

Ferdinando Buscema

Mariano Tomatis

The Art of  
Creating Magical Experiences



FOREWORD BY

Derren Brown



*Amaze* is a startlingly original introduction of a magical perspective into everyday life. It could have been written in the Middle Ages, but then it would have lacked the backing of modern science which the authors summarize so well; or it could have been written today, assuming anyone had the deep historical and philosophical knowledge that Buscema and Tomatis bring to the argument . . . . In any case, now that it is written, the reader will never find life boring again.

MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI

Best selling author of *Flow*

Founding father of psychology of happiness

In *Amaze*, Buscema and Tomatis succeed in creating the very thing they set out to describe: a magical experience. Drawing on their own work and research, history and philosophy, science and literature, they explore the nature of wonder and show us how to recapture the curiosity of childhood. Their message is a powerful one: we are never too old for magic.

MARIA KONNIKOVA

Journalist at *The New Yorker*

Author of *Mastermind: How to think like Sherlock Holmes*

Buscema and Tomatis are modern day mystics who move seamlessly between the realms of science, art, and magic, seeking wonder at every turn. They delight in inspiring us all to cultivate curiosity and embrace astonishment in our daily lives. This brilliant book is an empowering grimoire for hacking reality and giving the gift of magical experiences to others.

DAVID PESCOVITZ

Managing partner/co-editor *Boing Boing*

The best experiences seem magical so why not dive in, learn from the masters, and be amazed yourself? This book is magic — uncharacteristically yet predictably and satisfyingly. The authors have discovered an entirely new genre right before our eyes, previously invisible though it was there all along. Anyone interested in better experiences should read-up on how to make them not just nicer but fully magical.

NATHAN SHEDROFF

Author of *Experience Design*

Magical experiences are not about asserting the magician's will or creating illusions by sleight-of-hand. Magical experiences are designed delight, premeditated joy, engineered wonder. Creating Magical Experiences is like a nonfiction version of magical realism. I can't think of anyone who wouldn't benefit and marvel at this wonderful book—designers and entertainers, certainly, but also teachers, artists, poets, makers, the curious, the funloving, the believers in both science and mystery.

HOWARD RHEINGOLD

Author of *Tools for Thought*, *Smart Mobs*

From the invisible threshold of a wallless museum of wonders, Tomatis and Buscema indicate the horizon and announce a new morning of the magicians. Those magicians, they say, will not be an élite: those magicians will be us, all of us, no close caste of wisemen, no übermensch, magic to the people! Outside the narrow spaces of theaters and clubs, out of the less and less magical TV box set, out of the caverns of obscurevoyant and psychics, enchantment and awareness can—and must—come together again, to enrich life, to dance with eleven legs, to tell stories, and to enliven them by any means necessary.

WU MING

Best selling authors of *Q*

Add to the number of disciplines that have risen with the Experience Economy one more: Magic Experience Design. Thanks to the skillful hands and dazzling minds of Tomatis and Buscema, you too can design experiences that reach deep into the wells of magic to not only engage but to enchant and, yes, amaze your customers.

B. JOSEPH PINE II

Co-author of *The Experience Economy*

Surprising and delightful, here's a generous book about being surprising and delightful! It explores the essential but little-discussed art of creating wonder, and the ideas inside will stick with you for a long time to come.

SETH GODIN

Author of *The Icarus Deception*

*Amaze* brilliantly embodies the spirit and the work of our Academy, devoted to making the Ferrari customer experience simply magical. This book is a manual about engineering wonder, which will allow you to discover some of the secrets we use to make magic an ingredient of our success, and will guide you on new roads to conquer and delight your own customers.

ORESTE CAPPIELLO  
Head of Ferrari Academy, Ferrari SpA

Thanks to *Amaze*, wonder and astonishment are freed from the theatrical dimension to become precious tools within a company. These ingredients foster change, helping to develop versatile professionals who cultivate intuition and creativity, who find original solutions to concrete problems while applying technical skills and competences. Ferdinando and Mariano guide the reader to see beyond the ordinary, to rediscover ancient sensitivities and to challenge modern perceptions. If your vocation includes training and development, let these pages surprise and inspire you!

ROSSANA GRIGOLETTI  
Head of Learning & Development, PwC SpA

*Moleskine* has been magnetically drawn towards *magic experience design*, probably due to the very nature of what our brand produces: white pages and writing tools that help thoughts take shape—from the first sketches to full blown projects. Working on a notebook is a demiurgic experience, something magical in itself, and in this Buscema and Tomatis proved to be perfect interpreters of our brand, firing unexpected synapses and evoking an aura of magic around our objects.

GIOVANNI PESCE  
International PR and events manager, *Moleskine*

Let Buscema and Tomatis guide you through the world of hoaxes, pranks, tricks, and alternate reality games you had no idea are already happening all around you. *Amaze* opens up the mind to the possibilities of encountering magic in our everyday lives and helps you understand tactics to create mischief yourself. Read this book and then design your own fun.

CHARLIE TODD  
Founder of *Improv Everywhere*

All of us are on the search for a book that could possibly unveil the mysteries of life. Reading this book feels like opening a window into these mysteries, and I could feel my heart beating faster as I turned the pages. This book is in itself a kind of “Magic Box” filled with important secrets not only of magicians but also those in our society who are able to invoke wonder through the use of both ancient and modern technologies. To the initiated reader this book will represent infinite possibility. (If you don’t feel your heart beat a bit faster while reading this, put the book down right now. If you do then proceed to the checkout immediately. You have a mission to *complete*.)

KERI SMITH  
Best selling author of *This Is Not a Book*

FERDINANDO BUSCEMA  
MARIANO TOMATIS

# AMAZE

THE ART OF CREATING MAGICAL EXPERIENCES

Preface by  
DERREN BROWN

L'ARTE DI STUPIRE

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*In loving memory of  
Eugene Burger,  
teacher, mentor, beloved friend,  
who, by singing his own magical song,  
helped us to find our own voice.*

We believe it [...] legitimate to present this literary work, although making no claims, as a handbook on the embellishment of life. The mindful reader, discovering how to use this book, simultaneously will discover, even should a spontaneous cheerfulness be lacking, the importance of existence.

And that existence is exalting, as once curiosity is awakened; this exercise of curiosity transforms life into a poetic adventure.

LOUIS PAUWELS E JACQUES BERGIER,  
*The Eternal Man* (1970)

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# Preface

*by Derren Brown*

THERE is a school of thought, ascribed to a terrific magician named Paul Harris and much espoused by his fellow performers across the world, that the experience of conjuring restores us to a childlike state of wonder. When we were babies, it goes, we inhabited a world where everything was new. We saw everything for the first time. Bit by bit, our natural state of astonishment was eaten away by familiarity and understanding. It is the task of the magician to return us to those levels of openness and awe with which we greeted everything as infants. Harris' magical opus *The Art of Astonishment* offers some creative ways for a performer to reinstate that natural condition that his audience members will have sadly extirpated, piecemeal, from their lives.

Perhaps, in the right hands, a good magical performance can transport us to an appealing landscape of wonder, where we might for a while enjoy the vertiginous feeling of not-knowing as some vast expanse of surprise and delight opens up before us. I remember 'muling' (which turns out to be a word) in the foothills of the Atlas Mountains; the far-from-stubborn Paprika and I picking our way along arid winding paths flanked by rocks, wild thyme, and red Moroccan dust. We had ascended some way through these scorched narrow

tracks when, as we turned a corner, the terrain swept away without warning to reveal a vast panorama: a Berber village below us splashed across a wide green basin, milk-white Mount Toubkal crowning the vista far in the distance, and the plaintive sound of a call to prayer making its way to us indelibly through the air. My arm-hairs leapt to attention and I knew I was experiencing the most wonderful moment I could remember. Maybe magic can give us that feeling.

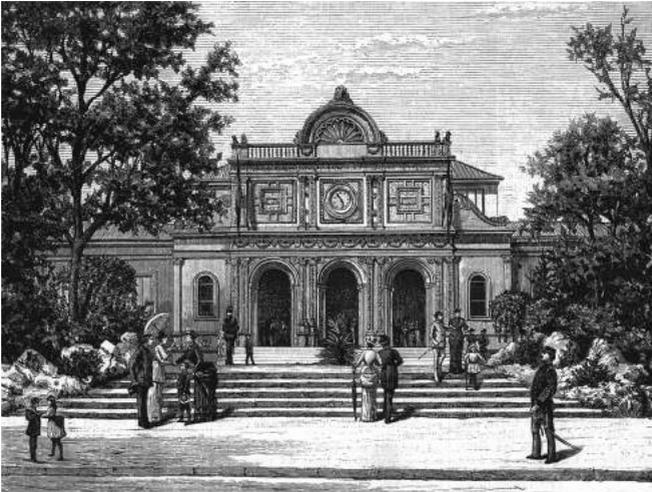
But I am sceptical. I have found myself gasping with delight only twice during magic performances: once at a convention in England when a fine magician called Tommy Wonder placed a cloth over a birdcage and it lifted from the table, and once again in Las Vegas when Penn's partner Teller produced the first coin of his Silverfish routine. But these are rare performers, true artists in a field of craftsmen. Most magicians perform at you, as if it were more important to show how clever they are than to transport you anywhere that might leave you haunted. Participants in magic tricks are referred to as "spectators" in the magic literature, and may indeed often feel like mere observers of a clever puzzle, afterwards politely commending the magician for a job well done.

I see no childlike state of astonishment in that. The sad truth is that if a magician is rude, halitotic, or is possessed of an annoying voice, the experience of magic for his or her audience will most likely be one of irritation. Magic happens only in the head of each member of the audience; it has no inherent worth or transformative power unless the magician in question is able, with that performance at that moment for that audience, to communicate such an experience. Otherwise magicians, optimistically looking for artistic worth in a craft founded on dishonesty, should not talk so solemnly of wonder. A painting is not good art purely by virtue of being a painting.

Wonder, then, is a tricky business. Mariano and Ferdinando admirably avoid the trap of this kind of posturing and step

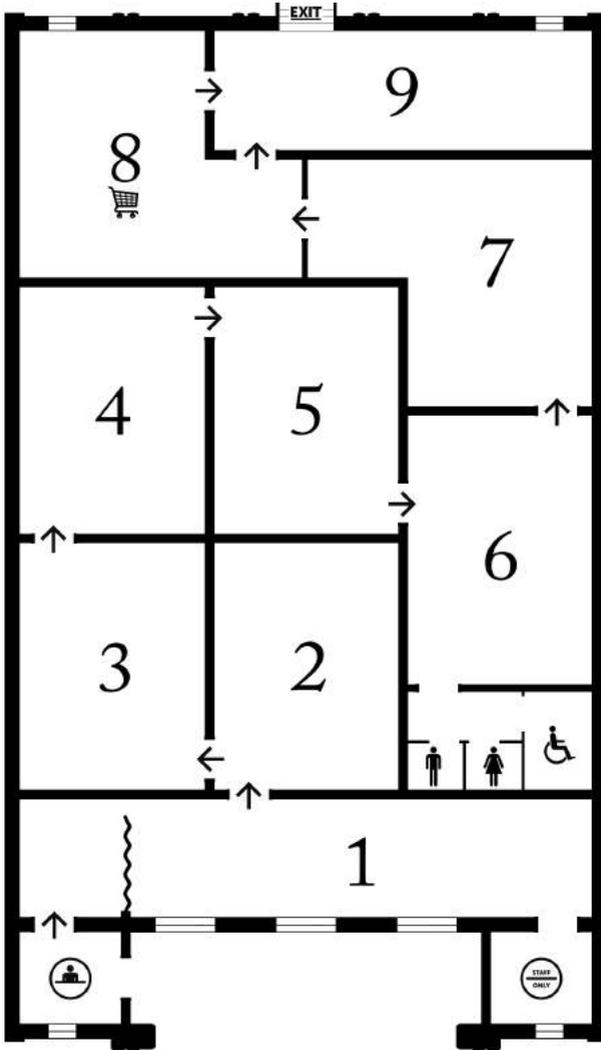
respectfully around their target. Like a rainbow that disappears when approached too closely, some things are best tackled indirectly. The examples and discussions in this book form an homage to an elusive state of mind, which is in part something childlike and primeval, but often requires the intellectual engagement of an adult to stir us most powerfully. I am flattered that they've included some of my own pieces within these pages; if a magic career is so often about falling short of your aims, it's nice for someone to appreciate your inadequate attempts.

London, April 2014



Museum of wonders

# Museum of wonders



- 1 Welcome • 2 Harbinger of Wonder • 3 Spring Snake Room  
• 4 Magic Mirrors Room • 5 Lollipop Room • 6 Game Room  
• 7 Magic Pot Room • 8 Gift Shop • 9 Oh, wow! Oh, wow!  
Oh wow!



# Prologue

*You look so beautiful I can hardly keep my eyes on the meter.*

WOODY ALLEN, *Manhattan* (1979)

THE cab driver picked Anthony up where 14th street crosses Union Square. At seven in the evening in July there was not much traffic in New York. During the ride, the young man betrayed some tension, and so decided to open up. "I'm having an awful night. I was supposed to meet this girl for a date, but I lost her number and the name of the restaurant." The cab driver absent-mindedly shook his head, replying with a thick African accent: "That's terrible, man. Just terrible."

Needing to unburden himself, Anthony told the driver about the previous night: "We talked for more than two hours at this bar. We totally clicked. From the first moment I fell in love with her." Then he described her: she was tall, a brunette, and beautiful. She was just perfect. All of this made his absent-mindedness even worse. "I'm just so stupid! I mean, she wrote down her number on a napkin and where she wanted to meet me for dinner tonight, and I lost the damn napkin!" As the story unfolded, the cabbie started to take to heart Anthony's dilemma and wanted to help. "You should have saved her number on your mobile! Do you have any idea where this restaurant is?" The cab was heading towards Peter McManus Café. "She said she goes there a lot, so I'm just gonna go there now, wait

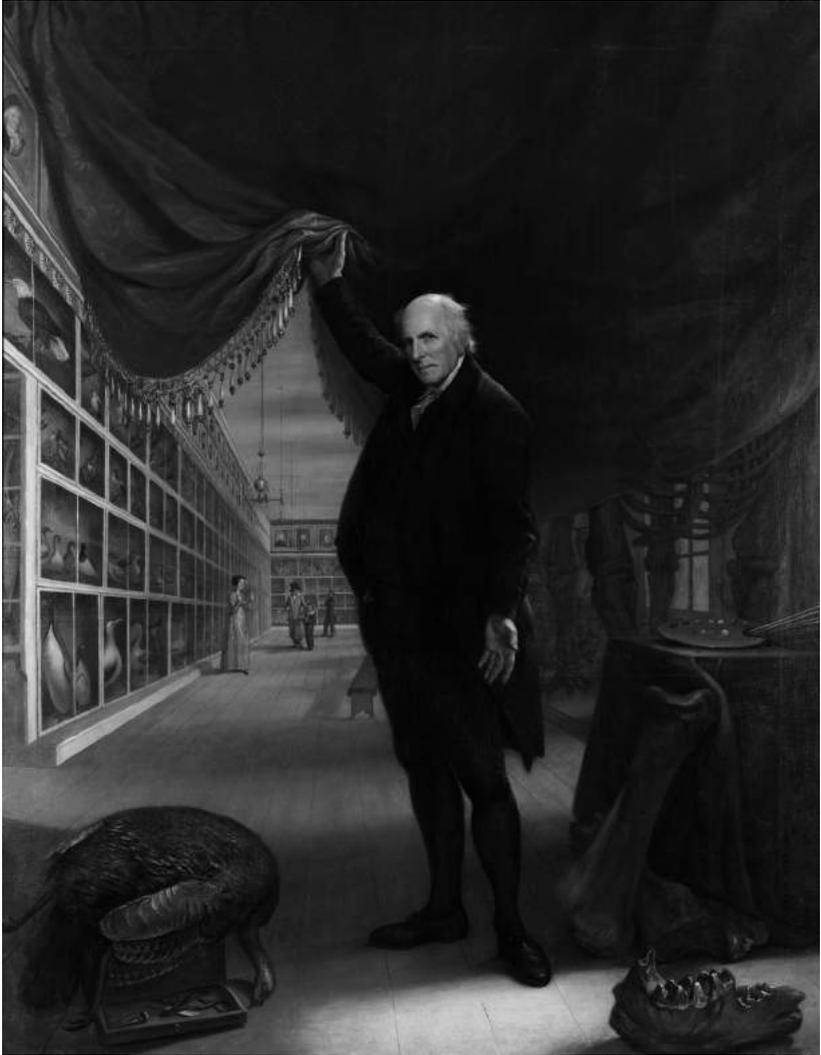
there all night, and hope that she shows up. I can't believe I'm so stupid! I mean, we really hit it off last night. She's everything I look for in a girl. Smart, funny . . . she has this amazing laugh . . . tall, brunette. She is just beautiful. I've never felt so strongly about a woman in my entire life." The taxi driver seemed to be sincerely taken up by the story, and said: "I really hope you can find her." The taxi pulled up in front of McManus, and the driver left Anthony saying: "Good luck tonight." The young man exited the taxi, walking towards the Café, getting ready for his long wait. The taxi silently drew away . . .

Half an hour later, the cab driver with the African accent dropped a customer on the corner between the 16th Street and 5th Avenue, when Kate hailed the cab. She jumped in the back seat, and asked to be taken to a restaurant on 20th Street. "You know, I have a date with a guy I met last night." The driver asked where they met, and the lady mentioned a vague spot. "Somewhere near here . . ." The driver suddenly turned his head around, excitedly asking: "When? When? When?" "Last night, in a bar." "Last night? I just dropped the guy off! Are you tall?" Kate replied a bit confused: "Am I tall? Yeah, I'm five-nine. He has, like, dark hair . . ." The driver was not listening any more. Now he was too excited, his tone of voice increasing with every question asked. "Where did you meet him?" "I met him at this bar on 19th and . . ." "And 7th!" The cab driver was able to give Kate's answers before she did, growing more and more convinced that in a city with 7 million people he was witnessing a pretty remarkable coincidence. "The guy was here! We drove all over looking for you. We didn't find you. He didn't know the restaurant." "But I wrote it down on a napkin." "Exactly! He lost it!" When Kate mentioned the McManus Café every possible doubt disappeared. The cab driver made a U-turn and reassuringly said: "I know where he is. I will take you to this man!"

The driver became excited. “This man, he really, really likes you. He told me so! He was very attractive and very kind. I can see why you like him.”

When they arrived in front of the Café, Anthony was walking back and forth, clutching his mobile phone to his ear. The cab driver was honking repeatedly and flashing his headlights. He stuck his head out of the window, shouting: “I have her! This is her! I have her!” Kate jumped out the cab, and Anthony hugged her, incredulous. The cab driver was grinning from ear to ear. He agreed to take a picture with the young lovers, and went away with an incredible story to tell his friends and family.

In that midsummer night, destiny had turned the driver into Cupid, making him the hero of a classic New York romantic comedy. As a matter of fact, destiny mattered little. For one thing was unbeknownst to him. Behind the curtain, in fact, there was a whole crew of people, involved in a sophisticated activity called *magic experience design*.

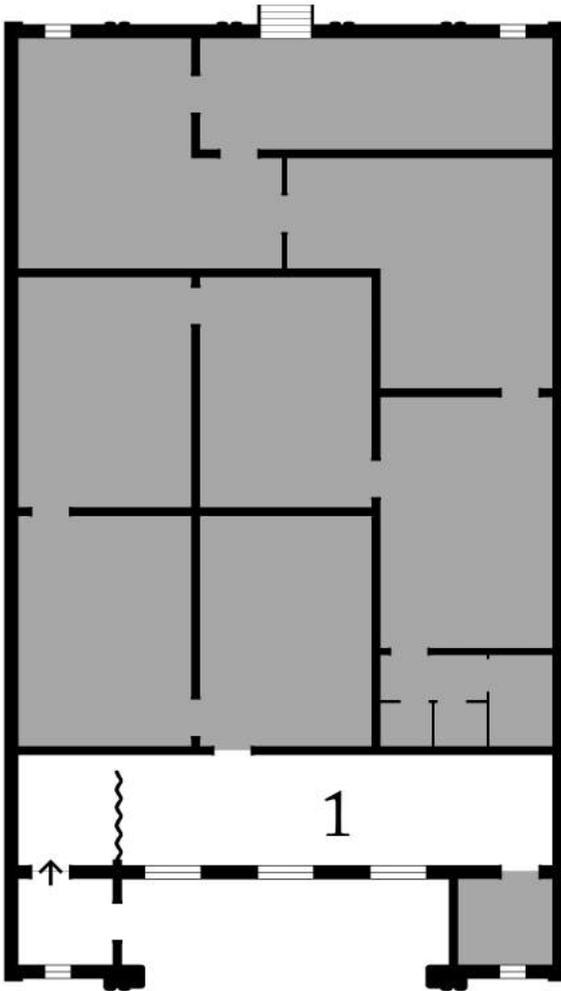


*“The Artist in His Museum”*

Self Portrait by Charles Willson Peale, oil on canvas, 1822.

THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA.

# 1 Welcome





*I have always been fascinated by magic, and I realized that magic is not just something that happens on a stage, in a very controlled environment. We all can create magical experiences all the time, and we can do this for our friends, for our colleagues and [...] for our students.*

TINA SEELIG

WE welcome you to our museum of wonders! What you're holding in your hands is the most unusual catalogue you can image. Our collection is very peculiar. We don't collect records, Renaissance paintings, or taxidermied animals. From the Great Book of the World, we carefully select a specific kind of story. All of them share a common element: protagonists who live a moment of wonder, a magical experience that forces them out of the mundane and surprises them, questioning their very worldview. Some stories seem to come straight out of an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. Other stories might have been imagined only by Stephen King. The most surreal plots evoke the writings of Robert Anton Wilson. Some other stories, like the one of the New York cab driver, seem straight out of a Sophie Kinsella novel. But the entrance sign speaks clearly: what we deal with here are only stories that really occurred. Or, at least, this is what the protagonists would be willing to swear!

Some of these stories are dearer to our hearts—the ones we personally designed in the last few years, during our activity of “creating magical experiences” or, as we like to call it, *magic experience design*. One thing we would like to warn you about: when dealing with our precious exhibits, it will not be possible to maintain the typical detachment of a

professional guide. Devoured by our avid passion for magic, mystery, and the extraordinary, we'll strive to make you, the reader, participate in the wonder experienced by the characters of our stories. And maybe, following in the steps of who came before you, you too might want to create a magical experience.

The path we're offering here cuts through our personal "cabinet of wonders"—something that in another time we would have called *Wunderkammer*. Only one shelf is still empty (you'll find it on page 211). We have a vague idea about how to fill it, but the story that will complete our collection is missing some details. It's the story of a person who finds a book, gets immersed in it, and discovers a never-before-heard-of discipline; a reading that opens up surprising perspectives, calls on wonder, and is meant to return some magic to our disenchanted modern world. We've written this book to find the protagonist of this story. We want that person to be you.

## **Magic Experience Design**

The story in the prologue happened in New York on the night of July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2005, and involved six people. As with an elaborate candid camera, only the cab driver was unaware of the complex design behind the scenes. Besides Anthony King and Kate Spencer, the two "lovers," other team members in action were Charlie Todd, Chris Kula, and Susannah Becket. Susannah stood in front of the McManus Café; ready to take a photo at the very moment the cab driver was to have reunited the couple. Also Chris was on site, recording the scene from a distance with a camera. Charlie was the mastermind of the operation and the central element of the handover in which the cab driver had been—unknowingly—involved. The whole process happened in three steps:

1. Anthony took the cab from point A to point B (the McManus Café), telling the driver about the previous night's misadventure as they travelled.
2. Charlie jumped into the taxi at the McManus Café, pretending not to know Anthony. He didn't say a word during the trip from B to C, but texted Kate that everything was working according to plan.
3. At point C Kate ignored Charlie and jumped in the taxi, asking the driver to go to point D (the restaurant). During the trip, the cab driver changed the route, heading towards the McManus Café, and so reuniting the two lovers!

The scene recorded by Chris has been uploaded on YouTube with the title “*Improv Everywhere—Romantic Comedy Cab*,” and this is the photo taken by Susannah:

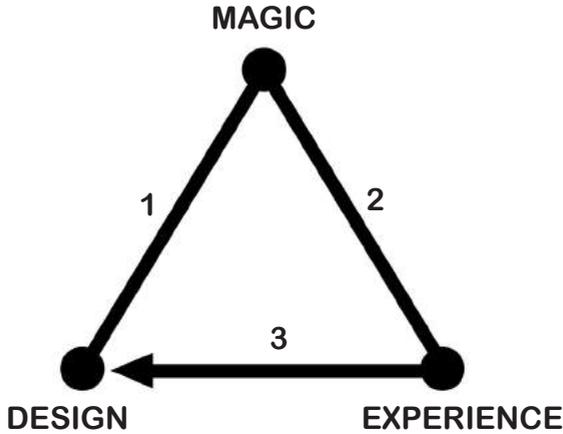


Charlie Todd had always been playful, but how did he come to conceive such an elaborate scheme? Behind what could have looked like a trivial prank, there was a key factor. As Charlie himself expressed it: “The term «prank» just didn’t seem quite right for what we had done. [...] We realized we had stumbled onto a new idea: pranks that didn’t need a victim. It was very easy to cause a scene by getting into some type of argument or conflict [...] It was much more challenging to come up with ideas that actually gave the people we encountered a good experience—an amazing story they could tell for the rest of their lives.»<sup>1</sup>

It is too easy to laugh at someone for emptying a bucket of water on their head. Charlie’s revolutionising idea was to place the classic “victim” of a practical joke—instead of into the typically unpleasant situation—at the center of a surprising event, capable of shaking the torpor of everyday life. In other words, a magical experience, as we’d like to call it.

For more than ten years, Charlie Todd has been regularly organizing these kinds of experiences with the group he founded, called *Improv Everywhere*. The organization is based in New York, but through their website *improveverywhere.com* they recruit people from all over the world, having become a point of reference for an ever-increasing community of peaceful subversives.

The story of the New York cab driver is the quintessential embodiment of what we call today magic experience design. Designing a magical experience means to create an event that offers its protagonist a moment of wonder and a surprising story to tell. Until a few years ago, we lacked the words to define such a bizarre and fascinating activity. The expression we came up with joined three elements (“magic”, “experience” and “design”), and their function gradually emerged. Putting these pieces together, we realized how many different phenomena the expression was able to describe. We felt we had stumbled upon a precious, maybe even necessary, concept.



Sliding our gaze along the sides of the triangle that connects the three words, it's difficult to keep the memories at bay. Because the path that led us to magic experience design coincides with our personal stories.

### **The first side: designing magic**

We both discovered magic when we were kids—our eyes wide with astonishment seeing magicians perform at Christmas time, in the school auditorium. While we knew very little, we did know that billiard balls could not endlessly multiply, colored scarves could not change colors, and rabbits could not appear from a hat. But all of this just happened; right before our very eyes, questioning the boundary of what-could-be and what-could-not-be. Armed with a rational (albeit limited) worldview, we found it irresistible that someone could violate the laws of nature in such a spectacular way. Our naturally rebellious nature rejoiced at such mischievous deeds, scoffing at rules.

The pleasure we felt for so many surprises pushed us to search for more and more. Such experiences left a very deep mark, fostering in both of us a very precise wish: not firemen, astronauts, or soccer players: when adults, we'd become magicians. But the world encouraged more concrete endeavours, and so we chose to study engineering sciences. And so, while part of our time was devoted to studying "rational" subjects, another part was devoted to the art of magic—the fascinating and mysterious discipline dealing with impossible things. In the morning we'd study the laws that make the world function, the equations that make things spin, and the algorithms that make things work. At night, we tried to violate the same laws, with a pack of playing cards and old conjuring manuals open on our beds. We soon discovered that a magic formula was not enough to make a playing card disappear: sometimes the task required very complicated manipulations perfectly executed in order to be invisible; at other times, we needed to use specially constructed objects. While at school we studied and conducted optical experiments with lenses, mirrors, and light bulbs, at night we employed the same principles tinkering with scissors, glue, and a shoebox, to create a magic box capable of making objects disappear.

Lovers of both disciplines, we could not see science and magic as opposites. Science, along with its technological incarnations, provided a wide array of tools to create our little miracles. Though the principles of design learned at school were aimed at the creation of products for practical use, we preferred to use such principles to develop more and more original magic tricks. It soon became clear that every good illusion required a more or less sophisticated work of design: "magic" and "design" were closely related, and the literature available on the topic was broad enough to provide us with years of exploration and study. Our shelves quickly filled with books, one after another, revealing tricks to be performed in every context.

We kept on learning new techniques, each allowing new magical feats to take place. When books were not enough, fellow magicians came to help: we joined magic clubs, attended the most important conventions, bought all sorts of devilish apparatus. The study of conjuring seemed to be reduced to mere technical and practical issues—how to find the best way to hide a coin behind one's fingers, or make invisible the false bottom of a hat.

One aspect of our studies made us uncomfortable: why was the performance of magic considered a form of entertainment suited only for children? Since our dream of becoming magicians had not abandoned us, was there a way to reconcile this passion with full maturity? How could we legitimize the idea of magic for an adult audience? Was there a way of winning over even the most refined tastes? At this point, our story seems to enter a novel by Carlos Castaneda, because the answers to our dilemmas came through the encounter with a wise old man. When the main character of a story is in trouble, the author can release the tension by introducing the figure of a spiritual master, who comes to rescue the unfortunate protagonist. According to the most hoary stereotype, he could be described with a long, bushy white beard and a sly smile, well educated and sharp-tongued, firm in his judgment, compassionate, slow to anger; the classic character of many cartoon strips, typically portrayed on the top of a mountain. Perhaps to remind us how much life and fiction can be similar, destiny helped us meet a man who looked exactly like this sketch. We didn't find him in a far away hermitage, but we met him in the pages of his most important work. His name was Eugene Burger.

### **The second side: the experience of magic**

The book was titled *The Experience of Magic* and reading it left us speechless. It was not the classic collection of sleight-of-

hand tricks: the author framed the idea of magic in a refined philosophical context, exploring issues whose importance had always eluded us. In particular, Eugene seemed to share our frustration, wondering like us: why is the performance of magic considered such a trivial art form? An esteemed philosopher, with a divinity college background at Yale University, our “spiritual guide” was a successful illusionist working in the most prestigious venues in Chicago and performing all over the world. He was a perfect blend of active and contemplative life, and his reflections on magic focused on a key word: “experience.” Eugene was convinced that magic could speak directly to the Unconscious, evoking—in the participants—a rich variety of experiences involving emotions, concepts, dreams, hopes, ambitions, fears, nightmares, and so forth.

He stressed the importance of nurturing the relationship between the magician and the spectator, the key factor that evokes memorable magical experiences. He invited us to reflect on the profound implications behind each and every word and gesture that accompanied the sleight-of-hand. He framed the art of illusion in such a wide universe of meaning that we were made dizzy.

Here was someone who shared our extraordinary ambition: magic was not limited to card tricks or balloon animals. Reframed in the right way, magic could become a tool capable of offering modern people experiences that could be memorable—and in some cases transformative. According to Eugene, the conscious magician “has always been the one who excites our minds and hearts with the vastness of reality, and with the smallness of our theories [...], and with the greatness of life itself with its endless surprises and terrors, its wonders and delights.”<sup>2</sup>

His words opened up horizons that trespassed into spirituality. Talking about magic, he used categories that had nothing to do with technical issues: according to him, the secret of a

successful show was the willingness to examine every detail “with care, with a critical eye, and with love.”<sup>3</sup> This was not an empty and superficial sentimentalism, but a concrete creative drive: putting the spectator and his experience at the center of the creative efforts, overturning the perspectives we were used to, resulting in stimulating and very practical ideas.

Where Charlie Todd was fed up with jokes meant to ridicule the victim, Eugene could not stand magicians who used illusions to make fun of their audience: “When a magician on stage asks for someone’s help in the audience, have you noticed how everyone turns away? No one wants to go on stage to be treated like an idiot!”<sup>4</sup> We found that *The Experience of Magic* had become the manifesto of a movement of artists against the tide: magicians who opposed the trivialization of their art, working to restore the dimension of mystery, by putting on center stage the spectator and his experience. The call to action was explicit: “It is time to do something new! It’s time for a new form of expression [...] It’s time to bring back the mystery into magic!”<sup>5</sup>

We felt an irresistible urge to meet Eugene Burger and the other artists who shared his mission. Ferdinando completely disappeared for six months. He came back with a stack of freshly printed sheets and a plane ticket to Amsterdam. Having discovered that Eugene was going to participate at a convention in the Netherlands, Ferdinando had designed a special magical experience for him. Ferdinando approached Eugene, introducing himself as a magician and a great admirer of his work. He asked for an opinion on a card trick, and the Wizard of Chicago gave him his attention. The magic happened when a card changed its face, showing an unusual image: a figure that didn’t belong to the court of the Jack, Queen, and King. It represented a man with a long, bushy white beard and a sly smile, with the indexed letter E. A unique card, made from “hacking” the image of a King, it was a Eugene of Spades! On

the right, a Ferdinando of Hearts—made from a Jack—allowed the human Ferdinando to conclude the short story that framed the magic trick, expressing the gratitude of a disciple towards his master.



In the brief conversation that followed, Ferdinando confessed that *The Experience of Magic* had been a seminal book for his own growth, and deserved a wider circulation. And he then asked Eugene: “Have you ever considered having your book translated into Italian?” The author said he was flattered by the idea and favorable in principle. However, he added, a translation would take time and resources that the publisher did not have available at the time. Maybe one day. At that very moment, Ferdinando put on the table the stack of printed sheets he brought with him from Italy, and with a *coup de théâtre*, revealed the content: “Here’s your book translated into Italian!”

Eugene’s eyes widened and for a moment he did not say a word. Then he burst into laughter, and hugged Ferdinando with gratitude.

Taking charge of the entire translation and putting on the table a work fully ready for the press, Ferdinando was offering Eugene an entirely unexpected shortcut that literally fell from the sky (with an Alitalia flight).

A fil rouge connected the transformation of a playing card into a Eugene of Spades and the production of an unexpected translation. If anyone would distinguish the two moments, calling the first “sleight-of-hand” and the second “an act of kindness,” for us such a distinction was misleading. They were in fact two “magical experiences,” designed to engage a specific person and offer him a moment of astonishment. Nor did we miss the irony of introducing ourselves to the author of *The Experience of Magic* by involving him in an elaborate “magical experience.”

The Italian translation was published in 2007 and Eugene travelled to Italy to present it. We toured with him in the main cities of the peninsula, and during the many hours spent together, Eugene told us the network of magicians who shared our aspirations. Max Maven considered magic a refined conceptual art. Larry Hass studied it in the context of the gift economy. Abigail Spinner and Jeff McBride focused on the shamanic roots of magic. George Parker deepened its relationships with creativity. Each new name opened wider perspectives and confirmed our intuition. Gone was all the triviality! Magic was a field of study with very meaningful implications.

Over the years, we had the opportunity to start meaningful relationships with each person mentioned by Eugene. Getting in touch with their different approaches to the experience of magic encouraged us to develop our personal point of view, which would soon result in the “magic experience design.”

### **The third side: experience design**

When Ferdinando coined for himself the curious title of “magic experience designer,” he had been questioning the need for such an expression. Was the “design of magical experiences” really a new discipline? Or was it just a combination of trendy words to describe an activity already known by other names?

For the community of magicians, the idea was not new at all: Eugene Burger’s book was a guide to designing quality magical experiences, and many other books—though not making explicit use of that expression—had very similar intentions. All of them, however, took for granted a theatrical setting. The examples provided involved playing cards, gimmicks, and paying spectators. Exploring the subject, we realized we had in mind something different and more radical: we started to question the theatrical dimension of magic, because that setting seemed to be only one of many possibilities. We could think of many examples of “magical experiences” drawn from everyday life, completely unrelated to the world of the illusionists: from the tears triggered by watching a movie to the adrenaline rush from playing an engaging game. Human existence was studded with stimuli artfully designed to amaze, paralyze, move, and shake us.

The confirmation came from the book *Experience Design* in which the author Nathan Shedroff introduced such a discipline. His goal was to identify the criteria to effectively design experiences that involved customers, consumers, users, or viewers. The theme was vast, and the book was an anthology of examples drawn from the world of the web: design of products, services, events, and spaces. Focusing on the individual’s subjective experience, Shedroff explored the strategies used to involve someone in an experience coherent with the style, the atmosphere, and the messages that companies and artists wanted to elicit and communicate.

The concept of “experience” was so general that a design activity would have to include a virtually infinite number of applications. Shedroff was aware of this problem, and clearly declared this in the first pages. While it was not possible to provide a book that would explore all permutations of human experience, the structure of an anthology allowed him to demonstrate the great variety of such things and provide examples of successful designs. A very interesting aspect is that the author did not claim any copyright over *Experience Design*, but rather emphasized its practical implications: coining such a tag, he wished that others could find it useful and contribute to defining its potential, features, and areas of application. We couldn’t hope for more. Given the state of the art, our “magic experience design” found a perfect setting in the discipline proposed by Shedroff, posing itself as a new branch: the one that involves surprising, unexpected, wonderful, amazing, extraordinary experiences of things—all that we usually label with the word “magic.” When we reached out to Shedroff for his opinion, he confirmed our intuition: he felt that our discipline was a natural extension of his project and he was curious to witness how we were going to articulate it. It was time to write its manifesto. We chose as a title its highest goal: *Amaze*.

## **Portfolio**

*Within this collection we decided to focus only on some stories, but as in any museum, every room has obscure corners and secret compartments. To provide you with a glimpse of some items that remain in the shadow, at the end of each chapter we collect a “portfolio” of brief notes. Read them carefully: just as a magic mirror has a hidden door, every one of these bits can open up new corridors of the museum that you might have ignored,*

*guiding you to discover books, movies, videos, anecdotes, and curiosities to keep your exploration going.*

**READINGS** Do you like the philosophy behind *Improv Everywhere*? Read Todd and Scordelis, 2009, and you'll discover some of their most surprising performances.

**VIDEO** Would you like to have a daily dose of wonder? The videos that Jason Silva creates and shares on the Web are a true joy for the eye and the mind: an explosion of images, sounds, and ideas addressing the wonderful aspects of the world.

**ANECDOTE** *What Are You Optimistic About?* The book you are holding in your hands has been inspired by the brilliant metaphor that our friend David Pescovitz used to answer the *Edge Annual Question* (2007): "We are recognizing that the world is a *Wunderkammer*."

**ACTION** Think of a person and use the following ideas to design a way to surprise him/her. Then let us know what happened: [info@magicexperiencedesign.com](mailto:info@magicexperiencedesign.com)