commentary

Rethinking Time

By Dan Formosa

I am, at times, one of those people whom James Gleick describes in his 2000 book *Faster* (or *FSTR*, according to the title on the cover). I can be seen pressing an elevator button multiple times, as if it will speed things up – imagining, I guess, that there's a real-live elevator operator whom I may be deliberately annoying. I also catch myself setting my microwave oven to 33 seconds instead of 30 before walking off to do something else in the kitchen, because pressing the *3* twice saves me a nanosecond compared with pressing *3* then moving my finger over to the *0*. I'm not time obsessed; more likely, my behavior results from a combination of impatience and preconditioning. Time has become such an ominous force in our lives.

Our culture's servitude to time makes me think of Buster Keaton dangling precariously from the minute hand of a skyscraper's clock in the 1923 film *Safety Last*. Or Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*, with workers mindlessly marching into a factory like lemmings, akin to Apple's famous 1984 Mac commercial. Or Charlie Chaplin trying to keep up with assemblyline production in *Modern Times* in 1936. None portrays positive images of time or work – an understatement if you've ever watched these films.

I think of time as an enemy. Growing up, I was always slow to wake up. My parents tried a solution, setting every clock in the house 20 minutes ahead, hoping it would trick me into getting out the door on time. It backfired. I no longer believe clocks. I am now 20 minutes late to everything.

I rarely ever wear a watch. Although I own two: a stopwatch-equipped Swatch chronograph that I've had for more than 10 years and a watch designed many years ago by the design group M&Co, which I haven't worn in a while because I need to replace the battery (meaning, currently it's correct twice a day). So in practical terms, I really have just one watch, which is just as well according to Segal's law: "A man with a watch knows what time it is. A man with two watches is never sure." Of course, I always have my insanely time-accurate smartphone.

My first mobile phone was a massive car phone, not at all portable, that I would use primarily to alert people to how bad traffic is in the New York City area and that I'll be arriving late. It at least eased some of the business or social stress that goes along with being expected somewhere and knowing you're not going to make it on time.

Today, although I still can be habitually late, I remain in awe of the fact that my smartphone keeps exact time, along with everyone else's, synced within milliseconds with the U.S. Naval Observatory's Master Clock. It's more accuracy than I'll ever need, in spite of my nanosecond-conscious microwave oven behavior.

Some conventions in our world are so universally accepted that we rarely think of them as human-made ideas. Timekeeping is one of them. It seems to be what it is and always has been. However, our system of timekeeping is a human invention. The measure of time is a concept. It was decided long ago that we should measure time in a circle, 60 seconds to a minute, 60 minutes to an hour (thank you, Babylonians), 24 hours to a day, 12 hours at a time – two revolutions of the clock's hour hand.

Given our 30,000-year history of what anthropologists qualify as modern human behavior, timekeeping is a relatively recent phenomenon. Yet we continue to do so obediently. Time controls us – we're not that good at controlling it. It's our own doing.

But timekeeping is one thing; what we do with it is another. As those silent movies demonstrate, living life by a clock can make us less than human.

Current attitudes can be attributed, to an extent, to the programming we've been subjected to since childhood. Our school system is based on a model invented when factory work was prominent, a system of education appropriate for the industrial age. But that was a hundred years ago. Aside from the idea that schools themselves are often run like factories (with everyone processed and graded identically), a side consequence is that we end up with an understanding that time has an inherent value. A factory model bases production on a timeline, success determined by the number of units produced per hour (speed) and the number of hours per day (time.)

This mind-imbedded model manifests itself in many ways. I know, for instance, people who feel a need to fill every vacant time slot in their online calendars, as if they're playing *Tetris*. Don't waste a minute – even though the filled time slots may themselves be full of unproductive time.

Creative activities are not the same as production-line work, yet we tend to treat them identically. In my field of design, it's standard practice to charge by the hour. Project fees are based on the estimated time to complete projects, as if we're able to produce a steady, conveyor-belt stream of ideas. But when I ask people where they get their best ideas, the response is never "In a conference

room." In fact, the answer is rarely the office or design studio. It's instead, as you may have guessed, while driving in the car, lying in bed at night, or the ever-popular while taking a shower. Yet I don't know any designer who has ever charged a company or client for taking a shower, even though it may have been his or her most valuable contribution of the day. Why? Because our minds have been ingrained with a time-based, factory-like model of our working worth. We're not valuable unless we're in the office or studio, sitting at our computers, or attending some form of sanctioned activity or meeting. We base our value on what we do and how long it takes as opposed to what we know and what we can actually accomplish.

I'll readily admit that, for me, creativity comes in short spurts, often just 15 to 20 minutes at a time, usually when I'm alone or just informally interacting with others. The rest of the time is spent working through those ideas. And although many design agencies call themselves "innovation consultants," I'm skeptical; if you're working within a set time and budget (especially within a limited time and budget, as we all seem to be doing), you are probably not innovating. If you were able to do that, you'd be innovating all the time, and probably for yourself.

My question is, in creative fields spanning a gamut of professions, is it detrimental to model our work methods on a 100-plus-year-old factory-inspired model? Can we rethink or redesign our time, and in doing so, rethink the way we value ourselves?

It's not a far-fetched idea. Successful people – super creative and/or rich – don't base their value on the time they put in. Value is based on their impact. For many people in design-related fields, this represents a significant shift in mind-set and a cultural change that can be difficult to attain.

For instance, is it possible to forgo time sheets, the bane of design agency existence, and instead focus on accomplishments? Or to customize a design process as opposed to continually replicate a cookie-cutter process – not because budget requires it but because it would make more sense and be more efficient for the goal at hand?

Want to try it? I'll propose a 2-week, time-related experiment on the next project you undertake:

1. Base your cost estimates on the value you will be bringing to the project. Admittedly, this may be difficult to gauge – although remember that it's the point of undertaking the project in the first place.
2. Assign yourself, or your team, the project by discussing the ultimate goal, not the time allocated. (If you were handed a project brief, try rewriting it a few times, asking a lot of "why" questions.) Keep in mind that by de-emphasizing time and focusing on the goal, you and your team stand an equally good chance of shortening the timeline.
3. Collectively come up with a plan. Don't simply base the plan on the "way we always do it" (a common frustration of creative team members, and a frequent killer of time when executing the project).
4. Do a reality check on your revised version of the plan (necessary, for instance, because timelines can be dictated by outside influences – although this should have been a consideration when devising the plan). Calmly push back on any constraints that may have an impact on success of the final goal.
5. Keep in mind that this may not be the last such project you'll be working on – it can make sense to think beyond this specific project to accomplish longer-term goals.
6. When finished, report not just on what you did but also on what you learned
    a. for the project itself, and
    b. for what you now know, that you can carry on to future projects (related or otherwise).

The point of the experiment: Eliminate time as an overpowering dimension, diminishing its role.

Once we alter our own views of time, the next step will be to start questioning how the linear, factory model of time is built into the things we design – for example, products, services, buildings, environments, workflows, and systems. Might we create something more human-centered by adopting other ways of thinking about time, and in doing so, help others by reducing the overwhelming pressure that time seems to be exerting on all of us? It will certainly be worth trying.

REFERENCE

Gleick, J. (2000). *Faster: The acceleration of just about everything.* New York, NY: Vintage.

Dan Formosa *is a designer who helps companies and organizations worldwide increase their impact. As the realization of the power of design continues to expand globally, he's helping to set new directions in the field. In addition to his personal consulting work, he cofounded two collectives, 4B (focusing on design and gender) and Brainpool (focusing on evidence-based practices in design). He also cofounded the Master's in Branding program at the School of Visual Arts in New York.*

DOI: 10.1177/1064804618755347