

On getting more from your ideas



Designer, writer, and educator Nika Simovich Fisher discusses how written and visual language inform one another, where her ideas originate, and how design goes far beyond aesthetics.

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As told to Divya Mehra, 2565 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Identity](#).

What came first for you—writing or design?

Technically writing did, because when I was really young, I spent a lot of time online and I was pretty active on Neopets. Neopets had all sorts of endeavors that you could partake in, and one of them was this thing called The Neopian Times. It was user-generated content from the community. The first time I submitted something that became recognized was there.

It must have been 2002 or so when I wrote a fictional story about this Neopet who has an existential dilemma about whether or not they should stop eating meat. And when I was that age as a preteen or so, I spent a lot of time writing. I feel that I didn't have a lot of completed essays or things like that, but I enjoyed carving out imaginary spaces.

Before that, with Beanie Babies, I would invent these fictitious environments, or I would draw and make stories and write down the relationships between all the people that I've drawn. So writing definitely came first. But with writing, there's a sense of narration, and then there's also a visual record of what that's going to look like. I don't see them as divided.

I think a lot about the interplay between visuals and text. When you write now, what do you visualize?

It's a really interesting question. I think I am constantly clued into what it looks like. I don't necessarily mean what it's going to look like printed out and presented, but more so the research process. What I like about writing is that you can pair many different people together. I consider all those people designers, whether or not they actually are. It becomes a way of illustrating a narrative.

I have an essay coming out about somebody I knew who passed away and how he chose to keep his website online. It's really about how people are remembered online after they're gone. In my research, I looked at Goodreads, thinking that perhaps this individual had a Goodreads account. Instead, I found someone with a similar name, and looked at all the books that he read. That led me into this other thought about how, for example, Luigi Mangione also became this folk hero in an imagined space in a lot of ways. People found his Goodreads, and I think he had read something like *The Bullet Journal*.

These are tangential references, but they are about visualizing something that perhaps doesn't have a form. You're referencing a memory, and then filling in the blanks.

Speaking of the online traces that remain of us, would you want your online profiles to remain as they are?

Eternally? I don't know about eternally, but I do think there is something to be said about an active social media presence that's connected to your creative work. There is something about going back and revisiting the song you used in an Instagram post, or how you wrote the captions. What was archived? What did you have at one point and then you removed?

It shows a lot of design decisions. If you are thoughtful about how you use the internet as a self-expression platform, there could be something meaningful about continuing your existence in that regard.

But I think the bigger question is who's benefiting off of it? In the case of Instagram, Meta is profiting from having your stuff up for as long as possible and using that as a data, a piece of data about who you were, how it's existing, who's looking at it.

So it's a difficult consideration to make, but maybe I wouldn't be opposed to having something curated online.

That leads me to the vignettes you posted during your recent travels. What led you to do that and what was that experience like?

It was an experiment. I keep a journal that I write in nearly every day. It's not something that I would ever publish. However, I enjoy the process of going back and reading some of the older entries. It shows how I was feeling and what was going on in my life and in the world. When I'm just writing for myself, I see my voice come out a lot.

Traveling to the Balkans has been really special for me. I was born there, but grew up in the United States. Still, we preserved that culture very closely in my home. We only spoke in Serbian; it was very important to my family that we felt like a Serbian household, and as an adult, both of my parents have returned back to Serbia separately. Having lived in the States for a long time, but still having Serbian as my first language, I am sensitive to the nuances and what feels specific to the Balkans versus what feels influenced by the West.

So, to answer your question, when you travel, you are bringing your whole self into this new environment, and it gives you a chance to reflect on what you're seeing. When I've traveled in the past, sometimes I'm just so absorbed in being in the moment that I don't write as much as I do when I'm at home.

And so I thought it would be interesting to take some time to write more regularly, but in bite-sized observations that could be experienced quickly. I chose to do it on Instagram because some of the writing I'm most proud of often exists in publications that are sometimes print-only, or behind a paywall, so not everybody can access it.

I also thought because they're short and just in the Notes app, but with the interface erased, Instagram could be a good space to experiment with a different form of writing whether it's fictionalized or a stream of consciousness or just something that I've been curious about.

On Instagram, you receive this immediate feedback too, right? You find out what people think about works in progress. I don't see writers using it as much, maybe more recently.

I see poets use it or posting screenshots or even the [Notes book that the Dirt did with Nightlife Gallery](#). But you're right, the immediate feedback is curious. One thing that surprised me was that I received feedback from people who were of different generations than me, but also from the former Yugoslavia, and then either emigrated and came back or were still there.

They told me that they thought it was interesting, the things that I was noticing, because I understood the language in a way that felt like a native speaker, but also there was this outside view I was paying attention to that somebody born and raised there might not.

One of my entries was about Guns N' Roses, and this billboard that was near buildings that were bombed by NATO in

the '90s. I was reflecting on what that looked like and what it meant to have both this American rock band that was really popular in the '80s and '90s with this devastated building that represented cultural pain. For me, it was visual because I'm seeing it and reflecting what it looks like, but I think it has a lot of political layers to it as well that can be hard to grasp in a short vignette.

The one that resonated most, if I'm judging based on responses and interactions, was the last one, about going to Starbucks and ordering a coffee with almond milk. The only difference there is that they ask you if you want the almond milk to be warmed up. Yeah, I don't know. I just thought that was so funny because it reminded me of this fear that was instilled in me from growing up of being cold. And it made me think about how everyone is really concerned if you're cold when you're out or even inside Starbucks.

It used to really bother me. I felt it was infantilizing and I felt it was kind of anti-feminist, to be honest. But now as an adult, since I live alone and I'm fending for myself and have made peace with a lot of things in my life, I see it as an extension of care and it doesn't bother me. But a lot of people who are maybe adjacent, not even in the Balkans, the vignette resonated with them. It surprised me that it wasn't just the Balkans, but perhaps a part of growing up in other non-Western households too.

Wait, do they only ask women if they want their milk warmed up?

[Laughs] No, they ask everyone! But when I was growing up, I was never allowed to have wet hair in the house, or I wasn't allowed to walk around barefoot because your ovaries would hurt and you'd have all these fertility issues or something. So I link it to sexism, but I don't think that it necessarily is.

As you're talking about all of this, I feel like all these different angles factor into your work. You're always thinking about the cultural and the political, but also the visual and the design. Could you walk through the process of where the germ of an idea comes from?

It starts with discomfort or attraction. Both are intense emotions. Usually when something grabs my attention, I try to stay with that. Donna Haraway wrote about leaning into the trouble as a way of getting information. She expands on it in a bigger way, but that sentiment has stuck with me. The germ of an idea comes from that feeling, and then questioning it, and then building out adjacent interests to pair it with.

I had a Wired piece that came out a few years ago about how AI is impacting spirituality. It started with seeing a lot of TikTok videos about astrology that felt a little silly sometimes. You hear the same notes over and over. And then I suppose I was a little skeptical about why people were doing these things. But at the same time, I'm a huge subscriber to that type of content and do believe in spirituality. Then I noticed that when I would give ChatGPT—at the time it was a little earlier in its development than it is right now—some of my writing and ask what Zodiac sign placements it thought the writer had based on that, it was actually very accurate. That really surprised me, and it made me wonder, is it able to see patterns that we don't see, or if there's just these styles that it's been trained on from the internet.

More so than do I think astrology is real—that's not really a question that interests me very much—I think it's this idea of asking for feedback that's very personal and then having it mirrored back to you in a way that feels resonant and how the nature of asking these questions is shifting on an online platform. So that was how the idea started.

Then I thought it would be interesting to pair different people together for that. I interviewed a spiritual practitioner who works primarily offline and focuses on African practices among others. I interviewed an AI researcher, who's really active on Twitter. I interviewed a TikTok Tarot card reader, and I also interviewed an academic who wrote one of the few astrological texts in academic studies in the '70s.

It's exciting to connect with all these people of different ages, different backgrounds. To me, they're all doing something related to design, but you probably wouldn't find them listed together in a design history textbook.

Yeah, interesting. It's a curation process. Like you said, how can I put all these different pieces in

conversation?

Exactly. And that critical thinking and having a wide range of perspectives is important to me. I feel like I'm not super forthcoming sometimes, and it takes me a long time to figure out what I think. And so I find it fascinating just talking to people about the same different topic and hearing how they approach it. It helps me understand what I think about the issue as well.

It relates to your teaching too. You also engage with a lot of students, although maybe younger than some of the other folks you're talking to, and hear a lot of their ideas as well.

Especially in the past few years, I've started working more with non-traditional design students in a way. They're career changers, so they have often worked in something else, whether as a Broadway performer or a real estate agent or even... What's the word for when someone's knowledgeable about wine?

A sommelier.

Yeah, yeah. So very different interests. And then I also work with graduate students who are a little older who tend to have a writing background, but haven't really turned on their sensitivity to what things look like.

It's been exciting to help people be a little bit more sensitive to their environments and using the knowledge that they already have, talking about how the visuals support that. I really don't like it if people think that... I mean, people can think whatever they want, but I don't like the criticism that looking at visuals is ambient.

I actually completely disagree with that. The way things look says a lot about why they look that way, why people have designed them that way, the political structures that are in place. And there are a lot of different ways of communicating that.

That's really well said. What I used to hear a lot was "make it look pretty."

That's also something that really doesn't interest me. Being sensitive is something I value, and curation is also something I value. And both of those can result in something that feels aesthetically interesting or appropriate for whatever it is that you're doing, but I don't like the idea of just making it look good, because that's really subjective.

Okay, I have one last question for you. You do many, many things. What do you do to creatively recharge?

I dance. I danced when I was growing up, but never very seriously. When I was younger, a lot of insecurities came up. And so in the past year, I've started taking jazz and hip hop classes. It's been such a wonderful outlet. It's incredibly humbling going in and not being as versed as I am with writing or design or teaching.

I've made a lot of friends in these spaces and I don't even know what many of them do for a living. We connect over this shared joy of jazz choreography.

And journaling, too. Even though it is related to what I do, it really does help me wind down.

Nika Simovich Fisher recommends:

Listen to: [Zora](#) by Boban Petrović (1984) and [Ja Sam Lažljiva](#) by Denis & Denis (1985)

Read: *Modern Love* by Constance DeJong (1977) and *Envy* by Yury Olesha (1927)

Linger: [\[emotional music plays\]](#) by Larissa Pham

Inquire: [Dog tarot](#)

Luxuriate: Take a barre class and then get in the jacuzzi. Come home. Place freshly cut flowers in vases. Vacuum

every surface. Launder the sheets, shampoo the dog, put on monochromatic silk pajamas. Optional: text someone.

Name

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Vocation

writer

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