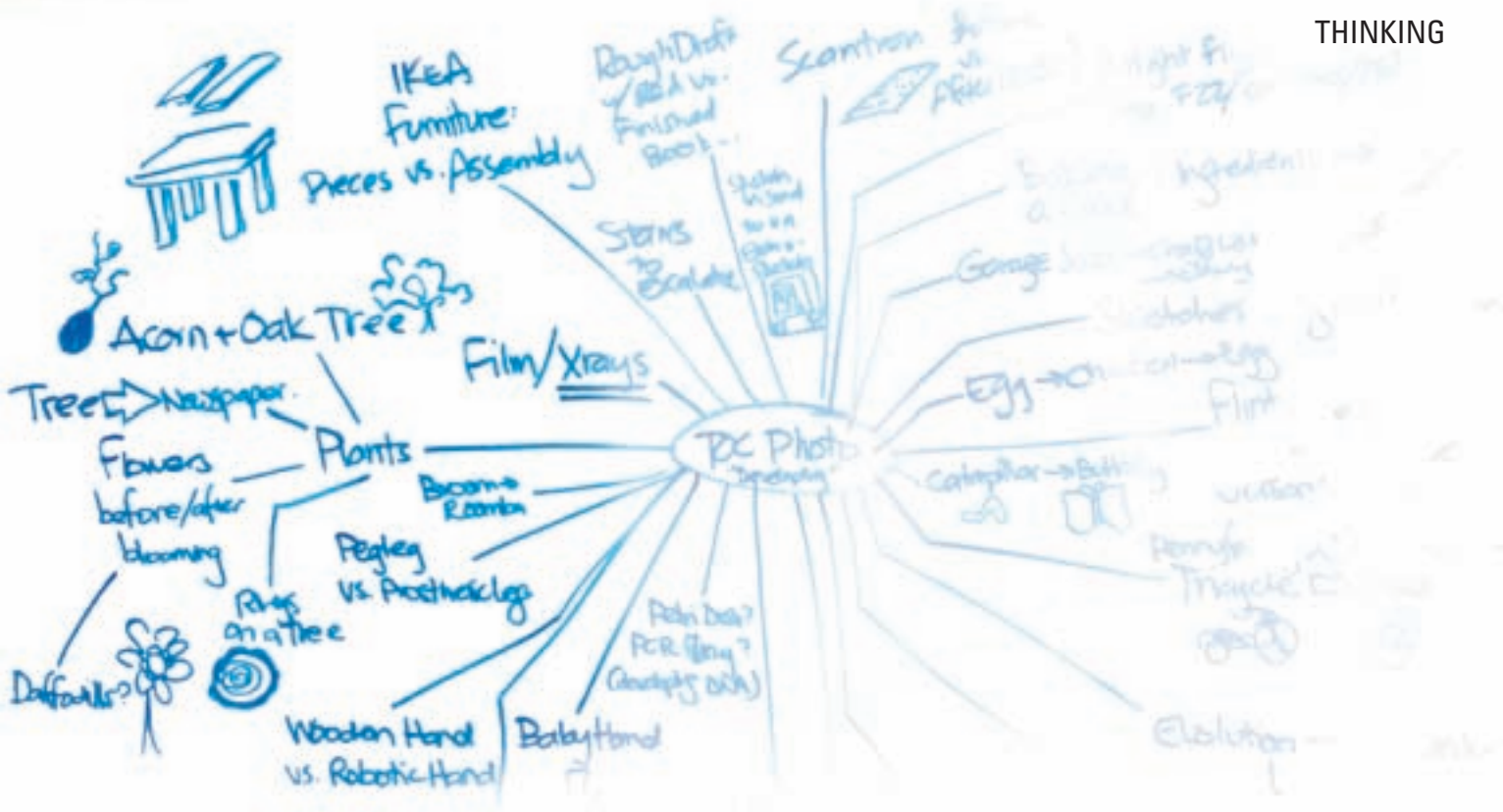


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Developing an Idea by Throwing It Away

by Liz Gerber

To me, the most interesting point in a design project comes when a team member suggests that the team erase their idea-filled whiteboard to start a new ideation session. Tension ensues. Team members complain. *What about all of those great ideas still on the board that will be lost?*

Only after someone suggests taking a picture of the board is there agreement to erase it. Interestingly, these photos are rarely referenced later. It is merely the act of taking a picture and knowing that a reference to the ideation exists that the concerns are quelled.

The fear of erasing the whiteboard comes from a fear that routinely stymies the design process: we assume that by moving forward, we are losing what we have created in the past. In fact, what we are doing is reducing our commitment to past ideas to make way for new ideas to be generated. Our

cognitive resources are diverted (only temporarily, perhaps) to speculating about new ideas rather than ruminating about the past.

To overcome the fear of erasing the whiteboard and the belief that our ideas of the past are better than any of our future ideas, I recommend practicing improvisation. Improvisation is a creative act composed without prior thought. Historically rooted in drama, dance, and music, improvisation is most commonly known for providing entertainment and comedy. Its use for developing ideas is often missed.

British director, Keith Johnstone, popularized improvisation techniques for drama as a way to make actors behave more spontaneously. While developing these techniques, he also developed principles to support a spontaneous orientation on stage. His actors struggled with the same predicament of designers. They feared they would not be able to recreate a brilliant performance of the past. He designed exercises and directives to help actors develop the attitude that nothing they do is precious and that future performances hold great potential. I extend

Johnstone's exercises beyond the stage to encourage designers to be less attached to their ideas, to make erasing a full whiteboard as liberating rather than fear evoking.

An example of an exercise designed to highlight the freedom that comes from letting ideas go is called "I'm a Tree." Players stand in a circle, facing

While developing an idea, if we hit a wall, identifying the assumptions we have built into it and then temporarily throwing away the idea may lead to new developments.

one another, while one player stands in the center of the circle. The player holds his arms in the air, mimicking a tree, and says: "I'm a tree." The players in the circle are challenged to join the circle as another object that might appear with a tree. For example, a second participant might join the tree as an "apple." A third participant joins as "Newton about to realize gravity," or perhaps as a "worm," temporarily completing the scene in the circle. At this point, the original "tree" selects an object of his choosing to exit the scene, leaving one object in the circle. Say, he leaves the "apple." A new scene begins with the apple. The next scene might involve a teacher and her desk.

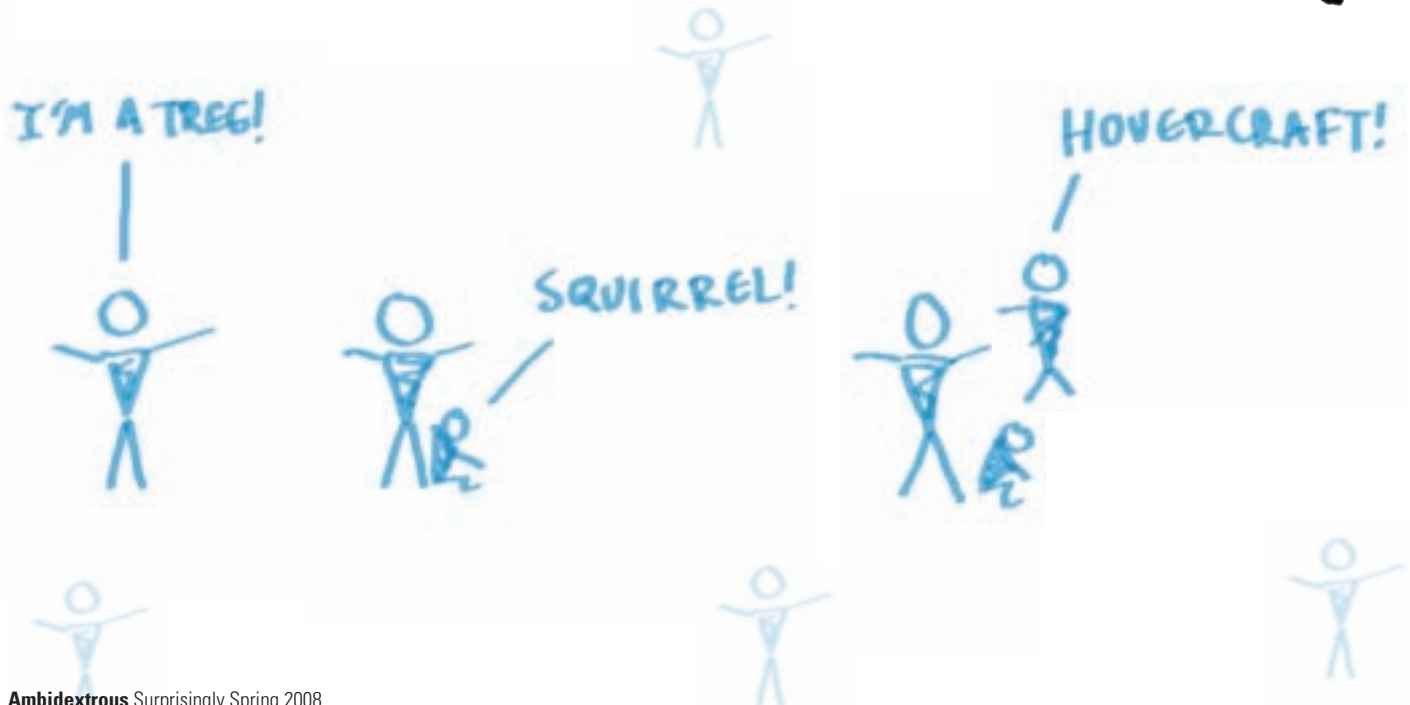
The scenes evolve over time and players take pleasure in the scene that exists in the moment and the memory of the scene. They are willing to progress with the exercise with the belief that more interesting ideas will develop throughout the game. Designers may use this improvisation exercise before or during an ideation activity as a re-

minder of what may come when past ideas are thrown away to make way for new ideas (see the next page for more examples of exercises).

This attitude that nothing is precious prevails on the stage during performances as well. If an improvised scene is causing pain to the improvisers, meaning they are having a hard time developing the scene, the audience is welcome to call for the performance to end immediately. Rather than perceive this as an insult or criticism that their work was not worthy, "blowing the horn" is considered a gift to the improvisers on stage. The audience recognizes that not all improvised scenes will be successful and rather than suf-

fering through an idea that does not appear to be developing, they end the scene so a new, potentially more fruitful scene may begin. Designers may similarly adopt this practice by providing a horn at the start of a brainstorm. Any team member can blow the horn if they felt that the team would be better off erasing the brainstorming question and subsequent ideas to start anew because too much energy was being spent on just a few ideas.

When should the horn be put to rest? If we are always throwing away our ideas, we may never get to develop the ideas we generate. Like improvisers, we must be mindful of our goals. If we are in the idea generation stage, throwing away ideas can make way for new ideas. If we are in the idea development stage, pursuing a few ideas in depth is critical for making progress and rapidly throwing away ideas may not be helpful. However, throwing away may still be useful as a way to get around obstacles. If we are in the idea development stage and have hit a wall, identifying the assumptions we have built into our idea and then temporarily throwing away the idea may lead to new developments. 🖱️



Improvisation Exercises for Designers



Try these exercises the next time you're working with your design team and want to practice letting go of ideas. These activities discourage stockpiling ideas—if you are busy coming up with what your contribution will be, you are less responsive and appreciative of the group's creation.



Sound Ball

A group of two or more people stand in a circle. One player starts the game by throwing an imaginary "ball" to another player in the circle while making an imaginary sound. The player catching the ball repeats the sound and throws the ball to a new player with a new sound to accompany the ball.

FROG... PENCIL... SANDWICH...

Dissociation Circle

Either alone or with a group, a player speaks a string of words that have nothing to do with each other until he finds the words he is saying are associated.



THE MARTIAN JUMPED.... INTO....



Word at a Time Story

A group of people stand in a circle and tell a story one word at a time. After one person says one word, the next person in the circle says the next logical word until the story is complete.