

THE ACCIDENTAL BUSINESS

Threadless was never intended to be a business. When Jacob DeHart and I started out it was all just a hobby—a fun thing to do for the other designers we were friends with.

The online design scene I was a part of in 2000 was a tiny, tight-knit group experimenting with computers, code, and art. Everyone seemed to know each other. We'd post projects and challenges on forums; we'd bounce ideas off each other, work together, and put up the results. There wasn't a ton of straight-up socializing; everything seemed to be attached to some sort of creative project.

The seed of Threadless came from a t-shirt design competition on dreamless.org for an event in London called the New Media Underground Festival. I entered, and won—though I never did get one of those tees with my design on it.

In an instant messaging conversation I said to Jacob that it would be fun to have an ongoing competition where people could always submit t-shirt designs, and we would print the best ones. And that was the start. We posted our first call for entries as a thread on the Dreamless forum that night: from idea to implementation in just a few hours.

After picking our first winners, we each put in \$500. Around \$200 was spent on a lawyer to set up a company, and we invested the rest in printing the first batch of tees. We built a real website to sell them on and this was when we introduced the voting system. Typically, a score of 3.0 and above was a great score, and still is today. But it's not just high scores that get printed. Sometimes we look for controversial designs that get a ton of zeros and a ton of fives (but have a mediocre average score), or designs that ensure we have plenty of variety on the site.

For the first two years of Threadless, every penny from selling tees went into printing more tee designs. We didn't even take a salary or cut of sales.

At that time I was going to art school part-time, and working a full-time job as a web developer. Jacob and my girlfriend, Shondi (now my wife), both went to school full-time at Purdue University, which was about two-and-a-half hours away from my base in Chicago. Shondi would come up every weekend and help to ship orders. Sometimes Jacob would come too. Later on I convinced him to quit school; I got him a job at the place where I worked as a web developer, and we began ▶

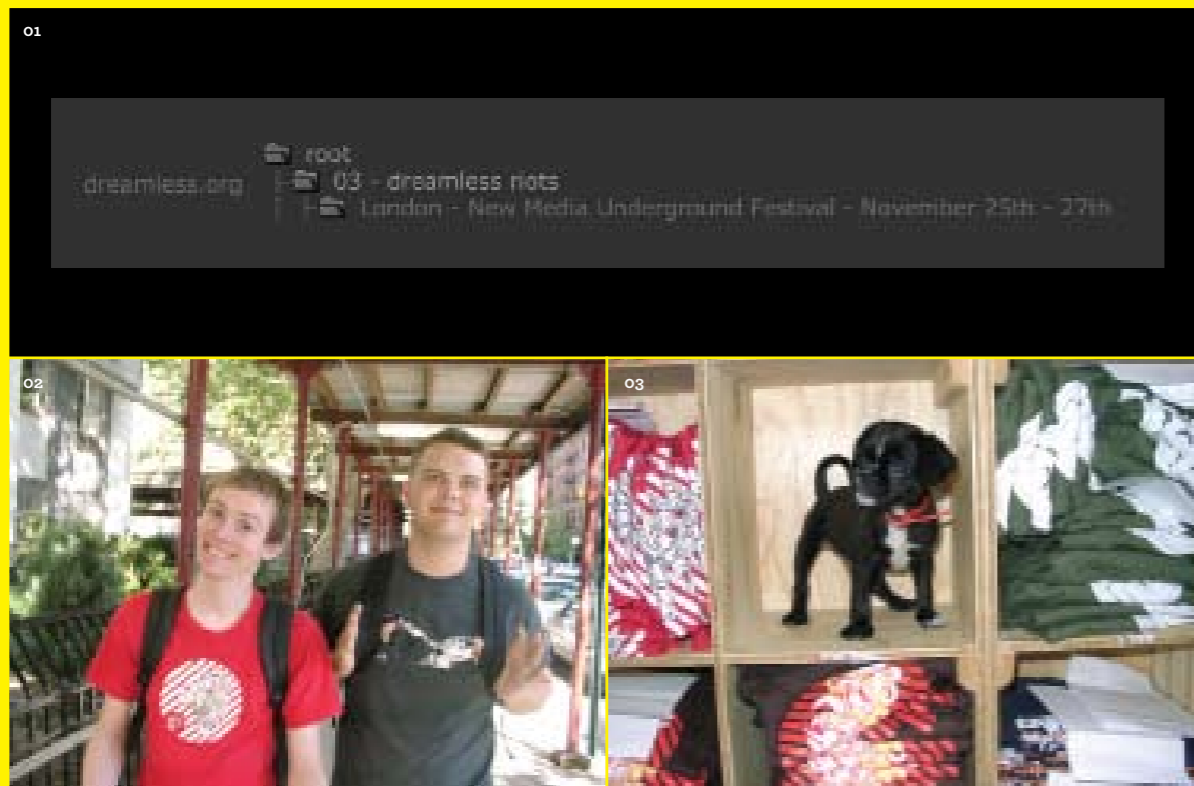


FOR THE FIRST TWO YEARS, EVERY PENNY FROM SELLING TEES WENT INTO PRINTING MORE TEE DESIGNS

01 Very early on we included free Threadless stickers in every order.

02 The place (sans desk) where Threadless started—the corner of my 400-square-foot apartment. Shot with the crappiest camera phone available back then.





I convinced him to quit school; I got him a job at the place where I worked as a web developer, and we began shipping orders on our lunch break. It was around this time that people began referring to us as “the Jakes.”

I had been building websites professionally since 1996, when, aged sixteen, I worked at the local Internet service provider in my hometown of Crown Point, Indiana. By 2002 I had quit my day job, dropped out of art school, and started my own web agency called skinnyCorp, with Threadless continuing to build under the skinnyCorp umbrella. We moved Threadless out of my apartment and into a 900-square-foot office.

The printing schedule for the tees was very erratic. It was completely based on how much money was in the bank. As soon as we sold out of the last batch of tees, new designs were printed. In 2000, we would print new tees every couple of months. By 2004, we were printing new tees every week. These were truly limited editions, and if they didn't sell, it would be a long time until we could print more.

But in 2003, we had our first real taste of success—a significant amount of revenue. By 2004, Threadless was large enough for us to fire all of our outside clients, focus on our own projects one hundred percent, and move into a larger warehouse space. Jacob and I also began teaching a course at the Art Institute of Chicago. That made us feel a little better about dropping out of school.

During the early years of Threadless, the t-shirt designs mostly appealed to the design crowd—they weren't mainstream. The most amazing thing about this book is seeing the tees change over time; seeing the growth of Threadless not just through revenue or community size, but in the style shifts and design trends.

It's hard to express how important the design community is to Threadless. It was the reason Jacob and I started, but we were doing a ton of other things for the community as well. When Dreamless “burned the village” (shut down), we started a new forum called yayhooray.com, which we continue to run today. We put on monthly events in Chicago called Anonymous

WE'VE ALWAYS HAD AN INCREDIBLY INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE, RIGHT FROM THE BEGINNING

Federated that attracted a few hundred people: flying in a designer to tell their story and show their work. We invited big-name artists to design tees for Threadless, and to become members of the community themselves.

There has always been an incredibly international audience, right from the beginning. London was the number one city we shipped to for the first few years, more than any US city. This was really cool for us, a company based in the middle of the country, and run by two dudes from small towns.

We also shared our office space with other designers and developers, including Charles Forman (founder of omgpop.com), Nando Costa (handocosta.com), and Jeffrey Kalmikoff. Jeffrey actually went on to become a huge part of Threadless. He started out doing a lot of design work on our earlier client projects. By 2004 we combined forces, and Jacob, Jeffrey, and I basically ran the business as a team.

As web developers, we spent a lot of time working on our website. We would completely redesign it every few months, just for fun. It was cool, playing around with different interfaces, and we did a lot



of innovative things in this way. The core model of Threadless remained the same, and still does today, but the website has undergone a lot of changes.

By the end of 2004, we fully realized that Threadless had huge potential to become a significant business. We started to focus more on it. We took a step back, and looked at what we were doing right, and how we were able to build such an incredible business almost accidentally.

01 The design that inspired Threadless was an event t-shirt for the New Media Underground Festival in London.

02 Here come “the Jakes”—Jacob and me hitting the streets of NYC soon after starting Threadless.

03 Our first office dog, Norman, looking cute in the t-shirt shelves.

04 Chuck Anderson, now a big-name designer, made this sweet banner for us!



01

With this design, I wanted to focus on the idea of positive and negative space as well as the notion of duality within an image. I also really wanted a design printed on fuchsia.

And How Are You Feeling Today?

by **Jan Avendano** aka **funkie fresh**, Canada

Score: 2.26/5 by 1,884 people

02

Liberty is inspired by my childhood memories from my hometown in San Isidro, Nueva Ecija, about little folk tales woven by old aunts who have nothing else to do aside from knitting kitchen pot-holders.

Liberty

by **Kneil Melicano**
aka **roadkill3d**, Philippines

Score: 3.24/5 by 2,069 people

03

I wanted to do a music-inspired piece featuring an LP. Then it occurred to me that I could connect the lines on the record with the pinstripes on a suit, and voilà, *Music Business* was born!

Music Business Remastered

by **Dale Edwin Murray** aka **DaleEdwin**, UK

Score: 2.94/5 by 1,258 people

04

A silly response to the popular *Keep Calm and Carry On* poster. Designed during the recession, when keeping calm was the last thing on most people's minds.

Now Panic and Freak Out

by **Olly Moss** aka **Woss**, UK

Type Tees

05

Just think lovely, wonderful, happy thoughts. And up you go!

I'm Like a Bird!

by **Lim Heng Swee**
aka **ilovedoodle**, Malaysia

Score: 3.61/5 by 1,173 people

06

Bye Bye Apocalypse is about leaving all your worries behind. Although the bigger picture is obviously terrifying, there are always fun memories.

Bye Bye Apocalypse

by **Budi Satria Kwan** aka **radiomode**, Singapore

Score: 3.27/5 by 1,166 people

07

The black cat—her eyes, her expression, and her elegant movements—has a powerful air of mystery. I always think a black cat is going to do something surreal. Next time you're at the beach, see if one is around.

I Got Another Whale

by **Chow Hon Lam**
aka **Flying Mouse**, Malaysia

Score: 2.39/5 by 1,929 people

08

While illustrating *Word!* all I could think about was one time I visited the library and all the characters from all of your favorite books were having the nastiest, geekiest sex imaginable.

Word!

by **Matt Palmer**
aka **bananaphone**, Australia

Score: 2.64/5 by 1,888 people

09

A huge angry ape throwing barrels from the top of a construction site: the premise for one of the most popular video games of all time. I thought the idea of this being an occupational hazard for everyday construction workers was pretty funny. The community at Threadless was instrumental in developing this design in the critique section—it was a real team effort!

Occupational Hazard

by **Aled Lewis** aka **fatheed**, UK

Score: 3.20/5 by 1,390 people

10

I originally thought up this design for a local arts conference called Spark. Some Thread-pals encouraged me to sub it to Threadless instead, which ended up being a great decision.

Graphite for Your Right

by **David Creighton-Pester**
aka **WanderingBert**, New Zealand

Score: 2.54/5 by 1,723 people

11

Keep It Simple Stupid may have been a by-product of working for a bike company or of my love of Rube Goldberg-esque contraptions, or both. Either way, there's nothing more conceptual behind it than aiming to create the most absurdly complex vintage bicycle conceivable.

Keep It Simple Stupid

by **Aaron Hogg** aka **hogboy**, New Zealand

Score: 3.05/5 by 1,186 people

12

Nature's most epic battle. This design is taken from an ink and brush drawing that I did.

The Squid vs. the Whale

by **Brandon Ancone**
aka **Bancone Illustration**, USA

Score: 2.97/5 by 1,278 people

13

In his downtime, Mr. Roboto likes to go sightseeing and explore the city.

Mr. Roboto Goes Sightseeing

by **Philip Tseng** aka **pilhph**, USA

Score: 2.83/5 by 1,242 people

14

Ultra-violent thieves vs. DIY kits: a match made in heaven.

Clockwork Kit

by **Kerkko Ulmanen** aka **gummi**, Finland

Score: 2.59/5 by 2,012 people

15

A simple visual of a familiar saying.

Birds of a Feather

by **Ross Zietz** aka **arzie13**, USA

Score: 3.40/5 by 1,602 people

16

This design is a union of my passions for pop art, retro stuff, colors, and experimentation.

Colorblind

by **Matheus Lopes** aka **mathiole**, Brazil

Score: 3.64/5 by 1,896 people

17

I love the exclamation point in the title. It needs to be yelled for full effect. Preferably over a thumping bassline.

Bob Nanna aka **BNannas**

Egyptionic!

by **Elise Nishiyama**
aka **SayonaraGangster**, USA

Score: 1.89/5 by 2,156 people

18

Darkness is only a curtain, waiting to be unfolded.

Hey, Mr. Blue Sky

by **Lim Heng Swee**
aka **ilovedoodle**, Malaysia

Score: 3.42/5 by 1,871 people

THIS IS NOT ABOUT T-SHIRTS

**HEY, IT'S NOT EVEN ABOUT
CROWDSOURCING,
OR NEW BUSINESS MODELS,
OR THE INTERNET.**

Seth Godin

It's about being willing to fail and relishing the idea of being different.

Ever since I encountered Threadless, and then particularly after I had lunch with "the Jakes," I've been in awe of their willingness to be wrong and their desire to be different.

Different = risky. Risky today = safe.

The magic of what Threadless has built lies in its apparent recklessness. But it's not reckless, of course. General Motors was reckless, wasting billions on boring cars they knew wouldn't sell. Circuit City was reckless, rolling out giant temples of average, knowing that people could find stuff just as average right down the street.

If you page through this book, you'll see example after example of love, and art, and joy . . . but not a lot of fear. Fearlessness and recklessness might appear to be related, but they're not. Jake is fearless. He understands that the actual risks are fairly small, and given that the risks are accounted for, he dives in. Reckless business people, on the other hand, are dangerous because they risk everything all out of proportion to the upside.

So, my hat's off to the crazy (smart) people at Threadless. Here's a company that hires the unhirable, codes the uncodable, markets the unmarketable. It did so during a time when everyone else was wringing their hands and whining, and they did it with flair and aplomb.

Can I have my free t-shirt now?

Seth Godin is the author of twelve international bestsellers including *Purple Cow*, *Tribes*, and *Linchpin*. His books have been translated into more than thirty languages and have helped transform the way we think about work, marketing, and change. Seth writes the world's most popular and influential marketing blog. He is also the founder of squidoo.com.

A RABBIT NEVER WOULD HAVE WORKED, BRO

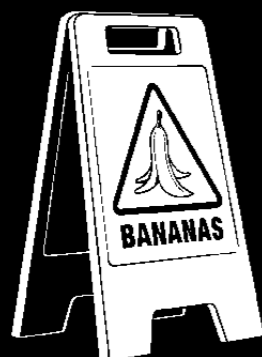
How would you describe the Dick Firestorm style? And how is *THE LAST F*CKIN' UNICORN* a consummate Dick Firestorm piece? BRO, THE DICK FIRESTORM STYLE CAN BE BEST DESCRIBED AS "TOTALLY FUCKIN' BADASS." ALL MY DESIGNS ARE PRETTY MUCH MADE UP OF THE SAME FOUR ELEMENTS: DEATH, DESTRUCTION, FIREBALLS, AND TITTIES. BUT BRO, THE REAL REASON THAT *THE LAST FUCKIN' UNICORN* IS A SUCCESS IS 'CAUSE I GOT SAM SCHUNA TO DRAW IT. **Why a unicorn? Did you try using any other adorable animal instead of a unicorn? Could this have been *The Last Bunny Rabbit*?** I ALWAYS FUCKIN' HATED UNICORNS. A RABBIT NEVER WOULD HAVE WORKED, BRO. LISTEN, IF YOU'RE GONNA BE SCORCHIN' ONE OF GOD'S CREATURES FOR A METAL DESIGN, THEN YOU GOTTA MAKE SURE YOU'RE SCORCHIN' SOMETHIN' THAT'S MAGICAL, MAJESTIC, AND ENDANGERED. **What music were you listening to when you came up with this?** I REMEMBER BEIN' AT A BAR HAVIN' A PRETTY SOLID TIME WHEN SOME DUMBASS WENT UP TO THE JUKEBOX AND PUT ON THAT "DANCING QUEEN" SONG BY THOSE ABBA ASSCLOWNS. BRO, AS SOON AS I HEARD THE FIRST FEW NOTES, ALL I COULD THINK ABOUT WAS WANTING TO DESTROY THINGS WITH FIRE. THAT WAS THE GENESIS OF THE UNICORN DESIGN. **You've collaborated with Sam Schuna (aka olie!) and Aled Lewis (aka Fatheed). Is there a collaboration with your friend Kenny in the future? Perhaps for the surprise lovechild of *THE LAST F*CKIN' UNICORN*?** THE LAST TIME ME AND KENNY SAT DOWN WITH THE INTENTION OF FLESHING OUT A DESIGN TOGETHER, WE ENDED UP GETTIN' SMASHED ON CHEAP MEXICAN BEERS, AND TAKEN TO THE POLICE STATION FOR TRYIN' TO SET A FIRE INSIDE BED AND BATH AND BEYOND. I DON'T KNOW WHEN OUR COLLAB IS GONNA HAPPEN, BUT WHEN IT FINALLY DOES, IT'S GONNA BE ONE FOR THE RECORD BOOKS. **You're from the great Garden State, would you care to reveal which city?** I AIN'T GONNA REVEAL A CITY. YOU KNOW WHY, BRO? 'CAUSE THE WHOLE FUCKIN' STATE OF NEW JERSEY IS DICK FIRESTORM'S TURF. I'M LIKE A WILD FIRE, BRO. I CAN'T BE CONTAINED IN ONE SMALL AREA. **Will you ever release your sketchbook post mortem? It would be a goldmine of awesomeness.** BRO, IF THE AVERAGE PERSON LOOKED AT JUST ONE PAGE OF MY SKETCHBOOK, THEIR FACE WOULD MELT OFF LIKE WHEN THEY OPENED UP THAT BOX IN THE FIRST *INDIANA JONES*. THE GENERAL PUBLIC COULDN'T HANDLE THE KIND OF WILD SHIT THAT I DRAW IN THERE. TRUST ME, BRO. **This book gives you a chance to become a legend. How does that feel?** IT FEELS PRETTY FUCKIN' SOLID. PEOPLE HEAR ABOUT ME ON THE SIX O'CLOCK NEWS ALL THE TIME, BUT I NEVER THOUGHT THEY'D READ ABOUT ME IN AN ART BOOK. DICK FIRESTORM IS GONNA BE A HOUSEHOLD NAME SOMEDAY AND IT'S ALL BECAUSE OF THREADLESS. **Any words you'd like to say in honor of Threadless's ten-year anniversary?** THREADLESS MAKES PEOPLE'S DREAMS COME TRUE AND SHIT. CONGRATULATIONS ON TEN KILLER YEARS.

THE LAST F*CKIN' UNICORN

by Dick Firestorm and Sam Schuna aka olie!, USA

Score: 2.57/5 by 1,604 people





Location: Auckland, New Zealand

Member since July 2004

It's always blown me away that I can be down here in New Zealand and have an audience all over the world. I started designing for Threadless at a good time, just before the Threadless "Big Bang." So when it exploded into the mainstream I was able to ride that wave too. The exposure was incredible.

It wouldn't be exaggerating to say that Threadless changed my life. I'd happily climbed the ladder in a design career for fifteen years, then as soon as I got to where I thought I wanted to be, I left it all to draw t-shirts. I take great pride in what I have achieved on Threadless, and would like to think that my illustration style and some of my designs helped forge a bit of Threadless's identity too.

When I signed up I couldn't think of anything better than Glennz as my username—Glenn from NZ. Amazingly creative! When I decided to open my own tee-shirt store I couldn't come up with anything else either, so I just added "Tees" to the end of it. Glennz Tees is based in Austin, Texas, which is the location of my friends and business partners who make Glennz Tees happen.

My work has definitely had a bit of a love-hate relationship with Threadless voters. My style didn't really change too much: some liked it, and some saw that as a negative. I think that consistency helped build an identity for me, so people knew my work just by seeing it. Unfortunately for some others it created the "that looks like a glennz" comments. Hopefully my work makes a few people laugh. ▶



GLENN JONES aka
GLENNZ

01



02



03



04



05



06



07



The best ideas come when I'm zoned out, like if I'm driving or running, but I probably only remember about one in five. I do most of my work on the couch, feet up, TV on. My inspiration comes from anywhere and everywhere. The Discovery Channel, and pop culture, always seem to be favorites of mine.

I love vector art—the crisp and smooth lines that can be achieved in Illustrator. I got my start drawing for a newspaper. Working in editorial graphics taught me to convey the theme of an illustration in a clear, understandable way as simply as possible. Less is more.

It's hard to choose my favorites on Threadless. I always liked MP(3), and Wingtips, also Take a Hike, Loch Ness Imposter, and Bob Shopping.

The best thing about art is anyone can do it and everyone has their own taste. The possibilities and potential are endless. It can bring all sorts of different people together on the same level, much like Threadless.

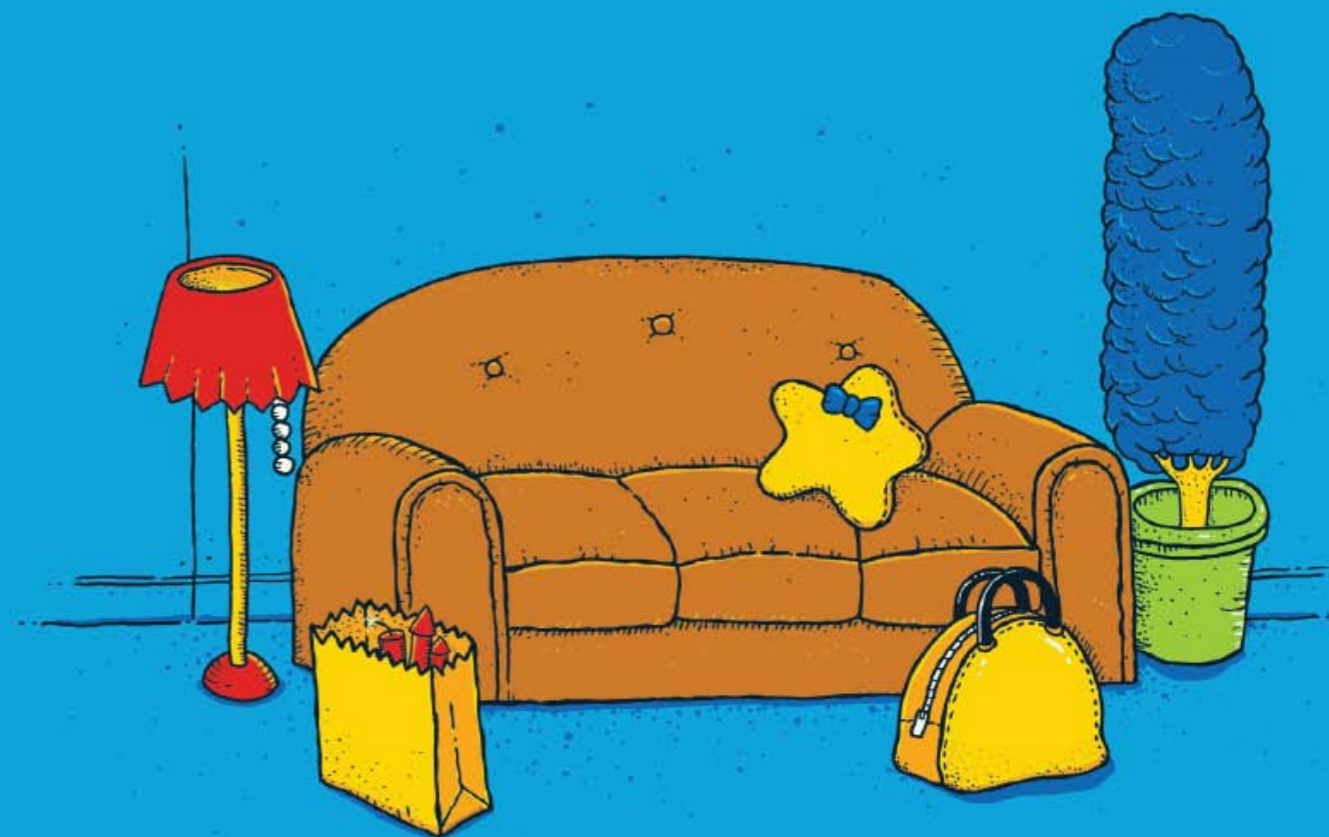
I learn stuff every day having my own online store, but I think the main things I would pass on are: (a) You'll

never be able to make everyone happy, but listen to what people say and try to keep improving. (b) Don't try to do it all by yourself. Surround yourself with people who are good at the things you aren't good at. (c) Lastly, be patient (I'm not very good at being patient). Some stuff takes time but you get there in the end, so it's worth the wait.

I've always got a kick out of seeing someone wearing one of my tees. When I first started subbing to Threadless the prize money was about \$150 so it was never about the money. The idea of people wearing my shirt design all over the world is so cool. I walked past someone wearing one of my tees last week, and I still feel the same way.

01 Direct Line
02 Deflating Defenses
03 Puzzled Putter
04 Cannibal
05 Equus Rockus
06 In Disguise
07 Organized Food Fight
(All designs Glennz Tees)

You can see some of Glenn's Threadless designs on pages 44 (01, 03) and 45 (06).



We've Got Some Work to Do Now (opposite)

by Travis Pitts aka travis76, USA

Score: 3.92/5 by 1,134 people

Springfield Still Life (above)

by Alvaro Arteaga Sabaini aka alvarejo, Chile

Score: 3.89/5 by 873 people