



THE DESIGNER'S GUIDE



THREADS
NOT DEAD

Jeff
by
Finley

www.threadsnotdead.com



TO THE APPAREL INDUSTRY

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Dedicated to Emptees.com (2007-2011)

On March 1st, 2011 Emptees.com closed its doors. The Emptees website had been instrumental in building a thriving t-shirt design community. It had been a major source of inspiration for this book and it is sad to see the site shut down. This book includes many references to Emptees and even links which may have been broken as a result of the closing. Fortunately, the community has come together to create a replacement that promises to archive and salvage all the content and be better than ever. This website is called Mintees.com. Every attempt has been made to relink and fix any errors that may have occurred. If you discover an error, please let us know so we can fix it.

Thank you Emptees,

Jeff Finley

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FORWARD

“You have to learn the rules of the game. And then you have to play better than anyone else.”

— ALBERT EINSTEIN

*Designs for
Fall Out Boy
by Rob Dobi*



What is This Book?

This book was written by [Jeff Finley](#), that’s me. I’m an artist/designer and partner at [Go Media](#), a creative agency based in Cleveland, OH. Over the past 6 years I’ve done t-shirt designs for bands ranging from Jimmy Buffet to Metallica and everywhere in between. I’ve worked with dozens of indie apparel brands on everything from their initial line of t-shirts to their brand identity. However, lots of people reading this book know of Go Media because of the design articles and tutorials on our blog [GoMediaZine](#) and our “vector packs” sold at our stock art boutique [Arsenal](#). For those that need numbers, here’s a vain attempt to prove my credibility: Our blog is read by over 300,000 visitors per month and over 22,000 readers subscribe via rss. The Arsenal has served over 80,000 customers since 2006 and is widely considered a leader in indie stock art boutiques. It was from these years of serving my clients and fellow designers that I felt I owed it to them to write this book.

Humble Beginnings

It took a lot of work to get to this point. 6 years ago I was just another art school kid trying to get good grades and graduate on time. I had no experience in t-shirt design – in fact I didn’t even know such a thing existed. I was oblivious and all I cared about was getting a “real job” doing CG special effects or animation for games or film. I spent my time prepping my resume and demo reel with the hopes I would land an entry level position at a studio somewhere. Needless to say, that’s not how things ended up.

The Inspiration

I was unable to find a job in my field. As I graduated I got jaded, and wasn’t really interested in CG special effects or games anymore and had discovered the work of [Rob Dobi](#), [Derek Hess](#), and [Angryblue](#). If those three artists had a dollar for every time I mention them as inspiration, they’d be rich by now.

What inspired me about those artists, aside from their sheer talent, was that they earned a living for themselves designing posters and t-shirts for bands I was into. Through their work, I discovered a whole new world of commercial art. That was the moment I decided I was going to follow in their footsteps and make a name for myself and design for my favorite bands.

The Secret Underground

In this book I will show you how I did it and reveal to you the secret underground of the apparel industry. I'll show you how other ambitious artists just like you overcame all the common stumbling blocks to become some of the most well-known designers in the indie apparel industry. You'll learn how to design for clients and how to start your own apparel line. You'll learn some of the tricks we have used to get ahead in the industry and how we have been able to transform our hobbies into careers. I think I can speak for all the experienced contributors to this book when I say "I wish this guide was written when I started out."

So Who is This Book For?

This book is for artists and graphic designers who want to dominate the indie apparel industry. Specifically, it's for those who want to make a living, get famous or otherwise live like a rockstar designer. If you're the CEO of The Gap or looking to take your multi-million dollar franchise to the next level, you probably don't need this book. But if you're an up and coming designer looking to break out in a big way and develop a clothing brand, this book is absolutely for you. If you are curious about who does the art on the shirts you wear, this book is also for you.

Why This Book?

I'm writing this book to show you how to dominate the t-shirt scene. My goal is to inform you of all the major aspects of being a designer in the t-shirt world. I'll talk about what it's like to be a designer and how to build your own apparel brand. I'll discuss design, branding, printing, marketing, sales, and e-commerce. I want you to learn from our collective mistakes and give you insight so you can quickly grow into the famous and recognized designer you want to be. I want you to go big time!

I've also solicited the help of dozens of successful apparel industry designers and businesses who have been there and done that. They have fascinating stories of how they started in a position just like the one you are in today. I've deconstructed their stories into case studies and common practices that will get you the results you're looking for.



"Flying Angel" - a collab between Derek Hess and Go Media for Strhess Clothing

Defy the Hand You're Dealt

This book is a lesson in doing things yourself and taking matters into your own hands. Defying the hand you are dealt, so to speak. It will help you realize that you can turn your small side project into a full time job and have tons of fun doing it. Been dying to quit your dreadful day job? You can, but not without determination and hard work. In fact, everyone I've interviewed can attest to that fact. It is hard work, but they all agree they wouldn't do it any different if they could.

This book will help you design better t-shirts and make a name for yourself. It will teach you how to make a decent living doing what you love. It will help you avoid making our same mistakes. It will also help you accept your own failures as learning experiences that only serve to make you better.

So without further ado, let's get started.



"The Strain"
by Angryblue

I

AN ARTIST WITH A DREAM

*"Find a job you love and you'll never work
a day in your life." — CONFUCIUS*

When I Grow Up...

Growing up, I was always the art kid. As early as elementary school I was being “commissioned” by my friends to draw things for them. I allowed myself to feel warm and fuzzy when peers gave me compliments on my drawings of Mega Man or Mortal Kombat characters ripping out each other’s spinal cords. One friend asked me for a drawing-a-day for a whole year and kept a binder of all my doodles. He said he would keep it until I was famous and then he could sell it and get rich. That made my 13 year old self dream big. What if I did

become a famous artist? What if I could actually earn a living doing art?

“I’m getting paid to create art. If that’s not the craziest thing you’ve ever heard of as an artist, then I don’t know what is.”

—RICHARD MININO (HORSEBITES)

Fast forward to today and I am living the dream. I AM making a living doing art and getting

my name out there. It’s not as hard as you might think. If you look around, tons of former “art kids” are breaking out, hustling, and transforming the visual landscape of our surroundings. They are starting businesses, making unique products, and inspiring others. The one thing we all have in common is that we LOVE what we do. I’m including YOU in this because if you didn’t, you probably wouldn’t have bought this book!

Dealing with the Best Job Ever

How many times have you said “I can’t believe someone is paying me to make art!” If you haven’t had the opportunity to say that yet, you will. Getting paid while doing something you would do for free anyway is a glorious feeling! Not only do you get paid, you can often set your own hours and work from anywhere in the world. Dream job? To many, yes!

Because this is a “dream job” so to speak, the industry is very competitive. There are lots of up and coming artists willing to work for less money than you.



New Mexican Disaster Squad artwork by Horsebites

It’s like the music or movie business where there are lots of people trying to “break in” because of the chance of making it big-time. I know because I was one of those eager ones myself.

I first started freelancing in 2004 and had the opportunity to do some designs for a record label. Oh boy, a real record label!? They weren’t even that big, but I was trying to get exposure and was willing to take just about any job. I worked my butt off for free and they let me put my logo on things I designed for them. I was just starting out so I found it worth the exposure. This is how a lot of us started out.

I soon realized that I couldn’t live on exposure alone and I had to start finding ways to make money at it. Of course right? This is where it becomes more than just about art, but about business and you’re going to need more than just drawing skills to succeed.

Your 3 Roles: The Artist, Designer, and Entrepreneur

The Artist

According to the Wikipedia, “*Artist* is a descriptive term applied to a person who engages in an activity deemed to be an art. An artist also may be defined unofficially, as, ‘a person who expresses themselves through a medium.’ The word also is used in a qualitative sense of, a person creative in, innovative in, or adept at, an artistic practice.”

Notice those keywords *creative*, *innovative*, and *adept*. I’ve seen the word *artist* being tossed around when referring to someone skilled at marketing, or influencing people: The “art of persuasion” or the “art of picking up chicks.” By that definition, it’s safe to say that...

Art has a lot to do with using your intuition; your ability to figure things out that don’t always have a clear path to the solution. That’s what makes us artists special.

The Designer:

As you get into commercial art, you’re making art *with a purpose*. Your art is supposed to help sell a product, define a brand’s identity, or evoke specific emotions in your audience. When you start making art for other people, your self-expressiveness gets put aside a little bit and now you’re trying to solve a problem for someone else. This is usually where the word “design” comes in. You’re crafting a solution to a creative problem and sometimes that involves drawing pictures or otherwise creating “art.”

So what’s the difference between artist and designer? I’ve heard some designers regard artists as self indulgent and pretentious. And artists regard designers as snooty know-it-alls who lack empathy and feeling. The truth is we are

BOTH. We are constantly shifting between the self expressive artist and the critical designer. It’s best to embrace the fact that these are two characteristics that make up who we are. If you want to look at it from another angle, an artist is who you are and design is what you do.

In this book I’ll often use “artist” and “designer” interchangeably.



“Tough or Suffer” hand lettering by Jeff Finley of Go Media

The Entrepreneur: Embracing Your Business Side

The other characteristic is the entrepreneur. This is the dreamer. The one that allows us to fantasize about “making it big one day.” If you’ve ever said to yourself “I want to start my own clothing line” then that’s your entrepreneurial spirit peeking its head out. We all have it. And of course, if you’re reading this, you are acutely aware of it.

This part of us gives us that drive. We crave to be better craftsmen, better illustrators, or better designers. But why? Because we have a goal and a vision for our success. To get the most out of this book, you must *fully embrace* the artist, the designer, and the entrepreneur. You must have a vision for yourself and an unrelenting determination to get there. You’re going to need it.

I must warn you, it’s not a cakewalk. It takes a ton of work and passion to get there. To move on to the next chapter you must decide right now whether you have what it takes.

11 Character Traits of Successful Designers

Over the years I've interacted with LOTS of designers. Hundreds. Thousands maybe? When you're knee deep in social media, blogs, and communities of other designers, it all becomes a blur. But certain people stand out from the crowd. I've noticed a lot in common with these standout individuals. Here are some common character traits that they all seem to share:

- 1. They are a genuine fan of design.** They outwardly express their love of other people's work and follow their inspirations closely. They are "hearty in their approbation and lavish in their praise," to quote the great Dale Carnegie, author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.
- 2. Hungry for knowledge and self-improvement.** They actively seek out feedback and have an innate desire to get better. They see themselves as a constant work in progress and enjoy the process of learning.
- 3. Humble yet confident.** The designers I witness doing well know they're good but could always be better. I like the phrase, "always a student, never a master."
- 4. Willingness to share knowledge.** You get more results out of helping others than by hurting them. Successful designers are often writing about their experience, sharing tips, answering questions, and helping others.
- 5. Unrelenting work ethic.** Most designers become successful by busting their ass. They admit to working long days and nights to get where they are today. Not because they have to, but because they WANT to. They crave it and eat, sleep, and breathe their work.
- 6. Undeniable Talent.** Let's not forget that most successful designers have a raw talent that has been honed since they were young. Talent isn't everything in this business, but it does go a long way. If you've got talent, you can get away with not having some of these other traits, but only for so long. At Go Media, we've always said that a designer with 30% talent and 70% hustle will outperform the designer with 70% talent and 30% hustle.
- 7. They have some marketing chops.** Every designer in the t-shirt scene knows that you can't be afraid of self-promotion. The successful ones are constantly putting themselves out there where they can get the most eyeballs. Whether

that's through advertising or simply interacting on communities like Emptees or Threadless. You can be an amazing artist but if you avoid the Internet or any sort of social engagement, you're facing an uphill battle.

8. They get lucky. Sure, some of the big name designers claim they got where they are out of luck and happenstance. It's true, I know plenty of designers who can have all these traits but are still spinning their wheels. But the truth is you need a small amount of luck to get you those big opportunities.

Successful designers create their own luck. They attend events, they network, they help others who, in-turn, help them. They stay in touch with their fans and clients, and they give people reasons to talk about them. In other words, they hustle and good things happen to those that hustle.

9. They understand branding. Good designers are memorable because they have a unique style or fresh take on what other people are doing. They don't want to be like everyone else and understand how important it is to have a solid brand. They are consistent with their image and people know what to expect. Every time you interact with a customer or fan, that's branding at work – you're giving someone an impression of you that sticks with them. From having a solid logo and visual identity to the way you treat others and deliver on projects, it all adds up. The best ones are consistent across the board.

10. They have a solid website. Successful designers use their website to show off their portfolio and attract customers. A solid website is deceptively simple and most people over think it. All you need to remember is to make it extremely easy to see your work, contact you, and learn about you. Link to your social media profiles, why not. But don't clutter up your site and try to make it "fancy" if that's not your expertise.

11. They are great communicators. They are professional and polite communicators and they put other people first. They are honest, direct, straightforward, and know when to say the right things. They respond to emails timely and make their clients feel good and pumped up about themselves.



Design for Nirvana by Brandon Rike

Keys to a Great Portfolio

The most important asset you have is your personal brand. This boils down to one thing: your work. Your portfolio should speak for itself and hopefully speak loud enough to attract new clients.

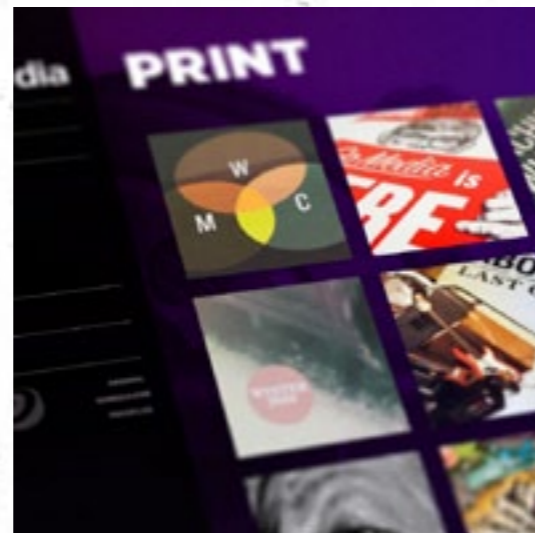
If you don't have a website with your own domain like www.yourname.com you need to get on that ASAP. Just go to GoDaddy and register your domain. Even though there are sites like Cargo, Behance, Coroflot, Deviant Art, Flickr, and more where you can show your portfolio, you should definitely have your own "home base." Same goes for email. Don't use a Hotmail or Yahoo email address. It's best if you had yourname@yourdomain.com but if you have to, Gmail isn't so bad. In fact you could still use Gmail and [brand it with your own domain](#).

Why you need your own website

- You have complete control with branding, functionality, hosting, etc. It's yours! It's more professional. It's also more trustworthy. Unless you have a .biz which looks spammy ;-)
- Who can forget about stats! Use [Google Analytics](#), [Clicky](#), [Reinvigorate](#), etc to see how people find you and what they're doing on your site. It's good practice to keep an eye on your stats and referrers.

It's really a no-brainer, but it's also important to have accounts on any site that allow you to upload a portfolio. www.behance.net and www.flickr.com are two of the big ones. It allows you to make contacts, get feedback, build your network and get exposure.

So what makes a good portfolio? From what I've seen, here are 5 traits of a rock solid portfolio.



A screenshot of Go Media's Print portfolio



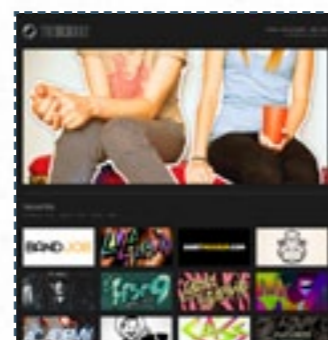
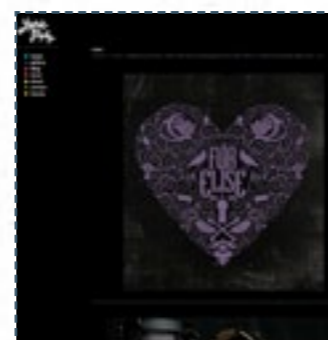
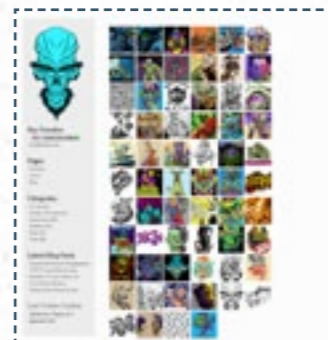
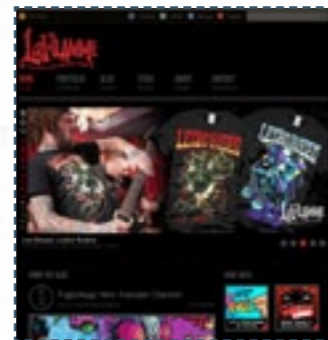
Logos of popular sites designers use to display their portfolio.

5 Traits of a Rock Solid Portfolio

- 1. Professional Presentation.** Lots of folks use the [Lightbox JS](#) or [Cargo](#) which is fine. It's not exactly unique, but that's ok. They usually have some sort of gallery to flip through work or it could be laid out all on one page. Another sign of good t-shirt design presentations are professional mockups. Cartoonish cut outs look amateur. Use real photos if possible, but if not, use photo realistic t-shirt templates. We [sell some at the Arsenal](#) and created shirtmockup.com, but there are plenty of others available if you go Googling.
- 2. Simply good work.** Duh, this is obvious, but not always possible when you're starting out. That's like saying good designers are good because they're good! But the simple fact is there's not much you can do if your work isn't any good. Also, only show your best work. You don't need to show everything! If you have bad work in there, clients will find it and make judgments about you. When in doubt, leave it out.
- 3. No more than one click away.** If it takes more than 1 or 2 clicks to get to your work, you're making it terribly inconvenient for people. One click to the portfolio and there should be work visible. Then maybe another click to view a specific project's details.
- 4. Recognizable Clients.** I never like to admit that name dropping big name clients is key to getting more work, but it's the truth. You need to have proof that you are worth hiring! Also, new clients like to see that they are the type of client you typically work with. If you list a lot of bands, you'll likely get more band work. If you list a lot of restaurants... You get the picture.
- 5. It's Targeted.** Great portfolios usually feature well done work of a specific type, client, or genre. Like I said above, the work you show in your portfolio often dictates the work requests you actually get. The best portfolios know what they want to show off and do it well.

Examples of Great Portfolio Websites

- Rob Dobi - <http://www.dobi.nu/>
- Felix LeFlamme - <http://www.felixlaflamme.com/>
- Laurie Shipley - <http://www.laurieshipley.com>
- Brandon Herbel - <http://www.makebelievestudio.net/>
- The Black Axe – <http://www.theblackaxe.com/>
- Oliver Barrett - <http://ohbarrett.com/>
- AJ Dimarucot - <http://www.ajdimarucot.com/>
- Ray Frenden - <http://frenden.com/>
- Glennz Tees - <http://store.glennz.com/>



Work for Me or Them?

This book is for designers in the apparel industry. This would include those that design shirts for other people like bands, clothing labels, universities, etc. You know, “clients.” This book is also for those that run their own company and design their own tees for it. We’ll call this “working for yourself.”

So what should you do?

Do both. Here’s why:

If you haven’t gotten your feet wet designing t-shirts for other people, then you probably aren’t ready to start your own line. Most successful artists spent years doing client work before they ventured off on their own.

At Go Media, we have worked for countless bands and indie clothing companies. There’s a lot to be learned about what people like and what sells. Not to mention the technical hurdles that you’ll overcome while getting paid by clients. It’s better to learn on someone else’s dime than your own, right? Of course, if you’re learning “on the job” – make sure clients are aware so they don’t see a massive invoice because you spent 23 hours reading Photoshop for Dummies.

Working with an Established Brand

In addition to freelancing or starting your own brand, you might consider working at an established company or brand first. Designer Jamie Tallerico has been around the block as a freelancer and in-house designer for XVLA Denim, Atticus Clothing, Abercrombie & Fitch, and American Eagle Outfitters. He’s seen it all.

The experience you can gain from being on the front lines like this is priceless. If he started his own line, he would have lots of insider knowledge most startup brands lack. Look into this as these companies might offer internships or in-house positions, so keep an eye out if that’s a route you want to take.

This next chapter is about working for clients and building a successful freelance design business. Shall we continue? Follow me, my friend.