

December 10, 2019

Tish Evangelista, Ben Pham, and Rishi Shourie
Co-Founders and Principals

1

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Founders in Conversation



REFLECTING ON 20 YEARS OF DESIGN, EXCITEMENT, AND COLLABORATION

To celebrate our 20th anniversary, we spoke to our co-founders: Tish, Ben, and Rishi. The three still lead the company alongside four other Principals, based in SF and NY. We asked them why they started Character, what design means to them, and what they're most proud of in the two decades since starting. The interview below has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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Tell us about the origin of the idea that became Character.
How long has it been, and why did you choose to create Character?

B Rishi, Tish and I formed a special friendship in art school because we shared the same passion for design and vision for the impact of good design. We started because we believed that when you gather people with a shared passion, then work becomes play, and great things happen. After 25 years, we still have that passion for our craft. We are still good friends who spend holidays and vacation together.

T At the end of the day, we thought it would be fun. We thought, what better way to live your life than doing what you really enjoy doing, with people you really enjoy working with?

R I never thought I'd want to have my own company, but it ended up being so natural. I don't remember being too scared, because we were young. We had no kids, no house, no car. What was my driving force to say, yes, let's do this? I think it was just the excitement, the idea of having our own firm. We shared a very similar passion, and that's what brought us together.

T I agree, for me it was a fun adventure.
Should we fail, that would be a fun learning experience too, because we were young and had nothing to lose.

When you decided to do this thing together,
what did you want Character to do?

T It was always a matter of doing great design. Challenging ourselves, and creating a design world that was exciting and new — whether

Interview with:
→ Ben Pham
→ Tish Evangelista
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01



for us or our clients. It was the idea that we could push ourselves in a new way, to do new things.

- B If you can treat a client or an approach with a new perspective where you were brave and unafraid to fail — as long as you don't let the client fail with you — the work comes across fresher. You don't have the guardrails and boundaries that normally prohibit innovative thinking. For us, we had the benefit of being in our early-mid twenties when we started Character. We were entrusted with significant responsibilities from prominent brands when we first started. In a way, our naiveté helped us, because we weren't doing things the way everyone else was. I think some of our best work threw everything out to try something new. We still have that mindset today.

- R Starting out, we didn't think about the money; we thought about the design. To this day, we still think about the work we could accomplish together and feel excitement about the unknown.

So, what was it like to be new founders in the design community?

- T We were very welcomed. At the time, we were focused on the 5-year goal, not focused on 20 years out. We were motivated by the doing of the work, rather than the end goal.

Was there anything you felt like the design community was missing or needed more of?

- B I grew up admiring designers that had their names on their agency door. But we felt it was time for a new agency that was



known for the collective teams' work, rather than those who founded it.

T There were all these companies in the Bay Area that were potentially great for us to work with, and that was exciting to us. So that's what we did. That is what drove us.

R It wasn't this grand plan. Our passion was just about doing good work and being able to work with good people who shared that excitement.

B For years, and even now, we try not to look beyond the assignment. We just focus on doing that job really well and pouring everything we have into it. In the past, it always paid off — so we've continued that mindset.

T That's the reason why we stayed small for so long. Keeping it a more intimate group meant that we could focus on creating great work and develop real relationships with the clients we had, versus develop lots of new relationships because we needed to.

[Launching Character] was what we really wanted to do. It's also what I really wanted to do, to open my own shop — and that wasn't a given for me. Starting Character was exciting, a great experiment. We thought, let's figure this out as we go along.

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As you went along, it seems like you've grown to know each other really well. What you admire most about each other's creative work?

T I admire Rishi's ability to be a designer's designer. He loves the intricacy of design and always immerses himself in that, and is driven by that.



Ben is incredibly dedicated. If there's one person who encapsulates the idea of tackling something entirely new without reservation, that's Ben. He's always embracing a new way to see something.

B That's very sweet, Tish.

R Ben, back in school and even now, always pushes me. And I can doubt it or fight against it, but it's a good balance for someone to always keep me on my toes.

As for Tish... Thinking back on it, would I have wanted to start Character with just Ben? Maybe not. [Everyone laughs] Tish grounds it out. She is extremely intelligent, and I knew we could do this because I knew she could get us there.

T Thank you, Rishi. [Laughs]

B Rishi sets the standard to the dedication of craft and care at Character. There's never a pixel out of place in Rishi's work. Tish and I have always felt Rishi sets the high standard of design that we have at Character. He has shaped me as a designer and the pride I feel about the work that we produce at Character.

Without Tish we would not have a business. At the beginning she negotiated all the contracts, with the help of a lawyer, wrote the employee handbooks, crafted our strategy approach, and was the face of HR, at the same time being a brilliant creative director. From the first day that we landed our first client and to our first hire, she reminded us that with that privilege comes a great responsibility to do right by them. Equal work and equal pay has always been something that she championed that she put into practice at Character since starting Character 20 years ago.

At the end of the day, we're proud that we've built



something and it lasted 20 years. Today, we still shared the same passion for what we do, and our friendship has never wavered through the years.

R This is all very personal. Do you have any... less personal questions?

[Tish, Rishi, and Ben laugh]

Ok, less personal question: Character's 20 year anniversary is this year. What are you most proud of, looking back?

T I'm most proud of the fact that we're intact. A lot of companies started by friends tend to have their relationship or their company fall apart; one tends to give. But we all still look at each other in the eye, choose to have dinner together, and spend weekends with each other. We as founders are still here, we respect each other, and we still enjoy working with each other. That's a success. Even if we disagree, we do it with respect.

R I'm proud that we've always evolved. If we were stagnant, we could still be around but we'd be doing crappy work. If I look back at the roster of work we've done, we always get better. Whether it's a project done 15 years ago or yesterday, I'm always really proud of the work we've been able to achieve with everyone. If we weren't doing good work, there'd be no reason for us to exist. And the work we've done is a testament of the people we surround ourselves with: all those talented people who share in our vision.

T Opening up our offerings meant accepting that the three of us had limitations. We came to a point where we needed real experts in specialized areas of the industry. We couldn't just wing everything



for the rest of our careers. We realized that in order to grow Character as a business, we need the additional help from people we could trust. Ollie [Ralph] joined us nine years ago to lead the business side of things and Paul [Miller] came on board shortly after to help round out the design leadership.

R The other big milestone was in the last couple of years. We always talked about having a New York office, and we've been inspired by New York culturally. It's the big phase we're in now. Having an office in New York isn't just having a new team; it's a new group of friends that we respect. And they're helping us shape the next phase of where we're headed.

T Yes, New York has always been a dream, and [opening it a year ago] was a big milestone.

B When I think about what I'm proud of, I don't always look at the work. I am proud of the relationships, like the ones I have with my partners Rishi, Tish, Paul and Ollie. I hold dear the relationships I developed with our clients, current and past employees, and the people we worked with over the last 20 years. Some of my closet friends are past clients, employees, and collaborators. I wouldn't have had this opportunity without Character.

06

Looking forward to the next 20 years, what are you most excited about?

B Like the first day that we started Character, there is the excitement of not really knowing what the future may bring—but comfort in the awareness that we can control our destiny with hard work and dedication.



- R For me, it would be continuing to meet and work with inspiring people. People that help me grow, who push me. To continue to do great work. And not retire. [Laughs]
- T 20 years is a long time. Getting there didn't take long, but the next 20 years will. I'm excited about this continued spirit of adventure, tackling new things, and constantly challenging ourselves.
- R I would hope that whether we're the same size or slightly larger, that we never stay stagnant.

