EPISODE 41

[INTRODUCTION]

> *"**CS:** I need to be more intentional about the kind of work I want. And to let that drive me rather than really focusing on title or any of that kind of stuff. And that's a privilege, obviously, that comes with time and investing in your skill set. But I think again, if you're thinking about the direction that you want to go in as a designer, and ultimately a creator or a person, like what fulfills you within the work that you do? Or if you don't think about work that way, what can you tolerate for eight hours a day for five days a week?"*

[00:00:35] TA: You're listening to the UI Narrative Podcast, the biweekly podcast that shares the stories of people of color, interface designers, and researchers, and their contributions towards creating user centered experiences. And I'm your host, Tolu Ajayi. Let's get started.

Hey, guys, it's Tolu with a quick word from our sponsor. To design great products, a focus on the user is everything. That's true for me and for the teams at Google. Today's sponsor, Google Design, produces original content, like articles and videos to show how Google's products come to life, and to inspire designers everywhere. For example, on design.google, you can learn how Google Maps streamlined a palette of 700 colors down to 25 major and minor tones, or how an R&D team distilled five years of research into a tiny, intuitive, emotionally intelligent radar chip. How cool is that y'all?

On Google Design, you'll get to know how the products used by billions actually get made and hear from designers behind some of your favorite products like Chrome, Google Maps and Nest. Head over to design.google to get inspired. That's design.google. Or follow them on Twitter and Instagram @GoogleDesign.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:01:53] TA: Hey, y'all, welcome back to the UI Narrative Podcast. Let me introduce you to today's guest. Catt Small is a product designer, a game maker, and frontend web developer. She is currently helping people work better with the Asana. She has done design work for

companies of all sizes, including Etsy, SoundCloud, and NASDAQ. She started coding around the age of 10 and designing at the age of 15. She graduated from SBA with a BFA in graphic design in 2011, and later received an MS in integrated digital media from NYU in 2016. Catt also makes awkward video games, writes about professional development and draws comics about interpersonal experiences of all kinds. You can follow her @cattsmall on Twitter, and view her work cattsmall.com. Everybody, please give a warm welcome to Catt joining us on the show today.

[00:02:52] CS: Hi. I did a fake yell of support, because podcast. It's great to be here. I love listening to UI Narrative. So I'm very excited to be a part of it.

[00:03:03] TA: Yes, I'd love to start the show off by talking about your earliest memories of being interested in design. Think back to a time when you're like, "Ooh, this is interesting."

[00:03:14] CS: Gosh. So I definitely would say that from a young age, I was very obviously interested in Arts and Technology. But the first time I actually learned specifically about design and thought of it more as a potential focus that I can actually do was when I was in high school. So I took a class that was called computer graphics. And I went to – For anyone who happens to be listening from New York, I went to this high school called LaGuardia High School. It is also known as, for people from the 80s or so, the fame high school. And we had a lot of classes where you could specifically major in things like fine arts, and I was a fine arts major. So I specifically went to this class that was called computer graphics. And that is where I learned about Illustrator and InDesign and those kinds of programs. And from there, I was like, "Wow! I like this a lot."

I want to I think actually become a designer. So I actually took that class twice, because I liked it so much that I wanted to take it again. And I was really interested in designing websites and T-shirts. And I even started designing a couple of custom made notebooks that I started to sell to my friends, and they were very supportive. It was very nice of them. I thought that I would end up going to college for either that or for cartooning. I ended up going for graphic design. And, of course, actually a high school fun story. I was also on the yearbook committee, which I feel like

a lot of designers who figured out pretty early that they wanted to be into design. I think a lot of us were the yearbook geeks. So it was definitely something I really as a teenager.

And then the other thing I think that was very interesting about this point in time for me was that I actually remember seeing a poster or like a signup sheet of some kind in the stairwell of my high school, and I remember it saying something along the lines of, "Hey, do you want to intern for this all girls design agency?" And so right after I'd taken this computer graphics class, of course, I was like, "Yeah," and I actually jumped into doing an "unpaid internship" for that company. And that, I think, also really urged me to actually go into design more full time.

[00:05:42] TA: Yes. So you started out with a college education, getting your bachelor's in graphic design, and a master's in digital media. And something that's like of conflict in the product design community is if college is the best option to get an education to become a product designer. And I'm sure you've had some people ask you this. So from your experience, like seeing how far you've come to where you are now, would you recommend novice designers get a college degree education or go with a boot camp? Or some people are going to self-taught route?

[00:06:14] CS: Oh, yeah, this is definitely something that I think is very nuanced. I would say that, for me, personally, one thing I will call out is that I did go to school for graphic design, and I went to get my masters. But a lot of what I learned specifically about digital product design were things that I either learned through self-study, because I taught myself to program when I was in college. And I'd also taught myself some web development concepts when I was younger. And so I think that self-study is great. I think it really depends on if you're the kind of person who can orient yourself around a project or something that you want to get done and you can teach yourself in that way. And not everyone is able to really commit to the time and the focus that's necessary to do that. So college or a boot camp can be really good for that if your learning style does not quite fit with doing self-study.

When it comes to college degrees or boot camps, I think it depends on the type of community that you're looking for. So I would say that with my college experience, it's funny, I probably could have done a boot camp because I was commuting to and from school from my mom's house. So I didn't really have a lot of time to connect with the actual students. But I feel like a lot

of the college experience does come down to all of the connection and community that you are having through the dorming experience. So if you think that you're going to be commuting more often, and maybe you don't have the full four years or want to spend four years working toward this degree that may or may not get you close to what you actually want to be doing, it depends on your major, then a bootcamp is great. It's really focused, and they do cram a lot of information into a very short amount of time.

I think the hard thing is, because it's a short amount of time, you just don't have – Like you got to be really focused. And so you may not have the same amount of ability to meander and to really go deep like you might get to do in a four-year school or in a two-year program for a master's degree. But I think if you're just looking for a general primer and you're looking to do a lot of learning on the job and you just want to get the gist of the real core concepts and maybe you don't have the money that's required to really stay at a place for four years in a row or even two, then I think boot camps can be great. College will give you a lot of connections, and you'll just have a sustained amount of time to invest in them. Bootcamps, they really aggressively want you to get a job. So they're going to like do a lot of work on that front too. So I think they both have benefits and it really, for me, personally, depends on like, how much do you want to invest?

[00:08:59] TA: Yeah, I completely agree. It is an it depends answer, because I've gone to university for graphic design. And I did do a boot camp through general assembly to get UX training. And from my personal experience, like yeah, it was great, like the boot camp itself, but a lot of is like, "Okay, if I were to dislike get the curriculum." You can find a lot of stuff online, especially like with YouTube, GoShare, all these resources that are available today. The key thing is like being diligent and persistent and being dedicated.

But something I always tell people is just do your research. Understand what the curriculum is like before you put your money anywhere. Don't put yourself in a situation where you'll regret spending 1000s of dollars on a boot camp or a college degree.

[00:09:47] CS: 100%. In either situation, you can totally end up having spent a bunch of money on something that you don't feel quite happy about. And I think the most important thing really

is, like you're saying, do your research upfront and make sure you know what you want to get out of it, because that is going to drive your decisions.

[00:10:04] TA: You've had a lot of success working at some big name companies like Etsy, SoundCloud, NASDAQ, and now Asana. And I think it's so important to set yourself a growth trajectory wherever you want to start a new job, because it helps you stay aligned with how to choose your opportunities that serve you and your purpose for whatever you want in life. What are some of the things that you've learned about your personal growth while being a lead product designer at Asana?

[00:10:29] CS: Gosh! I've learned so much in the past almost year and a half at this point. It's wild to think that I just joined last January. I feel like I've changed so much as a person. Because before I worked here, I've worked on large initiatives at other companies, but I felt like this was the time where all of my skills got put to the test. I essentially joined at a point where I think there was a very clear next step that needed to happen in terms of the next door that Asana was going to open with the product that I worked on, which is called Goals. So it's a Goal management-focused tool that integrates a lot of the work management aspects that people love about Asana and the focus that it helps create, but it also, now that we have Goals, you're able to actually determine the reason why you're doing the work that you're doing. And I think that connection is really beautiful.

And I joined and pretty much had to get started immediately in terms of saying like, "Hey, let's dig deep into who these folks are? Who are the people who are doing the goal management sides of things, and how do those folks differ? Or are they similar to the folks who are doing the work management within the product?" And I think it was just really a culmination of a lot of what I had experienced and learned throughout my time at a lot of the other places I've worked. Like, at Etsy, I had done a lot of work getting better at facilitating design sprints. And then within my first month at Asana, I was conducting a design sprint not just for a very small portion of a feature, like I've been more used to, but really, here you go, new product area, essentially, like a startup within this company that's been going for a long time that has a really awesome, caring, excited user base. So I really loved the fact that I could get started immediately and use a lot of what I've learned through my previous roles.

And I think that one of the things that I've really taken away from this is that there are going to be times where you wake up, and you're just like, "Oh, man! Like I am both excited and terrified for what is going to happen today." Because it is what growth feels like. It's like I don't fully know where exactly I'm going to land, but I know that I'm going in the direction that makes me feel very excited. And I feel like in the past year and a half, I've gotten really comfortable in the past year and a half with that feeling of trusting myself and trusting that the team and I can work together to get to an outcome that we feel proud of. And that ambiguity is something that I think in previous roles I just probably would have shut down and been really unwilling to be comfortable with.

[00:13:31] TA: Yeah. I completely relate to that not feeling comfortable at first feeling. Like especially when you're working with new team members, a new team. I've struggled with like asking for help when doing like design sprints. Especially like when you're in a lead position, it puts you in a position to mentor others. Because it's so easy to say like, "Oh, okay, I'll just do it myself," but you're not really helping the team grow, or the project stuff, you're just putting more stress on yourself. I always had that nervous feeling at first, like starting a project with new people, but it's a matter of leaning on others and just letting people do their job. And if mistakes happen, or things don't turn out as planned, like that's why it's a sprint. You have time to iterate again on the next round.

[00:14:19] CS: Definitely. And I think that the other thing, yes, speaking of asking for help. I wasn't just doing this constant brain trust with my team. We were like literally at points. This was before the pandemic, but we were at the whiteboard pretty much every day just like, "What is a goal? What does it even been to set goals? What is this stuff?" And we were just modeling out all this intense diagram stuff that was so fun, but it was just like mind-rending at some point, because you're really just starting to question pretty much everything. So there was a lot of those kinds of conversations and being comfortable with not knowing the answers.

But then on top of that, because this was essential starting up a new product area, I did also have some points in time where if we were going to launch this by the time that we knew that we wanted to launch this by, that I did need to just say, "Hey, I have the capacity for this amount of work. I can set expectations that I'm going to deliver this. Who else can I pull in to help?" because we got to make sure that we get this done. And for me, I saw that as a great

opportunity for me to really put on the leadership hat and put on my guidance shoes and start to say, "Hey, I would love for you to help with this portion. You're the expert in this part of the product. Maybe you can use your skills at designing notifications to help design notifications for goals," and things like that. Especially as a new person, I really had to start to get comfortable with pointing out, "Hey, you're a really smart person who's great at doing this thing. I just got here. Can you can you take this on, because you just have the historical context that I don't?" And I really am proud of the number of people that I was able to collaborate with on this product, also, because it set us up in the future to be able to have lots of great conversations about how goals could work across Asana in general. And I think there is a lot that we're going to do. And I'm really excited about strengthening and deepening that connection between the goals and the work. But like it was just so great to come in and have all these people get really excited about the work that we're doing.

[00:16:36] TA: When you start out in product design, it can be challenging to figure out what your end goal is, because I mean, everyone getting in the main goal was to get the job, right?

[00:16:46] CS: 100%.

[00:16:48] TA: There's this article that I read by Marissa Louie about designer levels, the individual contributor, and manager's tracks. And basically she talks about the importance of having a growth plan as soon as you start your design career. And she references a design team's level framework created by Peter Merholz. And this framework covers the different designer role types and categories, which are contributor, driver and leader. And I'll leave both of those links in the show notes for y'all to review. But mainly, I wanted to touch on that, so you get what I'm about to say.

So the point that I want to make is when you see the designer level that you're currently at, then I think it's easier to understand the skill sets it takes to get to the next goal that you have. And maybe it's like a promotion or you want to be a lead or like a senior role. But it's really up to you and like what you aspire to be. So Catt, before we had this call, we were chatting about like how you decided you don't want to be a manager. So basically I want to ask, like what designer experiences led you to decide this is what's best for you at this moment in your life?

[00:17:54] CS: Gosh! That is a lovely question. I think that it's really wonderful to look back on the path that got me to where I am right now. Because I definitely had points in time where I was sitting at my desk thinking, "Should I become a manager? Like is it my time?" because I'm not sure how else to grow. And I think back to a couple very specific moments. Firstly, pretty early on in my career, I remember thinking that my goal was going to be a senior designer. I think I was probably working at NASDAQ in like 2012 or something and I was just like, "I can become a senior designer, then I'll feel like I've really done it."

And then I got to SoundCloud, I've worked on several projects, and I got promoted. And that was around the time where they asked me if I wanted to become a manager. And I think it was partially because I have a history of building communities. I love to invest in groups of people and to build safe spaces for folks. In my spare time, I actually do a lot of that. And even at work, I really try to cultivate these feelings of community that feel really genuine. And I think the person who was my manager at the time saw that and thought, "Maybe this person would want to actually just go into management."

And I tried it. I tried it for maybe about six months, essentially starting with a shared intern. This person was split across product design and user research. So there was a user research mentor and a product design mentor who was me. That seems fine. So then I started managing two interns who I hired from scratch, and then essentially mentored for I think it was somewhere around six months or so.

That time was fun. I actually got to meet one of the people who was on an earlier episode of this podcast, Leah. But I think that what I learned through that process was that it was really stressful and a completely different skill set that I wasn't fully prepared for. I had no training or anything like that. It was literally just Catt has strong opinions about management and team culture because she has existed through some pretty harrowing experiences, and knows what a bad team looks like and what a bad manager looks like, and wants to potentially create a culture that is not that way.

So I learned that if I was going to be a good manager, it would basically mean letting go of a lot of the things that for a long time I really enjoyed about design and essentially picking up a whole new set of skills and being really comfortable with the fact that there were going to be times

where I had no control and just had to hope the people that I was mentoring and managing we're going to make it through. And I think that in 2015, 2014, back when I was at SoundCloud as a senior designer, I was not there yet. I just literally did not have the confidence in my skill set or in the ability to navigate ambiguity to actually take that. So I very explicitly remember saying like, "I'm not ready to manage people. I think I want to be an IC." And I think that the things I really like about management are the mentorship aspect and the hiring aspect. And I'm sure there are ways for me to keep doing that, while also being able to have a hands-on approach to the work. So that was the very explicit moment where I decided, "I'm going to just keep going with this IC, independent contributor thing, as long as I can. And maybe I'll come back at some point and decide that I actually want to put down the tools and get into investing in the people and kind of like being not the puppet master per se, but like the architect behind the scenes." But that just for me has not happened yet. And I do ask myself that question every couple of months even.

[00:22:08] TA: I agree with you on like, in the very beginning, the first getting started, like not knowing which direction I wanted to go as far as leveling up in my career, because like my goal was like to become a lead and then a senior. And now that I'm in a senior position, it's definitely like a lot different management style than I expected, because it takes on a lot more responsibilities. Even from now, like because every six months I like to evaluate like, "Okay, where am I at? What do I want to do?" Because I feel like it's just hard to know feature-wise what you want, because it depends on where you are in life.

And because I like designing so much, when you get into more senior roles, there's things you have to give up in order to be able to provide like whatever the company needs, because you're being shown more of the business side of things. So I think it's okay, like for anyone that is put in a position where maybe you're getting a promotion to like become a lead or like a senior, or like principal designer, I think it's okay to say like no to the promotion, but yes to the raise, because you shouldn't feel pressured to have to step up to fulfill a role that you don't feel passionate about. Because it's like, yes, you want to give your all to the company, but you can do that where you are. I mean, if you're already doing a great job, maybe they find another way to give you more opportunities to improve your skills. So it just depends on you on like what you're looking to gain out of the company while you're there.

[00:23:45] CS: 100%. You should make sure that as the person whose labor is being traded for currency, that you are considering what you want out of it, and then that you have agency within this experience. I think it's really important and valuable to consider what direction you want to be going in. And it's really great that people can open potential doors for you and say, "Hey, you could go this route if you want to."

But I remember learning this lesson from a friend of mine, Eileen Jo, she has been at the mid-level as an engineer for a long time now. And I told her repeatedly like, "Girl, you could be a staff, whatever, whatever at X, Y, Z company if you wanted to." And she's like, "I don't want that amount of responsibility. I like what I have right now." And I think when I was younger I was like, "Growth, growth, growth, growth, growth." And the older I got, it was like, "Actually, I need to be more intentional about the kind of work I want and let that drive me rather than really focusing on title or any of that kind of stuff." And that's a privilege obviously, that comes with time and investing in your skill set. But I think, again, if you're thinking about the direction that you want to go in as a designer and ultimately a creator or a person, what fulfills you within the work that you do? Or if you don't think about work that way, what can you tolerate for eight hours a day for five days a week? How do you make sure you get to where you actually want to be as a person and make sure that you're making decisions in that way? So I really do evaluate a lot of things in my life that way now. And people, as I mentioned, have repeatedly asked like, "Do you want to be a manager? Do you want X, Y, Z?" I think I also really benefited specifically from working at Etsy in this regard, because I met a lot of extremely talented people who were staff designers, which is essentially a lead designer or like a design architect almost where you're really creating the frameworks and the guides for folks to take the work that you're doing and the ideas that you have and to extend them into their own spaces. And that's really, at this point, the kind of work that I really value most, because I'm a systems builder. I love to think about systems and help other people understand the complexity of the world that we exist within.

And so once I saw people like Jess Harley who is currently not at Etsy, but we met there, once I saw her and the role that she had, I was like, "That is what I want." I don't think I want to manage people, I actually think I just want to keep being an individual contributor, and I want to be like the most powerful, thoughtful, embedded in the systems designer humanly possible and just do all the deep thinking brain trust stuff that I can do with people and come out of it and

have just like figured out the direction for everything. I don't know. But that's where I feel like I just get so excited, is that kind of thing.

And through that, I do think I help people grow. And I have a lot of great conversations with ICs who are at different levels than I'm at. And I love talking about career stuff. I think that, for me, the biggest joy is definitely not in that work. It is something that fulfills me in some ways, but really seeing that output that I directly have a hand in is really the joy for me.

[00:27:10] TA: I think being in tune with what you want for your design growth is so important, because opportunities will come. But if you don't take the time to reflect and think about if the opportunity serves your growth plan, then you may end up accepting an offer out of excitement or FOMO. And then like months later you'll regret your decision. So I know from experience like how sometimes the companies we choose to work for doesn't always turn out to be what we intended for our growth plan. But you can use that experience to add to your journey. I'm sure you can probably relate to this, but like in what ways have you tried to make the best out of a company experience to benefit your career growth plan?

[00:27:51] CS: I am definitely the kind of person who when I join a company or start a new role, I immediately start to think about what I'm hoping to get out of that role. I am communicating to my team, how I communicate and the expectations that I have for how we're going to work together. And I want to hear from them, of course, too, in terms of how they're hoping to grow. And so what I tried to do is really set the stage as soon as I am in any new situation so that everybody feels like they understand everyone else, especially me. And so that's number one. Just make sure that you're like level setting with your team, with your manager.

And then in general, yeah, I really think about what I'm trying to learn. I've really enjoyed that my manager during my time at Asana has really asked me some deep introspective questions about not just what I'm hoping to learn, but what projects might help to get me to that point. So I think that was a really great way of thinking about it as well. It's not like I'm going to pick up and drop certain pieces of work just because it's going to be a portfolio piece or anything. But I do think it is really valuable to consider the type of work that you do and how the project that you decide to participate in or get put on might actually get you closer to some of your goals. So I've really appreciated the fact that my manager has helped me think about things in that way.

I think, other than that, I really tried to if a company has educational benefits or anything like that. I'm on it. Like I'm taking a class, I'm going to conferences. Like I want to make sure that I'm staying up to date, and that I'm bringing that back of course to my team and sharing that information with them. I really think, for me, it starts with setting goals. Understanding what I'm hoping to get out of work experience essentially, and then working with my manager to set those expectations, sharing that information with my team, having everybody essentially support each other. And taking it from there and really seeing where it goes and checking in every now and then.

[00:30:14] TA: Yeah. And I think for people that don't have a manager that sets one-on-ones with you, schedule them. Take the initiative to be serious about your growth plan. Because, I mean, of course, we all want managers that are unicorns and care about our career growth at the company. But you'll have to take the initiative there if they're not setting it for you. And maybe it's just like the manager doesn't have time. I mean, there could be numerous reasons why they are setting one-on-ones. Yeah, just take the initiative, schedule it, and you'll get the benefits out of it that you need this. Just let them know like what your goals are for there. It shows you're serious about the company and its growth and how you're going to contribute to that. So yeah, schedule that one on one.

[00:30:54] CS: Yes, definitely. I've had managers who've had nine plus reports. And if you are newer to design or newer to the workforce, in design, specifically, over like four or five people, it gets really hard to pay attention to the context of each individual designer. So imagine like almost double that, or over double that. And you get people who are really overworked. And if you are in a one-to-one with them, you have to basically re explain your entire project every time you meet. So they're going to be people where it is really important that you are essentially extremely assertive about what your goals are and how you're tracking toward them. Because they just don't have the time to really invest exactly. That is what I've learned a lot over time. Like, I think when I was a newer designer, I was much more like, "Hey, how are you going to help me?" Because my first experience, I'll be honest with you, I really got lucky when I was working at NASDAQ and I had a person who the company culture was kind of – It was challenging for me personally. I think larger companies, you can get lost in them a little bit. But what I really appreciated was the fact that my manager was just like, "Go to this conference. Go

to this. Go to this talk. Like you're going to start trying to talk." Like, "Get on stage. Start public speaking. Let's build a brand for the NASDAQ design team." I really appreciated that because it helped me understand how I could grow as a person and as a designer.

So I think after that, going into other experiences where I didn't really have that much investment or people were overworked, I learned over a long time that you really have to be commanding the room sometimes, and you have to set the one-on-ones. You have to come in with your goals ready and things like that. Not to say, "I demand that this thing be given to me or anything like that." Although if you want to do that, go you. I think that it can be really valuable to say, "Here's my intent. Here's what I think I can do to get there. What do you think, manager?" I think that framing it in that way can be really valuable for removing some of the work from your manager's plate because they might be overworked. And it's a sad thing. But in a lot of situations, a person who is perceived as more senior, one of the things that they do is they literally are mostly foreseeing something that's going to be a burden for their manager and they're just doing it. They're doing it in advance. So I do that a lot with my goals, because I just realized that managers are people and they're really busy sometimes. And they're overwhelmed just like we are. They don't have all the answers. And you know yourself better than they do. So why not communicate that to them upfront?

[00:33:42] TA: Yeah. And also speak up if there's an opportunity that you want, because sometimes managers just don't know what you're personally interested in. Like if your company has events and you'd like to facilitate something or you'd like to be maybe a part of more like user research projects, just be vocal about the things that you're interested in. So that way, there's a communication there on like expectations of what you're looking for.

[00:34:07] CS: 100% I strongly agree. I think I really was the kind of person before who felt shy or felt like I wasn't good enough to actually ask for those kinds of things. I think that when I was younger, I was taught to be humble, and that if I did the hard work that I was going to get what I deserved to get. But when I realized really was that people aren't always paying attention specially if you're not like, "I'm doing this X,Y,Z. Tooting my horn from the ceiling." Like if you're not constantly talking about the work that you're doing, it can get missed. And I definitely am the kind of person who tends to default to like just focus on delivering and everything else will come to you. But that doesn't always happen, and you do have to inform people about the things that

you want, the things that you need. You have to externalize it and communicate it. And I think there's a balance that you learn. And every individual manager has a different balance and has a different workload and pays a certain amount of attention to their reports. So you may have to learn that person's style. But you are going to have to say if you want something, because they may not always think of you if they don't know that you want it.

[BREAK]

[00:35:22] TA: Let's take a short break.

So one of the top questions I get about product design is how do I stay inspired? And the other day I decided to take inventory of what I'm doing routinely. The biggest thing that stood out to me was how I'm always investing time to understand products that are advancing in design and technology. Today's sponsor, Google Design, produces original content like articles and videos to show how Google's products come to life, and to inspire designers everywhere. On Google Design, you'll get to know how the products used by billions actually get made. And hear from desires behind some of your favorite products like Chrome, Google Maps, and Nest. Head over to design.google to get inspired. That's design.google. Or follow them on Twitter and Instagram @GoogleDesign.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:36:18] TA: Alright, so I want to talk about game design. I have some questions for newbies like myself who want to get into the game industry. So listeners, Catt also has a background in game design. Those who are OG listeners of the podcast know that this is one of my ultimate dream jobs and what I hope to end up doing in the future, whether it be designing games people actually play or like any type of space UI within the game, or it could be fictional UI. Like I'm more into that type of stuff. But, basically, I'm asking like, how did you get into game design? And what did you struggle with the most when you first got started?

[00:37:01] CS: Gosh! Yeah. Game design is fun. It is, in some ways, a lot like product design for me, or UX design. And in some ways, it is very different in that you have less constraints, I suppose I would say. And, specifically, I've wanted to make a game since I was a kid, because I

feel like, as many people out there will probably identify with, games and play are something that we do a lot when we were younger, and I was one of those kids who definitely was really into Pokemon, and Kingdom Hearts, and Crash Bandicoot, and all these kinds of games that came with the Gameboy, through the GameCube, and like the PlayStation. And so this was when I was really coming into myself as a person, like coming into my own. And I realized that I wanted to figure out how to make games.

But when I was15 or so, this was like 2005, it was not very easy to make a game. It was very confusing. The only options were RPG Maker. And I think at the time, you essentially had to understand how to read Japanese if you wanted to like download it for free. Or you had to pay a bunch of money. I mean, this was back in the days of having to like, essentially, either you paid like 200 bucks for software, or you did things that I would not recommend. So I definitely was just like, "This is overwhelming. And I don't know how to do this."

So I let it go for a couple of years. And then when I was about 19 or so, I started hanging out with some high school friends who went to a polytechnic school, which actually it turned into the same school that I went to grad school for. But at that time, it was just known as NYU Poly essentially. And I started hanging out with this high school friend again, and their friends were just super nerdy gamer people and were also really interested in learning how to make a game.

And so what I did, since I had all this arts tech, comic drawing, cartooning design background, I decided that I would volunteer and make the art for them. And so, essentially, what I started doing is I would design the interfaces for them. I would make the art for their games, and then they would code the games together. And that's the funniest thing I think I've said in a while. Code the games together. But, yeah, they would turn my art and the UI that I designed into the actual game. And that was how I learned about things, for example, like this thing called the game loop, which is there's the initial setup that happens when the game first loads. And then there's this other cycle that's called the update loop. And what that means is every millisecond or so the game updates and it checks to see if anything was pressed and then it goes to a new location, or characters will move. And that is essentially how all games work. And I think when that unlocked for my brain is when I started to understand that games actually weren't as complicated as I thought they were. It's really that the programs were not very accessible up until like 2009 or so. At the at that point, they actually started to make things like construct,

which is a tool that is – It was originally for game prototyping, but actually turned into something that people actually use to just make full-fledged games. And that is a tool that you can just drag and drop "code", like lines of codes, and you can say, "Hey, if this thing happens, then do this." And I really liked that there are programs like that now, because it enables people to make games without having to worry about some of the older challenges of working with assembly, which is what you have to do if you wanted to make a Gameboy game.

So I feel like I lucked out in terms of running into just the right people to help me understand the landscape at that specific point in time, I started going to a bunch of game jams, which are hackathons for games, and volunteering my skills until I was able to really start to understand how I could possibly make my own. And then at that point, once I had volunteered for a couple of games in a row, I tried to make my first game. It was in a tool that export it to Flash. So, rest in peace. Would not recommend that tool anymore. But Construct 3 is a great tool if you want to just understand literally bare minimum, how to make a game.

And then from there, you can venture off into a tool like Gamemaker or into Unity. And that is essentially what I did. I started with something very simple to just wrap my head around it. And then I started venturing off. I actually also really liked this tool called Phaser. It is a JavaScript framework. And because I have a background in JavaScript programming and HTML and CSS, I highly recommend that for web folks, if you happen to know how to program in JavaScript. So I think I'm really about to do something that is comfortable, but like nudges you toward the outcome that you want. And then you can dive deep into Unity and all 3D stuff later.

[00:42:12] TA: Yeah. So I had started out in Unity. And something that really discouraged me when I got started was needing to learn how to code C#. Because I'm a designer, and I know like basic web coding like HTML, CSS, and I'm at the point now where I like avoid having to use coding knowledge unless I have to, because that just requires extra work.

[00:42:33] CS: It's hard.

[00:42:34] TA: Yeah. And for someone like me who's mainly interested in the UI of game design, are there any other shortcut routes around like learning C# or just like a basic requirement to be like an asset on a team?

[00:42:48] CS: Gosh! I think it depends on if you want to actually be the person building the UI or not. When I started out, I actually was just creating the art assets. And then the person who was doing the programming was actually implement it. Semi-similar to, I guess, if you were a web designer back in like 2006 or something. Like you Photoshop everything and then you cut it up, and then you give it to the person who's going to implement it. And that is pretty much how game development works, at least in the experiences I've had. I know that there are people who, when they work for larger companies, they are working in unity. And the designer might be the person who is actually implementing the UI assets. But if you're just starting out, I think that you can definitely, for example, either volunteer your skills or be the person who is the art person getting paid for specifically the UI creation. I don't necessarily think that you have to start with that. I do think if you want to eventually be the person who is responsible for implementing the UI itself, then it is really valuable to nudge yourself toward learning Unity.

You could start with JavaScript, if you were okay with that, because I know that Unity does support JavaScript as well. It is not a "first-class" experience in comparison to C#, but it is a start. I will say that I actually had to learn C# in a class as well. Well, I had to learn C# in a class, because it was so complicated. It's so much work. And like Unity, it's just so, so complicated, that it is the kind of thing that you need somebody to hold your hand through, whether that is a video tutorial, or something else. It is not simple. And I needed a guided tour for several weeks in a row to be able to really understand what was happening. And I feel like every year it gets more and more complicated to the point where I'm just like, "I don't want to touch that." I really love the functionality and the capability, but I think that, yes, it does take a lot of work to get into. But once you're in there, like just stay with it, because the moment you put it down, it might go away from your brain.

[00:45:04] TA: Yeah, I can attest to that. All the C# I've learned has gone away from my brain, because I haven't touched in months now.

[00:45:12] CS: No.

[00:45:13] TA: Yes. So when I do start again, I'd have to start from scratch. It sucks.

[00:45:17] CS: No!

[00:45:18] TA: But whenever I do, like I want to come to it with a positive outlook, because I think too, like I was just thinking like, "Oh, I'll learn this code, like it can't be that hard." And then I'll just call this up and get it to look the way I want it to look." I'm like, "Oh, my God! I don't know what's wrong. How do I troubleshoot this?" trying to find tutorials and all this other stuff. And it became like way more of an undertaking than I expected. So, yeah, it's one of those things that like you have to be diligent and patient with yourself, because you're really learning something new that is completely different than the UI that you're used to making on like websites and mobile apps.

[00:45:59] CS: 100%. It has that good feeling for those of you who have experienced with web code, and you know what it feels like when you type some words into a screen, and then you reload a page, and it's there. Like it has that feeling. It is just different. There are more layers. There's a lot more complexity. And the thing I'm really thankful for is that game development actually made me a much better programmer. It's made me a better designer. It makes me think a lot more about how things might break, or how we could make something more engaging in a way that provides value, of course, and leaves people with a memorable experience. So I think that I'm really thankful. But it is an investment. It does take some time. You also have to be very patient with yourself, because there are going to be a couple of things that probably happen. One, you're going to feel overwhelmed constantly. Two, you're probably going to get really tired of working on the same thing for a while. And you might need to stop.

So they're just going to be times where you have to just read yourself and understand like, "Do I have the bandwidth right now to invest what I'll need to get what I'm hoping to get?" And I would say that one other piece of advice I have for folks is to really, really, please start small. Please don't start with your long term vision game. Like just do something tiny, because you are going to have high expectations for yourself. And the moment that you do that, it is going to be infinitely harder for you to progress because you're going to start to see where you could be versus where you are right now. And it's going to get really frustrating. So just start with something that's really small and silly. That's what I did. I made literally a 30-second game. And I just got comfortable with it. And then I started making games that were closer to like 20 minutes. And then I made a game that was more like an hour and a half. And that is essentially what I'm

trying to do is just increment up in terms of the level of complexity. So I think the thing that's hard now is that it's been a while because I've been concentrating a lot more on organizing an event that actually celebrates game creators of color. And so I've been putting some game ideas on the back burner. And now I have to actually do this exact thing where I like start with something that's a smaller version of the idea that I'd like to get to eventually. But I'm excited to get back into it. And I love that you're also doing a lot of this work right now.

[00:48:29] TA: Yeah, one of the main reasons I'm interested in it is because I want to include gameplay with like education courses that I'm creating. And I completely relate to like how you said like don't start big. That's what I did, girl.

[00:48:43] CS: Don't do it.

[00:48:44] TA: And I regretted it. It makes you feel discouraged and give up. But like I still have like all the resources, because I had a whole plan planned out of like how I would do it. I will be taking that advice. I'm starting with 30-second games and build my knowledge from there.

So you've created a lot of games from scratch. If you were to like explain your process in a simple way, like what would it be like for creating a game from scratch?

[00:49:08] CS: What I'll usually do is I will – I'm a very intentional person, if you can't tell by all my obsessive goal setting and literally working on a team that focuses on goals. But I first started out by thinking about what my goals are going to be for this game. What is success for the player? Just doing some light writing and planning, because it's important to understand what you're trying to get out of the game. Sometimes you can just kind of play around and see where you land. But I find that it's really valuable to understand that the beginning of a process what the game is supposed to be saying and what the goal is and thinking really lightly about what some of the mechanics might be, like the interactions and what happens when you press a button. So once I figured out the general high-level structure, then I will figure out what framework I want to use.

So, historically, if I'm thinking completely from scratch, then I might use Phaser. So then I have to go download that and get my development environment set up. Similarly, with like Game

Maker or Unity, you have to like set your dev environment up. So that's the next thing. Just making sure that I understand like what my architecture is going to be like. And then from there, I can actually start to prototype something. So actually, historically, I've done a lot of paper prototyping, and I find that to be really valuable. So I'll actually like cut out pieces of paper and start interacting with them as if it was the game. And that can be valuable again for just testing out the mechanics that I wrote down to see if they actually work in reality. And then once I've done some prototyping in paper, maybe I'll actually start building out a very light version of that within the code or within the program that I'm using.

And from there, after I've actually gotten something working with some probably very basic art, I will start increasing the fidelity of the experience. I'll start increasing the fidelity of the art. I will see if I know anyone who wants to do music or anything like that. And then I pretty much just start play testing at that point. So I'll do some research and get some feedback from folks. Again, you can start to hear how it sounds like design. And yeah, it then becomes the process of like iterating and tweaking content to make it feel more engaging or interesting or worthy of folk's time. I think I've really tried to start thinking about memorable experiences versus just is a fun. I think they're very different things.

So, yeah, I do a lot of testing. And sometimes I'll put the game down and then come back and read the feedback and then have a bunch of other ideas and just keep iterating. And it really depends on how long it takes. But yeah, I think that, for me, it is setting the intention, prototyping as quickly as I possibly can, getting really excited about that. And then slowly increasing the fidelity and building out more pieces of the game, and then deciding at what point I think it's just good enough. Does that makes sense?

[00:52:23] TA: Yes. It makes completely sense. I was taking all the notes, girl. I'm like, "Yeah, I need this process."

[00:52:31] CS: I had the fun of teaching game development for a while a couple of years ago with this group called Code Liberation. And one of the most entertaining and fun parts of it really was just intention setting with people about what kind of game they want to build and getting folks really excited and going to game jam. So I know we're all digital now. But there are still a lot of game jams that are happening. Itch.io does a ton of them. If you just want to literally have

a space and a group of people online who are as excited about learning how to build games as you are, there are so many options out there. And of course, you can also come to my own conference. Of course, I'm going to sell this, which is called The Game Devs of Color Expo. And we talk a ton about game development and how people think about game making. So I find that sometimes when I'm in a rut, it's really valuable to like do a game jam or go to a gaming event and see how other people do it and then just get really inspired.

[00:53:31] TA: Yeah, that's amazing. The expo you said, is it – You just said the gamers of –

[00:53:35] CS: Game Devs of Color Expo. Yeah.

[00:53:38] TA: Is there a website up or anything yet or –

[00:53:41] CS: Yeah. So you can go to gdocexpo.com, or gamedevsofcolorexpo.com. Game devs is like a short version of game developers. It's like definitely a buzzword of sorts. But yeah, we have been running for – This is going to be our sixth year actually. So I'm really excited about seeing where we land with everything. Like we're just investing a lot of energy into creating a really high-quality experience to celebrate creators of colors who work in game.

[00:54:10] TA: We've covered so much today. Do you have any advice for aspiring and current product designers?

[00:54:17] CS: I really do think that I feel like the core of this conversation has been all about intention setting. And what I want to make sure that people do is to really understand why they're here and what drives them. It doesn't have to be the same thing that drives me or any other people, but I feel like it can be really valuable, if you want to become a product designer, understand why there are so many focus areas that you can also go into. Like you can be a game UX designer, or you can be a person who works in e commerce. You can work for a software company. There are so many options out there. So really understanding what is most interesting to you is something that's going to provide you with a lot of value over time.

And then I think other than that, really learning to find your voice and to be comfortable using it, and to know that you are as valuable as the other folks that are in the room, whether that'd be product managers, engineers, like you have a really valuable and insightful perspective. And I hope that no matter what your level, how long you've been here, that you feel like you can use it.

[00:55:29] TA: So I like to end the show with a random question completely unrelated to everything we've been talking about. What's something that you want to do in the next year that you've never done before?

[00:55:40] CS: Gosh! Well, this is so random. It would be really cool to parasail. I don't know. This is like the most nerdy thing, but I'm pretty sure in Sonic the Hedgehog, that's the thing you can do. Like one of the earlier games. And I guess that's why, but my brain was just like – It immediately jumped to a picture of Tails essentially doing like a hang gliding thing. And I was like, "Yeah, I want that." So I guess that's going to have to happen.

[00:56:11] TA: That's pretty fun from what I've seen on YouTube, to go vlog that type of stuff.

[00:56:14] CS: Yeah. It just seems chill. I want to do a chill activity that's also slightly terrifying.

[00:56:23] TA: Be on the edge of fear.

[00:56:24] CS: Yes, constantly. I also love rock climbing, and I'm terrified of heights. So I just live within that space of like terror, but it's fun. Yeah.

[00:56:34] TA: Rock climb with the harness or –

[00:56:37] CS: No.

[00:56:37] TA: Wow! You are all out.

[00:56:40] CS: Bouldering. Yeah, it's great. It's very fun. So yeah, shout outs to anyone who's listening who is afraid of heights.

[00:56:47] TA: I've been rock climbing, but with the harness. I love it. It's for sure fun. But like afterwards, my arms were destroyed. I could not lift a pen.

[00:56:56] CS: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely every time I go afterward, my arms are like, "Why did you do this to me?" Very specifically, the area that's like under the wrist, like every single time, which is why I love it. So yeah, I'm hoping to do that a bunch this summer. But then, yeah, I would love to do some more outdoorsy stuff that I haven't really gotten to do yet.

[00:57:17] TA: Something I want to do in the next year is travel to South Africa, because I have a cousin that lives over there. And we haven't seen each other in like over a decade. So it would be so awesome just to see her and in-person, because we like video chat all the time. And also too, visit South Africa. There're so many beautiful things in that country.

[00:57:37] CS: I went a couple of years ago.

[00:57:40] TA: Oh, you have?

[00:57:40] CS: Yeah, it was wonderful. I went to this design conference actually called Pixel Up. And it was so beautiful. Like, obviously, there are some parallels, I feel like between the United States and South Africa, but like I felt really at home. And that was really beautiful to experience as somebody who was born in the US, specifically in New York. There're a lot of black folks here. But I think that nonetheless, it was really beautiful to have people call me their sister and I was like, "I'm not even from here, but I feel really at home, and it's very beautiful." Like I know that my family is of West African descent, but like that's a huge portion of people. And so I think it was just really wonderful to be within a space with like a bunch of folks who really made me feel like I was at home.

[00:58:31] TA: Where can we connect with you online?

[00:58:34] CS: Yeah. You can find me – I tweet sometimes. I tweet sometimes, @cattsmall. Same on LinkedIn. Pretty much most places I'm Catt Small except Instagram, because somebody is barking that. It's cool. If you want to follow the Asana design team, we're on

Twitter. So you can go @asanadesignteam, and check us out. If you want to see more or if you're interested in working at Asana, you can also go to Asana.design. It's a website plank, air horn, and you will be able to see what jobs we have open. We are hiring for a lot of roles, especially if you're in SF. So definitely hit us up. And of course, hit me up too.

[00:59:14] TA: If you guys have any questions or comments about today's episode, make sure to tag Catt on her social channels. Or tag me @uinarrative on Instagram or @uinarrativeco. on Twitter. Also, don't forget to share this episode with anyone you think would benefit from it. I appreciate you so much, Catt, for taking the time to join us on this episode and having this conversation about design growth and giving us some tips about getting into game design.

[00:59:40] CS: Heart emojis.

[OUTRO]

[00:59:47] TA: Thank you for listening to the UI Narrative Podcast. If you like what you hear, make sure to show this podcast and love by commenting and subscribing where you listen. You can find me on Instagram and Facebook @uinarrative, or Twitter @uinarrativeco. I also respond to emails at hello@uinarrative.com. Talk to you later. Bye

[END]