

Where Did the Designer Come From?

A hundred years of design job titles



After Oskar Schlemmer, Bauhaus Stairway, 1932

A research report, October 2026

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Summary

Designers were doing the work long before anyone called them that. This report follows today's design job titles back to where they started, from a Ford factory in 1913 to job ads for model designers in 2026. Four things stand out.

1. New machines bring new names. The assembly line, the first computers with windows and icons, the web and ChatGPT were each followed by job titles for the people working around them^{1,2,3,4}.
2. Designers had to argue their way into being a profession. In Britain they did it in 1930, in the United States from 1944^{5,6}.
3. One name became many. Around 1920 there were two design job titles on the map. By 2020 there were thirty-three, and some of the old ones were gone.
4. Research is older than screens. Studying how people use things started with wartime equipment, decades before anyone said UX⁷.

The rest of the report goes through it decade by decade, then looks at what disappeared, why the newest titles are the hardest to date, and where all of this leads.

1 Before the names

Work without a title

At the start of the twentieth century people were already drawing posters and advertisements, setting type, designing books and deciding what machines should look like. They were called illustrators, typographers, sign painters and engineers.

1913: the factory

In October 1913 Ford started its moving assembly line at Highland Park, and the Model T could be made in numbers no one had seen before¹. When a factory makes thousands of the same object, someone has to decide what that object should be: how it is made, what it costs, how it is used and how it looks. That same year is the earliest record found of "industrial designer", used by the US Patent Office as another name for "art in industry"⁸.

The person usually credited is Joseph Claude Sinel, who in 1920 stamped "industrial designer" on his letterhead in New York⁹. He denied inventing it, and the earlier record suggests he was right.

1914: the film set

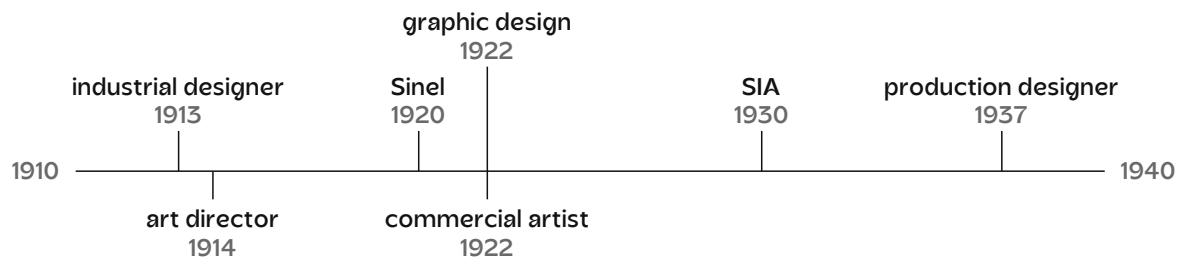
A year later Hollywood got its first art director. Wilfred Buckland took the title in 1914, when feature films grew big enough to need someone in charge of everything the camera would see¹⁰. The role grew out of theatre and scene painting.

By the late 1930s the job had outgrown its name. In a memo dated 1 September 1937, David O. Selznick proposed a new credit, "Production Designed by William Cameron Menzies", because art director no longer covered what Menzies did¹¹. The credit appeared on *The Young in Heart* in 1938 and became famous with *Gone with the Wind* in 1939¹².

1922: the printed page

Two titles from 1922 are about print. The Oxford English Dictionary's earliest "commercial artist" is from that year, in a journal called *Commercial Art*¹³. And on 29 August 1922 the type designer William Addison Dwiggins wrote in the *Boston Evening Transcript* that a "new kind of printing calls for new design", which is the first known "graphic design" in print¹⁴.

He did not write "graphic designer", and the term barely moved for twenty years. It spread after the Second World War, and by the 1960s graphic design was a profession in its own right, while commercial art slowly folded into it¹⁵.



2 Designers argue for themselves

Having a title is not the same as being taken seriously. On 9 May 1930 twelve commercial artists met at the Café Royal in Soho and founded the Society of Industrial Artists⁵. Among them were Milner Gray, Misha Black and Ashley Havinden. What they wanted was simple to say and hard to get: for designers to stand next to architects and engineers as a profession, with their own standards and their own clients. In 1986 the society became the Chartered Society of Designers.

The United States followed in 1944 with the Society of Industrial Designers. In 1965 it merged with two other groups into the Industrial Designers Society of America, and Henry Dreyfuss became its first president^{6, 16}.

What these societies changed was not the work. It was who got to decide what the work was worth.

3 War, research and the corporation, 1940s to 1970s

Studying mistakes

The Second World War produced machines faster than people could learn to use them, and people made mistakes with them. Psychologists, physiologists and engineers started studying why. In the United States this became human factors engineering. In Britain, K. F. H. Murrell named it ergonomics in 1949, and the Ergonomics Research Society was founded a year later⁷. A Polish scholar, Wojciech Jastrzębowski, had used the word in 1857, but for something else.

This is where research into how people use things begins. Usability engineering and user experience both grew out of it, decades later.

The company as a design project

After the war, companies grew large enough to need a single face. IBM started a coordinated identity programme in 1956, and in 1957 the New York consultancy Lippincott & Margulies was talking about "corporate identity"¹⁷. It drew on graphic design and industrial design at once, to make a whole company look like one thing.

Too much information

In 1976 the architect Richard Saul Wurman chose "The Architecture of Information" as the theme of the American Institute of Architects convention¹⁸. His point was that information had become something you need to organise, the way a building organises space. Some histories date it to 1975. Either way, information architecture was named five years before Xerox announced the Star.

4 Screens, 1980s and 1990s

Windows and icons

On 27 April 1981 Xerox announced the Star, a commercial computer with windows, icons and a mouse². Three years later, on 24 January 1984, Apple introduced the Macintosh¹⁹. The screen became something people pointed at, and someone had to design what was on it.

The earliest known "interface designer" is John Lasseter, hired into the Lucasfilm Computer Division around 1984 to 1985 with that title, according to Pixar's own history²⁰. Around the same time Bill Moggridge and Bill Verplank started calling their work interaction design. Moggridge had tried "soft-face" first, in 1984²¹.

Measuring

Interactive products needed testing, not just drawing. Usability engineering became a named approach through the 1980s, with a landmark chapter by John Whiteside, John Bennett and Holtzblatt in 1988^{22, 23}.

In 1989 a young Tim Schafer applied to LucasArts as an "aspiring computer game designer", for a job advertised as "Assistant Programmer/Designer"²⁴. Games were turning from programmer-built arcade titles into team work with design in it.

A service is designed too

Not everything new was on a screen. In 1982 G. Lynn Shostack published "How to Design a Service" in the European Journal of Marketing, and drew the first service blueprints²⁵. Service design started as a marketing idea and became a design discipline later.

The web

In January 1993 the Mosaic browser came out, and in April CERN put the World Wide Web into the public domain^{3, 26}. Merriam-Webster gives 1993 as the first known use of "webmaster"²⁷: one person who ran the server, wrote the code,

updated the content and handled contact. Dictionary.com dates "web designer" to somewhere between 1990 and 1995²⁸.

Also in 1993, Don Norman set up the User Experience Architect's Office at Apple. He wanted someone responsible for the whole experience of a product, not only its interface²⁹. "User experience" entered the language there. "UX designer" took much longer to become a common job title: in a professional survey, 9 percent of respondents used it in 2011, 27 percent in 2014 and 45 percent in 2022³⁰.

By the late 1990s web consultancies were hiring UI designers to design "the interactions on the page"³¹, and the first voice interface designers were at work. One of them later remembered: "We used to call ourselves VUI designers because it was all voice back then"³².

5 Products, platforms and splitting, 2000s and 2010s

Product designer

After 2000, interaction designers working on software started calling themselves digital product designers, and later just product designers³³. The title had meant physical products for decades. It now meant apps and platforms.

Then came the iPhone, announced on 9 January 2007, and the App Store on 10 July 2008 with more than 500 apps^{34, 35}.

Everyone gets a specialism

The 2010s are the busiest decade on the map. Titles that had been one job became several:

- UX researcher. The earliest example in a book is from 2011, describing a "UX researcher for Google New York"³⁶. In Google Books the term starts rising in the mid-2000s³⁷.
- Content designer. In 2015 the UK Government Digital Service described its content design team, which had been called editors³⁸. UX writer followed a couple of years later³⁹.
- Design researcher and design strategist both appear as job roles in a 2015 conference paper on service design⁴⁰.
- Policy designer. In 2014 the design researcher Bason suggested it should be a job title, the same year the UK's Policy Lab started as a design-led team⁴¹.
- Creative technologist. In 2013 Digiday called it "the recent hot one"⁴².
- DesignOps, for the people who run design teams as they grow. The earliest dated text is Dave Malouf's from 2017⁴³.
- Visual designer, the person who "pushes pixels", in a 2017 Adobe guide to UX job titles⁴⁴.

Figma opened to everyone on 28 September 2016, as a design tool a whole team could work in at once⁴⁵.

Designing what doesn't exist yet

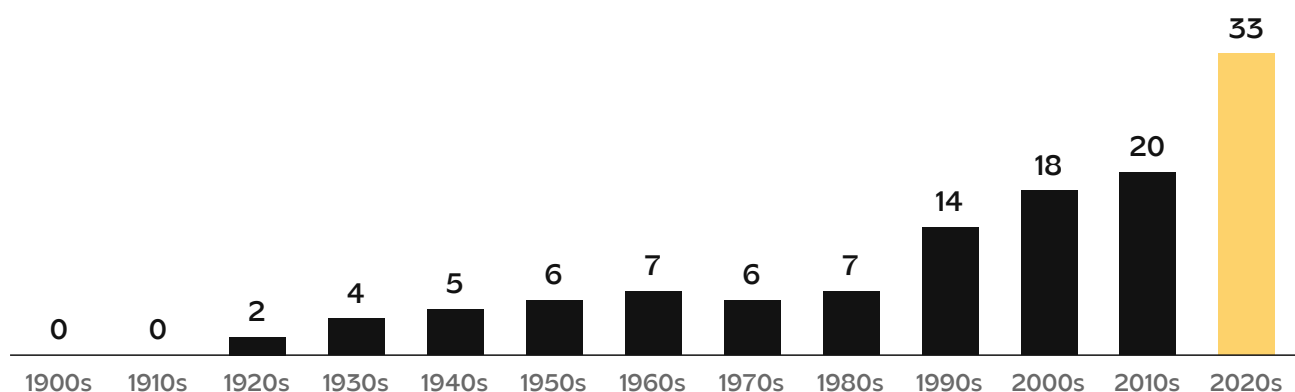
A smaller line runs alongside all this. Anthony Dunne wrote about critical design in his PhD in 1997 and in *Hertzian Tales* in 1999⁴⁶. "Design fiction" appeared in print in 2003⁴⁷, and Dunne and Raby's *Speculative Everything* came out in 2013⁴⁸. The earliest "speculative designer" found is a profile from 2011⁴⁹, and the earliest "futures designer" one from 2013⁵⁰.

6 AI, 2020s

The voice designers of the 1990s had a successor by the 2010s: the conversation designer, working on chatbots and assistants. The earliest example found is someone who switched to conversation design in 2016⁵¹. By 2023 it was an established role in research about it⁵².

ChatGPT came out on 30 November 2022⁴. Since then the titles have come quickly. Agent experience designer is in real job ads⁵³. In 2026 Figma advertised for an AI model designer to "teach our models how to be better copilots for designers", and OpenAI for a model designer to "design model behavior"^{54,55}. The design engineer, who designs in code, has been named since about 2020⁵⁶.

These titles are about how a system behaves, not how a screen looks. No one agrees on their names yet.



Design job titles in this research, in use at the start of each decade.

7 What disappeared

Not every title survived.

- The commercial artist folded into graphic design, illustration and art direction over the middle of the century¹⁵.
- The webmaster split into developers, operations, search specialists, content and marketing. In 2020 Google retired its "Google Webmasters" name, because so few people still called themselves that⁵⁷.
- The usability engineer was mostly absorbed into UX research and UX design in the 2000s and 2010s³⁰.
- The information architect partly merged into UX, product and content design, and survives as a specialism⁵⁸.
- Chatbot and voice interface designers are merging into conversation design⁵⁹.
- In film, production designer took over the top creative job from art director, starting with Menzies¹¹.

8 Why the newest titles are the hardest to date

Industrial designer has a year and a place. So do graphic design, art director and production designer: a newspaper, a dictionary, a memo. From the 1990s on, the trail gets thin. The first traces of UI designer, product designer or conversation designer are in job ads that are gone, LinkedIn profiles, and people remembering years later how things used to be.

That is why the map marks how sure each date is: a documented first use, a landmark use, the earliest example found, or a decade only. The titles people argue about most are the ones with the least written history.

9 Where it leads

Every title in this report started as a few people doing new work before it had a name. The newest titles on the map have mostly moved away from the screen: research, services, systems, code and how AI behaves.

That is where The Future of Design Work picks up, with six directions people are going into today:

1. Product designer who ships: product designer, UX designer.
2. Design engineer: design engineer, creative technologist.
3. AI and behaviour designer: conversation designer, agent experience designer, model designer.
4. Brand and visual craft: visual designer, art director.
5. Research and service design: UX researcher, design researcher, service designer.
6. Beyond the product: game designer, policy designer, futures designer, creative technologist.

Some of the work being done right now doesn't have a name yet.

Appendix: how this was made

The dates come from dictionaries, archives, professional bodies, books and job ads, gathered in October 2026. For each title the questions were the same: the earliest dated use, where it appeared, what it grew out of and why. Where a source was weak, a stronger one was looked for.

Each date is the earliest one found with a source, which is not always the first time a title was used. Where the only source is a blog, a vendor or a personal profile, the map's panel says so.

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