October 6, 2017 - HAWRAF is a (relatively) new design studio founded by Andrew Herzog, Carly Ayres, Nicky Tesla, and Pedro Sanches. They use design to apply new ideas, technologies, and methodologies to their work with clients and for themselves. The results are interactive communications that give audiences and users a means to engage with brands, products, and experiences in a meaningful and, quite frequently, enjoyable way. Here, Ayres and Herzog talk about the importance of finding inspiration outside of design circles, what it's like running a studio, and why they're not afraid to highlight privilege or discuss process.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 4135 words.

Tags: Design, Process, Beginnings, Collaboration.

HAWRAF on being transparent about your process

Process is part of HAWRAF's aesthetic. For instance, you're honest about how long it takes to come up with some ideas and publicly document it. How did you decide to approach your studio this way?

Carly Ayres: It's something we talked about early on, before we started the studio. We come from different backgrounds, but along the way we'd worked in places and collaborated with people and places that might be categorized as "dream jobs," or the pinnacle of this or that. Once we'd gotten in and peeked behind the curtain, though, you found that a lot of these places were all the same shards of rubble or were duct-taped-together institutions. When we set out to do HAWRAF, we wanted to make sure we showed that and demystified what it took to start a business, particularly a creative business, as well as all the decisions it takes along the way.

Andrew Herzog: A lot of these "dream jobs," at great places, are opportunities that come with monetary sacrifices, or are just not available to people. Us being able to have those opportunities was great, but they're not exactly an opportunity that's available to everyone, and the things you learn in those situations tend to be pretty valuable. We're interested in being able to share those moments that go into making something. It's not just about "This was the one idea and the final piece." It's that the one idea came out of 50 conversations, but you're usually, as an outsider, not privy to the 50 conversations. Our interest is in sharing those things. We want you to see the mistakes as well as the things that worked out.

As you say, not everyone can afford to take an unpaid internship. People don't always acknowledge the economics of these kinds of opportunities.

Andrew: On Twitter the other day, someone posted a screenshot of a DM about someone asking them, "Do you think it's more important to make sure that I'm taking an internship that's paid equally or is it more important to have an internship that pays less but the opportunity is really good?" This person posted this screenshot and said that you always take internships for the opportunity, never for the money, which I thought was a very one-sided way of looking at this. That's not always the only thing that goes into these decisions. It's not as if someone's like, "Oh, I would rather take a $5 pay bump than go to this really cool place." It's like, "Oh, I have to pay my rent, pay my phone bill, pay my health insurance," and all that stuff. It's a whole other sect of people that are not being considered in this conversation.

Carly: There are conversations taking place that obviously come from a place of privilege and don't take into account people who don't have access to these opportunities. By not talking about the rest of it, you're setting the bar at this level and you're saying, "This is the norm." Anyone who isn't there feels like they don't have access to it, or they're not working hard enough, or they're not doing well enough.

For us, being transparent about the things that enabled us to do what we're doing, shows that the bar is actually perhaps a little lower. Maybe we had a few steps up. How can you take that into account as well? It's not like I was born a fucking superstar and rolled into all these places. I had a lot of advantages and opportunities that enabled me to do that. So by demystifying that, hopefully someone else can be like, "Okay, well, she's doing great but I will also do great and maybe I can learn a few things along the way that'll help me get there."

Do you find because you're more forthcoming about process that people reach out to you in a familiar way, as if they know you?

Carly: Yeah, a lot about being straightforward and authentic, which is still just another sliver of who you actually are. We're all trying to be something online. We're all trying to project the best versions of ourselves. It's hard to be real as a person in general, especially online. But a lot of people reach out with very personal stories, which makes it great to be doing it, but simultaneously, you have to

figure out how to hold onto your own identity, too, which is something we're still figuring out how to navigate. You can't share everything.

We have a practice of recording videos, in-the-moment videos documenting when we lost a job or when we're negotiating a proposal. When people see those conversations, and they're able to peer into that, they're definitely able to find things that they identify with more than perhaps a shiny, clean, perfect veneer.

Andrew: It's interesting because there's only so much of a capacity for a person to equate, "Oh, this is the person that does this." Or, "Oh, this is the person that did this." While they may have seen a couple of things, they haven't seen everything. So sometimes it's very much like, "Oh, you guys are the ones that lost that one proposal that one time and you had to re-think about how you do this. How's that going?" It's like, "But we also do good sometimes!" That's always interesting, how much people have seen and how much they've really engaged with what we're doing.

You mentioned having a flowchart earlier. Do you have shared documents where you keep a record of all of the ideas you've had, even the ones you abandoned?

Carly: We have several docs. I started tweeting them out randomly. We start with white-boarding and then we just go to fucking deck town. Throw some things in a deck, take all those scribbles and try to create some sort of digital collage based on them that's enough to communicate what we were trying to think about. We have decks and decks on decks…
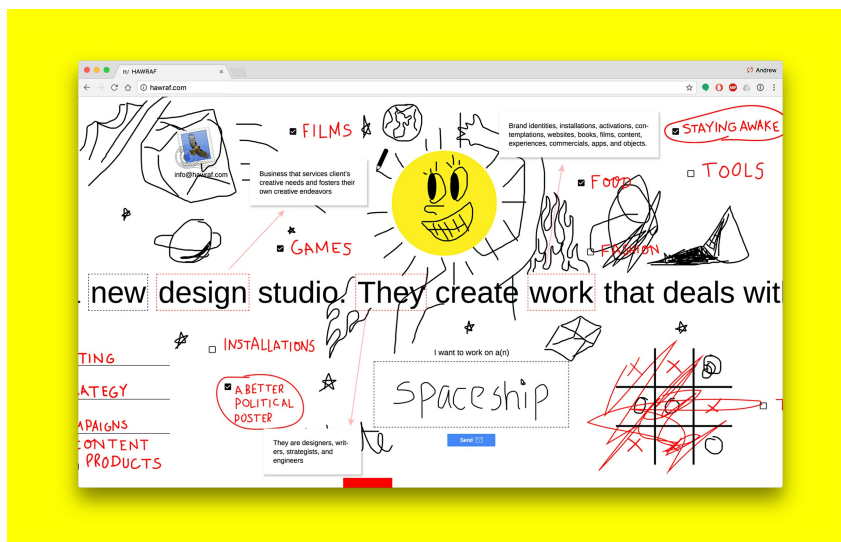
HAWRAF.com

We have it all. The flowchart is chill. That came out of a lot of conversations around like, "Should we do this? Should we not?" There's some logic to when we will and will not do something. "Does it give cancer to kids?" That's the first one. All right, damn. Ruled that one out.

Carly: A huge part of working for ourselves is that we've worked in places where you don't get to say no to that sort of stuff. If you do, you don't have a job. But if you're putting things into the world, you have a responsibility to think about who they affect. You'll never fully know the depth and magnitude of whatever you're making, and the effect it will have on the people who have to interact with it or will see it, but you have a responsibility to do the best you can.

Andrew: Our main job is communication. People pay us to communicate things for them and make people feel or think or interact in a certain way with what they do. It's a big deal that we consider what they're trying to say and what they're trying to mask.

When did you know going out on your own would be a good idea?

Andrew: I don't know that we had that moment. I think there's the general realization like, okay, we've had all these experiences… What's the next thing along this step? We have these ideas of our own. How do we test those ideas?" I think that, logically, is the studio and that is the core.

Carly: It's a sandbox. We met when we were at The Creative Lab at Google. We had all these ideas for things we wanted to try out, like ways of working and ways of collaborating, ways of building relationships with clients but also doing personal work as well. Starting a studio felt like a good tool to do that. It's still very much a business as a tool to enable us to do other things, versus just design.

That was sort of how that conversation started. It was also like if this exists for a few years and we learn a lot of stuff doing it, that's great. If that's it, then we'll go on and do something else afterwards. Seems to be going well so far, so we might make a bit of a run out of it. We're ready anytime to push the eject button and just fall into space!

Andrew: Which is a big part of it as well. It's a privileged pursuit. It's a privileged opportunity to be able to do what we're doing.

Carly, I've seen you identify as a writer. Andrew, you're a designer. Nicky's a programmer. Do you all do a little bit of everything?

Carly: We each take the lead based on our specific skill sets, but there's a huge amount of overlap. Everyone comes up with ideas. Any project we have, anyone can pitch something. Anyone can throw spaghetti against the wall and see if it sticks. Nicky will chime in and give great feedback on a design that Andrew's working on. We all like to give Andrew feedback on the designs that he's working on. Andrew will tell me if something that I've written in a proposal or elsewhere doesn't totally feel right yet. We all kind of come together to give that feedback and critique, which has been really nice.

Andrew: It's one of the core tenets of the studio. I think there's also this want to not create another design studio that's making the exact same stuff that every other design studio's making. In doing that, our process becomes—if Nicky has a comment about something that's coming from a developer that's making a design comment, I'm actually usually more inclined to say "Yeah, let's do that then. Let's change that, because I'm working from being a designer." Carly's working from being a writer. Creating that openness to be like, "Oh, I'm just doing this because it's what I know, but sometimes it's more interesting for us to do something that's different because it comes from a different opinion or a different perspective."

Carly: It definitely trickles back to the idea of opening up access. Even "I" conversations, we try to avoid. Everything comes from a point of "We" and we try to be very cognizant of that in the language we use, even within the studio as well as like, nothing should be defended by, "I went to design school," or, "I have this," or, "I'm the designer and this is the type we're going to use. This is the cool type." We just try to be really aware of the fact that you have to defend your work. You have to defend the things you came up with, and you have to defend it in a way that's accessible to Nicky or I to chime in and give feedback and understand where you're coming from.
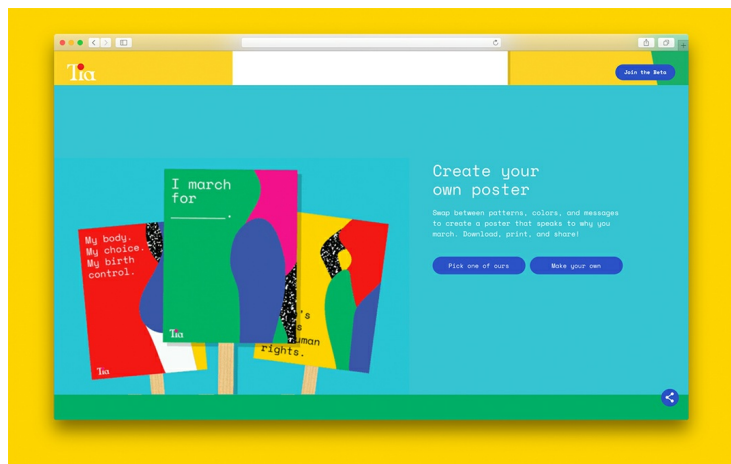
asktia.com

Andrew: Being able to explain it to someone else who's not a designer is a very big piece for us. Don't tell me about the languages you use. Tell me about how this is going to make it easier for me to interact with this thing. If it's not a word that you typically hear, it's not the right word. It makes sense but they're going to have to look that word up and that's a barrier.

Accessibility seems to be a central concern for the studio. You want people to be able to follow along and see your process. Have you ever thought about making a book?

Carly: We're thinking about a TV show.

Andrew: Even more than a TV show, a TV channel is what we're actually thinking of. I think our idea at the beginning was, after this first year, we're going to make a book about what the first year was like. Through that first year, we realized you have to back away a bit further than a year to really, fully be able to see. Like okay, this relationship led to this relationship led to this money. This project got us this. Some of that happens in a year but it's obviously much greater…

Carly: All that shit's still trying to connect. We realized we were left with this pile of string and we're still trying to connect all these disconnected dots. Some of them have definitely come together like, "Oh, cool, that coffee led to that first paycheck, led to that next thing…" But we're still trying to figure out where all those things will connect five years from now, which I think, will be much more interesting.

Andrew: Much more useful, too. What's the use in someone reading a story about "Oh, I just had this friend who works at Apple and he got us the job"? Great, cool story. What's more useful is the story where it's like, "Oh, this guy tried to recruit me when I was in college from a job fair. He gave me his card and I emailed him once a year every year for the past six years. Then when we started the studio, I emailed him again and he said, "Yeah, let's do something together now." That led to the first job that we had." That way someone who's reading it who doesn't have a friend that works at Apple, but maybe has a career fair or something like that, can pursue someone and hunt someone down. It makes it easier for them to understand and see.

You invite the audience in with your design itself, too. People can leave marks, type new words…

Andrew: All the work that we do deals with some level of interactivity. A lot of the work that we've done has this level of allowing people to move things around or change the way that something looks… to get their hands in it and be able to have an effect on the work.
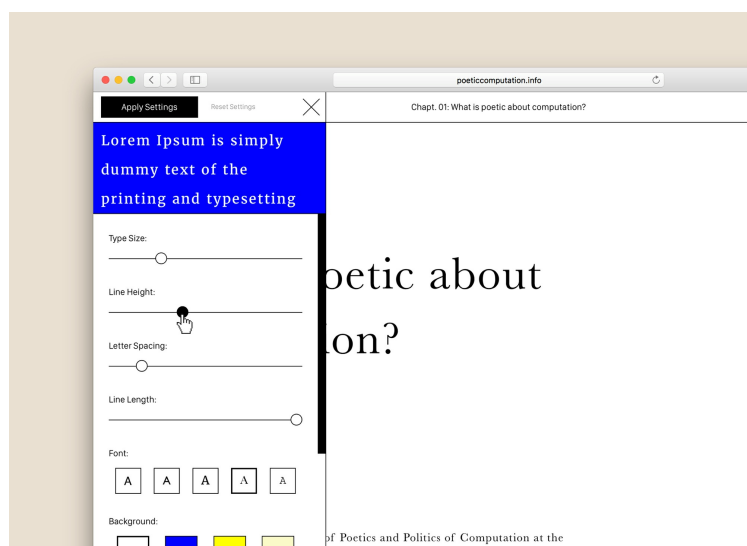
Poetic Computation Reader by Taeyoon Choi, design by HAWRAF, poeticcomputation.info.

Carly: We believe that the things you put out into the world should invite people to say something back. It's like our pitch. Part of it's based on this idea that you're going to learn something more deeply that way versus if I'm just telling it to you. If I'm like, "Come on, come fuck around with this thing." You're just going to remember that experience.

We did this live-stream project where we made something every hour for 26 hours to figure out how we work together. You really compress that situation until you really find all the parts where it works and where it doesn't work. People commenting and chiming in and watching and tweeting at us, all that stuff was incredibly interesting, just to see how people were able to engage.

Andrew: We're just in such a time where this idea of one-way communications is dying. It's not useful anymore. No one wants to do that. You tell me something, I want to tell you something back. In all the work that we're making, it's about creating that way for there to be that second conversation, not just, "Drink Coors Light! Wear Nikes!" It's like, "Make your own Nikes."

A lot of people want to be designers. At this point, how does someone rise above everyone else and do that?

Carly: The internet's become a great platform for that. The ability, for us, to give ourselves the tools to make the things we want to make and using the internet as a platform to disperse them as widely as possible. There are so many things you can learn online now. You can use it to highlight the stuff that you're doing, make the things you want to make, make money if you need to make money…

Andrew: The tools are so much more accessible now. Using the internet to learn, but then also knowing that I can make a film on my iPhone, if I have an iPhone. That's also a consideration. But if I can't make a film on my iPhone, I can make an animation. I can make a stop-frame animation with a ream of paper. You

can learn how to do that through the internet. Or I don't necessarily need someone to show me indirectly. I don't need to necessarily go to school. Obviously, there are some people that have much more time than others, but also it's kind of up to you in some or a lot of ways.

Carly: Find the tools you have the access to to make the things you want to make. Hopefully other people will want them, too.

Andrew: That's where a lot of really interesting stuff is happening. A lot of interesting work is made by people using what they have to make things that are different from things that are made all the time. I think it's so easy to make things that look exactly like everything else.

Do you ever run into creative blocks? If one person's having a day where nothing is coming, perhaps one of the others steps in?

Carly: Early on, we thought ideas were easier because we had so many of them. We'd put an hour on the counter and be like, "Alright, that's the brainstorm and then we'll make the thing afterwards." Then we very quickly realized, "Ah, shit." There is all this stuff that you figure out along the way, but you're like, "Oh, we need a meeting to talk about it and come up with some bad ideas." Then we need to go away for a week and come back to that and actually build that time into everything else. We definitely had a few projects where it was like, "What are the good ideas? We didn't come up with them in the one meeting that we planned to do this." Ideas actually are hard and they take a lot longer than you think they do.

Andrew: It's kind of like stew. Early on, we were going so quickly because we were thinking, "In order for us to make money, we need to have an idea now, so we can build this thing or design this thing or write this thing, immediately." But those aren't necessarily always great ideas. Sometimes they are, but not always. A lot of times it is just that: having a lot of bad ideas and us being very loose.
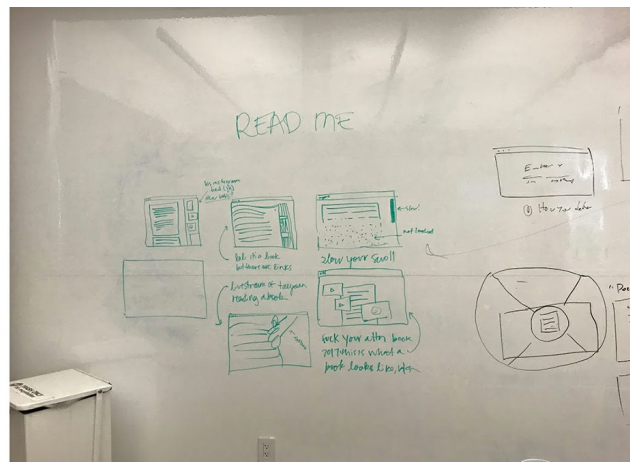
HAWRAF studio, New York.

We like white-boarding, just drawing on a board… everyone will just write or draw from really wild stuff that's not actually practical to things that maybe are and in between that, it's like, "But what if the goldfish tank wasn't 1,000 gallons? It was only five gallons and then we put it on the back of a car instead of an 18-wheeler?" It's balancing things that seem sometimes very high-in-the-sky, then going away from that and being like, "What the fuck? That was a terrible idea, but…"

Carly: We've been good about having inputs that are not always the same. Especially living in New York, you're able to see so many things, go check out galleries for free. I had a furniture teacher that used to always say, "If you want to design a chair, don't look at other chairs." We've tried to very consciously remove ourselves from looking at websites of the day and design.com. We're trying to make sure we're each coming to these conversations after reading a book, going on a trip, doing different things that make our ideas actually different. We spend all our time together during the day, so to go away and make sure that during that time we're actually having different experiences is valuable.

Andrew: I think it's Rauschenberg who says that if he has an idea when he goes to the studio, he leaves the studio. He won't work if he has an idea. He goes and walks until he forgets the idea, because the idea has to come from somewhere and he always felt like that was someone else's idea. It's not mine.

Carly: Leave your ideas at the door.

HAWRAF Recommends:

1. Share more.

2. Try different mediums.

3. Keep moving.

4. Make better sandwiches.

5. Drink water.

6. Don't only hang around with people who do what you do.

7. Take breaks.

8. Say your ideas out loud.

9. Nothing happens over night. Unless you work the night shift.

0. Diversify your inputs.

1. Go against the grain.

2. Think about why you do what you do.

3. Everything changes.

4. Be open to change.

5. Make it interactive.

6. Eat a good breakfast.

7. Go offline.

8. Volunteer.

9. Stay home.

0. Go out.

1. Advice is a form of nostalgia.

2. Work with people you like.

3. Think before you give advice.

4. Be original.

5. Sleep 7.63 hours a night.

6. Listen to rap.

7. Question "lists" that offer quick solutions.

8. Leave   space.

9. Digital isn't the only interactive medium.

0. Look at things from an inverse perspective from time to time.

1. There's a thousand ways to do it.

2. Eat humble pie.

3. Do the things you're not good at.

4. Listen.

5. Go a whole day without being the first person to talk.

6. Make a film.

7. Exercise.

8. Support the kids.

9. Be good weird.

0. Don't let people tell you what matters.

1. Most things can be learned.

2. Listen.

3. Donate your time, money.

4. Ask lots of questions.

5. Learn the rules. Then break them.

6. Wear sunscreen.

7. Make mistakes with other people's money. (Work for someone else.)

8. Treat design like a conversation.

9. Is this helpful?

0. Trust your gut.

1. Eat a good lunch.

2. Hire people of craft.

3. Make to learn.

4. Give credit where credit is due.

5. Mentor others.

6. Treat mistakes as learning experiences.

7. Listen.

8. Read books.

9. What's your plan?

0. What are you doing right now that helps further your plan?

1. Make things that make people feel less stupid.

2. Make the most of things.

3. Culture is always recording whether you choose to participate or not.

4. Wax poetic about computation.

5. They aren't always right.

6. You aren't always right.

7. Design for inclusivity.

8. Converge. Diverge.

9. Look at art.

0. Connect the dots.

1. Vote.

2. Stand for something.

3. You have at least one strength that no one else has.

4. Don't.

5. Do.

6. Rinse and repeat.

7. Cover your mouth when you cough.

8. Draw the fucking owl.

9. Help when you can.

0. Eat a good dinner.

1. Iterate.

2. Take stock of what you have.

3. Moss naturally grows facing north.

4. Disregard this list.

5. Take care of yourself.

6. Throw it against the wall. See if it sticks.

7. Cut twice.

8. Hold the door open for someone.

9. Wake up really early every once in a while.

0. Resist.

1. Don't rest on your laurels.

2. Go to the batting cages to blow off steam.

3. Don't stand on swivel chairs.

4. Listen.

5. Navigate the unknown.

6. Just because it exists doesn't mean it should.

7. Sometimes eat dessert.

8. Work hard.

9. Hardly work.

0. Keep an open mind.

1. Die a hero, or live long enough to see yourself become the villain.

Name
HAWRAF

Vocation
Designers

Fact
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Photo: Julia Robbs

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