

A designer's guide to AI: Why this designer switched to Cursor | Joel Unger

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SUMMARY

Joel Unger, design director at Atlassian, discusses how AI tools have transformed his approach to design, allowing for faster prototyping and more nuanced problem-solving. He emphasizes that while traditional design tools like Figma are still important, AI accelerates the creative process and enhances collaboration with engineering teams.

- *AI tools help designers focus on complex problem-solving rather than tedious tasks.*
- *Joel uses Cursor to prototype Trello features, enabling rapid iteration and feedback.*
- *The integration of AI allows for real-time adjustments and responsive design choices that traditional tools struggle with.*
- *Midjourney is utilized for generating creative assets, serving as a mood board for design teams.*
- *AI has shifted Joel's perspective from anxiety about job security to recognizing the value of human creativity in conjunction with technology.*
- *The collaboration between designers and engineers is enhanced through clearer communication facilitated by AI-generated prototypes.*
- *AI tools can save significant time, allowing designers to concentrate on higher-level design aspects like motion and interaction.*

How do you think about design differently now than you maybe did before? Initially, I was a little anxious, like, is this thing going to take my job? But you quickly find out what the limitations are, and that your thoughts and prompts are the only thing driving it, and all it really does is accelerate getting those ideas out of your head faster. Figma is maybe 10% of the job, and a lot of the rest of it is just thinking about the problems. It's even greater. With AI, you can get right into the gnarly parts of problems right away.

Welcome to How I AI. I'm Clarvo, product leader and AI enthusiast here on a mission to help you build better with these new tools. Today we're speaking with Joel Unger, design director at Atlassian, who has spent the last decade building great products we all know and love like Confluence, Bitbucket, and Trello. Joel answers the question, "Are designers really going to code?" With a resounding yes, showing us how he takes his Trello prototypes, puts them into cursor, and builds interactive specs his engineering team can use to build awesome experiences. Joel is an inspiring combination of designer and engineer, and you'll learn so much from his workflows on how to build products, brand assets, and even illustrated puppies. Let's get to it.

This episode is brought to you by Paragon, the integration infrastructure for AI SAS companies. Our AI features on your 2025 product roadmap. Whether you need to ingest data for rag from your users's external apps like Google Drive files, Gong transcripts, or Jira tickets, or build AI agents that automate work across your users

various tools. Integrations are key to building useful AI features. However, building every one of these integrations costs months of engineering, time you simply can't afford given the rapid pace of AI advancement. Paragon is an all-in-one embedded integration platform for AI products. Industry leaders like AI21, u.com, and Copy AI use Paragon to connect over a hundred of their users SAS applications to ingest data for Rag and provide their AI agents with thousands of integration actions.

They've accelerated their integration development velocity by up to 50x, allowing their engineering teams to focus on core product features. Want to fasttrack your integration roadmap this year? Visit useparagon.com/howi-ai to learn how. That's useparagon.com/howi-ai. Hey Joel. So great to have you here. Before we jump into the demos and I'm really excited about what you're going to show us. I know there's a lot of changes happening at Trello. So tell us a little bit about what you're working on right now. Yeah, I would love to. And I'm going to demo exactly what I've been using Trello for in preparation for this podcast. So, traditional canban style Trello, I'm sure you're familiar with it. cards on a board. Recently, we've been pivoting Trello to become your personal productivity powerhouse. And what that means is you can now quick capture anything from third party apps like from Slack, email, voice capture, notes right to an inbox. And so that means on the go all week long I've been having these thoughts about what can we talk about on the podcast and sending them to my inbox from my phone, dragging them into columns and it's really helping me get set up. In addition to that, I have been using planner, the new feature that lets you not only capture your tasks, but plan time to get them done. So, you can see there's a lot of surfaces that have to play together. And one of Trello's principles is tactile. How can we have drag and drop interactions between inbox to planner, planner to boards, boards to planner, etc.

And this isn't a traditional like sidebar toggle system where you can just like pop in and out inbox or planner. There's not really a center to this view anymore. It's all of these can be up beside each other at any time. So, you're adding a lot more features and those features take space and you're trying to figure out the configuration of all of it and build what if you're not watching and you're only listening is a quite beautiful product. So, how did AI help you get to this great end state as a designer? Well, I didn't start in AI. Of course, I use the traditional design tools. I jumped into Figma and specked out like a ton of variations of like how can inbox planner and board all fit together on a screen be responsive and be configurable in any sort of which way the user wants to have them up and it took a while and I think any designer is familiar with this process like you see specs that outline pixel values and widths it's a bit tedious But at the end of the day, you get your message across to your developers and it gets built to spec.

But it doesn't seem like this this got you where you wanted to to go with the product. No, not quite. So, we launched to beta and we got great feedback. People were finding the panel system intuitive, but they wanted more control. they wanted to resize these panels and customize like exactly how they fit on their screen because we found users had ultra wides or really narrow or they were docking their Chrome browser to the side. So, we kind of had to immediately respond to this feedback and say, "Okay, how do we allow users to drag and drop?" And that is where Figma falls short.

Now, what I did was set up my developer environment and cursor and get all the tricky parts out of the way and

eventually it was set up and could just paste a picture into the chat and say, "Okay, start from here. I have a three panel system. I want to make it drag and drop." So I'm in cursor and I paste in my image from Figma and say okay build me a three panel system with a toolbar to toggle on and off panels. Guess what? Spelling doesn't matter. There are no rules. It'll interpret it fine. My favorite feature of AI products is spelling doesn't matter. So it's going to go off read the entire system and get it done. Great. So then it's building out this code for you. And then what do you get on the other side of this as a designer that you found so useful? It's pretty nuts.

But if you have the right libraries to start with, it'll just do it. It takes a little bit of knowledge on your end to go search for what it is that can actually achieve these results. But once you're there, like you're set. And what decisions did this help you make? Right. really nuanced, responsive design choices that I would have never encountered in Figma. Like, as you can see, dragging and dropping means you can literally have this in any layout. It's really nuts. So, what happens when you drag from the side all the way to the left and you have three panels open?

Like, I I don't know. Like, let's go try it out. I see how useful this is just from a user experience testing perspective. Did you hand this code to your engineers? like how did you actually take it from this to what we saw earlier which is this beautiful production you know production experience I'm pretty close to my dev team and I knew that they couldn't actually use this code like they need to write unit tests they need to actually assure quality at an enterprise scale which is a completely different ask from a prototype but it got the conversation started and I could start to tell them like okay look the min width needs to be this and min widths need to stack. And now if you drag it past this break point, it needs to collapse all the way to the edge. And instead of just like describing this, I could show them in a loom video. And it was instantly understood. And is this is this in the product now? It is in the product. There we go. A little different. Oh yeah. And just shout out to my developers. They caught things that I didn't even catch. Right. So, what happens when you actually toggle off all these and it goes full screen?

Like, can you drag from the edge anymore? No. So, little there's always work to be done. Now that I see podcast prep up here, I'm also going to call out a little last minute AI use case that you told me you did before we started recording. So, tell us how you used AI to prep for your AI podcast. You sent me kind of a run sheet of the topics we would go over. I pasted them in the chat GPT and said, "Okay, voice mode. Let's prep." And off we went.

Amazing. Really great to just have like that live feedback. How How did you feel like it did? I think it missed a few points. Yeah. What point? it didn't give me a lightning round question and so context windows too short. Too short. Okay. And it wasn't it just wasn't as charming as your human host. undoubtedly. Undoubtedly, this episode is brought to you by work OS. AI has already changed how we work. Tools are helping teams write better code, analyze customer data, and even handle support tickets automatically. But there's a catch. These tools only work well when they have deep access to company systems. Your co-pilot needs to see your entire codebase. Your chatbot needs to search across internal docs. And for enterprise buyers, that raises serious security concerns. That's why these apps face intense IT scrutiny from day one.

To pass, they need secure authentication, access controls, audit logs, the whole suite of enterprise features.

Building all that from scratch, it's a massive lift. That's where Work OS comes in. Work OS gives you drop-in APIs for enterprise features so your app can become enterprise ready and scale up market faster. Think of it like Stripe for enterprise features. OpenAI, Perplexity, and Cursor are already using work OS to move faster and meet enterprise demands. Join them and hundreds of other industry leaders at workos.com. Start building today. Who was the benefit of this this work? Your engineering team, you did you save time?

What's what was kind of your takeaway from doing this prototyping this way? I mean, my time, right? Like it's so valuable to be able to spend it doing like the thinking part of the work. You always kind of say like you know Figma is maybe 10% of the job and a lot of the rest of it is just thinking about the problems. It's even greater with AI you can you can get right into the gnarly parts of the problems right away.

Speaking of saving time, you have another design use case for us that came out of a lastm minute pretty big ask of the team. Can you talk us through what you did there? Just two days ago, I think there was a ask to replace logos across the products before our new team launched in April and we're approaching a code freeze for that event. So, it's down to the wire and I was like, "Okay, no big deal, right?"

Like a simple asset swap. We should be able to handle this." And I roll my mouse over the logo and remember, oh shoot, it's animated. And we're the only product that has a sort of Easter egg that animates the logo on hover and on page load. And I love it. I I'm a sucker for these little micro interactions. So I inspect the code and I think, "What are you little animation logo? It's an animated GIF. Oh no." And I think I who knows how old this is. like am I going to be able to track down the files? No.

And old me would have just eaten the cost of After Effects license and recreated it by hand. But I thought, okay, wait, I have the SVG. I know SVGs can be animated. Can I throw this at cursor? I I threw the vector art in there just to get a little start and ask it did to do a clipping mask and it could do that. And then I said, "Okay, here's the image. Can you make these little bars go up and down? And it interpreted all this crazy math. Like I can't even read this stuff. Like this this is robots speak. All I had to do was describe it. Say dance the little animation up and down. And I I did have to find exactly how many milliseconds the animation lasts. I put a GIF in an online tool and it told me, but really that's it. And the rest was just fighting with cursor saying, "Oh no, few pixels to the left, a few pixels to the right, etc." Yeah, that's that's true designer work there, saying not only do the pixels have to be perfect, but the frame rate has to be perfect. So, show us what you got. So, hero moment. I show up to the chat and drop these and it's live. They're so cute. Animated SVGs and it's exactly what we needed. And so, you got it in last minute ask and you didn't have to sacrifice hours and hours and hours to artisally crafted animated bars. Exactly right. Amazing. Okay. And then I'm wondering if you can show us one more demo which is a little bit around generating even more creative assets using one of my favorite tools which is is midjourney. So I'd love to hear a little bit about how you have use midjourney. What are some of your prompts and tricks and actually how are you getting this into the organization as well? Midjourney is amazing. I've been tinkering with stable diffusion and the like for years now. And one of the most powerful things you can do just to get started is kind of like an image mask. You throw a black and white image at Midourney and it will just generate all sorts of fun variations of that thing and you can prompt it and say like oh company logo in a swamp as a aerial view of an island. It's really fun. So what you're doing here, just so I understand, is you're taking a kind of black and

white vector style image of your logo. You're dropping that into MidJourney, and then you're prompting it to do something really cool with that.

Exactly. So, who is Taco? Taco is Trell's cutesy little husky mascot, and he pops up for onboarding and empty states and is beloved by fans of Trello. Now, I was curious how could I nail this illustration style if it was even possible in mid Journey. So, I spent I don't know an afternoon just like giving it my best effort. Cute cartoon husky clip art, blue collar, gray fur, solid blue eyes, etc. Like just just to see like how close can you really get. And it's okay. I'll I'll say like it's not perfect, but what I found was that it didn't have to be. It's more like a mood board, right? Like this is something that you would put together and take it the next step. Actually get out your tablet pen and draw it for real. And I think we're going to have a design day coming up soon where the designers just jam on this stuff and redo our assets and and decide what is like the style guide for Taco. Like does he have black eyebrows or gray? And does he have a pink ear or like what's what's pink paws or black paws? I don't know. We need to make these choices and make a consistent character clearly and this is a great starting point for that. Got it. So you use midjourney one to test how consistent of a character output you could get and from what you're telling me mid and but two it creates sort of a mood board for your design team to then go actually articulate what are the design standards that we need around this illustration and maybe if you come to an agreement around that then you can loop back around to midjourney and see if you can drive that character consistency in the outputs. Exactly right. And you got to answer the really important questions like how floofy should the fur be?

You heard it here. Key word in image prompting, floofy. All right. So, you know, you showed us three very, very, very different features. We saw complex UI interactions that would been really hard to prototype any other way. We see recreating brand assets with motion, which is pretty complicated. And then we see sort of more of the exploratory illustration work that's maybe an input into design work, not an output itself.

So I'm curious now that you've used these tools to do so many different things, how do you think about design differently now than you maybe did before? Initially, I was a little anxious like is this thing going to take my job? And I think a lot of designers can resonate with that. But you quickly find out what the limitations are and that your thoughts and prompts are the only thing driving it and all it really does is accelerate getting those ideas out of your head faster. So that was pretty eye opening to me is realizing how much more value I have actually after using these tools. Cool. Yeah, I agree. I mean, this is this is a lot of great work. And what I say is it allows designers to sort of operate at the the top tier of their craft, which is motion and interaction and brand and all those things that you want to do versus mocking up UI. Okay. Thank you for showing us all that stuff. it's really exciting. It's giving us a a couple very specific things we can bring into our own design work, but let's hit you with a lightning round and then get you back to all these exciting launches you have going on. So, thank you. You showed us a bunch of tools. What's the number one AI tool you think product designers need to know right now? I'm biased, but I think you should jump into Cursor. And it's a little bit of a learning curve. So, I'd say partner with a developer friend who can get you set up, but once you are set up, man, your your speed just is 10xed. Amazing. And so, what is a design task that you thought AI would be good at that it wasn't? I think really simple like responsive stuff was surprisingly hard. Like it can't see your browser. So you have to kind of like take a bunch of screenshots and send it what it looks like at various sizes. So that's interesting. And I think that problem will be solved very soon once the agent gets access to be able to like see the browser. Okay. And then I

saw you do what we all do which is we argue with cursor in the sidebar.

What is your go-to get cursor unstuck prompt technique? Are you a yeller? Are you a pleader? Do you offer money? What is your style? Who knows? It has my money. yeah. I I call it a an amateur, I think, sometimes. Okay. So, you neg I'm like, what is this junior tier nonsense? no. It can it makes me feel bad because if you turn on thinking mode, it will say user is angry at me. I should be like, you know, I should do my job better like that. Oh, no. All right.

This has been so fun. Thank you for giving us some practical applications of how you can use this in design. The products look great, the work is exciting, and you're clearly having a lot of fun. So, to end, where where can we find you and where can we be helpful? Yeah. joeler.com and also Trello. Go check it out. It's awesome. Amazing. Well, thank you, Joel. Thanks so much for watching. If you enjoyed this show, please like and subscribe here on YouTube, or even better, leave us a comment with your thoughts. You can also find this podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite podcast app. Please consider leaving us a rating and review, which will help others find the show. You can see all our episodes and learn more about the show at howiipod.com. See you next time.