EPISODE 44

[INTRODUCTION]

> *"**TG:** My biggest advice for your portfolio is to just keep it simple. Keep it simple. A well-organized portfolio that showcases your design and our research talent is going to stand out. That is the best way to demonstrate your skill sets before an interview other than a resume. Have a portfolio that matches the jobs you are applying for. You need to show the hiring manager in one to two minutes that you are a great fit for the role."*

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 Garcia. Let's get started.

Hey, guys, it's Tolu here 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.

[EPISODE]

[00:01:52] TG: Hello there. Welcome back to the UI Narrative podcast. This is a solo episode. Today's topic is going to be about portfolios. As many of you know, I work as a senior product designer at a small design studio called Not Dev. I recently went through the process of looking at over 200 portfolios for a position we needed to fill. And as I was going through these

portfolios, I noticed a common problem. A lot of y'all don't know what to put in your portfolio or how to keep a hiring manager on your portfolio for at least two minutes. So this episode is going to be me ranting and also providing guidance for anyone that is a designer, a researcher with a portfolio. I've never had to look at this many portfolios in my life. So now I have a general understanding of what most of your portfolios look like after finishing all my boot camp, or course, or whatever form of education.

And I hate to break this to you, but they suck. And nobody's told you this. And I even happen to say it out loud because it makes me the bad guy. I'm not going to be judging you this whole episode. Instead, I'm going to be giving you clear steps on why it sucks and how you can make it better, because I really want you to land the interview.

Before we get into all of that, I have a quick shout out to make. So this past week, I ran into a podcast fan named Melissa at The Parks Small in Arlington, Texas. And y'all, I almost cried from excitement. Melissa, if you're listening, I was so excited to meet you. It's just so exciting meeting someone that listens to my podcast in-person. So yeah, I really appreciate you coming up to say hi to me, listener. So I'm sort of out in the streets in Texas. So if you see me out and about, please come say hi. I would love to meet every one of you in-person, and maybe one day do like a meet and greet. Until then, wave at me or come say, "Hey, hey," if you see me melting in these hot ass Texas streets.

One more shout out to my recent reviews on Apple podcasts, Diana does design, my nickname for reviews. Bailey3, Katherine, Claire UX, and so many more of you from all over the world, thank you so much. Your reviews really warm my heart, especially on the days when I'm feeling extremely unmotivated to record. This episode is actually my second time recording, because the first time I accidentally deleted, which is like the first time I've ever done that in recording my podcast, but I was using a new software to record, and I didn't understand what I was doing apparently. So yeah, like just going back and like reading your reviews really just motivate me to just keep going. So if you haven't left a review yet, and you're listening on Apple podcasts, please take like one to two minutes. Let me know what you think about the show. I'd love to know the impact this podcast is having in your life. And if you don't have Apple podcast, please tag me on Twitter @uinarrativeco and let me know which episode is your favorite so far. And as always, you can always email me at hello@uinarrative.com. So yeah, let's move on to the show.

So as I mentioned, we need to talk about design and research portfolios and how they affect your possibility of getting hired. And I'm giving you this advice as a hiring manager and your user. The most important message for this entire episode is to have a portfolio that matches the jobs you are applying for. You need to show the hiring manager in one to two minutes that you are a great fit for the role. If it's a job with designer in the title, and I'm talking about like product designer, UI designer, UX designer, and just any job with designer, then your portfolio should showcase your best visual design skills and show less research.

If it's a researcher job, I'm talking about UX researcher, data analysts, et cetera, your portfolio should showcase your best research skills and show us design. And just to be clear, I'm not saying other skill sets are unimportant. For example, some additional great skills are interaction design, motion design, coding and business. But depending on if you're going for a designing or researcher title, the core skill you should start with is designer research. And you can build upon those skills to become a T-shaped designer and/or researcher. And what I mean by like T-shaped is having a deep expertise in one particular area, but also a broad at our experience across the field.

So throughout this episode, I'll be talking about how to improve your visual design and research projects for your portfolio and also going over what to include in a portfolio. Let's talk about designer positions first. So the number one thing that you need to work on is your visual design. And I know that probably makes your palms start to sweat because, well, a lot of boot camps and courses and colleges are not teaching students how to improve their visual design effectively. And most of these UX designer jobs require a lot of design work and minimal UX work. That's just the reality of why it's important. You showcase decent UI skills for any designer position. So you can start by choosing an interesting project that showcases your design skills. If you're taking an online bootcamp, be aware that hundreds of other students might be working on the exact same problem statement as you. So a lot of your peers' projects will look the same. But you can stand out by creating a custom problem statement.

Try choosing a local business that needs a website or app redesign. For bonus points, also reach out to them to see if they'll agree to your client for free. And I know some of you might be like, "Why free? Tolu, why free?" If you were just starting out without any experience, your

designs will most likely not be that great. So you're mainly doing this for the client experience. And opportunity to work with a real client will look better than any hypothetical project in your portfolio. And any chance that you have to work with a real product is a huge advantage, because it's a great way to get the job experience.

Another way that you can improve your projects is to show the visual design more than the research. And I know that this one is going to be controversial to y'all, because I'm sure the boot camps or courses you've taken talks a lot about showing the research process and they talk about like persona, the user flow, etc. But listen, the research comes second to the design on the portfolio. And I know like your designs are based on research show yes, it's important for you to show the process, but you got to make the main focus on your portfolio the visual design to impress the hiring manager. So yeah, like don't show the boring screens first, like sign up or like admin screen. Show off the main attraction, like whatever the prettiest looking screen is that you've got. And like, okay, I'll go over an example, because I'm sure some of you might be confused. So the first time you were showing a preview of the project, you should show your best UI for that project. So like the first image on your project page should be the best UI that you got. And the reason for this is like once you've impress the hiring manager with your UI, then you've gained their interest to read more about the project. And I promise you, like the first one to two minutes that they're on your portfolio is them looking for what will attract them to stay. Remember, like hiring managers looking through like 30 portfolios a day if they're really trying to hire someone quickly. So they want to see if you have the visual chops first. Then after that, they'll click on the project that seems the most interesting and skim read your process for how you created that beautiful design.

Next, let's go ahead and break down researcher position. So the number one thing that you need to work on as you research process. Showing visual design is good too, because it just makes your research more interesting to read. Choose a project that you are passionate about. Here's a quote by Kate Jacobs that might inspire you, "I'll let you in on a little secret. We don't all love our jobs every day, and doing something you have passion for does it make the work part of it any easier. It just makes you less likely to quit." And that's by Kate Jacobs.

Also, I think you'll just be more adventurous with trying various research methods if you are working on something that you're passionate about. So like I said, for designer positions, try

choosing like a local business that needs help with their website or app. You can do a UX audit for them. And even if they don't want your free services, you can conduct research on your own. Conducting UX research on an existing product is just better than a hypothetical project, because you get experience working with the product constraints.

Another way that you can improve your projects is being specific with why you chose your research methods. Hiring managers want to know that you're a self-starter independent and can start a case study with little to no direction. You need to show your decision making process for why each research method conducted was beneficial or why it wasn't. The first preview of the project should highlight the biggest breakthrough in your research. And the first section on your case study page should also highlight this breakthrough. And I feel like a lot of that to applies to design as far as like showing your design process is pretty important. It's just a matter of like luring the hiring manager of like, "Oh, okay. This person can actually design. Let me go ahead and see their research skills as well," which is why I said earlier that it's not that research skills are important. It's just the design skills is what can get a hiring manager to stay on your portfolio a little longer.

Here're some things that apply to both researchers and designers. I want to go over a list of what to include in your projects. For designers, you must include project title with the product image, project introduction, which is like the background object problem statement, your role in tools, high-fidelity with usability testing with key research insights, iteration of design and/or research. What's next, which is basically the conclusion of your project. What would you test next if you had more time? What new features would you add? For researchers, you must include – it's pretty similar to designers, project title with the product image, project introduction, which is background, objective, problem statement, your role tools and research methods, usability testing and research methods. What key research insights, very important for any researcher position. Iteration of your research. What's next? Collusion of projects. What would you test next? If you had more time, what new features would you add? So you can see how these lists are mostly similar, but each is more focused on design or research skill sets as like the basic. And you can always build upon this and add in more skill sets to show off. But as far as like the bare minimum, that's what you should include for designer or research projects.

Here're some additional things you could also add to your projects for either designer or researcher. User interviews and/or secondary research, any additional synthesizing of research like personas, including their goals, affinity mapping, empathy mapping, how-might-we's, use user stories, et cetera, information architecture, like sitemaps, user flows, user journeys, et cetera, branding, like logo, style guide, color palettes. You could also do some sketching, wireframe, wire flows. Showing like a low-fidelity screen user flow. And some ways that you can make your portfolio stand out would be showing off your high-fidelity UI design in some device mockups. You can find mock-ups on places like Creative Market. And there's just a bunch of resources like on Google if you just search UI design mock-ups. You'll find some for free and some that are paid. You could also include a mixture of business-to-business, which is b2b, or business to customer products, which is b2c. And a huge plus is showing a variety of operating systems like mobile, iOS and Android, desktop, TV, watchOS, VR or AR. If it's your first time creating a website, it's best for you to stick to a template.

There're multiple free and paid portfolio content management systems, CMS, that are available to help you build your website. And for free ones that are out there off top of my head, Squarespace, Webflow, Wix and WordPress. But I highly recommend that you stick to a template. Keep it simple. Save your time. And it's just less for you to worry about.

Let's take a break

[BREAK]

[00:15:21] TG: 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.

[EPISODE CONTINUED]

[00:16:10] TG: For the entire portfolio, you should include your name and title. And for titles, this is when people get hung up on whatever your title you're going for. You don't have to put junior in front of it, unless you are still studying, like you're still on a course, still getting education. Sure, put Junior. But once you've already graduated from your education, then remove the junior and just put the title, because, I mean, a lot of job titles out there, like as I'm sure you've seen, there's not a lot of like junior position. So it's better if you just don't put that in front and just in case. The recruiter is using some type of filter system, and you might be disqualified just because you have junior, which isn't fair.

But yeah, having your name and title at least three projects, an about me page and a contact page. And also link out your LinkedIn and your email address. On the homepage, there should be your full name and the job title. This could be something like to Tolu Garcia, Senior Product Designer. And I won't be prescriptive on how this should look. However, I do recommend that the title on your site be your full name, because it makes it easier to remember whose portfolio you're on. Each project should follow the guidelines that I said earlier, the list that I gave you earlier. And for your project view, each project should follow the guidelines of the list for the projects that I gave you earlier. For your project list view page, include a little excerpt about the project so it teases the content on the page. And make it easier for the hiring manager to know what the project is before they click. This will make it easier for hiring managers to know which project best fits the needs that they're looking for, because they won't have time to go through every single project on your portfolio. So yeah, they just go to the one that looks the most appealing or matches what they're looking for first.

So the about me page should include more information about you. Anything else you want to share, like skill sets and hobbies, include non-design related personality here too. So I know UX is like your passion, but you're not a robot. For contact, you need to have your email address in an easy to copy format. And double and triple check that you have made it easy to contact you.

My biggest advice for your portfolio is to just keep it simple. Keep it simple. A well-organized portfolio that showcases your design and our research talent is going to stand out. That is the best way to demonstrate your skill sets before an interview other than a resume. I'm sure a lot of

you want to progress quickly. And one of my biggest tips for that is you need a mentor that will give you actionable feedback. So there's a learning curve. Getting in to UX design and research no matter how fast the course is, it takes time to understand, and a mentor can help you speed up that process. You may not always have you know the best questions to ask are things to think about, but a great mentor will give you direction on what you need to improve in your designer research. And they should be someone that leads a conversation to get you talking. So resources to find a mentor are adplist.org, designed.org, rookieup.com, and of course you can always chat with me at uinarrative.com/workwithme, or email me at hello@uinarrative.com.

One more tip to improve your visual design quickly is to practice recreating well-designed mobile screens and websites. This is the fastest way that you will learn how to work quickly in design software, like Figma, Sketch or Adobe XD. When it comes to software, it doesn't really matter which one you start with. Most of them, they're pretty similar. So there's not a huge learning curve there. It's a matter of understanding how to use the software to create what it is you're visualizing, which I think is like the hugest learning curve for any person getting into UX design, especially if you don't have a background in like graphic design or any type of design.

So I promise you, if you practice recreating screen, this is how I personally have gotten better. This is what I would use to do all the time. I definitely started to understand better how to create components. And I was able to figure out how other designers were doing things that I couldn't quite figure out, was just by practicing, and also, too, looking at tutorials on YouTube if there's a specific thing that you're trying to learn how to do. Okay, so we discussed everything that should go in your portfolio. Now I want to rant. I want to rant about pain points I've experienced while reviewing 200 plus portfolios. And I was specifically looking for a junior product designer with decent beginner UI skills.

And while going through these portfolios, I allowed myself one to two minutes per portfolio so it wouldn't take me like a month to review everything. So yeah, here are my pain points. As your user and as a hiring manager, some things that I will give you guys some advice on. Number one, show me the work as quickly as possible. So let me go over a little bit like how my process was when I was going through each portfolio. So the first thing I would do is just look at the work. Mainly, what I was doing is looking for which project catch my eye first. And if they had like a little excerpt there, give me a little description, then I would like read it a little bit just to see

which one I should probably spend my time on looking at a little bit more. So whichever one looked the best project-wise, that's what I clicked on first just to see –They have to wow me what their visual design first. Draw me in. So once I clicked on a project, then I would scroll through, read through their process a little bit, mainly skim reading, just because a lot of the portfolios, like the project pages, were super long. So that's another tip.

It doesn't have to be as long as you think. Summarize it as quickly as possible. You don't have to show every single screen, every single picture you've taken. Try to keep it short enough to where you don't feel like you're babbling about something. I would also consider too, like if you're trying to showcase different skill sets, highlight that throughout your different projects. Like if one project, maybe you got to do one research method versus the other. Maybe highlight that one a little bit more, or maybe there is a feature you designed a little bit better on one project than the other. Consider what you did the best on that project and highlighting that stuff first. If you don't think it's that great, maybe you can skip showing it, but then you just write once and it's talking about it. Just because like in most cases, like I'm not reading every single word, I'm skimming it, and looking at the images to gain an understanding of what you did.

Another tip, skip the profile picture on the first page. Here's an idea feature, your best project in place of that. And I want to evaluate your skill sets as soon as possible. So any way you can quickly show me that is amazing. Because, if it's the first thing I'm looking at and it looks amazing, I'm going to go ahead and click on it. Why do I need to go to the other projects? Right away, if that's the one that's going to gain my attention and be amazing.

After I look at the work, then I would go to the about you section. So yeah, like I don't care what you look like. I care what your work looks like. So yeah, you could skip the profile picture on the first page. It doesn't really matters. I mean, and I'm not saying that to beat mean. I'm just saying that because like I don't care what you look like. I care what your work looks like.

Number two, if your portfolio looks dated, I assume the worst. And in all cases, that's what it was. So I developed a bias for dated portfolios after seeing several 90s-looking websites that have terrible UX and UI. If you are confused on what that looks like, take a second to Google 90s website design and go to the images tab. I'm sorry. You can't see that. But that's the type of design I mean. This is why I recommend you use a template instead of coding a website. Like

all those ones I've mentioned, like Squarespace, et cetera. If you have little to no experience coding, use a template, man. Even if you have experience coding, you could still use a template. Don't try to be different by reinventing the wheel for basic website navigation, accessibility, and making me so confused. In most cases, it just makes it harder to navigate your website. And I get distracted by a poorly designed website, because it takes me it takes me longer to find your projects, which results in a bounce rate if I can't figure out how to navigate.

The third pain point I had, double check your links, double check your spelling, double check your portfolio website was pushed alive. That one was kind of funny to me, because I'm just like you're sending out a portfolio link, but your website isn't live. Like you'd be surprised how many people do that. But anyways, review it and have a friend do it as well. I mean, just give them five minutes and be like, "Hey, can you read this real quick?" I'm pretty sure too, there are software out there that can check the spelling for you. Just do a Google search for that. I know there's one that I used to use for a client before, but I don't remember the name of it right now.

Number four, I know you're probably tired of hearing me. I only got eight, okay? Just deal with me for eight. And I promise these will change your portfolios for the better. So number four, do not have external PDFs, JPEGs, et cetera of your work. Display all your work on your portfolio. And think of it this way, do you want your user to be distracted when they are taken off your website and they forget they were even on your portfolio? An ad could pop up on an external link. Or they could forget which portfolio they're on. And mark yours as done.

So have everything ready to view on your portfolio. And this will most likely be extra work. But I promise you, it's worth preventing a bounce rate on your portfolio. Also, it's extremely annoying to open like 10 links to try and gain an understanding of your entire portfolio. So yeah, just keep it simple. And remember, you have like one to two minutes to grasp for their attention. It's really competitive.

Number five. I don't want to say this one, because I know some of you are going to be like, "Oh, that's me." But okay, don't do a redesign of a brand that already looks good unless your design skills is also going to look amazing. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. But I have to say it can't look worse than the original even if you solve a UX problem on the original. I'll say it again, even if you solve a UX problem for the original design.

So hear me out. As a designer, it is extremely hard to not judge your UI decisions for a redesign if your redesign makes the UI look worse than the original. So I think it's so important that you ask for feedback if you're unsure if your design looks better. And it's just best to stay away from redesigns, unless the original design itself looks terrible. Go for something completely original instead.

Number six, I'd rather see a gallery of photos for your best UI designs than your prototype. I think it's awesome that you know how to prototype. It's an important skill to have, but I hardly ever click through your prototype. I just don't have the time. I assume that you know how to prototype if you can create several high-fidelity screens and talk about your user flows for your project. So just upload them in a gallery, or showcase your best like six UI designs.

Number seven, if you have a coming soon project or like a non-disclosure agreement, like NDA, with a password, add in a short summary of what you achieved while working on it. And I know that you can't add in a ton of images, or maybe even talk about it too much, but at least it shows your input on the project so we can evaluate your skill sets for that project.

Number eight, the last one. I'm almost done ranting y'all, I promise. Keep in mind that there's a psychology to persuading the person to stay on your portfolio. So this empathize with the person who has very little time and is most likely stressing to get through at least like 30 portfolios for the day while completing their day job. So just make your portfolio a pleasant experience for them to remember for all the right reasons.

All right, rant done. Next, we're going to get into listener questions. Y'all has such great questions. I asked on Instagram what questions you have about portfolios. First one is from Ziggy Curls, "I am starting to work on putting together my UX portfolio. Is there a benefit to having an about me section with a candid photo and hobbies to show personality? Or should I only show my three projects and nothing else?" You should absolutely showcase your personality. So the first thing that I do after that I decide I like a person's work on their portfolio is looking at their about me section, because it's a quick preview to see if they are a good culture fit. And of course, like I'll still bring them in for an interview regardless of if they have a personality in that section. But a lot of times during the interview, we'll talk about something

outside the box. We learned about you from your portfolio. And it's a way to break the ice and learn more about each other. So yeah, please go for it.

Kenneth Jordan Burke key said, "I am finishing up my UI design course for CareerFoundry. So I am very much newbie to the UX/UI world. What tips would you have for someone building their design portfolio and trying to land their first job in UI?"

So after you finish your course, take some time to polish up your design work. I think most students are going at like jet-speed pace to complete all the work to pass the course, which makes sense. I did the same college. So there's a lot of design decisions that you could probably make look better if you had a couple more weeks to think of another design pattern or color palette to use, for example. If you don't find anything that you want to change after your course, then do a once over to make sure things like alignment and spelling are correct on all your UI screens. Sometimes the deciding factor between you and another candidate is one person use justify texts for everything, and the other person did not. It's the little design decisions that mattered the most. And of course, take some time to listen to this episode. I give so many tips on what you should do while building your portfolio.

Next question is from Oyin_Doc, "How do you start build a design portfolio?" So the first thing that you need is a completed project to start putting a portfolio together. If you're struggling to start your first project, here's a couple options. You could find a local business that could use a new website and see if they could be your first client. The second option is to create a hypothetical digital product based on a need that you see in your community. So once you've completed all the necessary steps for designing the product, and if you are familiar with what those steps are, you'll just need to start with a design and research education first to understand how to problem solve for digital interfaces. But yeah, once you've completed a project, then you can go ahead and start adding everything you've done to your portfolio. Take your re-listen, or read. I have transcripts available on the website, uinarrative.com/podcast, and look at the list of all the things to include in the design portfolio.

Next question is from Michelle Leons, "Hi, Tolu. I am starting to create my portfolio. What websites do you recommend to build in?" There's plenty of websites out there. I think whichever one you choose is fine as long as people can view your portfolio on web and mobile. I

personally prefer Squarespace. I use it for my own portfolio, because it's user friendly. And it's easy to make quick edits too from your phone as well. And I like not having to think about coding. It's little to no effort to make the pages responsive for mobile, and it's hassle free, and they have several templates to choose from.

The next question is from Meme2k7, "Hi. Few questions. What's the min projects for UI portfolio? And what should be included? How many pieces go into a brand case study for portfolio?" I would shoot for three projects that showcase different operating systems. So try a mobile, website, and whatever else you'd like to do. And the amount of process that is included in the project is up to you. I went over earlier in the episode project list requirements. You can take a re-listen or read on the website, uinarrative.com/podcast. But yeah, get creative and see what additional things you'd like to include in your project.

The final question is from Troy Lilly, "Should I redesign screens from projects I worked on with a team that don't match my visual design centers? I was told to do this in our portfolio review session." If you think you can do better and you have the time to do that, then yes, yes, yes. Why sell your skill set short? Be clear in your portfolio of why your design patterns are important.

So that's all the listener answers I have for this week. As a reminder, you could be included in the next episode. Make sure to follow me on Instagram @uinarrative and on Twitter @uinarrative.co. I randomly asked questions that will be featured in an episode. And I choose people to answer questions live on the show.

I want to end this episode with this quote for you all, "Soon, when all is well, you're going to look back on this period of your life and be so glad that you never gave up." And that is by Brittany Burgunder. I hope I said that right. I've been a designer for over seven years now. So I personally understand how time consuming putting together your portfolio is. But I promise you, it's so worth the effort when you take the time to get it right to impress hiring managers. If you're struggling with your portfolio, book a portfolio review workshop with me at uinarrative.com/workwithme and I will personally scrub your portfolio from head to toe. I'm going to scrub it clean y'all. And give you specific feedback on how you can improve.

As always, you can email me hello@uinarrative.com, or DM me on Instagram @uinarrative, or Twitter @uinarrativeco if you have any questions about this episode. And I can't wait to talk to you guys. But yeah, see y'all in two weeks. Bye.

[OUTRO]

[00:37:20] TG: Thank you for listening to the UI narrative podcast. If you like what you hear, make sure to show this podcast some 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]