

Design Boards

“Design boards are among the first steps in the motion design process and what I have spent most of my career creating. When I design a board, I’m doing more than designing frames—I’m figuring out the best way to tell a story or communicate an idea. I am visualizing the spot and using the boards and a written treatment as a tool to share and sell my idea. Essentially, the boards visually articulate the concept and story so that the client, animation team, and creative director are on the same page before beginning the production process. Each frame in a design board needs to represent a moment in time in the piece, but together the frames need to tell a story. To me, it’s important that the story is grounded in a smart concept because that is what will ground the work and make it memorable.”⁶ —Lindsay Daniels, *Designer/Director*

What Is a Design Board?

A *design board* is a series of style frames that tell the visual story of a project. The term “design board” is derived from storyboarding—a practice that originated in film productions as a way to plan the action of characters, events, and camera direction. Like hand-drawn storyboards, design boards depict key scenes in a project as well as transitions. The difference between a design board and a hand-drawn storyboard is the level of art direction. *Each frame in a design board is a fully realized style frame.* In addition to clearly illustrating the cinematic intentions and narrative, a design board firmly establishes a visual aesthetic. They are an effective way to plan and present the concept, story, and style of a motion design project.

Unified Visual Aesthetic

One of the first questions asked during a class critique of design boards is, “Does every frame feel like it belongs in the board?” The same visual pattern that unifies the look and feel of a style frame needs to translate across an entire design board—conceptually, visually, and sequentially—in order to create a cohesive project. This pattern requires design consistency in areas such as color, texture, typography, and cinematic qualities. A style frame that does not adhere to the defined visual pattern in a design board will feel out of place. This inconsistency disrupts a viewer’s connection to the piece and fails to communicate.

“Motion design is all about focus and flow. So much of our work, and the development of our work, is based around design boards. When you are working with clients, they are going to pour over those boards and pick them apart. It’s part of the process. Ultimately, you want to engage an audience and draw people in. When people look at a moving image, they don’t see the whole thing. They don’t see the whole frame. They are always looking at something within that. If you can chart where your audience’s eye is moving through your images, where they are going to leave one image and pick up with another image, and really make the journey interesting and engaging, and understand the pace and rhythm, then you will be able to do a piece of work that really engages people.” —Patrick Clair, *Designer/Director*

Visual Storytelling

Design boards are a visual and narrative representation of a concept. Ideally, motion designers should be familiar with the



Figure 1.14: Design board by Joe Ball, Associate Creative Director at ManvsMachine. Board created at SCAD, Design for Motion class.

traditional narrative structure of introduction, rising tension, climax, falling tension, and resolution—or, in simplest terms, the beginning, middle, and end. Although narratives can play out in infinite variations, the two most common types are *linear* and *non-linear*. Linear narratives follow a clear

progression from the beginning until the end. Non-linear narratives unfold non-chronologically or in an abstract manner. In addition to understanding the structure of narratives, motion designers need to be able to tell a story by crafting visually compelling boards.

Variety of Shots

Utilizing a variety of shot sizes and angles in a design board creates a sense of movement. Showing changes in camera distances and angles takes the viewer on a journey through the board. The cinematic flow of how style frames are arranged crafts the rhythm and the arc of a piece.

Establishing shots are typically the first frames in a design board. These shots are key to orienting the viewer in time and space. They introduce locations, characters, and the representational world of the motion design project. Establishing shots can also be used to define new scenes.



Figure 1.15: Establishing shot style frame by Eric Dies and Kalin Fields. Frame created at SCAD, Design for Motion class.



Figure 1.16: Hero style frame by Stephanie Stromenger, Freelance Designer. Frame created at SCAD, Design for Motion class.

Hero frames are style frames that portray important moments in a motion piece. They require strong compositions and clear focal points. Hero frames indicate where the viewer should be looking and what the viewer needs to process. In order to achieve this engagement, a hero frame needs to establish a *sense of presence*.⁸ A designer of motion uses visual principles

such as contrast, value, color, negative space, depth, and texture to effectively control the viewer's eye.

Between hero frames, we find *transitions*. Transitions illustrate seamless changes of visual elements or scenes. Transitions can be executed in any number of ways, from simple camera movements or adjustments of visual properties to

frame-by-frame liquid motion or complex CG. Whatever the form, ideally, transitions should be aesthetically pleasing in addition to serving the concept and story. If a transition can produce a pleasant surprise in the viewer, it has effectively done its job.

In Figures 1.17 and 1.18, we see transitions for *The Night Manager* title sequence. This motion design project showcases excellent examples of transitions. Dramatic changes in relatively short amounts of time create compelling moments that engage the viewer. These transformations are elegantly crafted and express the underlying ideas and themes of the show they are introducing. Here is a description of the conceptual thinking and technical approach, by director Patrick Clair.

“I watched the show and I loved it and started talking to the producers and the director. They were talking with how the show dealt with the commercialization of war and weaponry. Back when I was doing documentary pieces, they were most often concerned with the fascinating bleeding edge of new technology driving warfare or being harnessed by warfare on one side and the ethical complexities that emerge when war and technology and killing is merged with business, and economics, and international relations. So, I had all this thinking in my head about that. But the actual idea was really simple. Let’s take luxury stuff and turn it into weaponry, and back again. That tickled my brain and I love fitting things together. How can the plume of a missile launch match the shape of a martini glass? What does a tea set look like if it is laid out in the form of a Gatling Gun? My favorite shot in that piece is a cluster of diamond earrings break, and as they fall, they become cluster bombs. You look at it, and it feels like the images are fused together in an impossible to understand way. It’s just a cross-dissolve. But it’s a cross dissolve done with the intent of really

beautiful lighting, moving in the right way. The simplest things done well can be much more powerful than some kind of super complicated morph.”⁹

The Shape of Stories

When we go to the movies, see a play, watch an episode of a show, or read a novel, we are seeking a dramatic experience. *Drama* is the art of representing extreme changes to entertain and to instruct.¹⁰ A story without change is flat. In motion design, we are creating stories and narratives on a smaller scale than movies or novels. However, our stories still need to be interesting and dynamic. Motion designers need to be able to create stories that engage viewers with dramatic change, contrast, and tension. When creating a design board, it is important to be clear about the overall shape of the story you are telling.

American author Kurt Vonnegut introduced an idea called “The Simple Shape of Stories” (see Figure 1.19).¹¹ His theory illustrates how classical tales have recognizable patterns. Vonnegut identified a number of simple shapes that repeat over and over again in storytelling. Joseph Campbell explored similar ideas with his books *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*¹² and *The Power of Myth*.¹³ Campbell identified archetypal stories that occur repeatedly in different cultures around the world and at different points in history. Christopher Vogler translated Joseph Campbell’s ideas into a text for writers called *The Writer’s Journey*.¹⁴ This text outlines the essential patterns that repeat in heroic stories and has served as a template for many Hollywood films. These authors have identified contrast and tension as the primary ingredients of dramatic storytelling.

To illustrate this idea, I will often show my students the graph editor in After Effects because it is an information graphic of how velocity changes between keyframes (see Figure 1.20). In the graph editor, velocity that does not change over time appears as a straight line, which is relatively static and boring.

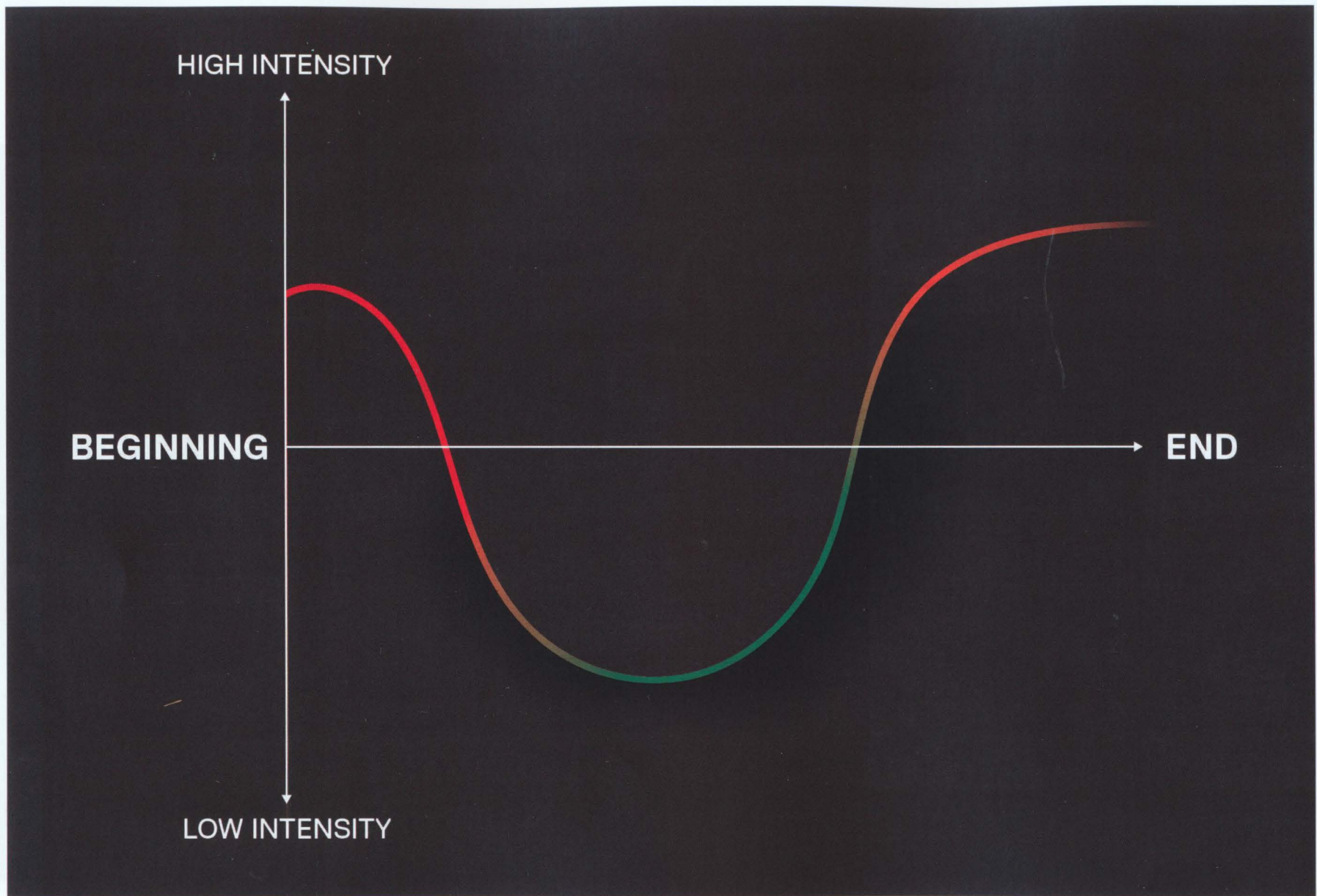
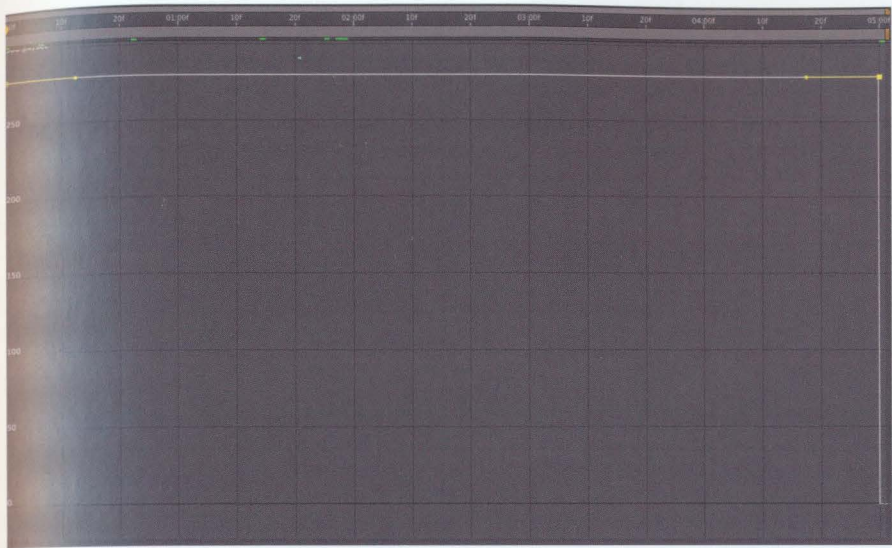
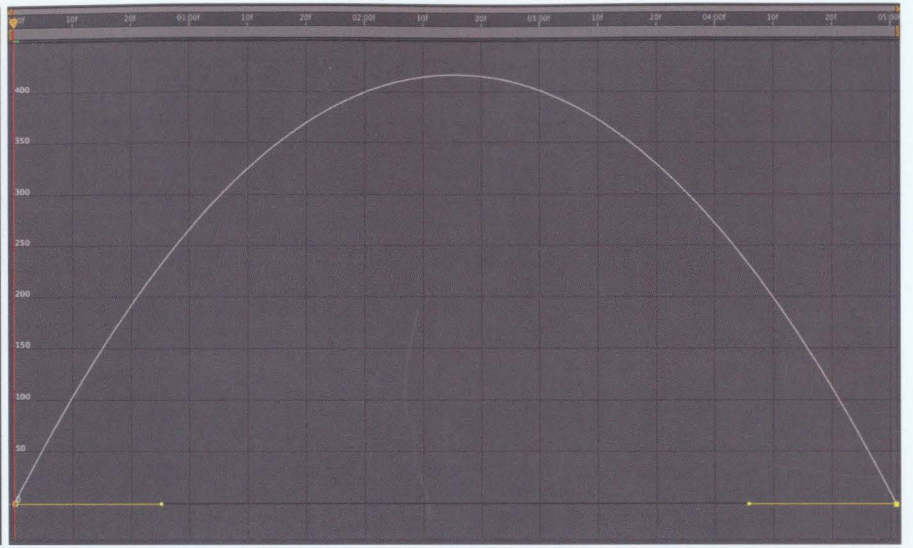


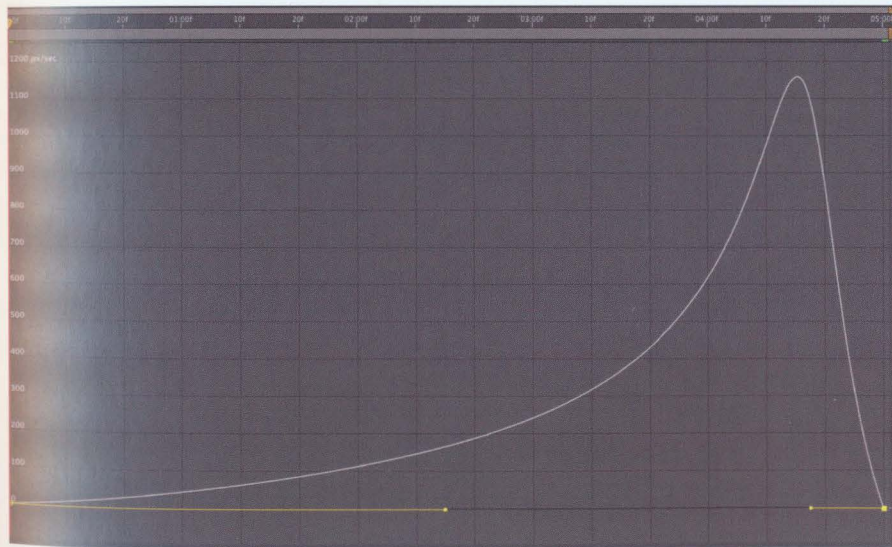
Figure 1.19: Information-graphic representing Kurt Vonnegut's "The Simple Shape of Stories."



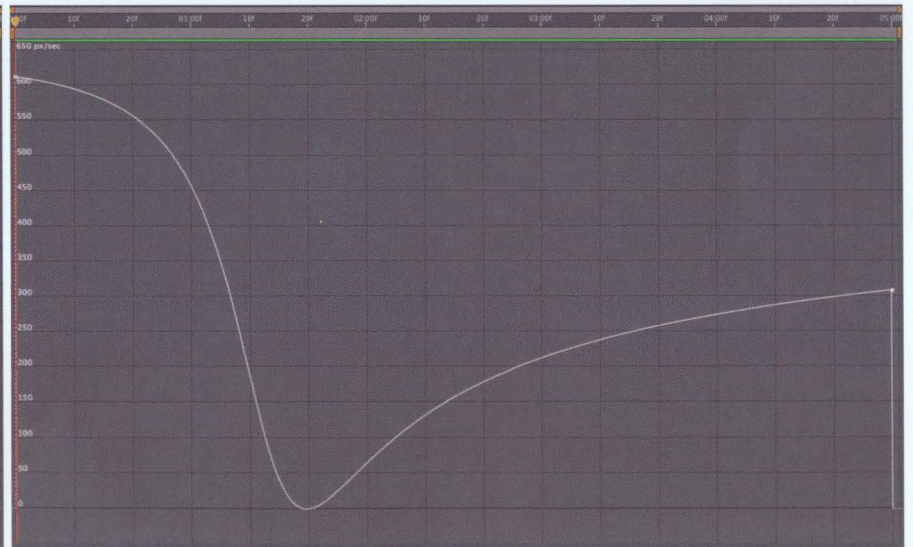
LINEAR - NO CHANGE



EASE OUT & EASE IN - SUBTLE CHANGE



DRASTIC EASING - DRASTIC CHANGE



UNEXPECTED CURVE - UNEXPECTED CHANGE

Figure 1.20: Screen captures of After Effects graph editor.

Author's Reflection

The layout of a design board is just as important as the composition of a single style frame. The arrangement of style frames reveals how the story unfolds. I often advise my students to think about their design boards as a journey from one beautiful composition to another.

Students often ask how many style frames are needed in a design board. There is no set number. You need enough frames

to clearly communicate the concept and narrative. However, you do not want so many frames that it either confuses the viewer or overly constricts your production. Leave some room for growth, change, or simply for the viewer's imagination to fill in what happens between frames.

The more dramatic the shape of the graph editor curve, the more dynamic the motion. The graph editor in After Effects and Kurt Vonnegut's "The Simple Shape of Stories" idea can be helpful tools for planning the shape of your design board's narrative.

Design Boards in Production

Like style frames, a vital function of design boards is to plan and guide productions. Design boards establish the parameters for the visual style and narrative of a motion design project. For a studio, the design board keeps all members of the creative team on the same page. There are a lot of moving parts in every production, and ideally, they all need to move in a unified manner. Throughout a design-driven production, all members of the team can refer back to the design board for clarity and consistency.

With competitive pitches, clients *award* projects based on the strength of a concept and its visual presentation. When a client awards a project, they are buying that style and story. Design boards are like a promise, or a visual contract, that a studio or

designer makes with a client. There is an expectation that the final outcome of a motion design piece will look like the style frames and design boards that the client approved.

Design boards are like insurance policies for an artist or a studio. Because design-driven productions can be very time-consuming and costly, it is vital that the client signs off on the design aesthetic prior to animation production. The last thing an artist or studio wants to do is to spend weeks building assets, compositing elements, and creating motion only to be told by a client that they want a different design style. If the client is willing to pay for these changes and push the deadline for delivery of the project, that can be negotiated. However, even under the best circumstances for the artist or studio, it is challenging to switch aesthetics halfway through a project. Design boards offer the opportunity to be sure that the client and studio are in agreement regarding the visual look and feel of the project before production gets under way. *Be very cautious of starting a commercial production before a client signs off on the visual style.*