DISPATCHES FROM INDUSTRY

The Changing Definition of Designers in the Age of Generative AI

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Abstract: As generative AI transforms the boundaries of creativity and intelligence, the role of the designer is undergoing a profound redefinition. This article explores how design practice must evolve in response — not by resisting AI, but by reshaping how it operates within human systems. Drawing on two decades of fieldwork, product development, and leadership in conversational and multimodal AI, the author proposes four emerging identities for designers: advocate, curator, orchestrator, and mediator of emotion. Each represents a distinct but interdependent response to AI's strengths — and its blind spots. Designers must now move beyond aesthetics and usability to safeguard meaning, ensure ethical alignment, and preserve emotional resonance in systems that otherwise optimize for efficiency alone. The author argues that design's most vital role is to act as a counterforce to algorithmic reduction. In a moment defined by speed, scale, and automation, we must ask not just what AI can do — but what it should do, and for whom. The future will be automated. But it must also be human.

Implications for research: As AI decision-making increasingly requires designers to advocate for human values (Section 3), those designers must recognize what kinds of UI elements and properties impact values in AI-based interfaces, and how. A validated framework could focus designers' attention on crucial aspects. The assertion that AI cannot curate the quality of generated material as well as humans (Section 4) begs investigation, and an understanding of how human curation differs from AI curation might crystallize human capabilities that must be preserved. Systems that coordinate multiple models (Section 5) might compound the uncertainty inherent to AI, and standards for such systems must be further developed. And most directly, the discussion of the emergent area of neuroaesthetic design (Section 6) culminates in a call for frameworks that can strengthen arguments for system transparency over engagement metrics.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, design advocacy, generative AI

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1. Introduction

I remember it like it was yesterday — the first time I spoke to Alexa.

In the early days of the current AI boom, I often found myself in rooms where I was the only designer. Engineers marveled at the technical breakthroughs, but I was thinking beyond the tech. One day, in a locked-down conference room, we gathered around a very early version of an Echo speaker. For security reasons, the device was encased in a ridiculous shell, bolted shut to hide its true form. I had to sign my life away to be in the room with it. The only thing exposed was the now-iconic light ring.

Curious, I asked my first question:

> "Alexa, what's the best movie of all time?"
>
> Alexa: "Citizen Kane."

That moment stuck with me — not because of the answer itself (after all, *Citizen Kane* is a reasonable option), but because of its apparent certainty. Understanding natural language was one thing, but where was that answer coming from? Who decided *Citizen Kane* was the greatest movie ever? Was it a programmed truth, an algorithmic consensus, or something else entirely?

The answer did not come from a listicle or a panel of critics — the AI conjured it from a multitude of sources. That clunky little smart speaker was the first tremor of a seismic shift, a quiet signal of the tidal wave that would soon reshape everything: generative AI.

That question — where AI gets its answers — has only grown more urgent over time. The typical response is, "Well, it's a black box." But the reality is far more complicated.

At RAIN, where I spent over a decade as chief creative officer, my team built countless voice experiences. Every month, we ran headfirst into foundational questions no one had asked before — questions about intent, privacy, how children interact with AI (we built and launched Alexa for Kids), and the delicate trade-offs between convenience and security. Unlike other areas of design, where best practices and design patterns guide the way, we had no one to follow. We were making it up as we went every single day.

2. The Changing Landscape: From Designer as Definer to Design as Counterforce

When I graduated from college with a Bachelor of Graphic Design in the early 2000s, the dean handed each graduate a "Capital D Design" pin. This notion of a "Capital D Designer" is one that I love. In part, it stands for a definition of design that is bigger

than aesthetics or cold functionality. It calls for a more significant design notion that operates strategically and embraces interdisciplinary approaches. What's not to love?

But I also think it meant "designer as definer." An architectural, "top-down" notion is that we, as designers, define a given product, building, or experience and then allow our work to curate and guide the user accordingly. We *define*.

But in this new era of data, where insights and businesses emerge from the ether stochastically (seemingly randomly from complex probability distributions), the definition of "designer as definer" must evolve. Design can be a counterforce to AI's reductionism: preserving human context, emotional resonance, and ethical considerations in a landscape increasingly dominated by algorithmic efficiency. Through my field research and professional practice over the past two decades, I have identified four emerging definitions of the designer's role in the age of AI, each representing a vital dimension of our evolving discipline.

3. Definition One: Designer as Advocate

Advocacy is an overused word these days, but it takes on new weight in the context of AI. When we think of advocacy in design, we often picture standing up for the user — ensuring accessibility, clarity, and a frictionless experience. But in the age of generative AI, designers must advocate for users and the integrity of decision-making.

We are no longer just crafting experiences; we are shaping how intelligence itself interacts with the world.

One particularly illuminating experience came during my work developing AI assistants in the UAE. During this project, I encountered an AI loan approval system that made decisions based on an unexpected data point: the applicant's phone battery level at the time of application. This system achieved an unprecedented success rate in predicting loan defaults, yet no one could explain the causal relationship.

As the chief data scientist told me: "If you go in with a hypothesis, if you try to force meaning onto the data, you'll taint the system. You'll introduce bias. And the AI will fail."

This counterintuitive insight reveals a critical tension in AI development: the gap between correlation and meaning. AI systems do not "understand" the consequences of their outputs. They do not question whether their recommendations are fair, ethical, or even remotely logical to a human mind. They optimize for outcomes, following correlations detected in data — no matter how absurd, biased, or potentially harmful they might be.

This is precisely where designers must now become advocates. In a world of algorithmic decision-making, the designer becomes the last guardian of human values. Designers are not just tasked with making AI-generated decisions look good or feel seamless. We must interrogate those decisions — ask what is behind them, who they impact, and whether they align with human values.

Are we making products that empower or manipulate? Are AI-driven interactions transparent, or are we just making the black box more palatable? Are we designing with intention, or are we merely refining the illusion of control?

AI will not ask these questions. Engineers will optimize for performance. Businesses will optimize for revenue. However, designers must advocate for the human layer — not by resisting AI but by shaping how it interacts with people while aligning it with business and organizational goals.

This advocacy means making invisible systems visible — ensuring users know when AI is making a decision, providing ways to challenge or override it, and creating feedback loops that keep technology accountable. It also means advocating for interpretability. Just because an AI-generated insight is statistically valid does not mean we should blindly trust it.

In traditional models, we asked technology for answers. Now, as advocates, we must question those answers. Designers are no longer just creators of experiences — we are the last line of defense against systems that optimize without care.

4. Definition Two: Designer as Curator

If advocacy is about questioning AI's decisions, curation is about shaping them into something meaningful. Generative AI is a machine of endless possibility. In seconds, it can generate thousands of images, architectural layouts, UX flows — anything — far beyond what any human could create alone. But raw output is not design. AI does not understand quality. It has no instinct for what feels intuitive, compelling, or meaningful.

Like a museum curator selecting pieces for an exhibition, we do not just arrange what AI produces — we decide what belongs and why. This is part of what Maeda (2019) calls "computational design" — the ability to navigate vast possibility spaces and extract meaningful patterns that align with human values and intentions. Earlier this year at Adobe MAX, I watched a generative AI demo create hundreds of logo variations in seconds. While the tech was impressive, the real skill was not in prompt engineering — it was in the designer's ability to sift through the flood of outputs and identify the five with true creative promise worth developing further.

The curation process involves several layers of judgment that AI cannot replicate:

- Cultural context: understanding which AI-generated solutions will resonate within specific cultural frameworks.
- Intentional selection: identifying which options align with strategic objectives beyond surface-level aesthetics.
- Ethical filtration: removing options that may be technically impressive but ethically problematic.
- Coherence creation: assembling individual elements into holistic experiences that make sense to humans.

This shift redefines our role. It is no longer about dictating a singular vision but about guiding an emergent one. It demands a designer who thrives in uncertainty, embraces iteration, and knows how to elevate the right ideas while discarding the rest.

Because left unchecked, AI does not create meaning — it generates chaos. Patterns without purpose. Options without insight. Randomness that only feels intelligent. Designers must be the human layer that transforms AI's brute force into something intentional, beautiful (if that is a goal), and useful.

Some might argue that AI could eventually learn to curate effectively through reinforcement learning or analyzing human preferences. However, this perspective misunderstands the fundamental nature of curation as a culturally embedded practice. Curatorial judgment relies on contextual understanding that transcends statistical patterns — it requires cultural literacy, ethical reasoning, and an intuitive grasp of emotional resonance that remains uniquely human.

In this new era, we are not just creators but curators. Not defining from above, but shaping and co-creating from within.

This curation role connects directly to our advocacy function — while advocacy ensures AI systems respect human agency, curation ensures that they produce outcomes worthy of human attention. Together, they form a foundation upon which our next roles build.

5. Definition Three: Designer as Orchestrator

Before I unpack this definition, I need to establish two critical premises.

Premise one: technology is moving toward "context-first" experiences. Over the past 75 years, computing has transformed across three distinct waves:

1. Desktop-first (legacy era): Technology was static, tethered to a single location, with hardcoded, linear interactions. Users adapted to machines, navigating with keyboards and mice.

2. Mobile-first (transition era): Technology became portable and responsive, adapting to different screens and touch-based inputs while still requiring explicit user commands.
3. Context-first (emerging era): Technology is now ambient — unbound from devices, seamlessly aware of its environment, and powered by AI-driven personalization. Interfaces are human-first, engaging through natural language, gesture, sight, and motion.

This third wave is not just an advancement — it is a paradigm shift. When technology can see, hear, speak, and predict, the traditional interface becomes just one note in a broader symphony of interaction.

Premise two: the rise of multimodal AI. AI is no longer confined to a single mode of interaction. It is multimodal, processing and generating across multiple dimensions simultaneously:

- Converting spoken language into structured data,
- Generating visuals that align with a user's aesthetic preferences,
- Adapting its tone based on emotional cues,
- Writing code that materializes ideas in real-time.

As technology becomes more ambient and interactions shift to context-first models, AI-driven systems no longer operate in silos. Every touchpoint is infused with multimodal intelligence, requiring designers to embrace complexity and think in systems.

This shift is not just a technical evolution — it is a fundamental redesign of how we shape digital experiences. Designers are no longer just crafting interfaces but orchestrating ecosystems of intelligent systems.

Consider the challenge of a "simple" AI-driven experience:

- One model analyzes user behavior,
- Another generates responses,
- A third ensures brand consistency,
- A fourth handles visual composition,
- A fifth monitors for ethical considerations.

Left uncoordinated, these systems optimize for individual objectives, leading to disjointed, inconsistent, or conflicting experiences. Without deliberate orchestration, AI models operate like musicians playing different tunes — each technically proficient yet collectively chaotic.

In an era where AI makes autonomous decisions, someone must safeguard coherence, human-centeredness, and intent. The designer's role is no longer just about building screens — it is about engineering relationships between AI, interfaces, and users.

True design in this space is systemic, not static. It is about crafting environments where complexity is understandable to the user — where despite the immense intelligence behind the scenes, everything simply works.

Orchestration is a higher-order design skill and requires understanding the relationships between AI, interfaces, and users — and ensuring that what emerges is greater than the sum of its automated parts.

6. Definition Four: Designer as Mediator of Emotion

If designers act as advocates, curators, and orchestrators, then a new challenge emerges: How do we ensure that the products, experiences, and emotions we design remain deeply human? AI is reducing decision-making to cold optimization, but meaning is more than mere efficiency.

During a European research tour with a major luxury house, I encountered what I believe represents the next frontier of AI: neuroaesthetics, the science of designing directly for the brain's emotional circuitry. This emerging discipline moves beyond subjective taste, using brainwave analysis and cognitive modeling to scientifically decode how humans process beauty, art, and design at a neurological level.

Consider my recent project developing a digital fragrance experience. Through neuroaesthetic testing, we discovered specific color combinations and motion patterns that triggered olfactory responses in viewers even without physical scent present.

By mapping these brain-sensory connections, we created digital interfaces that could mimic the sensation of smelling citrus notes or woody undertones purely through visual and auditory cues — quantifiably more effective than traditional marketing approaches. Our AI generated these designed elements based on a neuroaesthetic understanding of the data.

Bentley exemplifies this science-driven aesthetic at scale. Their design studio employs neurological feedback to validate every element in their vehicles — from the precise curvature of dashboard lines to the rhythm of seat stitching patterns — ensuring each triggers the exact emotional cascade that defines their brand experience. What was once intuitive artistry has evolved into rigorously measured emotional engineering.

The implications go far beyond luxury. In healthcare, neuroaesthetic principles could inform AI-powered patient interfaces to reduce anxiety and boost treatment

adherence — using precise visual and auditory cues. In the workplace, environments could be engineered for focus and collaboration through intentional use of form, texture, temperature, and sound. Companies like Kinda Studios are already applying these ideas across industries, with encouraging early results.

Some critics argue that designing for emotional response is fundamentally manipulative. However, I would counter that all design influences emotion — the question is whether we do so consciously, ethically, and in service of human flourishing. As AI systems increasingly mediate our interactions with the world, designers must develop and apply rigorous ethical frameworks for emotional design that prioritize transparency, agency, and genuine well-being over mere engagement.

This new capability carries unprecedented ethical weight. If AI optimizes for efficiency *and* emotion, designers must now answer: Whose emotions are we optimizing for? What experiences are truly meaningful versus merely addictive? Which neural patterns are ethical for us to trigger? The greatest risk is not that AI will fail to understand human emotion, but that it will understand and manipulate it too well, without the ethical constraints that guide human designers. We need new frameworks for responsible neuroaesthetic design that prioritize transparency and human flourishing over pure engagement metrics.

Each of our four definitions progressively builds a more complete picture of design's evolving role:

- As advocates, we protect human autonomy within AI systems.
- As curators, we extract meaning from algorithmic abundance.
- As orchestrators, we coordinate complex systems into coherent experiences.
- As emotion mediators, we ensure these experiences resonate at a human level.

Together, these roles represent a unified framework for design practice that balances technological capability with enduring human needs.

7. Conclusion: Design as a Counterforce to Algorithmic Reduction

The four definitions I have outlined — designer as advocate, curator, orchestrator, and mediator of emotion — collectively point toward a new comprehensive vision of design in the age of AI. They represent not a rejection of technology but a more nuanced integration of it into our practice, one that preserves and amplifies distinctly human values amid increasing automation.

The "Capital D Design" pin I received at graduation carries new weight today. Design is indeed larger than aesthetics or functionality — it has become the essential counter-

force to algorithmic reduction, preserving the nuance, context, and emotional depth that make us human.

In a world where efficiency and optimization have become our default values, designers must stand for something different. We must be the ones who ask not just "how fast?" or "how accurate?," but "how meaningful?" and "for whom?" As AI threatens to flatten experience into whatever can easily be quantified, designers must be the champions of everything that resists such reduction — the ambiguous, the emotional, the cultural, the ethical.

The machines will refine, predict, and accelerate — but only we can ensure that they serve something greater than their own logic. Our job is not to compete with AI, nor to passively accept its influence, but to wield it with intent — to design not just for usability, but for humanity.

Because in the end, AI will not decide what kind of world we live in. We will.

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Author

Will Hall is a serial entrepreneur, creative executive, and presenter on *America by Design* on CBS. A pioneer in conversational AI, he developed the first voice application for Alexa. More recently, he secured over $40 million in funding — backed by sovereign wealth in Abu Dhabi — to build and scale an AI company across the UAE and Asia. Over the past two decades, Will has led creative, product, and innovation work at companies including RAIN, Adult Swim (Pop), Honest, MRY, and Rockwell LAB, with a focus spanning media, tech, AI, and design. He has collaborated with 23 of the Fortune 100 and served on influential boards and advisory councils, including Google's Agency Council, NYCxDESIGN, and NC State's College of Design Leaders Council. He is also a member of the MIT Media Lab Consortium. Earlier in his career, he played a role in the record-breaking Alibaba IPO — the largest in market history. His mom still has no idea what he does.

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