



THE NOVELTY MYTH AS A NORMATIVE MODEL OF CREATIVITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF DESIGN PRACTICE

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Abstract. This article examines how creativity is understood within contemporary graphic design practice, arguing that it is increasingly reduced to the continuous production of novelty. While creativity research generally treats novelty alone as insufficient to constitute creativity (Amabile, 1996; Boden, 2004; Runco & Jaeger, 2012), contemporary design environments often equate creativity with visible differentiation and constant renewal. Drawing on sociological and systems-based approaches to creativity, Barthes' concept of myth and Reckwitz's creativity dispositif, the article introduces the *novelty myth* to describe how "the new" operates as a normative expectation. Through practice-based artistic inquiry, combining autoethnographic reflection with parafictional design experiments developed within *Unagency*, the study examines how procedural forms of novelty become visible when familiar operations of design practice are isolated and exaggerated. It contributes to critical creativity studies by bringing sociological theories of creativity into dialogue with situated artistic inquiry, using graphic design practice as a diagnostic site for examining continuous novelty.

Keywords: creativity, novelty, design practice, practice-based research, critical creativity studies, creativity dispositif, iteration, transformational creativity.

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1. Introduction: creativity and the demand for the new

In this article, creativity is understood not as an inherent individual capacity, but as a socially structured practice shaped by production, evaluation, and recognition systems (Godart et al., 2020; Kiriya et al., 2020). In contemporary graphic design and visual communication, creativity becomes closely tied to novelty through client-oriented work, branding cycles, and demands for visible differentiation. Designers are expected to continuously update outputs to remain culturally and economically relevant, while novelty appears as a self-evident value aligned with progress and innovation.

Yet, professional design largely unfolds through revisions, updates, refinements, and re-combinations rather than radical transformation. Novelty can therefore become procedural: something must be new, regardless of whether it changes anything substantively.

The central question of this article is therefore: *How can the demand for novelty in contemporary graphic design practice be examined through practice-based artistic inquiry?* To address this, the article introduces the concept of the *novelty myth* – a cultural construct that frames continuous renewal as natural, necessary, and inherently creative. Following Barthes (1991), myth is understood as a system of meaning that presents historically contingent conditions as self-evident. In this sense, novelty appears not as a neutral descriptor, but as a normative force shaping both practice and perception.

This article contributes to critical creativity studies by bringing sociological theories of creativity into dialogue with practice-based artistic inquiry. Rather than treating the experiments as representative evidence of contemporary design practice, the study uses graphic design as a situated diagnostic site from which to examine how the demand for novelty may be experienced, materialized, and reflected upon in everyday creative work.

2. Theoretical context: creativity, novelty, and the politics of creative production

Creativity research generally defines creativity through outcomes that are both novel and appropriate (Runco & Jaeger, 2012; Amabile, 1996). Boden (2004) further distinguishes between combinational, exploratory, and transformational creativity: while the first two operate through variation within existing frameworks, transformational creativity changes the framework itself. These distinctions suggest that difference alone does not constitute meaningful creativity. Yet contemporary design often treats “the new” not only as an aesthetic quality, but as a cultural expectation and professional requirement.

The novelty myth builds on Barthes’ understanding of myth as a cultural construct that comes to appear natural. Novelty is therefore approached as a value-laden narrative presenting continuous renewal as inherently necessary and creative: what appears self-evident – that design must constantly produce the new – is historically and culturally produced. Novelty is also inherently unstable: the new begins to age the moment it appears (North, 2013). Under conditions of social acceleration, novelty shifts from rupture to requirement; the new increasingly operates as obligation rather than transformation (Lijster, 2018).

Sociological and systems-based approaches similarly understand creativity as socially produced and evaluated rather than as an intrinsic property of individuals or objects. Godart et al. (2020) emphasize processes of valuation through which audiences, institutions, and fields determine what becomes recognized as original or valuable, while Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model locates creativity in interactions between individuals, domains, and fields (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). Within creative industries, these processes are further shaped by organizational and broader socio-economic conditions (Černevičiūtė et al., 2015).

Reckwitz (2017) situates these dynamics within the creativity dispositif, in which novelty, originality, and singularity become organizing principles across cultural and economic domains. Creativity becomes a generalized social expectation operating simultaneously as aspiration and structural demand. In design, this is expressed through continuous cycles of updating, refreshing, and differentiation, where even minimal variation can function as a marker of value. This recalls critiques of standardized cultural production operating through the appearance of difference rather than substantive transformation (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997). While Reckwitz (2017) describes this broader social regime, the novelty myth addresses how the historically produced demand for continuous newness becomes naturalized as a self-evident condition of creative work.

Contemporary discourse increasingly frames creativity as an economic resource tied to flexibility, innovation, and self-renewal, while simultaneously subjecting creative work to managerial, technological, and market-oriented forms of organization (Kiriya et al., 2020).

As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue, contemporary capitalism increasingly absorbs values historically associated with artistic forms of critique – such as autonomy, flexibility, and creativity – transforming them into productive imperatives. In graphic design, this translates into an expectation to remain constantly inventive – continuously adapting to trends and new technologies, producing “fresh” ideas, and effortlessly moving through endless cycles of revisions, updates, and campaign rollouts.

This process is inseparable from broader dynamics of acceleration. Rosa (2013) describes late modern society as structured by dynamic stabilisation, in which systems must continuously increase speed and output simply to maintain themselves. Under such conditions, change becomes a mechanism of continuity rather than transformation. Design practice is deeply entangled in this logic: visual communication translates change into visible form through updates, redesigns, and new versions, even when underlying conditions remain largely unchanged. What appears externally as pressure is also internalized. Han (2015) argues that contemporary productivity regimes rely on self-mobilization, where compulsion is experienced as motivation. In creative work, the demand to continuously produce novelty becomes both external expectation and internalized desire, positioning the designer as both producer of novelty and manager of their own creative exhaustion.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that novelty operates not simply as an outcome of creative work, but as a normative condition that structures creativity itself. The novelty myth describes how this historically produced demand for continuous renewal comes to appear as an inherent requirement of creative practice.

3. Creativity under conditions of continuous novelty

If creativity is conventionally associated with the emergence of something new, then contemporary design practice presents a paradoxical case. Design is saturated with the demand for novelty, yet its production is often organized through repetition, adaptation, recombination, and iterative change. These processes are not inherently less creative or valuable than transformational forms: iteration may produce meaningful refinement, maintenance, or contextual adaptation. The issue is rather that some forms of creativity fit more easily within systems organized around continuous production and evaluation. Design labour is frequently organized around iterative adjustments – another version, another refresh – operating within narrow frameworks of allowable difference.

These processes can be understood in relation to combinational and exploratory creativity (Boden, 2004), where variation occurs within established systems. Within contemporary design, such forms may be easier to accommodate because they can be iterated, evaluated, and integrated into accelerated production cycles. As Godart et al. (2020) suggest, institutional and organizational mechanisms of recognition shape which forms of novelty become visible and valued. The result is not the disappearance of transformational creativity, but uneven conditions in which iterative, demonstrable variation is more readily produced and circulated than forms requiring uncertainty, extended exploration, or fundamental reconfiguration.

4. Methodology: artistic research and parafictional design

This study is situated within artistic research, where creative practice participates in the production of knowledge and understanding (Borgdorff, 2011; Sullivan, 2010). Rather than seeking representative findings about graphic design, the research develops situated and diagnostic understanding. Borgdorff (2011) describes artistic research as thinking “in, through and with art,” articulating tacit and embodied knowledge through practice. His recent account emphasizes experimentation, interpretation, and critical reflection (Borgdorff, 2026). Bödeker (2023) similarly argues that artistic insight need not be equated with scientific knowledge to constitute a meaningful research outcome. The experiments therefore function not as empirical evidence of graphic design as a whole, but as diagnostic probes that isolate, exaggerate, and reflect upon particular conditions of practice.

The research adopts an autoethnographic position in which the designer-researcher works from within the practice examined (Ellis et al., 2011). The author’s twenty years of professional graphic design experience form the experiential field from which recurring operations and tensions – versioning, revision, accumulation, and demands for “freshness” – were identified. Autoethnography functions not as evidence that these experiences are representative, but as a methodological filter through which implicit, affective, and procedural dimensions become available for reflection. This is compatible with artistic research, where the researcher’s practice may constitute the field of investigation (Borgdorff, 2011), and with recent design research emphasizing situated and self-reflexive research positions (Vanni & Crosby, 2023).

The investigation is conducted through *Unagency*, a parafictional design agency that imitates and subtly distorts familiar formats and procedures of commercial design practice. Parafiction describes fictional constructs that operate within real-world systems, using ambiguity between fact and fiction to expose underlying assumptions (Lambert-Beatty, 2009). Unlike speculative design, which commonly constructs alternative scenarios to question existing conditions (Dunne & Raby, 2013), *Unagency* remains deliberately close to existing professional routines, exaggerating their internal logic rather than imagining alternatives to them. This allows ordinary operations of design work to be temporarily separated from their usual productive purpose and treated as material for inquiry.

The four experiments were selected from the broader *Unagency* project because each isolates a recurring operation of design practice: versioning, naming, accumulation, or classification. They are deliberately constructed situations rather than a representative sample. Each experiment is organized through *Unagency*’s parafictional structure of an *un-brief*, *un-pitch*, and *un-deliverable*, followed by an account of the procedure. The resulting artefact and process are then examined through three stages: procedure – what was done; retrospective observation – what became noticeable; and interpretation – how these observations relate to the research question and theoretical framework. This retrospective articulation is consistent with reflective artistic research (Bödeker, 2023; Borgdorff, 2026). It also aligns with art-and-design-based approaches that use design practice itself as part of knowledge production, without requiring statistical generalisation (Černevičiūtė & Liebutė, 2022).

Rather than empirically verifying the broader sociological theories, theory and practice are brought into dialogue: sociological accounts provide a framework for understanding wider conditions of creative production, while the experiments provide situated artefacts and processes through which aspects of these conditions can be retrospectively reflected upon.

5. Experiments: probing the production of novelty

5.1. Versioning without improvement

Procedure. Horizontal lines were drawn successively on a blank sheet of paper, each marked with a timestamp, until no physical space remained for another line (Figure 1). The *un-brief* defined updating as a continuous procedure without meaning; the *un-pitch* examined novelty through repeated corrections and versioning typical of commercial design work, without criteria for evaluation or resolution; and the *un-deliverable* presented the resulting accumulation as movement without direction, correction for correction's sake, and progress without transformation.

Retrospective observation. Differences inevitably appeared between the lines, but no criterion existed by which one version could constitute an improvement over another. The sequence therefore accumulated variation and chronological progression without producing an identifiable direction of development.

Interpretation. Read through Rosa's concept of dynamic stabilisation, the experiment foregrounds how activity and change can continue while the underlying structure remains unchanged (Rosa, 2013). In Boden's (2004) terms, variation occurs within a fixed conceptual space rather than transforming it. The experiment thus isolates a procedural logic of the novelty myth in which continued updating itself becomes evidence of creative activity, independently of improvement or transformation.

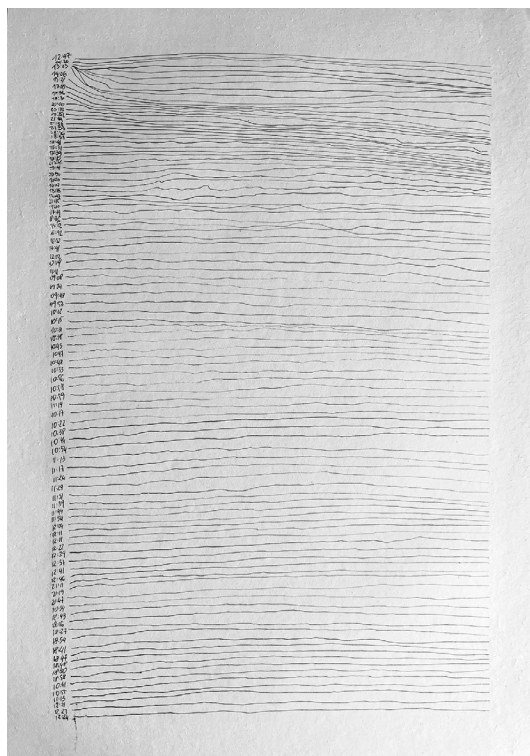


Figure 1. Versioning without improvement. *Unagency* experiment (source: author's work)

5.2. File naming and the illusion of progress

Procedure. Real file names from a single design project were collected and presented as an archival diagram without visual interpretation (Figure 2). The project itself was never released, leaving the sequence as a record of iteration without resolution. The *un-brief* defined file naming as a means of documenting versioning in design practice; the *un-pitch* shifted attention from visual outcomes to how versions are produced, renamed, and accumulated; and the *un-deliverable* presented novelty as registered through the multiplication of versions rather than transformation of content.

Retrospective observation. Read as a sequence, the file names produce a chronology of development in which terms signalling completion, such as *final* or *approved*, repeatedly cease to mean completion. Each new label differentiates one stage from another while anticipating further revision. The unreleased status of the project makes the accumulation particularly visible as a record of production without final resolution.

Interpretation. The discrepancy between the language of progression and the cyclical character of revision foregrounds how difference becomes recorded and made legible as development. Read alongside Godart et al.'s (2020) account of creativity as shaped by systems of valuation and recognition, the experiment draws attention to the ways novelty must not only be produced but also become recognizable as difference. File naming can thus be understood as a mundane mechanism through which continuous iteration acquires the appearance of forward movement, even when the scale or direction of change remains unclear.

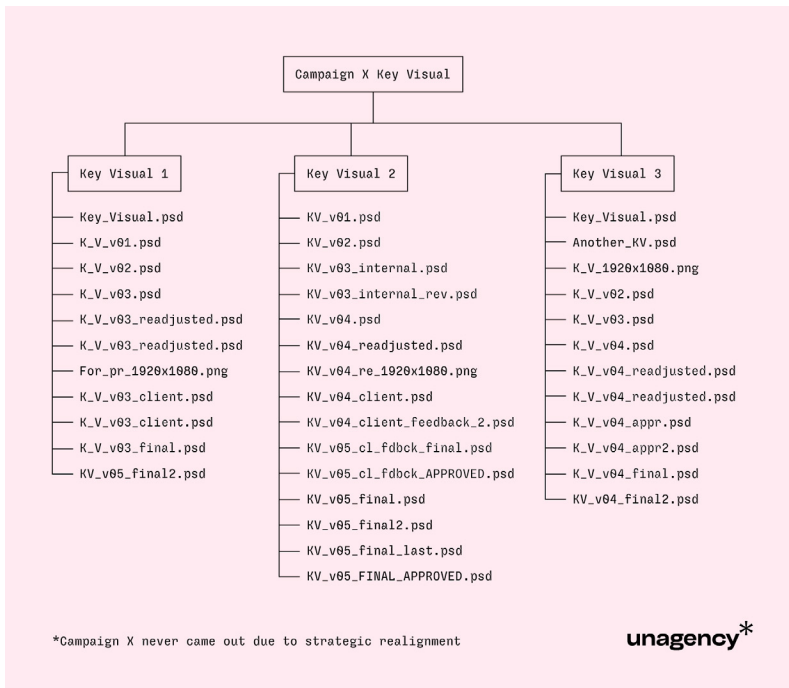


Figure 2. File naming and the illusion of progress. Unagency experiment (source: author's work)

5.3. Stacking: Excess as outcome

Procedure. Visual artefacts from a single doctoral design project were layered without selection, hierarchy, or qualitative judgement, with opacity adjusted only to maintain their visibility (Figure 3). The process concluded when distinctions between versions collapsed into a unified visual mass. The *un-brief* defined the task as accumulating design outputs without selection; the *un-pitch* reframed design practice as a form of hoarding in which all iterations are retained rather than refined or discarded; and the *un-deliverable* presented the resulting visual mass as an unresolved accumulation in which individual versions become indistinguishable.

Retrospective observation. Layering makes distinctions between draft, iteration, rejected option, and final design difficult to maintain. Accumulation produces opacity rather than clarification, and the chronological narrative of development collapses: progression and excess occupy the same visual space.

Interpretation. The experiment makes materially visible the volume of intermediate production normally concealed by a resolved outcome. Read through Rosa's (2013) dynamic stabilisation, accumulation can be understood as increasing activity that does not necessarily produce structural transformation. It also resonates with Kiriya et al.'s (2020) account of the industrialization of creativity, in which creative work becomes organized through continuous production. By suspending selection and resolution, *Stacking* shifts attention from the novelty of individual outcomes to the accumulation generated through ongoing creative production.



Figure 3. *Stacking: Excess as outcome.* Unagency experiment (source: author's work)

5.4. Taxonomies of novelty

Procedure. Industry terms describing changes in brand identity – including *refresh*, *update*, *revamp*, and *repositioning* – were collected and organized into a classification system, visualized through deliberately subtle formal variations (Figure 4). The *un-brief* defined the task as classifying forms and terminology of renewal; the *un-pitch* isolated brand identity as a domain in which differently scaled changes are organized through the language of newness; and the *un-deliverable* presented novelty as a linguistic and classificatory structure in which even minor modifications can be registered as renewal.

Retrospective observation. The taxonomy brought together terms implying different degrees of intervention while often referring to stylistic, corrective, incremental, or reorganizational change. Classification made the boundaries between these categories unstable: differently named processes could correspond to comparatively similar degrees of change, while the category of the “new” accommodated a wide range of modifications.

Interpretation. The experiment foregrounds how novelty can be organized discursively as well as visually. Read through Barthes’ (1991) account of myth, the terminology makes particular forms of continuous renewal appear as self-evident categories of design practice; in relation to Reckwitz’s (2017) creativity dispositif, such differentiation can be situated within a broader cultural demand for novelty and singularity. The taxonomy thus materializes one possible operation of the novelty myth: differently scaled changes become legible within a shared language of newness.

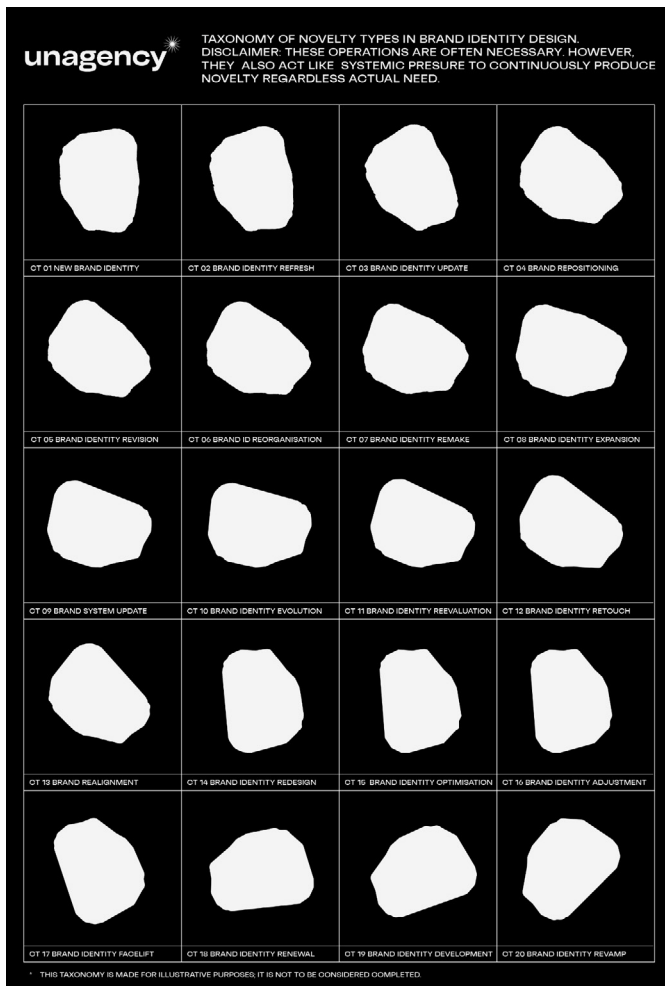


Figure 4. Taxonomies of novelty. Unagency experiment (source: author's work)

Viewed together, the experiments bring into view aspects of the industrialization of creativity described by Kiriya et al. (2020), in which creative work is structured through continuous production, visibility, and differentiation. By isolating versioning, naming, accumulation, and classification, they foreground how difference is produced, recorded, accumulated, and classified as part of ongoing creative activity.

6. Discussion: creativity within the novelty regime

Read collectively through the novelty-myth framework, the experiments foreground recurring operations through which novelty may be experienced and enacted in design: versioning, progression through naming, accumulation, and the classification of newness. They do not establish a general model of contemporary graphic design, but provide material for reconsidering how these operations organize continuous newness.

Alongside the theoretical framework, these operations suggest that the novelty myth works not by eliminating creativity or iteration, but by shaping the conditions under which particular forms of creativity are more readily produced and recognized. Iterative creativity is not inherently less meaningful than transformational creativity: revision, adaptation, and recombination can generate improvement and contextual change. The issue is their structural compatibility. Forms that can be repeatedly produced, evaluated, and circulated fit more easily within organizational systems oriented toward responsiveness and continuous output (Godart et al., 2020; Kiriya et al., 2020).

Verganti et al. (2021) identify a comparable tension: iterative Design Thinking can generate path dependency, keeping design within incremental trajectories when more fundamental reframing is required. The problem is not iteration itself, but its suitability when existing frames need reconsideration. In Boden's terms, systems organized around continuous production readily accommodate variation within existing frameworks, while transformational creativity requires the possibility of questioning the framework itself.

This distinction also clarifies what the novelty myth adds to Reckwitz's creativity dispositif. Reckwitz (2017) describes the broader social regime in which creativity, originality, and singularity become generalized expectations. The novelty myth operates at a more situated level: it describes how the demand for continuous newness becomes naturalized within the routines through which creative work is produced, named, evaluated, and renewed. In this sense, *Unagency* brings routine operations into view by interrupting or exaggerating their usual logic.

7. Conclusions: rethinking creativity beyond the imperative of novelty

This article approached novelty in contemporary graphic design not merely as a creative outcome, but as a normative **expectation**. The novelty myth frames continuous renewal as historically and culturally produced rather than inherent to creative practice. The *Unagency* experiments provide situated encounters with its possible operation through versioning, naming, accumulation, and classification.

Rather than rejecting novelty, this perspective opens creativity toward maintenance, care, and continuation. As Mattern (2018) and Russell and Vinsel (2018) argue, contemporary culture privileges innovation while rendering the maintenance on which systems depend largely invisible. Creativity may emerge not only through rupture, but through sustaining, repairing, and adapting existing forms.

Automation further complicates procedural novelty. As combinational and exploratory creativity operate through structured variation (Boden, 2004), computational systems may increasingly absorb such production. Generative artificial intelligence already accelerates ideation while raising concerns about the originality and diversity of creative outputs (Flores Heymann & Briedis, 2025). Verganti et al. (2021) argue that as ideas become increasingly abundant, design may shift from generating solutions toward sensemaking and reframing.

The temporal dimension remains important. Rosa's (2013) concept of dynamic stabilisation describes systems in which increasing output and renewal become necessary simply to maintain stability. Read through this framework, the experiments suggest how continuous activity can coexist with limited structural change: another version, another designation of newness, another accumulated outcome. The question raised by the novelty myth is therefore not whether iteration constitutes creativity, but what happens when continuous renewal becomes a precondition of creative production.

For creativity studies, the contribution of this article is conceptual: by treating design practice as a diagnostic site, it shows how normativity can operate not through explicit rules, but through procedural, evaluative, and organizational mechanisms that privilege continuous variation, responsiveness, and visible differentiation. The framework of the novelty myth may therefore offer a conceptual lens potentially relevant to other fields in which creativity becomes institutionalized as a productive demand and measured through the continuous demonstration of newness.

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