Twitter Thread by Morgan



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Now that Google+ has been shuttered, I should air my dirty laundry on how awful the project and exec team was.

I'm still pissed about the bait and switch they pulled by telling me I'd be working on Chrome, then putting me on this god forsaken piece of shit on day one.

This will be a super slow burn that goes back many years. I'll continue to add to over the next couple of days. I'll preface it with a bunch of backstory and explain what I had left behind, which made me more unhappy about the culture I had come into.

I spent most of my early career working for two radical sister non-profit orgs. I was the only designer working on anywhere from 4-5 different products at the same time. All centered around activism and used by millions of people.

It's how I cut my teeth. Learned to be the designer that I am today. Most importantly, the people I worked for are imho some of the greatest people on the planet. Highly intelligent, empathetic, caring, and true role models for a young me. I adore them.

You might not know who they are, but if you're reading this then you have definitely seen their work. Maybe OpenCongress, or Miro, or maybe Amara which is Vimeo's partner transcription service. Definitely Fight for the Future, our internet defenders, which was shortly after me.

I married the love of my life in 2008, started a family, and at some point realized that I simply needed to make a better living. No matter how prolific, non-profits usually can't provide the type of income that you need for a growing family with huge ambitions.

So as I gained visibility – via @dribbble – I started to field recruiters and consider new opportunities. Mostly little startups. I interviewed at one (Rockmelt) and they passed on me (hi, @iamxande ■).

Got an email from Kickstarter (hi, @amotion ■). Schlepped to New York and wasted days of time to be passed on by their founders. Then they unfollowed me on twitter. At least I ate some deli. ■

Then Google reached out. I remember that ”holy shit” moment. “Me!? Are they kidding?? The schmuck who tested out of high school and dropped out of college??” They told me I’d interview to work on Chrome. I was over the moon. I remember Manda tearing up. God I love her.

They gave me a little bit of time for a design exercise. You can see it here in all it’s dated glory: https://t.co/gopeF9dxTq Click and hold for the overlay. More schlepping from LA and an interview at their silly college-like campus. I was a nervous wreck.

The process felt very haphazard. At one point a front-end dev with a bow-tie grilled me on CSS and asked some super dumb questions. My advocate (a sweetheart named Peter) seemed to be rushing people through, quelling their fears. I still appreciate his belief in me to this day.

I felt like I had done ok. The last two interviews that I failed at were real shots to the heart. I took this one incredibly seriously. I wanted this job so badly. I wanted to prove I was worthy.

Weeks went by and I heard nothing. I accepted the inevitable and started responding to other recruiters. It was ok. I wasn’t joining the big leagues. I could play triple-A ball for longer. As long as I got up to SF where the opportunities were.

I took a gig with a failing news startup (lol) called Ongo (hi, @bethdean ■). They got me up here. I guess it was a bit of a Hail Mary for them. In a couple of months I knocked out more work than they could have built in a year with their eng team. Then…

Google got back in touch almost 3-4 months after the interview (who does this??).

I got the job.

To be continued…

Day one was so weird. It’s exactly what I’d imagined a freshmen orientation at a prestigious college would be like. I dropped out of art school, so this was foreign to me.

I was with a big group of “nooglers” (so lame). We were led into a large room that looked like it was set up for a time-share pitch. I found my seat. Sat down and read the paper that was in front of me.

There was some kind of codename for the team I'd landed on that I don't recall.

I was told it meant I’d be working on Google+.

Fuck. “Whatever”, I thought, “I’ll just do my best and move to Chrome or something cooler after a while” Heh, so naive.

I later found out that one of the interviewers who I had liked the most - let’s call him Chuck - was the design manager on Plus and that he had fought to bring me into his team. Bittersweet.

Chuck was a sweet guy. A bit of an OG at Google. Super chill, super kind, and really funny. Seemingly non-political. My kind of manager. We'll talk about him more later.

At some point I was given a badge and shown around the building I'd be working in. This was the first indication for me that something was awry.

Aside: The building design could only be described as kitsch. Goofy colored furniture. A slide. Crap...everywhere.

Google+ was situated in THE main building. 1900. A floor away from Larry's office (CEO). If you were one of the 12,000+ people at google in MV who didn't work on Plus, then you didn't have access to these floors.

The CEO didn't just have an office. The entire floor was his. We all had access to it and were encouraged to use it sparingly. A "war room" here and there.

We had access to "his" cafe too. A super fancy vegan cafe called "cloud" that wouldn't be sustainable in the real world.

Why this exclusivity? What made this project so special? Why was it held so closely to Google's chest? I'd find out later that the SVP of Plus used his clout to swing all of this.

His name was Vic Gundotra.

He was relatively charismatic. I remember him frequently flirting with the women on the team. Gave me a compounded horrible impression of him.

My desk was directly next to Vic's glass-walled office. He would walk by my desk dozens of times during the day. He could see my screen from his desk.

During the 8 months I was there, culminating in me leading the redesign of his product, Vic didn't say a word to me. No hello. No goodbye, or thanks for staying late. No handshake. No eye contact.

Vic's product vision was fear-based. "Google built the knowledge graph, and Facebook swooped in and built the social graph. If we don't own the social graph then we can't claim to have indexed ALL the world's data."

It made sense at the time. That was a valuable dataset that Google would never be able to leverage.

Vic was powerful at Google. He had buy-in from the top and he wielded that stick aggressively. He made Plus as pervasive as he could. Each product org had a mandate to integrate its social features.

If your team, say on Gmail or Android, was to integrate Google+'s features then your team would be awarded a 1.5-3x multiplier on top of your yearly bonus. Your bonus was already something like 15% of your salary.

You read that correctly. A fuck ton of money to ruin the product you were building with bloated garbage that no one wanted ■ No one really liked this. People drank the kool-aid though, but mostly because it was green and made of paper.

This made Plus the center of the Google universe and made Vic feel invincible, I presume. Once, I had to hold back laughter after he announced his “brilliant” idea to redesign the product from the ground up...every 6 months. lol

Vic left the company in 2014. Maybe because of this type of thing? Hard to say.

To be continued...

https://t.co/rjyuVDvtoJ

Google, like many companies, has different tracks and levels for different disciplines. They of course asked me how much I made in my previous role. I made substantially below market rate, but *amazing* for non-profits.

They low-balled me. My offer was $115k a year with $100k in stock vesting over 4 years. It was way more than I’d ever made, but still below market rate. I accepted with no negotiating. My title was UI Designer Level II. Also low.

Aside: Never do this. Always negotiate. Never tell a prospective employer how much you currently make. Tell them what you want. Their goal is to save money and yours is to make it. Your best interest is not theirs.

On my second day, I found out that I was sitting next to another designer and I was so stoked!

I had been solo & remote for 3+ years with the non-profits since I had left my second job, a little agency in LA.

(still reminisce about the old days, @WesOHaire?■)

I introduced myself.

This was their first job out of an Ivy League. They were one level below me. They were working on a tiny sliver of a sidebar tucked away on an internal page of Plus. Games, or something. “Inconsequential” is a good description.

My first thought was “wtf? how is this a job? they pay you for this??”

I was kind, of course, and let them know if they needed any help to just let me know.

Now my second indication that Google wasn’t what I expected.

Thought this was the pros.

Never would’ve imagined that I was joining a team of 50+ designers where a bunch of them had never designed before.

And I was “evaluated” at *about* their level? These weren’t interns, these were designers in their very first roles ever...at Google.

I was first placed on the Google Photos team which had been swallowed up by Plus. It had some seriously good front-end devs (and good people). It was a small team within a very large team.

My first project was to redesign the photos lightbox. I introduced some new and basic patterns, and drew all the iconography in the given aesthetic. Made some prototypes. Eng started building. Non-controversial.

This was a matter of weeks. But...now what? I didn't have anything else lined up in the sprint.

My desk mate was still cranking away on their little area.

Well, I didn't know the rest of the team at all, so I figured I'd go around meeting folks and offer to help with anything they needed.

I'd grab a seat and draw some ui, or and icon, or rattle off thoughts. Whatever they needed.

I got to know a few people, but most importantly I got to know what they were working on, and it wasn't pretty.

Everything being produced felt disjointed or siloed. Not part of the whole. The M.O. was build and copy as much shit as possible. "Win the race."

There was a distinct lack of a grand vision.

None of it had been made with the consideration of all the products in the Google ecosystem. Just a bunch of "UX designers" not caring about the actual customer experience. Just focusing on their silos because that's how you complete tasks and play the game.

It's now November and I'm tasked with designing the opt-in UI, and parts of the functional UI for facial recognition in photos. That was about a week worth of work.

FB copied some of my visuals on this, but whatevs our whole platform was a ripoff of theirs. ■■

I went back to knocking things out for other people.

Designed some community branding, did a sweater design for SWSX, drew some visuals for people. The entire time I was also noodling about the disparate stuff I was seeing.

I think it was around this time that Chuck, my manager who wouldn't micro-manage but pumped you up and encouraged you to shoot for the moon (I truly liked him), got replaced by a guy that he was managing. An awfully bad designer with a love for bureaucracy.

Let's call him Greg because his real name is just as vanilla.

He was a smarmy, politically motivated little fella who had no intentions of ever leaving Google. He told me that. I didn't like him from the moment I met him and the feeling was mutual.

He was now my manager.

I knew it wouldn't go well.

Half the team was out of office beginning early to mid-Dec.

I took the standard vacation time towards the end of the month, except I didn’t really vacation, I worked through all of it.

I had a vision.

To be continued...

The common thread between 99.8% of the people that I interacted with at Google is that they were ethical, highly intelligent, and hard working.

I had a lot of admiration and respect for many of them and wish more of them had stayed in touch.

The design organization was massive and spanning almost every product, of course. (Some products didn’t have designers) It felt like design had many rival factions split by not just certain product orgs, but between skill and schools of thought.

There was the “creative team” which was a service team that would create icons or other assets based on the outdated style guides. You’d have to submit a form and wait for them. They were a bit surly.

Then there was a team that was iterating on Kennedy, the name for the new Google UI style. It was if they were on a mountain, secluded. This is the style that Gmail and Calendar has had for years, now replaced with some Frankenstein version of Material.

The craziest thing about this team is that one of the most pivotal players was a...contractor. I was blown away when I found this out.

Anyhow, it wasn’t super clear what other teams were doing. It wasn’t clear who I should have been collaborating with to achieve my loftier goals of affecting all of the UI patterns at Google. Nothing was ever clear.

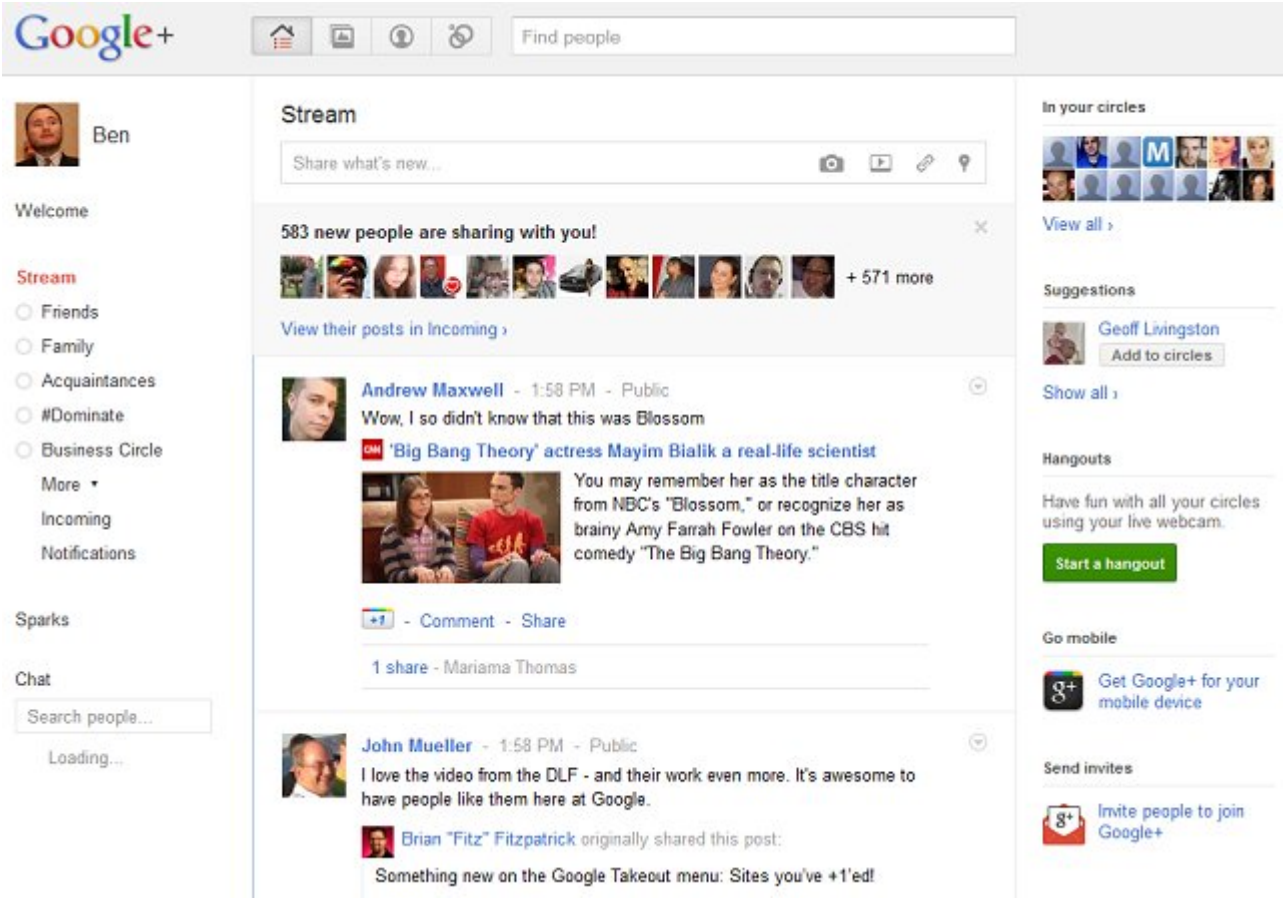
Which is weird because Google seemed to be very transparent. I mean, you could pop open a web page and see every detail about every employee, from their level to their desk location.

Back at home, during my break, I was cranking away. Playing with my baby girl in between trying to rationalize everything going on in the project. Real Time Communications (RTC) was hugely important to the team. Hangouts came from Plus.

Greg was managing that team originally. Part of why he was respected. Hangouts was the only good thing about this shitty product. It was sort of at odds with the current RTC paradigms. Chat Moles.

Moles were the name for the little chat boxes that pop up from bottom of gmail, enabling you to chat with someone. They’re an effective UI paradigm.

None of this stuff was tightly integrated. More of a layer on top of everything. I wanted to change that. This was Plus when I joined. Lots of sections. Lots of junk. Bad navigation. Left-aligned content.



I wanted to make RTC a first-class citizen. I designed a responsive layout that would give you list of friends on the right, and if your screen was large enough, you'd also get all of your message threads. Almost identical UI to messages on OSX (slightly before it existed).

That top gray bar was called the Sandbar. Just kind of slotted in there. I integrated it with a new navigation on the left side with a rounded edge. Drew a new set of icons that fit with an overall polished aesthetic. I put a lot of attention into crafting their various states.

The whole vision was to integrate google's other apps into this sidebar navigation. Obviously it's a bit of a technical challenge, but this would have been a viable UI framework to work towards.

No separate websites for each product e.g. gmail, calendar, plus, just one place to go with everything seamlessly integrated. I also put a new coat of paint on literally everything. Polished it up nicely.

It's now January of 2012. I'm back in the office. I have a little something up my sleeve. I show it around to various folks and people seem to like it. Awesome.

Even Greg reluctantly liked it. Someone (maybe him) told me I needed to talk to another guy to get buy-in on my chat plans. He was the exec that was responsible for it.

I found him and was able to give him a quick elevator pitch on what I was going for with RTC.

He said “Haha, there’s no way we’re doing that. I/O is coming up and we’ve just spent the last 4 months building a Chrome extension that does something similar. If Plus has this, then we’re going to get laughed off the stage.”

I was like, “...what? But shouldn’t these all work together in a sort of ‘your conversations are available wherever you are?’ kind if way?”

“No, we’re not doing that.”

I was floored. Did he say chrome extension? Did he even understand what I had explained and showed him? Was he a huge fucking idiot? Sigh. Whatever, I pushed forward.

Sitting behind me was the most badass group of people on the team. The User Experience Engineering (UXE) team. They made things come to life. Wielded front-end code like no other. I showed them my work and they were legitimately stoked.

This team was lead by the imitable Andy Hertzfeld. A god damned saint. Honestly, working with Andy was the highlight of my short tenure. He seemed genuinely sad the day I told him I was leaving. I was too.

Anyhow, one guy on the team offered to build a prototype. His name was Chris, and without him this would have never gotten off the ground. He was incredible. Kind and generous, and he put in his all.

We collaborated for a couple of weeks and when he was done, you could replace your hash (unique identifier for your account) in the URL and use the prototype with your data. It was superb.

Greg used it to pitch the redesign to Vic. Made me feel shut out and like a disposable employee due to the fact that I wasn’t involved. What was said in that meeting? Was it pitched right? Was the whole vision conveyed? So much anxiety.

It didn’t matter. Vic bought in.

The whole team would rally around my work.

To be...

Just kidding I’ll keep going. ■

Everything at google has to have code name in order to be taken seriously. I had huge ambitions for this work and the paradigms it introduced. I wanted it to be the North Star. Arrogant right? ■

I told a handful of people I wanted to call it North Star while trying to gauge their reaction. The consensus was pretty much “yeah, I guess.”

Greg tells me a couple days later “Vic wants to call it North Star. He thinks it will be foundational.”

■■■■ OK.

I quickly designed a logo for the project. It was essentially a compass rose. I printed a huge version and stuck it on the designated war room. I'd put my flag in the ground.

The team huddled together and started phasing the project. Areas of the product were divvied up, people took ownership, everyone worked in tandem. I was the go-to for any questions and direction. I was responsible for finishing the visuals that I had started.

One of the other designers on the team - we'll call him Jim - had worked on Plus from its inception. He was one of the better visual designers on the team. He had done most of the icon work on the project. He was understandably proud and a bit protective.

He's a timid and generally kind person (running theme). But also not sure of himself. Not confident in his work. Also understandable considering it wasn't the best. Often times he seemed anxiety stricken.