

ALEX ARÁEZ

THE ELEPHANTS UNDER THE RUG

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**SURVIVE THE CORPORATE WORLD AND THRIVE
ON YOUR TERMS AS A FREELANCE DESIGNER**

ALEX ARÁEZ

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THE ELEPHANTS UNDER THE RUG

Survive the Corporate World and Thrive
on Your Terms as a Freelance Designer

* Portions of this book were previously published in:
Survive the corporate world and go freelance as a creative designer.

Alex Aráez

Where the
hell is Viktor?

I think he hasn't
come back from
holidays yet

What? He was supposed to
be here yesterday! We have a
presentation that needs to be
finished tonight...

Preface

I lost all my enthusiasm, and I didn't know why.

I used to be one of those unbearable people that can't stop talking about design. I remember spending my little savings on buying design books when I was just a student. While everyone else was looking forward to going out and get wasted, I was looking forward to reading the next book or going to the upcoming design conference. My friends and family couldn't believe how I changed from being lost in life to being entirely focused on only one thing. Some people told me I was obsessed.

Back in those days, everything was possible. I had plenty to learn and nothing to lose. I managed to be one of those guys who could sell anything to anyone, even though I didn't have any sales in my background. I was able to make analogies on the spot, linking life situations with design or communication. Some people even told me things like: "you should write a book," "you will go far," or "you should be a teacher." I was only in design for a couple of years; I knew nothing. But I spoke passionately, and I believed in what I was saying, and that confidence perhaps made people believe in me.

I had a promising future. I had a great job. I had made it – some people would say. But all that was far from the truth.

One day, all of a sudden, all my enthusiasm was gone. My passion went away like smoke on a windy day.

I lost what kept me going for so many years. I lost what excited me and what woke me up at night. I had no enthusiasm for any particular job or design project. I quit my job and locked myself at home for four months, where I did nothing. I felt empty.

I got sick any time I thought about coming back to work. I was exhausted. And worst of all, I had no idea why.

Everyone knew one thing about me: I was a passionate designer. But, to me, it was a confusing period because I wasn't that person anymore. I stopped caring about design or creativity. The industry had become toxic, and it made me feel tired and the opposite of excited.

It was hard to admit to the people around me. I merely said I needed rest. I honestly hoped that my passion would come back. That I will be on fire again and that it was just a 'down period'. But it wasn't.

Months went by, and nothing changed. Years went by, and nothing changed. Believe it or not, it took me nearly six years to get out of it and to finally understand what the hell happened.

I had a burnout. In 2012, I had a massive burnout. But I didn't have any clarity on what was happening to me. I guess I quit my job before I blew up. And since I wasn't able to admit it to myself, I couldn't get any help to get out of it. I had no information about what a burnout is and how to deal with it.

Instead, I just let time heal and hoped for the best. But what I did wrong was to force myself to keep working to maintain my image of being a designer. Which, in turn, made me drag the burnout out for all those years.

I couldn't go back to a full-time job, so I decided to go freelance and see what my chances were. At least I would be my own boss, and I could take time off anytime I wanted. I worked on many projects, and literally, none of them excited me as in my early days. I thought it would never be the same.

Until one day I got a severe physical injury that didn't allow me to work.

I had an operation in my right shoulder, and I couldn't work for over four months. I couldn't open my computer; I could hardly use my phone. My days were about going for walks, having coffee on terraces and reading books. I had plenty of time.

It's funny how incredibly slow time passes when you have nothing to do. Those four months felt like a year. Since I was physically incapacitated, I couldn't distract myself with sports or any other activities. My only distractions were friends, food, books and being in my head, thinking.

That period was the time of healing. Not just for my shoulder, but for everything. Even my burnout. It was the first time I realized that I just had a burnout and I didn't deal with it appropriately. That I was resisting it and I was afraid of admitting to myself and others that I wasn't the same passionate person anymore.

When I admitted this to myself, it felt like fresh air. I felt like I unlogged something that was stuck. I had clarity at last.

A burnout doesn't happen in one day. It happens slowly, bit by bit. Those bits that led to my burnout and what many creatives face in their day to day are what I call 'Elephants' – The obvious problems most companies decide to ignore or put 'under the rug'.

I have met other people who burned out as well. Some of them were severely damaged and needed to visit a psychologist to deal with the problem. Some others decided to travel the world and find inspiration somewhere. And many others either started their own companies or became freelancers, as I did.

I can say I am back in the industry again, but I learned to protect my mental health. Now, I negotiate some conditions before I work anywhere, especially in advertising. It turns out that now is the best time of my creative career. Ideas are now flying. It's almost effortless. I let creativity come to me naturally. I spent little time on the computer and more on the notebook. I keep a healthy work/life balance, and that is noticeable in the work I produce.

I am also working on personal projects, which are the ones I enjoy the most and the ones that keep me awake, like writing and designing books like this one.

The Elephants Under the Rug is a wake-up call to an industry constantly evolving on the outside, but stuck on the inside. It points out some of the most common problems the creative industry faces internally. The ones that make talented people leave or burn out. The ones about poor creative work, inefficiency, employee mental health, unsustainable workloads, and big egos, among others.

I wrote this book hoping to do two things: prevent talented creatives from getting overworked into a burnout, and offer some realistic encouragement to those who might enjoy becoming independent as a freelancer. To do that, I'm just going to tell the truth. I'm going to say what many people can't – or won't – say. Because you need to hear it.

Maybe you're a creative on an internal corporate or agency team. Or perhaps you're a freelancer trying to find your footing and a strong direction. Either way, the grass probably sometimes looks greener on the other side. You sometimes wonder about making the switch, or wonder if you'll regret having already made it.

But the truth is, both sides come with their own elephants. It's your job to decide which ones you can live with.

To Viktor,
who never finished
that presentation.

For deciding to never
come back to that office
again and for politely
telling his boss
to go fuck himself.

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Part one

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ELEPHANTS IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRY

Ten reasons why designers go freelance.

01.

Too many opinions

Have you ever played that game where a bunch of people sit in a circle, and the first person whispers a secret into the ear of the person next to them, then that person whispers it to the next, and the message goes around the circle? In the end, it ends up being an entirely different secret. It's called 'The telephone game' or 'Chinese whispers'.

In big companies, opinions come from left and right. Your work will have to pass through a labyrinth of layers and opinions to get to the last approval or the final decision-maker. And by the time an original, good idea reaches the decision-maker, it's become so different that it probably no longer makes sense. Or if it does, it might at the very least have suffered from everyone adding in their two cents.

Democracy, even though it can be a beautiful idea, does not work in communication. The idea of choosing something democratically may sound good in a political campaign, but not everyone is equally talented or has the same background.

Only the people who have been working on a problem long enough have the knowledge and intelligence to propose ideas considering all angles.

I have been in presentations in which a project manager commented on not liking a feature or an idea. I have heard people coming from a financial background saying "that idea won't work." I have heard "this font is ugly," from someone whose role was business accounts.

Just because you have eaten food before doesn't entitle you to tell Jamie Oliver how to cook a stew.

Opinions, on the other hand, are well received when they come with tact. I used to work with one brand manager who was quite tough, but he knew how to share his opinion. He always said: “I am not a designer, I have no idea of how to do this, and this is your call... but from a marketing point of view, perhaps our audience... etc.”

That point of view has no commitment. He allows us to ignore it if we want, it's still our call, as it should be. He knows he can't tell us how to do our jobs. We all respected that guy because he respected us.

Showing respect for the people who have been working on a project for a long time should be mandatory.

Unfortunately, the brand manager I used to work with is a rare gem, and many people in the creative industry have a long way to go when it comes to giving opinions.

I remember once being in a situation of having to sell something I thought was insulting to any human being with half a brain. The original proposal was exciting, but after all people's opinions and changes, it turned into a really stupid solution. I didn't want to defend something I didn't believe in, especially since the CEO of the company was really intelligent and had an excellent sense for communication.

I had to present it anyway, and all I felt was embarrassment. The CEO wasn't convinced, and I agreed with all she said and had nothing positive to say. Knowing there was a significant possibility of me getting fired, I mentioned the original idea. “We did think of a different solution at first,” I said. After two seconds of intensity from everyone except the CEO, she said that she would love to go ahead with that idea. Luckily, since I had said ‘we’ instead of ‘I’, everyone was happy to make the adjustments, share the credit and let it go.

This situation was the exception and not the rule. When everyone in a company gives opinions, an original, great idea will get twisted beyond recognition during the approval phases. And this is one of

the biggest frustrations of creative people, and what leads them to leave companies.

Creativity and design are talents that take years or decades to master. It is not for everyone, despite what many people believe. And this constant back-and-forth of opinions makes the process endless. It exhausts the creative team, resulting in massive quotes and poor creative work.

But I can offer one small glimmer of hope. Remember that original idea? The one the purely expressed your vision and ideal? Save that version for your portfolio. Because that one is a much more explicit expression of your creativity than the 'final piece' that gets printed, published or posted.

Well
Noted.

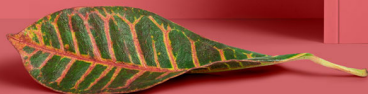
*“Your opinions are well noted.”
This is a way to respond to opinions that don’t matter.*

END OF THE SAMPLE

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ALEX AHAEZ



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