**Participants, Not Spectators
What Rossman and Duerden’s book *Designing Experiences* can teach us about creating engaging experiences… and why we should listen.**

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45 days ago, if you were to ask me what came to mind when I heard the term “experience design,” the first words out of my mouth would have been, “the party planning committee.”! Not to say that after any real reflection I would reduce the concept of experience design down to such simplistic terms, but I was ignorant of what it really meant and, more importantly, of the drastic implications for misunderstanding it.

I’m a millennial, so it’s probably no surprise that I’m a huge fan of the NBC show *The Office*. Naturally, the PPC (“party planning committee”) was a hilarious trope within the American workplace that left a lasting comedic impression, not just on me, but on society. This may have been where I thought experience design, from a professional/workplace vantage point, might have been best classified, but there was something more that seemed to intrigue me, so I decided I was going to dig a bit deeper. One of the driving factors of this was my recent discovery of, and interest in, the idea of “embodied cognition” and “creative experience.”

*Why shouldn’t creativity be defined more holistically? Our lived experiences and unique interactions with the world around us surely influence our manifestation of creativity and creative expression…right?*

That was my question, but this led me to an even bigger question:

If creative experience is more important to understanding, identifying, and defining what creativity really is at a psychological and cognitive level, then could it be possible to intentionally design an experience meant to foster those opportunities?

I set to work, and the first book on my list was *Designing Experiences*, written by James Rossman and Matthew Duerden. Having some experience in design thinking methodologies, I was hoping that I might find some overlap. I soon learned that these worlds are intertwined. *Designing Experiences* seemed to be a book custom-written for a brain like mine, accounting for the multidisciplinary nature of life itself within the context of experiences. My concerns about too much focus on “trendy” aspects like “user experience design” or technologically-based applications were immediately put to rest. The authors not only addressed the elephant(s) in the room within the experience design community, but also provided actionable solutions, recommended ways that even I (a total newbie) can start intentionally designing experiences, and then capped it off with a robust set of case studies that reinforced everything they advocated for throughout the book. Better still, ***it reads like an interesting story, not a “how to” guide or a dissertation.***

To try to capture all the wisdom and value that this book offers within a single blog post would be a tremendous disservice, both to you as the reader, and to the authors – too much passion went into this book for me to water it down that much. If you’re anything like me, you’ll find that even Part 1 of 3 is potentially transformative on its own, opening your mind to a whole new understanding of experience design, and a near-limitless number of possibilities that suddenly become accessible to you.

Reader, understand that I can only give you the wave tops! I hope that will be enough to leave you desiring more, wanting to go deeper…because then you’ll buy this wonderful book, and the experience design community will grow by one more. Let’s dip our toes in, shall we?

**Experience Design – Defined!**

Hopefully it isn’t a surprise that the authors felt the most important issue to address first was to define experience design, no small task in a professional field where each independent community of experience design has its own flavor and goal. As an outsider with no background in any sector of experience design, the first myth dispelled for me was that ***a service is not the same as an experience***.
A service is a unique category of economic activity, but an *experience* requires conscious, intentional engagement from the participant. In a “service,” customers or participants have things done *for* them, but an experience “demands conscious attention, engagement, and action.”

Experience is defined as, “a unique interactional phenomenon resulting from conscious awareness and reflective interpretation of elements that is sustained by a participant, culminating in personally perceived results and memories.” ***Experience Design*** is defined as “***the process of intentionally orchestrating experience elements to provide opportunities for participants to co-create and sustain interactions that lead to results desired by the participant and the designer.”***

*“Great experiences don’t happen serendipitously –
they require intentionality and planning.”*

**Great Experience Designers Use Psychology and Cognitive Science!**

Based on the definition provided above, it’s clear that experience design is inherently human-centered. It’s not just enough to think about what your participants want, however…it requires the designer understand and apply so much more than a desired outcome! Great experiences are designed to leverage “flow,” and they will impact one or more aspects of positive psychology (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment). Only by accounting for both can the experience designer achieve the right stimulation and development needed to change behaviors and create a sense of “meaningfulness” for participants. This also requires a degree of open co-creation, where participants feel they ***own*** aspects of their experience and contribute to it throughout.

“People want and need great experiences, but to provide them, you have to design experiences that can capture people’s attention.”

**Experience Design Framework: The Foundation for Building Great Experiences**

The last sneak-peak I’ll add is the wonderful framework the book provides, because *every part of life is an experience, but not all experiences are worth remembering.* The framework provided helps conceptualize the “hierarchy” of experiences, and the cumulative/concurrent nature of them.

From the ***prosaic*** experiences of our day-to-day life and the ***mindful*** experiences we have when encountering novelty, through the ***memorable*** experiences in which we have emotional investment, and hopefully onto ***meaningful*** experiences that allow us to discover something new about the world or ourselves…and in the best of experiences, when that meaningfulness results in a ***transformative*** experience that forever alters our personal journey… experiences large and small are all around us. With this book as a guide, we can start intentionally designing experiences that have lasting positive impacts. Love the punch line here, great conclusion.