



By

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We recently met with Academy Award-nominated production designer Bill Sandell, known for his work on fan-favorite films like *Hocus Pocus*, *Master and Commander*, *The Perfect Storm*, *Robocop*, *Total Recall*, *Air Force One*, *The Flintstones*, and *Newsies*.

Bill talked about his role as a production designer, the challenges and rewards of working on set and gave us an inside look at what it was like to work in production for Halloween-favorite *Hocus Pocus*. Here are the highlights from our event and the parallels we see between UX design and production design.

First off, what does a production designer do?

As Bill puts it, “The production designer is that name at the beginning of the movie, right by the editor and the cameraman, but nobody really knows what we do.” In actuality, the production designer is the head of the art department. So, they’re one of the first people hired onto a film.

After reading the film script, the production designer sits down with the director to formulate a cohesive look and feel for the movie, essentially advocating for the director's vision. “I’m the one that pitches the ideas to the studio; I’m the front man for this very talented gang of people. I’m the guy they fire, or I’m the guy who gets a lot of credit,” he said with a smirk.

Parallels between the film industry and UX design

Many Blinkers have experience in the film industry, from project planning, and special effects, to screenwriting and post-production design and editing. So, it’s no surprise that the two industries have many similarities and complementary talents. Our talk with Bill reminded us of three valuable principles we use for creating great UX designs.

1. Understanding the audience leads to better outcomes.

In UX research and design, we sit down with clients to determine their project expectations. This alignment sets a foundation for a project and helps us understand what our client or “audience” hopes to get out of our engagement.

Bill's method for working as a production designer is comparable. First, he reads the script and sits with the director to understand their style. Then, where Blink might visualize an experience using journey mapping, wireframes, and user personas, Bill collaborates with illustrators to produce images and storyboards for the film's keyframes.

For Bill, getting the director's approval for these sketches helps the art department move forward with developing a visually coherent film while also ensuring the team portrays the director's vision accurately.

2. Collaboration is key to producing innovative ideas.

At Blink, one of our greatest strengths is [how we collaborate](#) with our clients and each other. Similarly to how we approach our projects, Bill preached the importance of creating a collaborative work environment to break down silos and align teams.

“In an art department, I listen to everybody. I don’t care how up or down the totem pole they might be in the structure of a design team. You’ve got to be fluid because a great idea can hit you from any angle.”

— Bill Sandell

3. Prototyping gets you there faster.



A picture of The Flintstones movie set. In 1994, Bill worked as a production designer for this well-known film.

In UX design, an [experience prototype](#) conveys design ideas so stakeholders and users can easily experience and understand them. When [we build full-scale prototypes](#), we might transform our lab spaces into an interactive and scaled version of the product and environment where participants can experience and illustrate common user scenarios.

Similarly, in filmmaking, Bill expressed his firm belief that creating a realistic set helps elicit an actor's best performance. Bill is unique in his approach to creating sets that not only look but also feel authentic to the actors. For example, Bill instructed his team to create a bona fide bar for the film *A Perfect Storm*. "I want you to spill beer in there; I want people to carve their initials in the bar if they want; I want them to go puke in the back, whatever they want to do. I want it to smell and look like a real bar," he said.

In both UX design and filmmaking, these prototypes or sets help people get into character and better understand how they would interact with the actual product, experience, or location.

Working in production for *Hocus Pocus*

Hocus Pocus was a natural fit for Bill from the start. As a true lover of all things Halloween, he was thrilled when Bette Midler told him about the script (his contract even stipulates that he always gets October 31st off work).

Unfortunately, *Hocus Pocus* was not initially a success. Disney decided that Tim Burton's *Nightmare Before Christmas* was to be its big Halloween film, and sadly *Hocus Pocus* was pushed into a summer release. The producer, David Kirshner, still laments his frustration with Disney's decision to release the film during the summer, where it got buried among the other blockbusters. It wasn't until ABC started showing *Hocus Pocus* as part of their 13 Days of Halloween that the film found a new audience and slowly developed what has now become a cult following. Bill also credits the rise in popularity due to a significant surge in Halloween's popularity. "Halloween when we shot this was a billion-dollar business. Now it's a 10 billion dollar business."

Bill smiled as he fondly recalled how special it was filming on location in Salem, Massachusetts, during Halloween, at the 200th anniversary of the Salem witch trials. The city of Salem has genuinely embraced the film and even has *Hocus Pocus* tours where visitors can see the various filming locations. Bill keeps in touch with the owners of the home used as Max and Dani's house and sent them some illustrations from the film not long ago, which they thoroughly enjoyed. "It's fun that our little movie is now a piece of the fabled history of Salem."



Bill Sandell and Bette Midler (as Winifred Sanderson) on set for Hocus Pocus

Design is all around us

Our talk with Bill reminded us that we can find design everywhere, from the products we use to the movies we watch. As UX researchers and designers, we appreciate hearing how different design experts implement best practices into their work. Although Bill's work differs from ours in many respects, one thing is certain: understanding your audience, collaborating with your team, and developing prototypes all lead to better, richer, more meaningful products and experiences.

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