“Daddy”, from Vision to Video

Abstract

“A designer rarely works alone”. The first sentence of Jonas Löwgren and Erik Stolterman's chapter on design as a social process made me curious.

What if a designer worked alone? What are the actual differences between working on a project alone and as part of a group? How would it influence the creative process? What would be different when coming up with ideas, meeting with clients and setting deadlines?

Does the influence of another designer stifle the individual creativity or does it actually nurish it?

This paper is written to answer these and other questions as well as take you through the creative process of the production of “Daddy” - the music video.

Keywords

Digital media production, music video, design process, creativity.
Introduction

Anyone who has ever worked on a project that involves some kind of creative aspect knows that there are many things that has to be taken into consideration. Limitations and restrictions by the client, deadlines and the opinions and visions of other designers are all things that affect a designer’s workflow.

Digital media designers are not artists in the same sense that a painter is. Success is not measured from the designer’s viewpoint but rather from the client’s. In the end they are the ones that has to be satisfied with the result.

Deadlines are part of every project and designers are always handed the challenge of expressing themselves creatively under pressure.

When given the opportunity to make a music video for the swedish pop/rock group December Darling I was delighted. I had actually made a music video before. However, on that project we were a total of five people working full time on it for a month. It was a great process and taking on the role of director made me learn a lot.

So here I was again, given a chance to work on something I loved and hoped to do for a living in the near future. There was one huge difference though – I was doing it completely on my own. Just me, alone, from start to finish. All decisions was to be taken by me and me only. Could I do it? Did I have the time? I was so used to working on projects like this as part of a group. Could I really produce something on my own that was of relevance in the time given?

This paper reports an introspective study of a design process in designing a music video. The process was documented and analyzed on the basis of Stolterman and Löwgren’s theory model (see Image 1) of “Design as a social process”[1] together with several related articles. The main purpose was to examine how the creative process is effected by social context. Outcomes are presented and finally these findings are that when a designer is working as part of a group can both excel and get curbed. It all depends on the personality of the designer and their need to express themselves.

Method

In order to make the comparison as fair and accurate as possible the method consists of three phases.

Phase 1: In this first phase, an inward analysis on the individual design process of the music video for “Daddy” was conducted.

Phase 2: Secondly the results were contrasted with previous projects where I was involved as part of a production team.

Phase 3: In the last phase key differences between the processes were investigated based on Stolterman and Löwgren’s 3 design steps: Vision, Operative Image and Specification[1].

Vision, Operative Image & Specification

In “Design av informationsteknik”[1] Stolterman and Löwgren defines the design process in three steps.

Vision is the initial stage of the design process. It can be anything from first ideas that pop into your head to basic technical solutions for the problem at hand. Depending on the experience and background of the designer visions can come from different places. An experienced media designer might draw parallels to previous projects they have worked on while others might get inspiration from things or productions that they have seen. The biggest problem with visions is that they are vague. This leads to a conflict
between the ideas that do not get resolved until further specifications and choices have been made.

The second step is the Operative Image which the designer develops into the first concrete sketches of the project. As the work progresses the Operative Image changes into stable starting point for further work. The Operative Image is based on an initial vision that has been taken a step further.

The third step in the model is the Specification. As you go deeper into the creative process and when the Operative Image is relevant and clear enough it turns into a detailed Specification. The Specification is the blueprint, or roadmap if you will, for the whole project.

The Creative Process: Previous Research

The has been several studies on the creative process. "Design av informationsteknik"[1] is a book on the subject written by Jonas Löwgren and Erik Stolterman that outlines that particular process in an easy and educational way. Their models on "Design as a Social Process" and "The 3 Levels of Abstraction" were used to analyze the individual design process of the music video for "Daddy".

An essay written by Andy Warr and Eamonn O'Neill from the University of Bath called "Understanding design as a social creative process"[2] tackle related issues. Their conclusions include the fact that since a creative process usually involved more than one person it should be treated as a social creative process. They argue that theoretically social creativity should be more productive than individual creativity, and so design teams should be more creative than individual designers working alone. The essay is valuable because it exposes some of the differences between designing individually and in a group. However, what is missing is the application of the theories on a practical case.

Taking a Look at Other Music Videos

Before getting started on the creative process, I viewed several music videos in search of creative inspiration. Pacific’s “Numbers One”[3] was a video with the same graphic look as I was aiming after, it was however not a conscious process of using it as an exact reference.

Another music video which I had liked the appearance of is Teddybears Stockholm’s “Rock ’n Roll High School”[4]. That video is portrait as an old arcade game and the band members moved around in the video as computer game characters. The realization that both videos were made for Swedish bands was interesting but not intentional.

A third music video is the one for Peter, Björn and John’s “Young Folks”[5]. Another video that has almost the same exact look I was after.

Steps in the Design Process

When facing a fairly large project like this there are many steps to be taken from start to finish. It is in no way a linear process, on the contrary, it is highly dynamic.

The creative process can at times feel like taking two steps forward and one back. Ideas that seem brilliant in the early stages of the project might turn out useless or simply too time-consuming to go through with. As a designer you have to be flexible at these moments and be willing to leave ideas behind even if you may have spent a lot of time on them already.

Working on a creative process that is focused on design is never predictable. Every design process is unique. You can however strive to take certain steps that are applicable on a majority of design situations media producers are faced with.
The Vision Grows
A designer should never just wait for “a brilliant idea” but instead, take the specifications at hand and begin brainstorming and putting ideas onto paper.

When first handed a task and the information that surrounds it creative ideas usually starts flowing around immedeately. It is important for the designer to make choices and take decisions in the design process in order to move along in the production.

Before even knowing what song I was doing a video for visions started popping into my head. These were ideas that have been latent in my head all along and just came up to the surface when I started thinking about the design situation consciously. My initial images were based on various things. Some of them came from existing music videos that inspired me, a couple from motion pictures I had viewed and also ideas that were based in previous experiences and productions came into mind.

Inspiration can come from many places, as a designer it is important to capitalize on that inspiration and transform them into producable ideas.

When working in a group
When initiating a project as a group the first step usually is a discussion and brainstorming session. Everybody contributes with their personal insights and perspectives. Members of the group may not agree on all of the ideas but there are usually plenty and it is an excellent starting ground for launching a project.

When going through this initial stage alone and reflecting on situations that I took part of as part of a group the difference was evident. The lack of immediate feedback on my ideas made me feel both uncertain and relieved.

Uncertain because usually there is a direct respons that I can relate to, either good or bad. And relieved because I was “allowed” to express all of my ideas without the hinderence of other people.

The circumstances left me confused. Were my ideas good or bad? Which ones stood out? Usually the input from other group members quickly reveals this, but now I had to decide everything on my own.

“The father of brainstorming” Alex Osborn[6] claimed that a person can think of twice as many ideas when working in a group than when working alone. The ideas produced would be of both higher quality as well as quantity.

Comparing to similar situations when I was part of a group I have to disagree. The case was often that one or two people took a leading role and stated their ideas. Depending on the personality of the designer there is a risk that they get stifled and restrain their ideas. Those kind of designers can definitely benefit from working alone and expressing their ideas in that way.

At this point however I had enough ideas and the next step was to start forming them into an Operative Image.
The Operative Image Forms

Depending on what kind of project the designer is working on, if they get initial feedback from their client or if they simply start making decisions themselves on which of the ideas they want to continue working on they move onto the second step, which is to form ideas into structured plans.

It was at this point that I met with the band for the first time. One of the biggest parts of working on a design production project is the relationship with the client. As digital media designer is not a traditional artist in the sense that the success of a design is judged by the client, not the artist itself. Every situation differs and the client that gives the assignment has to give the designer creative freedom but in the end they are the ones that have to be satisfied with the result.

With this in mind I went for my first meeting with the band. I had some initial questions that I wanted to ask them. I was curious what kind of music videos they liked, if they had any ideas for this one and if there was a special feeling or message that they wanted to mediate with this song.

Since I was working on this project alone the band was the only ones giving me feedback on my ideas. Therefore, this was the first feedback I got.

I presented my early idea to making an animated video, and they all liked it. I was still unsure exactly what way to go with the style of animation, but they basically gave me the freedom to continue with the project as planned.

I started making plans on how to continue and what the next steps were. I needed to focus on which ideas I wanted to use for the project. Animation, OK, but how?

I had previously done a few drawings with a tracing method used on the feature film "A Scanner Darkly"[7] and decided that it would be interesting to give animation a try with the help of that particular graphic style.

The concept of the video was at this point unclear. I decided on how the animations would look but the context in which they were to move was not decided.

When working in a group

The designer-client relationship is obviously an important one. When dealing with it as a group there is usually a project leader that handles the main part of the interaction.

When alone the designer automatically takes that role so in that sense there isn’t any huge differences.

I enjoyed doing this part of the process on my own and I actually think that it was an advantage to do so.

The meeting with the band went well and it was nice to handle it on my own. I did not have to think about anybody else and I was able to present my ideas as I preferred them.

Getting Specified

My first steps of the real production was to decide what kind of pictures I needed of the group and then photograph all group members in them.

For a majority of the animations I chose to split the movements into three parts. In case of the guitar and bass player I drew three basic hand positions – one with the arm 45 degrees up, one with the hand
on the strings and one when the arm is pointing down.

I photographed the drum player in different stages of hitting a drum and the keyboard player when she was playing.

An important part of the animation was the singing. How could I best portray it and still stick with the planned look and feel of the video? I started out by experimenting with rotoscoping. Rotoscoping[8] is an animation technique where you trace over live-action film movement, frame by frame. I gave it a try but when I discovered that it would take about several hours to trace one single second of film I decided that it was too time-consuming and the result did not outweigh time it took making it.

I researched what kind of animations they used in cartoons and came across a popular method where they used phonemes. A phoneme[9] is the smallest postulated structural unit that distinguishes meaning. To use this I basically had to make one mouth shape for every syllable used in the song. I narrowed it down to 10 different ones that would cover it, they were: “Schh” – “Rrr” – “Ooo” – “Mmm” – “Iii” – “Fff” – “Eh” – “Ahh” – “Closed mouth”.

When animating, the different mouths were assigned one keyframe each and as I went through the song I simply revealed the mouth I deemed most appropriate.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back
After working on a production for some time the designer realizes that some ideas just do not work. It is possible that things are too time-consuming or they simply do not look right once they are implemented into the finished production.

It is important not to be afraid of “killing your darlings”. Which means to remove ideas and parts that you may have spent a long time on but simply does not work. Some designers are too strong-headed and insist that everything they have produced and worked hard on has to end up in the final version of the production.

I, myself, encountered several of these situations. When I first started working with my animations the idea was to make a digital book where the pictures came to life and the lyrics for the song were written down as text in the book. This, however, turned out to be a difficult task if it were to look believable. Another idea I began working on was that I would look like a comic book where the characters moved around and performed. I spent weeks working on pictures, animating and researching. However, I had to put those ideas aside when I saw that it would not look as I imagined it.

When working in a group
This step gets a lot harder when working in a group. People get upset if anybody should say something bad about their work. Killing other people’s babies is a big problem in project groups, and this is where a clear structure is needed with a project leader and other people in their roles. By having a person that is the decided leader beforehand saves a lot of trouble because this person simply has the last word in those kind of decisions.

Putting it All Together
Finally I started working on my final idea. I had decided to make two scenes; a living room and a little girl’s room. In the living room there was going to be a book shelf, a TV and a sitting chair. Musical instruments would be playing in the TV and in the foreground Matilda, the singer, would sing as the room animated.
Everything in my animations is in vector, this allows me to zoom in and out as much as I want to without losing quality as well as contributing to a certain "look" of the video.

The girl's room would have the same look but with different colors. A desk, a computer and a dresser was the furniture I had to make for that room. I also decided to draw four “rockstar” posters where four of the band members would be represented.

Once I had made my final decisions it was a matter of getting to work with everything that had to be done. I needed animateable full-figure portraits of all band members. I needed to draw the scenes and furniture.

The process was basically the same for everything that I produced. I started out with photographs that I scaled down to appropriate sizes and imported into Adobe Illustrator. Similar to inking a graphic novel, I started by drawing thin black outlines around major forms and proceeded to fill in the darkest regions of the image, shadows and such.

Once I finished with "inking" the blacks, it was time to start painting in the color. I worked from dark to light, one color at a time.

Parts that were going to be animated I created different versions of. Like the arm of the guitar players, I had in three different positions.

I imported the vector images into Adobe After Effects and proceeded to animate. I did smaller animations first and then imported them into bigger scenes where I animated the full frame, showing the final movie and exporting the different scenes.

The final stage was in Adobe Premier where I edited all the video into the finished 4 minute music video.

You never know how long things will take when planning these things. Certain parts took a lot longer than expected and in hindsight I should have known exactly what I needed and how much it showed.

With experience comes an idea of a reasonable time-span but as I previously mentioned every design process is unique.

**When working in a group**

I knew that I had to make everything on my own which was a little stressful. I absolutely missed having group members to work together with, both for moral support and also for the physical company and companionship that forms when you are several people striving towards a shared goal.

**Major Differences Between Working Alone and Working in a Group**

Jonas Löwgren and Erik Stolterman writes that a designer rarely works alone. The design process is usually complex and one person simply cannot handle it alone. And because of this, the design process has to be handled as a social process as well. Even if individual tasks might be taken care of alone they are often a smaller part of a greater whole.

A model in "Design av informationsteknik"[1] explaining the design process seen from a social perspective can be applied to my specific situation. In the center we have the core, which is represented by the main designers and clients. The next layer (the periphery) consists of the users and clients that are not directly involved in the project. Lastly the context is where everything happens, where the design is going to be used and for what purpose.
In the core we have myself and the band, December Darling. The band has not really been involved heavily in the process so I would like to say that they are somewhere in between the core and the periphery. Another person in the periphery is my tutor at university that I have had contact with throughout the project. The context is universal. The video will be used by the band for promotional purposes and it will be an extended form of their creativity. For me personally the video will be used as reference when I apply for work later on.

It is important to consider all levels when producing a project. The core (me) has to consider at all times in what context the video will be shown. I cannot for example make a video that can be considered offensive by some people because in that case it could not be used for the desired purpose of promotion. Also, since I am using the video for personal reference it is important that it cannot be misinterpreted by a potential employer.

If I had been working together with other designers in the project the core would look completely different, I would have to consider their input and expression.

Motivation and Creativity
So how is motivation and creativity affected by the design situation? Creativity has for a long time been considered an individual task but as previously mentioned a designer rarely works alone. The fact that the sum of the parts can be bigger than a whole is true and designers can motivate each other and collaborate to make the creative process excel.

When working in a group the individual designers get constant feedback from other members of that group. Depending on the level and amount of creative feedback a designer can in fact get stifled. I discovered that when I worked alone without other designer’s constant input, “maybe you should do like this instead”, I was allowed to express myself creatively however I wanted.

In the article "Understanding design as a social creative process”[2] Andy Warr and Eamonn O’Neill mentions a model originally taken from a 1926 book called “The Art of Thought” by G. Wallas. The model explains creativity in four phases; Preparation, Incubation, Illumination and Verification.

The first step, Preparation, is when you clarify and gather information about the “problem”. Incubation is when you no longer consider it as a problem. However, a creative input is still needed. Illumination is when the creative insight (eureka!) comes. Finally, the verification stage is when you make sure that your design will in fact work and is sufficient for the task at hand.

These four phases correlate with Vision, Operative Image and Specification very well from start to finish. Preparation and Incubation can be defined in the Vision stage. You are preparing yourself by letting the first creative ideas form. Once you have these you no longer see the problem. Illumination correlates with Operative Image in the sense that your “eureka!” moment transfers into a more defined vision. Finally Verification is like the Specification of a project where you define all the ideas and steps and verify that they will fulfill the purpose and be sufficient.

One might ask themselves what effect does the social aspect have on creativity? When taking into consideration that several people work closely together on a project there are bound to be social conflicts, confrontations etcetera.

Another aspect of group dynamics is the social loafing that might occur. Social loafing is the definition of the phenomenon that certain group members sometimes get
lazy and rely on the other designers to complete the tasks. To avoid this is it important to have a clear structure and assigned tasks for each individual designer. Social loafing is obviously never a problem when working alone.

Conclusion
One of the key differences when working alone is how the creative process advances. When you are several designers with the same goal the collective push and motivation grows.

When working alone the design work tends to point more towards an artistic expression. Especially when the client gives the designer free hands to do as they please. The only one that has to be taken into consideration is the designer's artistic vision and form.

Creativity can be effected in different ways depending on the designer. On one side there is the collective effort that can propell ideas into even better ones and on the other side we have the designer that gets hindered by the fact that other designers are involved. Personally I did not see any major differences in the creative part of the process at all. It was actually valuable for me to be able to realize all of my ideas without having to compromise my artistic expression.

The difficult part for a designer is to satisfy both the artistic side of their creativity as well as the client at hand. If a designer has a broad contact network that can give input without hindering the creative process I think that they may in fact work best when they do it on their own.

Working alone was both liberating as well as frustrating. Personally I felt that there is definitely a lot of value to gain from having somebody to discuss ideas and share creative input with. The advantage is the ability to work alone and not worry about other designer's need for expression.

It is still true that a designer rarely works alone, but I am not so sure that it is a bad thing.

References


