

# DOING EPIC WORK

... in less-than-epic places



Dan Willis (@uxcrank), UX consultant - GIANT Conference, June 2014

As many people in this room can tell you, I'm no Albert Einstein. My name is Dan Willis and I've worked at some great organizations, but from a UX perspective, most of them were not what I'd call "epic." And yet, I think I've had a bunch of opportunities to do epic work and I wanted to figure out how exactly that had happened.

One of the ways I figure things out is I talk about them in presentations at conferences. Like most of us, I'm pretty self-conscious about going in front of a large group of my peers and looking like an idiot and that fear pushes me to think deeply about whatever it is I'm going to say in front of you guys. So I had to figure "epic" out.

The organizers of the GIANT Conference are nuts, can we just agree on that? Christian Manzella first talked to me about speaking at this conference in September of last year. You don't have to be an Einstein to do the math on that one - that was nine months ago. A baby goes from an unfertilized egg to a ready-for-prime-time human in nine months. nine months is a ridiculous lead time for any conference, especially the first time you put one on.

So these guys are treating this conference like their baby and as any parents with the means



The GIANT Conference Web site: the picture of excess.

available will do, they have spoiled their child with excess at every possible opportunity. They have six keynotes. Don't get me wrong, I'm very grateful to be one of them, but six is a lot. When Christian and his two loony buddies started to roll out the names of their other 70 speakers, I wondered who would be left in our tiny community to actually buy tickets. I came to Charleston half-expecting Shriners, with their fez hats and little go-carts, filling the open seats or cardboard cutouts, like the kind they used in movies before digital effects could make baseball stadiums appear full.

They have 43 sponsors and partners. They have three full-scale parties during the conference. They offer free ice cream and free beer ... possibly, at the same time.

As we close out the first day of this huge, fat, spoiled baby of a conference, I'm pretty sure one common experience among us has been the sweet frustration of making impossible choices between equally amazing talks. Clearly, these guys, from day one, have been aiming for EPIC.

Albert Einstein aimed for epic. He didn't *accidentally* develop the general theory of relativity and help create modern physics. He took a job as a technical assistant - level III at the federal patent office in Bern, Switzerland because he didn't have to use much of his brain juice to do the job well. He worked there evaluating patent applications for electromagnetic devices for seven years. And in the middle of it, he did it well enough to get promoted. And he got his PhD. And in his spare time, he wrote four high-profile scientific papers that would forever change how we think of space, time, mass, and energy.

Quick, name the other individuals working with Einstein in that patent office who would later



Einstein in his patent office years conserving his brain juice during the day and changing our view of physics at night.

go on to great acclaim. Any guesses? There were none. He worked side-by-side with patent clerks whose names we will never know. They held on to those jobs for decades and dreamed of soup and wool socks. If we're not an Einstein, are we just one of the guys who sat next to him for seven years borrowing his pencils and complaining when he left the coffeepot empty? How can we do epic things, too?



A winning lottery ticket is amazing, but it's not epic. Like this conference, or the general theory of relativity, you have to make epic things happen. I have some suggestions on how to do that even if you don't work for Apple or Google, *because most of us never will*. We're going to talk about five tactics for epic.

### **Tactic 1: Remember the True Enemy**

Now look, I am not exactly fanboy material, but I will admit that I read a bunch of comic books as a kid. I was a Marvel guy, especially the X-Men when Chris Claremont was writing about galactic-scale wars. So it should be no surprise that I think the first Avengers movie was pretty stinking epic. Mark Ruffalo as Bruce Banner? Captain America running tactics on the fly in the middle of an alien invasion? They even took a stupid character, Hawkeye, and made him cool and turned one of the most sexual (yet always fully-clothed) superheroes ever, Black Widow, into a cerebral, analytical powerhouse. C'mon, that's great stuff!

I am a year older than *Batman: The Movie* starring Adam West, an actor who was both chunky and spindly even in his prime. You might think awful superhero movies like that are what makes



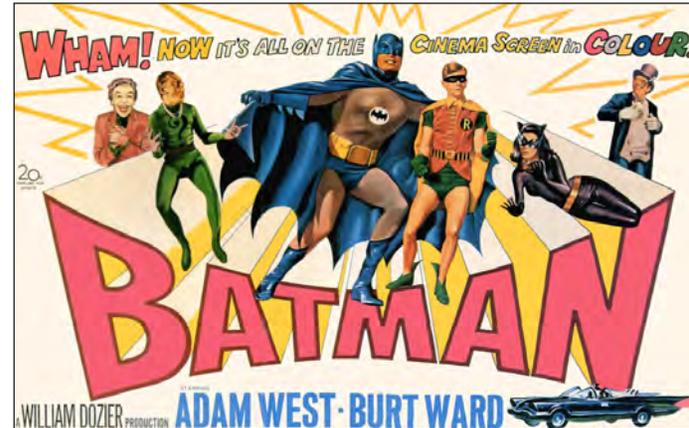
excellent movies like *The Avengers* hard to get made, but the true enemy of epic is mediocrity.

Most people will agree when something is total crap. Mediocrity, however, is insidious, lulling your organization into a complacent slumber when it most needs to excel. Striving for some epic standard requires arguments and people fear confrontation and assume it is the result of a problem rather than being the answer to one.

Mediocrity has none of that subtle complexity; to avoid arguments, people settle for "good enough."



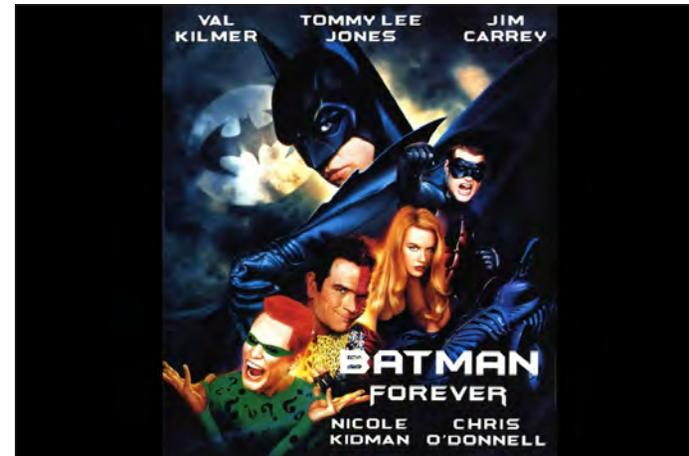
The first Avengers movie: EPIC!



The 1966 Batman movie: As bad as anything ever made.

Val Kilmer is no Michael Keaton, but he's *heroic enough* to wear the bat suit for 1995's *Batman Forever*. Joel Schumacher is no Tim Burton, but he's made plenty of profitable movies, so that's *good enough*. Two-Face is a weakly described villain, but Tommie Lee Jones is such a good actor he can make it work *well enough* ...

Don't spend any more time than is absolutely necessary killing obviously bad work. Instead, sharpen your skills identifying the mediocre. Don't settle, especially when those around you are anxious to find anything everyone can agree on.



The 1995 version of the caped crusader: Meh.

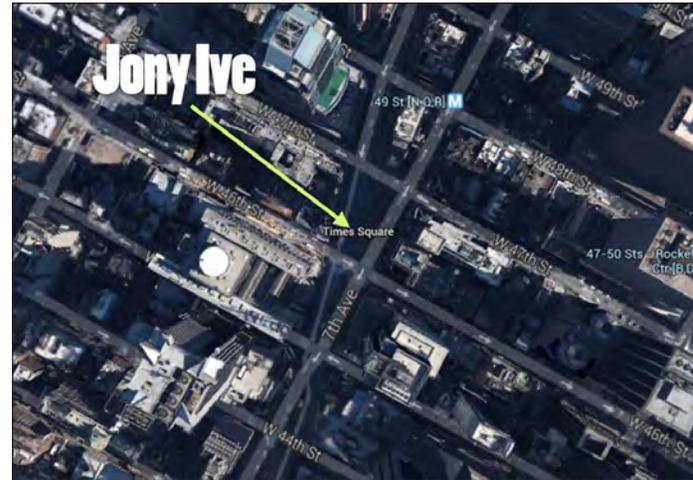
### **Tactic 2: Keep Other People's EPIC-ness in Perspective**

If you're an anglophile and you also idolize the late Steve Jobs, I expect any mention of Sir Jony Ive, the Senior Vice President of Design at Apple, probably makes you wet yourself with excitement. Knighted by the queen and respected by the Apple founder who otherwise showed so little respect, Ive must brush and floss his teeth with epic three times a day, right?

As far as I can tell, Ive isn't to blame for all the hyperventilating. He speaks quietly and maintains as low a profile as is practical in his position. He put the work in early, designing microwave ovens and toilet seats at the start of his career and still sounds like a guy who might design a coffee cup in his free time.

The first two tactics I suggested create a foundation for the next three. First, we must actively reach out from the easy mediocrity all around us. Second, we have to reject other people's definition of what it is remarkable and we have to avoid letting envy of others turn, as it so often does, into self-loathing.

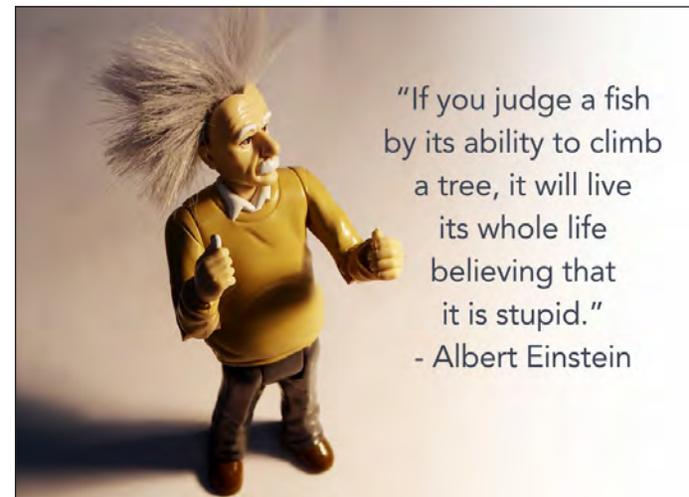
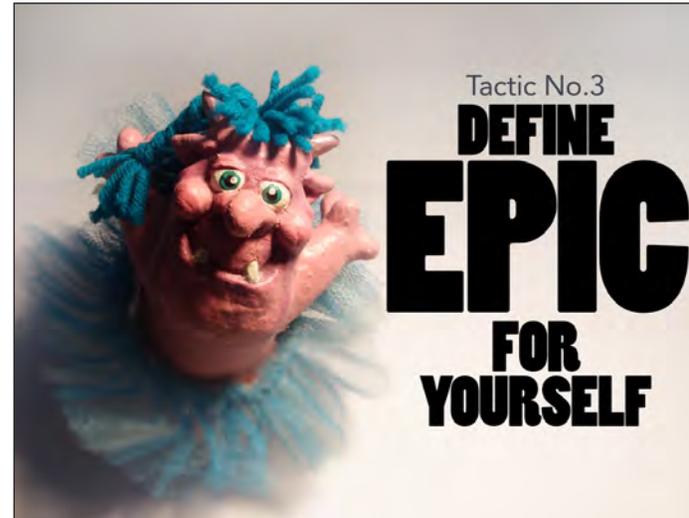




You see any difference?

### Tactic 3: Define Epic for Yourself

The Salon in Paris was an art exhibition that defined the Western world's popular tastes from the mid 1700s through the end of the 19th century. Every year, organizers filled all possible spaces at the venue to cram in as many paintings as they could. They introduced medal winners in the Salon's last few decades and the next few pages show the kinds of paintings that did particularly well in 1888.





The Shepherd's Star by Jules Breton

This is a heroic image of a French peasant. The more dominant the Industrial Revolution became, the more romantic an agrarian lifestyle seemed.



*Preparing to Go Fishing* by Fernand Cormon



*The Pilots* by Gari Melchers

On the left, Fernand Cormon oriented this painting from a similar perspective as the farming peasant, casting his fisherman as a noble figure looking off to an uncertain fate. On the right, *The Pilots* has more of a snapshot feel than the propaganda that defines the other two paintings, but Melchers' empathy for peasants puts him in the same group as the other artists.



*The Roses of Heliogabalus* by Lawrence Alma-Tadema

This historical piece is obviously unlike the peasant paintings, but it too looked back to a mythical past. This was the most popular of the four and is considered one of the artist's greatest works.

In the same year, 1888, and in the same city, an ailing Dutch painter with a nasty smoker's cough was only able to get his art displayed by talking an owner of a restaurant where he ate his meals into putting up a couple of paintings.

The troubled artist soon moved to the south of France where he hoped to start a utopian art colony. And he kept painting.

*The Roses of Heliogabalus* may be what epic looked like to the art world of 1888 ...



... but a hundred-and-twenty-five years later, *this* is epic.

Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night Over the Rhone* isn't about noble peasants or lush Roman orgies. His work is an internal investigation of himself and his own vision of the world at the moment and all around him.

He may have been jealous of the painters who found success following popular themes and styles, but he would not, or could not bend to other people's definitions or adapt them as his own. And because of it, he had an effect on art similar to Einstein's effect on physics.

#### Tactic 4: Tell Your Own Story

As author of *Content Strategy for Mobile*, Karen McGrane is the face of content strategy in a cross-platform, multi-device world. That's how we define her because that's the story she wants us to associate with her.

Few realize that Karen has more IA and design management chops than most of the people in our community. She has a background in usability and human-computer interaction and started working as an information architect for Razorfish not long after the dawn of the commercial Web. Over the ensuing decade, she built Razorfish's user



experience practice.

With that resume, she could have looked forward to promotions from VP to SVP and further. She was on track to be a case study for UX professionals moving into the senior management ranks of major corporations. But something felt wrong about the well-paved road ahead of her. She left Razorfish and tried a couple of things, but only half-heartedly.

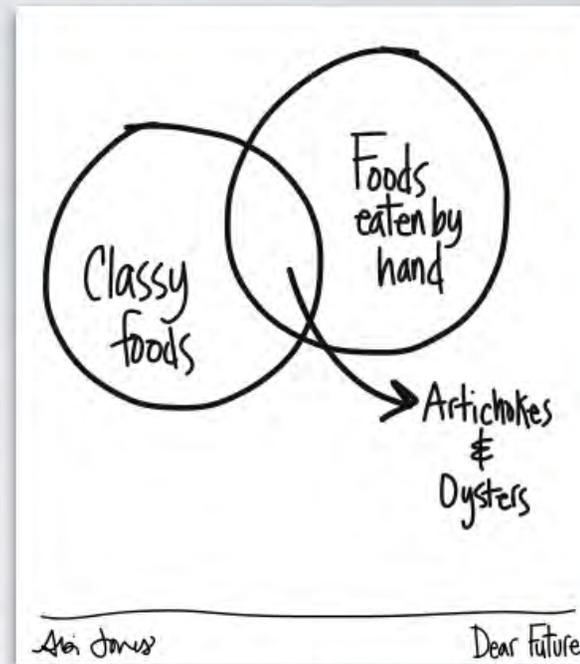
Over time, she realized that better than anything else, she understood how content worked online. Coupled with that, she discovered in herself a powerful urge to help other people understand the same thing.

It's not that she keeps her earlier career a secret, it's just that she tells her current story so well.

Let me tell you the story of another one of my friends. Abi Jones is an interaction designer for Google. She is wicked smart and fascinating at a company that prides itself on collecting and supporting the smart and the fascinating. That's the story other people would probably tell you about Abi.

It turns out that Abi has an ancestor who kept a journal as she came across the country on the Oregon Trail in the 1800s. Mostly she wrote about seeds, which frustrated Abi because she wanted insights into how past generations considered the world. The cartoons Abi posts on [dearfuture.com](http://dearfuture.com) have become that kind of a journal.

While the rest of us are scurrying around trying to enhance our personal brands, Abi is drawing comics and is intentionally avoiding design topics. That's what makes Abi's story so interesting to me. She didn't grow up wanting to be a cartoonist and she doesn't create them to raise her profile in the UX community. She draws cartoons as a way to think about what her life is really like and what she notices about the world.



**Abi Jones**



It doesn't matter if they're your critics or your friends, you can't live your life based on the stories other people tell about you.

This is my story, both how I describe it and how others might tell it for me.

# Print Journalism



## EPIC

Learned to hit any deadline under any conditions.

Started up a print magazine for a major media company.

## not epic

“He designed metro news pages ... you know, the ugly ones.”

# Early Web



# EPIC

Launched a bunch of robust digital products before anybody had done it well.

# not epic

"He built stuff that doesn't exist anymore ... and he always seemed irritated."

# Early UX



# EPIC

Built the business.  
Created The Washington Post's first UX team.  
Became a full-blown UX evangelist.  
Got fired.

# not epic

"He never shut up about how we were chasing symptoms instead of problems."  
"He refused to do things the right way."  
"... and he always seemed irritated."

# Best People Management Experience Ever



## EPIC

Team experience.  
Fully realized as an artist.  
Site redesign #FAIL (3 times!).

## not epic

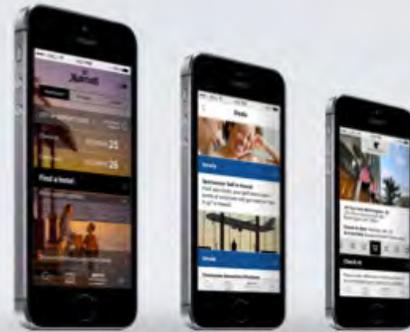
“Why couldn’t he just be satisfied approving program sites?”

“He couldn’t seem to accept that strategy isn’t part of the design process.”

“ ... and he always seemed irritated.”



# Mobile Practice



## EPIC

Established a mobile experience design practice.  
Moved multiple UX projects forward despite a highly bureaucratic environment.  
Designed AND managed design.

## not epic

"I don't really understand what he did, but apparently he did it well enough."  
"He did too much of the UX work himself."  
"... and he always seemed irritated."

# Solo



# GOALS

Be happily employed.

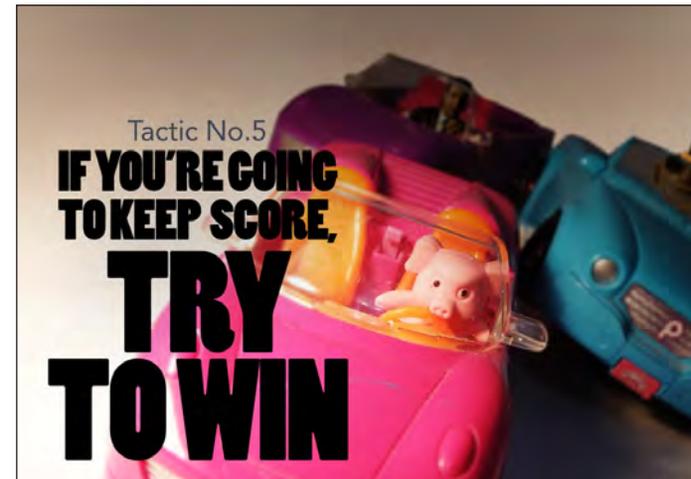
Work with the many talented people I now know.

Do epic UX design work.

### Tactic 5: If You're Going to Keep Score, Try to Win

You have to *make* epic happen. You are in a competition against standard operating procedures. Here are some ways you can win:

- **Be reckless:** As long as what we do isn't going to hurt other people, we should give in to reckless abandon. Launch solutions live to real users if you want to measure success, tweet drunk, suggest bold action and put the time and effort in to make it happen. Have no doubt about this, this is about FAILURE. You *will* fail, you *will* get chewed out, you *might* learn to follow failure with success.
- **Be protective:** Identify who around you is special and risk your own ass to protect theirs. Keep an eye out for poets (the people who think about things in ways that will never fit the organization) and pirates (the people who do their best work outside the normal boundaries of the organization.)
- **Be Twain:** Mark Twain said "A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way." For a long



time, I used that quote to talk about other people, but more and more, I realize it's about me. It explains why I do conference presentations like this one; they teach me things I can't learn in any other way. We should aggressively look for singular actions, even potentially dangerous ones, to gain unique experience.

- **Be the student:** The more we learn the easier it gets to fall into the trap of thinking we know something. We shouldn't expect user research to provide

answers, it's great value is to suggest deeper questions. We have to stay open to learning even as we teach others. The best tool a UX professional has is their brain and avid, relentless curiosity is the key that unlocks it.

- **Be Python:** The British comedy troupe Monty Python treated silly things as if they were significant and significant things like they were silly. It required them to analyze and master both the silly and the significant. It was the engine that drove their humor and keeps that humor fresh 40 years later. We can do the same. Don't just question the status quo, mock it. Glorify radical ideas, treat the unlikely as if it has already happened.
- **Be hungry:** If you think about it, both success and failure breed complacency. Success feels good and can lull us into a pattern of trying to maintain things that worked in the past. Failure beats you down and you get used to that feeling. It gets easy to be satisfied just surviving another day. Hunger, on the other hand, demands



action no matter what happened before we were hungry.

- **Be excellent:** None of this works if you have mediocre talent. In fact, if your skills are limited, I don't really know what to say to you. I guess I should have said this in the beginning, I apologize. Every tactic I've talked about today first requires you to be more than good at what you do. If you aren't any better than that, fix it. Get better before you try anything we've talked about today.

# Dan Willis

## User Experience Consultant

Equally skilled at motivating CEOs as he is manipulating pixels, Dan Willis offers broad digital product design expertise. His successes include:



Transforming Marriott's mobile design practice.



Establishing washingtonpost.com's first user experience team



Leading discovery for AMNH's first wayfinding app



Defining and designing DHS' citizenship research system



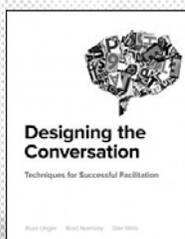
Designing and launching Tribune's first digital classified advertising products



Implementing PBS' first enterprise-wide Web analytics system



Introducing mobile app design and usability standards at the VA



Dan Willis is co-author and illustrator of **Designing the Conversation: Techniques for Successful Facilitation** (2013, New Riders)

For case studies and work samples please see [dswilllis.com](http://dswilllis.com)

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*Photo by Gary Barber*

# Dan Willis' Digital Product Design Experience

dan@dswilllis.com

## Consultant

April 2014 – Present

- UX commando for projects in distress
- UX lead for any and all stages of digital product design
- Seasoned design, IA, content strategy, user research and mobile subject matter expert

## Founder

Cranky Talk Workshops for New Speakers

October 2010 – Present

- Design and facilitate workshops to teach user experience professionals how to talk about their work and move it through organizations

## Director of Mobile Experience Design

Marriott International

September 2012 – April 2014

- Led mobile digital product design (iOS, Android and mobile web apps)
- Transformed Marriott's mobile experience design practice
- Designed sophisticated mobile prototypes

## Associate Creative Director

Sapient

November 2007 – September 2012

- Provided design, IA, content strategy, and user research services to clients in all phases of digital product design
- Led Sapient Government Services' UX professionals

## Director of User Experience

Public Broadcasting Service

May 2005 – November 2007

- Managed design, information architecture and Web analytics resources

## Sr. Information Architect

K12 Inc.

April 2003 – May 2005

- Provided design, IA, content strategy, user research expertise for online educational company

## Director of User Experience

Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive

May 1998 – October 2002

- Established washingtonpost.com's first user experience team
- Led local and e-commerce digital product design and sitewide UX design optimization efforts

## Sr. Producer/Design and Production

Tribune (Sun-Sentinel Co.)

February 1996 – May 1998

- Led digital product design and production

*Please see [www.linkedin.com/in/uxcrank](http://www.linkedin.com/in/uxcrank) for detailed descriptions for all jobs from 1988 to the present.*