money (that will either come or not), but if it will bring pleasure or do good or change attitudes. If not, then why bother? Everyone wants a hit, but a very smart miss will do just fine.

Design entrepreneurship, which we've been writing, teaching and lecturing about for nearly 16 years, began a century ago. Today it's the answer to the question, *What's next?* When we co-founded the School of Visual Arts' MFA Designer as Author + Entrepreneur program, the next logical step for graphic designers was to become "content producers"—similar to our design ancestors from the Arts and Crafts, Werkbund, Bauhaus, as well as Charles and Ray Eames and other design movements, schools and studios from the late 19th and early to mid- 20th centuries.

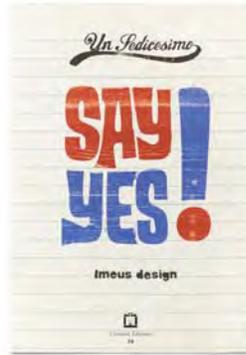
It was becoming obvious in the brief period from the late 1980s through the 1990s that graphic design's cultural force was losing steam. The computer, which had shined its bright screen on the flamboyant and experimental design that gave rise to designers with household name recognition, would eventually marginalize graphic designers. It was time for a preemptive radical shift, transforming endangered graphic designers from service providers to idea "conceptualizers" to makers of the ideas they conceived. Thus, the design entrepreneur applied conventional skill and talent to conceiving and producing new products.

Initially, we used the term "author" to describe our MFA program because design authorship had a loftier ring than "entrepreneur." "Author" implied the freedom to conceptualize anything that wasn't client-driven—as long as it wasn't art for art's sake. "Entrepreneur," conversely, was as much about business as creativity. Despite an increase in professionalism during the '70s and '80s, the "B-word" (business) threatened some design artists. As a design author, business strategies and plans were rejected or embraced but weren't a prerequisite. Being a design entrepreneur, however, demanded considerably more rigor in terms of business, marketing and promotion savvy; it was important to maintain a balance of art and commerce.

Any designer who runs a studio, office or firm is entrepreneurial. In fact, anyone with a studio already has an infrastructure for entrepreneurial content development. But design entrepreneurship really picked up steam in the early 2000s when technology provided the tools for making things and the opportunity for various "making" end results or outcomes. While a lot



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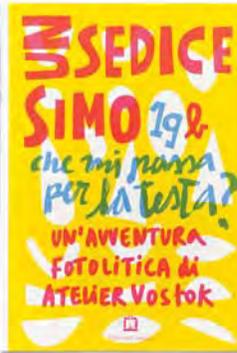
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Un Sedicesimo covers are created by various designers, such as Italo Lupi (1), Anthony Peters (2), Fanette Mellier (3), Wilhelm Staehle (4), Atelier Vostok (5), Giulio Iacchetti (6), Nora Krug (7), Grégoire Korganow (8), Protey Temen (9), Demian Conrad (10), Frank Chimero (11), Rosa Linke (12) and Esther Lee (1.3).



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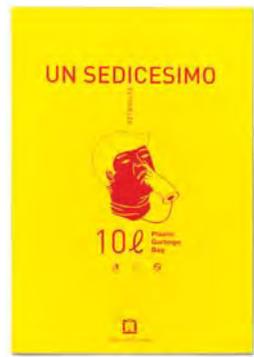
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“I usually invent as I go and play it by ear. I consider the business side of the project to be an integral part of the creative process.” —Aleksandar Maćašev

of what’s made doesn’t necessarily require high technology—think greeting cards, T-shirts, etc.—the computer makes “making” matter-of-fact. It also enables makers to prototype, promote and sell their wares directly to consumers.

The surge in online market and the capacity to reach customers and raise funds from modest investors through fund-sourcing sites has forever altered how business is conducted. Now, internet entrepreneurs are developing more systems and structures that enable design entrepreneurs to dip into and benefit from new markets. The ability to produce and market has helped to reposition graphic design in the new entrepreneurial economy. Which isn’t to imply that graphic design services are no longer necessary—to the contrary, they’re more important than ever, in part because design entrepreneurs are raising the bars and standards.

Entrepreneurship isn’t for everyone, yet everyone, especially creative people, harbors at least one viable product idea. What’s more, designers don’t have to be profit-makers—they can be “social entrepreneurs,” creating campaigns or events that serve the greater good. By virtue of their creative skill

set, graphic designers are easily thrust into being entrepreneurial, either individually or collaboratively.

Making is the new sketching. The prevailing ethos is to make first, test later. Once it’s made, if it doesn’t fly, simply make something else. The costs for putting prototypes into the world are minimal compared to pre-computer/pre-internet days. What’s more, many entrepreneurial products today are digital, so startup investment is manageable. This may account for why so many designers are currently producing and distributing their own “bespoke” (custom or limited-edition) products.

The following is a selection of eight ventures, from print publications and vinyl toys to a social-impact iPhone app, that have found—or are still searching for—their rightful audiences.

1. UN SEDICESIMO

Un Sedicesimo, which literally translates to “sixteenth,” represents a single printing signature and the title of a series of 16-page portfolios of thematic work by individual designers and illustrators. Published quarterly in Italy since 2007, *Un Sedicesimo* is the pet project of creative

director Pietro Corraini. “I wanted to make a magazine that not just spoke about design but that would be a design project itself,” Corraini says.

Contributors are selected almost randomly by Corraini: “There are no scientific criteria in choosing the new author,” he notes. “I choose what I like the most and the people I think are able to make an entire project in just 16 pages. That’s why we mix great masters, like Milton Glaser, Italo Lupi and others, and young and unknown illustrators like Esther Lee, Peteris Lidaka or Protey Temen.”

The designers are also completely free to choose their own approaches: “Most of the time it’s surprising, even for me,” Corraini says.

Un Sedicesimo is published through the family business, Edizioni Corraini, which produces graphic design books and artist books, as well as children’s books (www.corraini.com). “*Sedicesimo* is a self-sustaining project because we didn’t need to build new structures for distribution-end editorial works,” Corraini says. What’s more, it doesn’t take much time: “I just need to invite the authors, and they do all the rest.”



letterpress



identity



website



photography



newsletter



PASTA



Cravings grew out of Celia Cheng's thesis project into a thriving website focused on food, which includes "Cravings videos" and a pasta page. Also pictured is the Year of the Horse card, which celebrates the New Year.

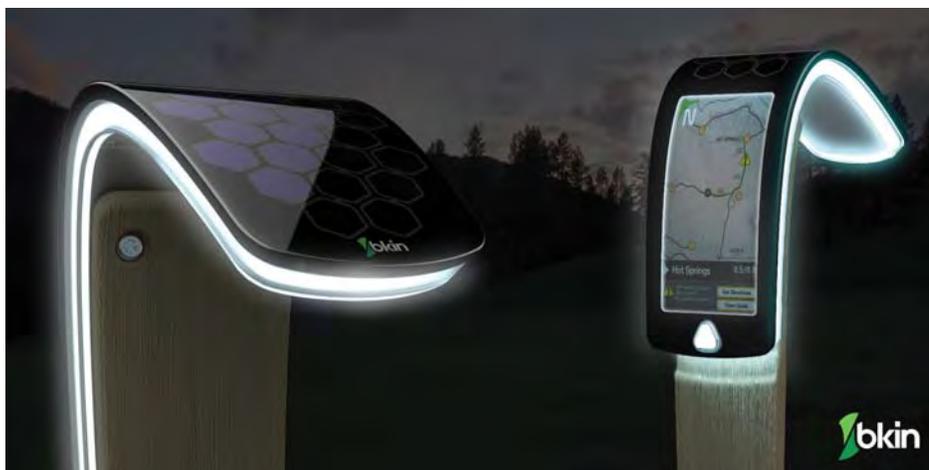


2. CRAVINGS

Findyourcraving.com is the home base for Cravings, a guide to gastronomy and design, which developed from Celia Cheng's MFA Design/Designer as Author + Entrepreneur thesis project in 2005. "Cravings brought out the entrepreneur in me," she says. "What started out as a database of recommended dishes at restaurants soon grew to include events to meet and eat with chefs, sweepstakes giveaways and travel videos. The creative ideas just kept pouring out, and I was having so much fun with it, the growth was organic."

Cravings focuses on food, wine, travel and lifestyle, all of which are presented through thoughtful design. People noticed the site immediately: Two years after launching, Cheng quit her secure job at a digital agency to create her own business. Today, Cravings includes more than online advertising, partnerships and event organizing. "As the demand for these different revenue streams grew," Cheng explains, "I decided to pull them together and launch Cravings Productions, a production company that produces videos, provides letterpress, design services and photography, [all] with a focus on the food and beverage industry."

Cheng continues to use the online Cravings newsletter as part of the brand outreach that keeps her subscribers in the loop of what she's up to. "The content we provide attracts an audience that has genuine interest in our recommendations," she says. "In addition to our latest content updates, the newsletter also lets our community know when we have events or sell services and products."



Top left: BKIN industrial design renderings by Greg MacNamara, owner of Formant Studios, in collaboration with Studio Akko.

3. BKIN

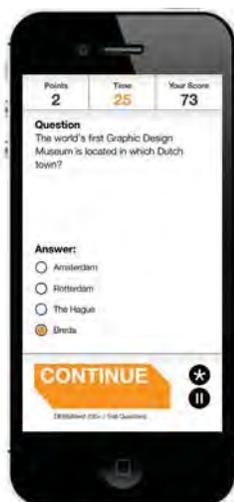
Ron Goldin says his New York Studio Akko (akko.co) has a mission to identify and solve the problems “we see in our own lives or the world around us, rather than being given a brief by clients.” He established Homebrew’d Projects to generate ideas and so-called Minimum Viable Products (MVPs, in the startup world) that they “put out into the wild and see if they stick.”

One of those products is BKIN, a way-finding system for remote places like national forests and backcountry ski slopes. It’s a solar-powered device with a small footprint and minimal installation requirements that lives outdoors, allowing people to interact with a digital map and discover both nearby attractions and hazards, as well as communicate to a central station in emergency scenarios.

“It came out of what felt like a near-death experience where I got caught after

closing hours on the wrong side of a ski slope as it was getting dark,” Goldin explains. “I was lucky that security checking the grounds happened to find me and helped me back to civilization. I left that situation thinking this was a solvable problem: how to stay in the know in places that are outside of the reach of technology.”

A few weeks later during a brainstorm, Goldin spawned the idea for BKIN, a product that works anywhere and anytime and handles both emergency communication and digital wayfinding. BKIN was a close collaboration with an industrial designer to help render images of what it could look and feel like from a physical standpoint. Goldin’s team at Akko handled research and software requirements, as well as detailed interaction and visual design for the interface, which is currently waiting to be fully realized.



Above: The DESIGNerd App is in development, building upon the original 100+ trivia card games. Left: Fun Gus characters born from a DIY blank: "Pink Power" by Buffmonster and "Space Gus" by Frank Kozik.



4. DESIGNERD 100+

Created by Kevin Finn, creative director at TheSumOf in Brisbane, Australia, the DESIGNerd 100+ game is for fans of design history. It's "the first design trivia game to feature unique slants on design history, fact and fiction," Finn says. "And it's really about celebrating DESIGNerds all over the world."

Each of the three volumes of DESIGNerd 100+ game (more are on the way) includes 100 questions contributed by a specific design nerd/author, with bonus questions provided by Finn. Recent editions feature questions by Stefan Sagmeister, and the authors of this article, Steven Heller and Lita Talarico.

"We love design. We're DESIGNerds! Simple as that," says Finn, who is poised to launch the first digital app for his previously self-published analog trivia series.

5. FUN GUS

Travis Cain, Kiehl's' assistant vice president/global creative, was a designer at Planet Propaganda the year they were chosen to be included in the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum's National Design Triennial. That same year vinyl toy producer KidRobot was selected as well.

KidRobot (www.kidrobot.com) asked all the design firms involved in the exhibit to submit ideas for their signature Dunny toy, which, if chosen, would be produced as limited edition souvenirs in the museum

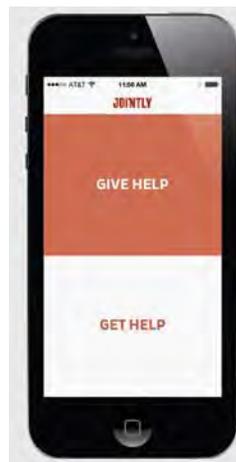
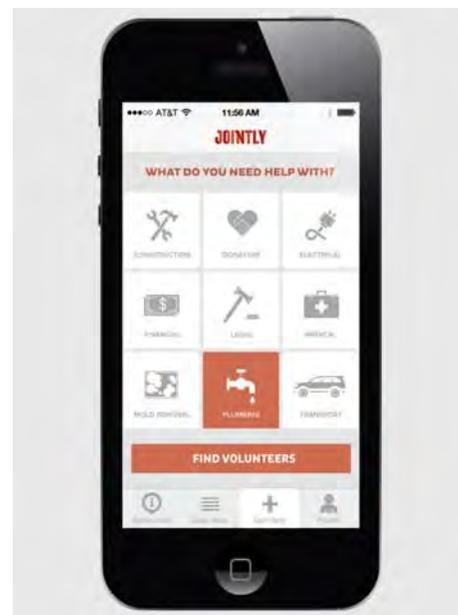
shop. Two of Cain's designs were picked. "While I was working on the Dunny designs," he says, "I stumbled on expressing the idea of love and pain going hand-in-hand, and how sometimes things that seem completely incongruous or incompatible often do end up together."

This was the idea behind "the bffs," the miniseries of toys Cain proposed that were ultimately produced. "The bffs" are objects that, like a tree stump and an axe, shouldn't be friends because one could cause the demise of the other. But they are anyway. KidRobot has since produced two different "bff" series.

Cain has also wanted to produce a larger scale toy for some time. "Fun Gus is an 8-inch toy character I've been working on for about four years, and he's finally coming together," he says. The original idea came from Cain's playing with the word "fungus." "I think of him as a mushroom who has been cross-pollinated with 1980s hip hop style."

Because of the high costs associated with producing a large-size collectible toy on his own, Cain used Kickstarter to raise the necessary funds. "My plan is to produce a blank white customizable version so people can make their own Fun Gus, and also make three limited-edition artist versions for the launch." He already has had toy maestros Frank Kozik, Jeremyville, and Buffmonster create designs.





Jointly is an app that connects individuals with volunteers during times of disaster.

6. JOINTLY

Following the devastation of Hurricane Sandy, Samia Kallidis was working on her thesis in New York City and was convinced that design and technology could play a major role in helping make the emergency response and disaster recovery process smoother and more efficient. By speaking with disaster survivors and emergency personnel, she found that there are many needs that don't require the attention of expert response professionals.

Her venture, Jointly (www.jointly.us), is an app designed to address those needs long after the relief agencies have gone. It's a peer-to-peer program that helps people self-organize disaster relief to rebuild faster and sustain long-term recovery. Jointly directly connects individuals around the globe with volunteers who can help, allow-

ing disaster survivors to obtain services and donations, and find skilled volunteers nearby.

"What typically affects disaster survivors' recovery are things large agencies aren't well-equipped to handle on an individual basis, creating disproportion between demand vs. supply, wasting time, money and leaving disaster survivors with unmet needs," Kallidis says. "I believe that increasing the capacity for self-organization builds resilience, providing for quicker and more efficient self-help actions in times of need."

Dubai-based Kallidis was an entrepreneur-in-residence in New Enterprise Associates' NEA Studio program for summer 2013, which provided mentorship, critique sessions, guidance, workspace

and a network to facilitate the building of the startup idea into a full-time company. Recently, she has put a significant amount of emphasis on design and user experience for the venture.

"We currently have a nonfunctional prototype and are looking to hire a great and passionate developer to join the team in order to build it," she says. "We've built prototypes for usability and A/B testing, which has resulted in several design iterations to ensure the best user experience and the qualities necessary for optimal app performance in disaster recovery." Kallidis has partnered with a nonprofit organization in New York City in order to test the app and deploy it in other high-risk areas in anticipation of a spring 2014 launch.



In a First, Baby 'Cured' of AIDS



Pope Benedict XVI to resign



Toyota eyes mass production of fuel cell car by 2015



Beckham's PSG wages go to charity



Meteorite Hits Russia



French, Malian troops take Timbuktu's airport



Iconic Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez dies



Sundance film festival 2013- Jobs – first look review



Nintendo returns to profit

7. ICONSTIMES

Sylvain Boyer founded the site icons times (iconstimes.com), a venture he asserts “is quite possibly the first iconographic news aggregator.” It’s a fresh way to present current events and stories through informative icons that change over time and topics. Boyer says the idea derives from the term “signage information,” which is typically used to describe road signs.

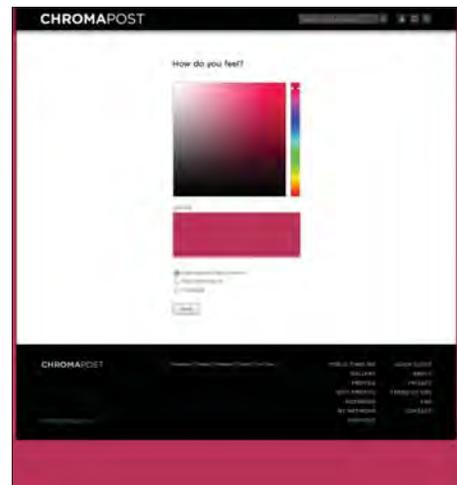
“I wanted to apply this design process not only for signage information but for all global information, to create a ‘signage global information,’” he says.

Icons are meant to be simple; however, frequently, the news is wildly complex. It’s necessary to balance the two. So, Boyer uses “converging ideas, converging signs, especially when the subject is hard to treat”—referencing the time he ran a story about an employee

falling from the JPMorgan Building. “The man was a vice president, an important man who fell from the top of his office,” Boyer says. “I found that there was a link between the fiction of the ‘Mad Men’ TV intro and the terrible reality of this news.”

News aggregators use complex technologies that come at considerable costs. So such startups are usually based on classic business models rooted in advertising. “But, for now,” Boyer insists, “I don’t want icons times to live with advertising. The business model that I want to install is more like an art gallery where profits come from the sales of works; therefore, I’ll sell frames and T-shirts from icons times. It’s like pop art in the way of the Keith Haring shop,” Boyer says, adding that icons times is more of an “art-up” than a “startup.”

Sylvain Boyer designed icons times to tell a news story in an easy-to-understand format.



MESSENGER BAG PRODUCTION BY ARTBRIDGE AND BROOKLYN INDUSTRIES; PHOTO BY BROOKLYN INDUSTRIES

8. CHROMAPOST

Chromapost (www.chromapost.com) is a nanoblogging platform for expressing emotions through color. It began as a personal artistic exercise—a reaction to New York-based founder and designer Aleksandar Maćašev’s reluctance to be vibrant in his own work. “We constantly face a torrent of influences on our perception of color and on our expression with color,” he says. “Culture, visual communication, commerce and design trends all shape how we think about color. And if you went to an art school, add color theory to the mix. I wanted to get rid of all these limitations as much as I could and try to use color in a very personal way by expressing my own emotions through it.”

He started the venture as a blog where each post would be a single color chosen by the common color picker, and that color would summarize his entire daily emotional experience. “After a year or two of playing with my color archive and creating some outgrowths out of it, the commercial potentials presented themselves,” he says. “I usually invent as I go and play it by ear. I consider the business side of the project to be an integral part of the creative process. It isn’t something I add on to the final product. It’s a part of the product. And I find it’s similar to the ‘perpetual beta’ logic of internet startups.”

It was a logical step to make a platform for others to participate, so he started the Chromapost Social Network a year ago

(www.chromapost.net). Maćašev expanded it with a couple of additional features like color messaging, chromapost of the moment and the “Make Art” wizard. “I find that the ‘Make Art’ feature has a lot of potential,” he says. “Basically, users can create artwork out of their own emotional color diary by using templates I created. The aim is to enable everybody to create art. Similar to the logic of Instagram, where everybody can snap a cool picture.”

In fact, Maćašev’s focus for the future is on “Make Art,” which offers users more artistic freedom but still guides them enough so the final result remains good and true to the project—in the direction of a generative art platform. “I’m also trying to develop a mechanism of making actual products out of these artworks that users can create and purchase,” Maćašev says. “After that, I’d like to implement geotagging. It would be interesting to see color expression on the world map.” ■

Steven Heller is the “Visuals” columnist for *The New York Times Book Review* and author of more than 160 books on design and visual culture. For more of his design commentary, read *The Daily Heller*. www.printmag.com

Lita Talarico lectures and conducts workshops on design entrepreneurship around the world. She has co-authored five books on design and design entrepreneurship.

Chromapost asks visitors to express their feelings with color. The site includes a public timeline, an interactive page and a compilation of the user’s artwork. The site’s creator is also developing products, like *The Chromapost Messenger Bag* at top left.