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## KING OF THE TEES

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Around 150 new designs are submitted each day to the Threadless contest, and those that pass an initial screening are posted on the site for scoring by an online community of 350,000 registered members. Each week, up to six winners then have their designs printed and sold on T-shirts for US\$15 plus p&p.

In just a few short years, Chicago-based company run by three young has mushroomed into a US\$20 million turnover business shipping 80,000 tees a month. An online celebrity in his own right now, Jones is often contacted by US journalists for interviews and comment about Threadless' success.

Each win nets a designer US\$2000 – that's \$1500 cash and \$500 store credit – as well as the thrill of making it to print. With 14 wins under his belt (many in the days of much smaller prizes) Jones estimates he's won about \$15,000 all up (which helped the mortgage and paid for a few nice holidays). But mostly he does it for the fun: "I love it. Once you start doing it, especially once you've had a win, it just becomes addictive."

He also now has a wardrobe bulging with T-shirts, half of which he'll probably never wear (although his girlfriend loves hers). "Maybe I feel a bit self-conscious about wearing my own designs, but I'll always buy them". He still has something like \$2500 store credit, which he would happily trade for shares in the company, given the chance!

Glenn Jones has so far had every one of the 82 designs he's submitted passed for voting, with amazingly high scoring averages – an average of 30 per year since he joined – hence the conspiracy theory. "I go through spurts if I have a bit of spare time or I might get on a roll and just start pumping out ideas," he says. "Thinking them up is a refreshing change from the structured detailing of a working day in packaging design, he says. "It definitely makes you think a little bit more outside the square, I think. It's a little bit of creative exercise for the brain."

Jones has found his best ideas for T-shirts often come quite quickly and he'll dash them off freehand on Adobe Illustrator at home in front of the TV. "I'm quite an impatient sort of person so I never spend too long on one; you're talking two to three hours tops."

There's some very a talented people on the website who add much more detail and create beautiful works of art. "But the key with any shirt that does well on Threadless, is that people can instantly understand what's going on," says Jones. Humour helps too, along with perhaps a second layer of meaning. "People like to just put two and two together and fill in the blanks a little bit."

American designer Ross Zeitz, who has now equalled Jones' record 14 T-shirts, joined the staff at Threadless last year as one of two creative directors. Zeitz told ProDesign that his rival has a great knack of knowing what works on the tee medium: "Glenn is awesome and his style is becoming unmistakable. He is a pro at making me think to myself, why didn't I think of that? He also seems like a pretty modest and likeable guy as well and never comes across as cocky."

The Kiwi illustrator has six designs in the Top 20 highest average of 63,000 scored, although a high score does not guarantee a design will be printed. Even one of his top six didn't make it. "They just won't continuously print my shirts and it's the same for everyone really," says Jones. "They can't do all of them. And it is a community so they don't want to be in a position where they

are printing too much of one person.”

Glennz designs have sold in excess of 50,000 Threadless T-shirts, including more than 12,000 of his most popular design: ‘Dark Side of the Garden’ in which a Darth Vader-like figure is trimming a shrub in the shape of the Death Star.

“For a T-shirt to do well it has to have mainstream recognition,” says Jones. Given that over 60% of the Threadless audience is American, he draws much inspiration from universal themes in popular culture, particularly successful movies and 1980s TV programmes.

Text on tees is seen as a real negative, he says, because people see it as having to explain the idea – except when it’s a contest to illustrate a slogan (such as his winning MacGyver tee), one of several side-competitions regularly run on the site.

And everyone can instantly recognise The Ark, sinking like The Titanic in ‘Biblical Disaster’ (his second highest-scoring design); but what really makes that design work is the little unicorn bobbing in the water, the one that didn’t make it into a life raft.

Popularity isn’t everything. His portfolio of T-shirt designs also garnered critical acclaim in New Zealand last year, with a highly commended in the Graphic Design Arts category of the 2006 Best Design Awards.

Many of his fans have asked why he doesn’t start up his own line of T-shirts. “But it’s not as easy as that – I’ve looked into it. Threadless has 24 hour customer service, and you’ve got to have your stock somewhere...” He much prefers the nice, creative release outside of his regular work. Jones has been creative director for just over a year at Dashwood Design, where he has worked since his return from a two-year working OE in 2003. Trained as a graphic designer in the early 1990s, Jones started out as a newspaper illustrator, and then worked for former Auckland design company Arteria before heading to London, where he worked for Woodward and Co. on in-store graphics for Sainsbury’s and Walls.

At Dashwood, where he oversees four other designers and three art workers, Jones works on branding and packaging for mainly food and beverage companies, including Tip Top and Frucor brands like Mizone, Fresh Up and the recent V3 promotion. It means he hasn’t had the time to take up international offers of work attracted by his Threadless exposure – including editorial work offered by Readers Digest – but says it’s a great creative forum for others. “The more and more it becomes mainstream, there’s some quite influential people looking at this site.” Some of the fellow Threadless Kiwi designers he has met online are also enjoying success – in more ways than one. Freelance illustrators Aaron Hogg and Blair Sayer, for instance, have both seen it boost their businesses.

Wellington-based Sayer, aka ‘Mr Rocks’ who has had two T-shirt designs printed, has picked up several contracts. “I never expected it to generate interest from other apparel companies, such as Oddica.com in the US, and New Zealand companies Moneyshot and Cleatis-Preston. I have even started to design small illustrations for boxer short patterns, for a Mexican-based company, after the art director saw my submissions on Threadless. It has basically worked as a second portfolio site for me, which is great exposure considering it’s indirect, and completely free. I have also had one or two unsuccessful Threadless submissions picked up by other smaller apparel companies, which is a nice, mostly ego stroking, way of seeing them go to print,” he says.

In Christchurch, multi-talented Aaron Hogg (designer, video director and former guitar-playing vocalist of Pumpkinhead) now has seven Threadless T-shirts printed as ‘Hogboy’ while having to be “pretty selective” with the work he has picked up as a result in the US and Canadian streetwear and action sports markets. “I’m just wrapping up soft-goods ranges for both West-beach Snowboarding Apparel and Kona Bikes Co. and managed to successfully sub-contract out a number of prints to one of the designers I met on Threadless without ever having met her face to face,” he says.

Both are fans of Jones’ ironic style, as is Wanganui Design School lecturer and Hyperthesis Visual Lab co-founder Yeoh Gah Hong, who has had two of his own Threadless T-shirts printed: “Glennz’ design definitely became a great inspiration and motivation for me.”

Shaun Lee, creative director at Lee ter Wal Design in Auckland, says of Threadless: “It’s great to have a place to publish all those ideas that otherwise would never find their way out of my sketchbooks. The open brief lets me be really creative which I can then bring into my corporate work.” He’s had seven designs through the scoring process by is yet to see his own T-shirt go to print.

“I, like many of the other illustrators, have a love/hate relationship with Glennz – he is an absolute genius and I am definitely jealous.” Lee’s friends, family and work colleges all have Glennz designs. “The local design community are still getting their heads around the Glennz phenomenon. In my opinion he is fast becoming New Zealand’s most famous designer... ever. He could be the next Gary Larson.”