

**EPISODE 48**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[00:00:05] DB:** Turning a room of engineers, or business, dev people, or even some of the VP level leadership for product to help them make really smart decisions about what we produce, that is a skill. I'm still developing that. It's something that I'm spending a lot more time doing.

**[00:00:26] TA:** You're listening to the UI Narrative Podcast, the bi-weekly podcast that shares the stories of people of color, interface designers and researchers, and their contributions towards creating user-centered experiences. I'm your host, Tolu Garcia. Let's get started.

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[INTERVIEW]

**[00:01:44] TG:** Hello, everybody. Welcome back to the UI Narrative Podcast. Let me introduce you to today's guest. Donald Burlock is more than just a designer engineer. He's a problem solver and diligent at producing solutions that celebrate both utility and aesthetics to memorable

experiences. Whether in a studio, or in corporate design, he is passionate about driving creativity, and helping organizations understand and activate the value of the design process.

He is interested in unlocking the creative challenges of the present in order to open doors for an innovation to be launched, adopted and deemed impactful in the future. His design experience ranges from working with global brands, including GE, Coca-Cola, Dolby, Cisco to many startups in Silicon Valley. Prior to coming to the Bay Area in 2013, he spent time working as a product designer at IDEO in Boston.

Listeners, let's give a warm welcome to our guest, Donald Burlock.

**[00:02:49] DB:** Thank you, Tolu. Great intro. Thank you for having me.

**[00:02:54] TG:** Yeah. I'm so glad to have you here. Something I'd like to ask all my guests, for starting out, what's the one of your first memories of being interested in design?

**[00:03:04] DB:** Oh, my gosh. That's the best question, right? That's a great place to start. We all have an entry point somewhere.

**[00:03:10] TG:** Exactly.

**[00:03:12] DB:** Right. That's the memory we hold near and dear. For me, I honestly would say, it started when I was still working as an engineer. Some people don't know this, because I've been working now as a designer for almost a decade. Prior, I studied engineering. I actually had a mechanical engineering degree when I entered the field, entered the job force. I worked at an automotive supplier called Delphi Electronics & Safety.

At that time, I was primarily focused on what we would now know as the infotainment system of the vehicle. Really, anything that the customer would interact with in the car. I had some form of responsibility for in those days. It wasn't that long ago, but it's long enough, where we were still trying to figure out how to integrate CD players and make the jump to customers who wanted to have their MP3 experience in cars.

I was designing the trim for the NAV systems and the radios. When I say design, it was really the engineering. We had the responsibility of trying to figure out how we would tool the plastics that would actually create this infotainment system in your dash. Often, I would work on the plastics. I would be in CAD, or I'd be doing some really detailed mechanical study. I would think about who actually comes up with the styling. Who's coming up with the look of these dash systems for these different vehicles?

At the time, I didn't know anything about design. The only design experience I had had up until that point was being aware of fashion designers, or architecture. I had no clue that there was an entire field of people completely dedicated to starting with the very beginning of a concept and bringing it to life. Fast forward, two years into working as an engineer, and I had this opportunity to go up to Troy, Michigan. When I was in Troy, I was actually there for a couple of engineering meetings. The building I was in happened to have an industrial design studio. Now, I didn't know it was called an ID studio.

It was incredible, because I walked by this room, and I remember seeing all of these people who were sketching on tablets. They were doing these really gorgeous sketches, lots of colors, it was vibrant, expressions of different car styling, lines. The room was dark. I could see that everyone was sketching on their tablets. When I looked through the room, I could see that there was a separate room where they had basically, a five-axis CNC router. It was carving out clay. It was creating wheels. There were people that were managing the router.

Essentially, they were at the same time, bringing other parts near this wheel and trying to work out the styling of how this wheel might fit onto a vehicle. I'll never forget that, because it just looked like an incredible space. I thought to myself, "Wow. What if I could work in a place where I'm cutting clay, I'm sketching, I'm looking at these amazing materials and these beautiful images on the board?"

That was really my awakening. That was a moment where I thought, "Okay, there's something here, something really fantastic that I need to dive into. I just didn't know what it was called." That's how it started.

**[00:06:54] TG:** I think that's so funny, because I've been hearing the same type of story from senior designers, as far as – because UX wasn't coined yet, technically. It was by coincidence, a lot of people found a new passion in UX, from seeing other people doing it. I mean, that's how I got into it. Yeah, I think that too, like there's this controversy of the term 'product designer', and what it means. I feel like, with you started out in mechanical engineering, that's the OG of what product design really is, because you're working on physical products, versus digital products.

I don't know if it was Netflix that originally was the one that first started using product designer, relating to designers creating digital products. I just wanted to hear your take on product design. Was that something that you started out with, as far as when you saw people creating the designs for cars in that room?

**[00:07:47] DB:** Actually, it wasn't. At that moment, I didn't know what it was called. I had to do some more investigation to understand exactly what I saw. Later on, I understood that there were industrial designers that were in the world, creating product experiences. I didn't understand the expansiveness of the design world at that moment. It wasn't until I did some more diving into different programs, investigating different studios. Really, just starting to peel away the layers that I discovered, "Oh, there's industrial design."

Then at this particular moment, there were a lot of people talking about digital design, because we had made that jump to so much activity happening on our personal devices. This is still 2006, 2007. To some degree, the iPhone was still becoming very much a part of somebody's everyday experience. When I actually made the transition, to study design, and I was very intentional about this, I decided I was going to go to a school and pursue a program of design, as opposed to just moving right into a studio, or some other position.

Once I did that, I studied every aspect that I could about design. I had never heard of design thinking. I wasn't really aware of product design at that point. ID was the program I was a part of. Very quickly, I'm talking about more than just human factors. We're talking about HCI, human computer interfaces, and I'm like, "Oh, wow. What's that?" All of a sudden, everything just started to connect. I was like, "Oh, my goodness. I can't just think about this object in my hand." Some of these things have screens.

Then, “Oh, if I think about how people move from something that's in the box to something that they're using every day, well, how do I do that? Who is coming up with this process? It was this very slow, methodical like, “Oh, my goodness. I can't believe I didn't know this before, but it all makes sense.” That was my experience those first couple of years as I was pivoting from engineering to primarily understanding design.

**[00:10:00] TG:** Yeah. It's a lot of being in this curious state. Like, you find a branch to something else. It's not until you're exposed to it, too. Listeners, if any of you are curious of the different types of UX/UI jobs out there, check out the podcast episode I did, the different types of UX and UI and product designer roles, to give you a bit more exposure to what's out there. Because I mean, you only know until you see it. Some people is just like, unless you follow the right person, you don't know what type of jobs are out there.

**[00:10:33] DB:** Yeah. That's such a great point, Tolu. Especially, because I think at this stage in my career, I wasn't spending a ton of time on social media. I had a Facebook account. Honestly, one of the things that really helped me start to see these different branches, and I love that you said branches, because that's really what it felt like, was being on these blogs. I was into the blogosphere world when I was in school. Often, I was going through the process of trying to come up with a new concept. Inevitably, I'm trying to figure out, “Oh, what's out there?”

2008, 2009, 2010, these are the times where I remember blogs being really, really big. I mean, this is, Pinterest was coming into play, but it was really the blogs that as a designer, I would go to. That's where I would see this amazing stuff. I would see people who were working with motion graphics. I would see designers who were exploring how to integrate something that was in the physical realm, was something that they were doing in the digital realm, so there was all of this translation from analog to digital. There was this experimentation with interfaces. A lot of that was seen in other designers, who were out in the world, exploring things and documenting their process online, and then saying to myself, “Oh, my gosh. That's really —” Your word is great, Tolu. Curious. It was so much curiosity. I'm like, “Oh, I want to experiment that way with projects I'm working on in the studio.”

**[00:12:06] TG:** I've talked a lot on the podcast, how crucial it is to become a multi-talented UXer, in order to stand out amongst competition. A way that you can do that is to have T-shaped

skills. I know some of you are probably like, “What is that?” T-shaped skills is basically means, having a deep expertise in one particular area, but also a broad experience across the field. Imagine the vertical bar on the letter T represents the depth of related skills and expertise in a single field. Whereas, the horizontal bar is the ability to collaborate across disciplines and experts in other areas to apply knowledge, in areas of expertise other than your own.

Basically, your depth specialty is your strong skills, and your broad specialty is your capable skills. For example, I have deep expertise in visual design, and a broad experience in information architecture, IA, usability testing, interaction design, animation, etc. Donald, I want to ask you, what are some of your T-shaped skills? What's your depth specialty? What skills are part of your broad experience?

**[00:13:18] DB:** Yeah, that's a great question, Tolu. I actually love the explanation that you just gave for all the listeners, because the T-shape model is still quite relevant. I've heard different types of models over the years; T-shape, X-shape. Honestly, the T-shape in many ways, still has quite a bit of power for designers who are growing their career, especially in the earlier individual contributor days, for lots of reasons.

One, I think it's because of what you said in terms of how broad you can become as a designer. It helps you connect a lot of dots. Then going deep, allows you to not only develop an expertise, but you also develop a credential, and you have the ability to become known for something. That's also very important when you're just getting started. In my case, I decided when I was finishing up grad school at Georgia Tech and the industrial design program, that I wanted to get very deep in sketching.

I felt that there were many different ways to sketch. I also felt that there were so many different tools that lended themselves to sketching. Not just sketching in terms of pulling out my pen and going to my sketchbook, although that was certainly a skill that I wanted to develop, primarily because in instances where I needed to visualize something, or communicate something very clearly, I could do that. I also wanted to develop sketching skills in terms of how I wireframed. At the time, I was really into balsamic. I was really into some of the new tools that Adobe was introducing. I also, at the time, was really starting to get into flows. Just overall screen flows. I

felt like, if I could sketch really quickly on the screen, then it could lend itself to communicating a concept fast.

For me, I wanted to understand how to sketch digitally on Wacoms, on paper. I wanted to understand how to sketch 3D form, in terms of industrial design. I wanted to understand how to sketch flows. I wanted to be known as the person who could sketch in all of these different degrees and articulate a concept fast and very clearly. Now, as a result, I also allow that sketching to give me more opportunity to work very broadly. Because I actually felt that industrial design, though, it was a good starting point, lended itself to thinking about the entire design experience.

I wasn't just sketching the form of a product, I started sketching the packaging. Then, if there was a companion app, for instance, for a product, I went from just designing the hardware to now sketching out the flows and thinking through how someone might actually interact with the app, which lended itself to working with other user experience designers, and obviously, people who are helping on the back-end to code some of the experiences that we wanted to create.

For me, I think that I've become more broad in terms of interface design, in terms of presentation skills, mostly because those things connect quite deeply to the skill that I've developed very deeply. I'm still growing in many different ways. I mean, the T-shape evolves over time. I still love the T-shape, because it gives us a good starting point to talk about our skills.

**[00:16:43] TG:** Yeah. I think some listeners are probably wondering how they can expand their skill set to become a T-shaped designer, researcher. A few tips for how you can do that, I would start out writing down five skills that you aspire to learn. Starting out, you may not have a depth specialty. If you're a complete novice yet, because you're still learning, right? But that's okay. Because over time, you get more familiar and experience what UX and you'll develop a depth specialty. As you're developing these new skills, you realize that you're better at one more than the others. That's how you discovered your depth specialty. It's also okay to change your skills as your interest change, because I'm sure that's happened with you over time, too, Donald.

**[00:17:28] DB:** That's right.

**[00:17:30] TG:** When I was fresh out of college, packaging design was my depth of expertise, because I have a background in graphic design, and for the broad specialties. You can also think about it this way, like skills you have from previous jobs, or professional development opportunities. Maybe you've done some writing, or some business presentation, I think is a great skill to have, for sure. Because even if you aren't the best designer, if you can sell the idea, I think that's pretty important. Yeah, you can add the skills that you aspire to learn and start looking for opportunities within your job, or online education, books, resources to begin growing those skills. Another thing too, look for ways to improve your skills over time to not say, stagnant when you initially start. Yeah. That way, you can begin to focus on the ones that interests you a bit more.

**[00:18:19] DB:** Really, really great information there. That's so good, Tolu. It's true. I actually feel often that when I get that type of question, I'm trying to give people a starting point. Often, you can really start with what you have. It's amazing how often I see designers who want to go broad, really quickly, which is great, because in some ways, you're curious, right? That's awesome.

Then, when I try to understand where do they have some expertise? Where have they learned a lot? Sometimes it's hard for them to express that. I love what you suggested there about starting out with jotting down those five skills that you're really good at, you feel extremely confident, you love, you're passionate about and then people know you for it. Yeah. Absolutely love your suggestions there.

**[00:19:07] TG:** Yeah. I'm always looking to, like as I said, for ways to grow. For instance, I'm interested in game design. I've said this on the podcast. It's a skill that I would eventually like to add to my broad experience, how to code UI for games. It's going slow, so it's more on my wish list. I'm curious, Donald, do you have any skills that you wish to add to your experience?

**[00:19:30] DB:** Yeah, definitely. At this stage of my career, I actually think a lot more about communicating a concept a lot faster, and in a way that brings everyone to a consensus. Often, there's competing goals, and you have rooms full of people who are all obviously wanting to see a successful outcome, but they have different ways of trying to get there.



I think, as a designer who has had some more experience in the field now, it's about having some influence. I've grown in my sensitivity of design. I've also learned quite a bit about what yields a really successful result in the market. I think that turning a room of engineers, or business, dev people, or even some of the VP level leadership for product to help them make really smart decisions about what we produce, that is a skill. I'm still developing that. It's something that I'm spending a lot more time doing.

There's some project management, and some pitching types of dynamics that are certainly a part of that, that I've picked up over the years working at startups. It changes over time, because the room is always a little bigger, the further you go in your career, and the bigger the projects. Understanding how to influence those rooms and doing it in a way that leaves everyone charged and really excited about the next step. That's an incredible skill that I've seen senior leadership, senior design leadership, really showcase over the years. I think, that's definitely an area that I'm trying to grow in terms of a new skill set.

**[00:21:20] TG:** Yeah. I think, it's also too important to acknowledge skills that you suck at, right? Just being honest with yourself with areas for growth. I think, great communication as a skill will help you learn like, "Okay, if you can delegate that to someone else on the team," or if you're collaborating right, maybe you are a better prototype and the other person is the better visual designer. Trying to not set yourself up to fail, basically, is what I'm trying to say, and being really open about something that you're not as good at. Maybe that too, it just means you need to take more time on a project than other people would take. Voicing that to the team.

**[00:22:00] DB:** Yeah, that's a really important point, especially when I think about my early days, I sometimes would have a request from a team member to take something on. There's this mix of, "Well, I don't know if my skill set is really strong in that area." I think that's the beautiful part about design is you get an opportunity to explore if that works. If it does it, you learn. Perhaps, you learn a lot from the failure. I certainly have had those. I used to do quite a bit of 3D modeling. For quite a while, I thought, "I could be a lot better at this."

I enjoyed it to the most degree that you could, spending hours in front of a computer CADing something. I noticed, I wasn't as quick as some of the other designers I worked with. They seem

to be very fluid, and they could use some of the programs in ways that I could just never imagine using it. I didn't abandon it, but I also recognize, to your point, Tolu, that was an area where I needed to gain some competency. Ultimately, that wasn't one of the areas where I was really deep.

It ended up pointing me in a direction where I started spending more time on the digital front, learning how to articulate some of the concepts that I wanted to express via some of the tools that allow me to move a little faster. I found myself gaining some different tools, and using those to express my concepts, as opposed to trying to stick with the tools that I knew I was a little bit slow in. That's a really great point. Understanding yourself and understanding where you can grow, where you can strengthen your skill set and also, areas where oh, okay, maybe you spend a little less time there and more time somewhere else. Really, really good point.

**[00:23:52] TG:** Let's take a short break.

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**[00:23:55] TG:** One of the top questions I get about product design is how do I stay inspired? 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.

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[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

**[00:24:49] TG:** Since the theme of this episode is about leveling up your skills, I want to get into Donald's book, *Superhuman By Design*. I'm sure you have noticed on the podcast, I don't

usually recommend books much on the podcast, because I'm really particular about only sharing the best resources out there, because I don't want y'all to be spiraling down the endless amount of resources out there.

Listeners, his book is pretty amazing. I recommend it for anyone that wants to become a multi-faceted designer, but also to reflecting on how you can be creative in all aspects of life, not just work. Yeah, what's great about *Superhuman By Design* is it challenges me to think about how the skills I learned can affect the life that I'm building. He uses design process references in the book, which is so relatable as a designer. Donald, can you share with us what inspired you to write this book?

**[00:25:44] DB:** Oh, my goodness, Tolu. Thank you so much for allowing us to talk a little bit about *Superhuman By Design*. I'm incredibly proud of the project. I actually feel as an author, it just gives me an opportunity to share more deeply about things that you and I are talking about today. My inspiration for writing the book primarily came from wanting to figure out a way to share at scale. Often, I would have a designer who is really fresh out of a program, or even someone who is really senior in their career, who had been working in one capacity. Say, for instance, they have been working as a programmer doing quite a bit of software development. Then they decided, they really wanted to make a pivot and perhaps, work as a UX designer and think a lot more about how a customer might interact with a product, especially on the front-end.

I would occasionally get these messages. I would try to field them, either in LinkedIn, or Facebook. Sometimes, there would just be so many messages and I would think, "I should teach a class." Then, I would start working on how do I get in front of a program and try to share. I kept looking at all of the different questions that were coming in and I thought, "You know what? I need to put this in one place. I'll put it in one place for me. I'll put it in one place for everyone. I'll talk about my experiences. I'll talk about what I learned." Then inevitably, it became a much larger initiative, as these things can become. Tolu, I know you probably imagine that this happens when it's a personal project, and all of a sudden, it becomes this really big thing.

Last year, in 2020, I decided with everything going on, I had to write the book, because I think that design has so much power beyond just producing an experience or product for someone. I

think that as designers, we have the ability to unlock creativity in others. That's a pretty amazing thing, because you can have someone who has a completely different skill set, or interest. You're able to get them to think in a way that leads to something really unique, novel, something that is even innovative. That comes from unlocking the creativity in someone else.

A good portion of the book is about understanding your superpowers, the things that you do extremely well, the things that we're known for, the talents that we've been manifesting and creating as we put the energy into learning how to articulate our creativity as designers, and then I expand on that. I talk about how critical it is to leverage those superpowers in order to do some really incredible things for the world.

On the surface, it sounds a little motivational. It sounds a little inspirational, but it's actually a lot more than that. I think, especially for this audience, it's the right type of book that brings everything together. It's not just in terms of your career, although that's really critical. It's also speaking to what you do, in the context of your career. It speaks to understanding how to leverage your superpowers to do some really great things for others.

Often, I think about my own design work. I think about how it's very easy to not imagine the end of life of a product, or the impact that it's going to have on someone else. We have the superpower to do that, if we exercise it. I think, it's really, really important for all of us to understand our superpowers, understand how we're leveraging those in the world, obviously, for our careers, but even more so in our interactions with others. Because at the end of the day, we're serving others by what we're doing. That's the work that we're bringing to life, through what we create. It could be for customers. It could be for an audience we may not even know about. We have this incredible responsibility to think about the people that we're creating experiences for.

Ultimately, I feel the book is this opportunity for us to have a conversation about career, about life, and ultimately, about how do we bring the best creative energy out of those who are around us. I hope everyone picks up a copy. It's a really easy read, too. It's a quick read, because we're designers. We love to understand and digest material quickly. I believe that this book, *Superhuman By Design: Keys to Unlocking Your Creativity for Life-Changing Results*, does just that for an audience.

**[00:30:29] TG:** It definitely is a super easy read. Also, too, Donald provides some action items, which I feel is so crucial for giving people direction on what to do next. In the book, Donald also talks about superhuman attributes, which are awareness, humanity, integrity, humility, resilience, and sacrifice. I think that these attributes are something you can learn as a skill and are a great foundation for building a meaningful life. I think, too, they can also help you improve your empathetic design thinking skills as well.

Another thing, this book challenges me to show people how creative they are, because how Donald was saying, some people just need to have that creativity unlocked. Also, too, just showing people how they can leverage those skills for a career in designer research. I think, some people, they just need that direction to truly see just how amazing they are and the potential that they have.

Yeah, listeners. If you want an autographed copy of Donald's book, please visit [theburlockgroup.com/book](http://theburlockgroup.com/book). That's [theburlockgroup.com/book](http://theburlockgroup.com/book). Also, too, I already bought mine. It comes with this post-it note highlighter, which is pretty cool. It's also available on Kindle and Amazon. Yeah, I'll have all those links in the show notes.

**[00:31:50] DB:** Thanks, Tolu. Yeah. It's full of application and inspiration. That's the goal. It wasn't just sharing a story and my personal experiences as a designer, but it was also trying to figure out how to give some real gems, some really great applicable experiences that people could take with them, much like our conversation today. That was the goal behind bringing it to life.

**[00:32:14] TG:** Was there anything new that you discovered about yourself while writing this book?

**[00:32:20] DB:** Many things. I discovered so much about myself while writing this book. I would first say, that becoming an author really requires a level of intentionality that I didn't even understand as a designer. That's what really blew me away. To put down words that other people can relate to, and other people can read through and say, "Oh, I'll grab that. That's really

good. Thanks for giving me that.” It took a lot of effort. I was absolutely blown away at how many times I was acting as a designer, trying to iterate on my own writing.

I thought, “Okay, I’ll put this thought down. It’ll be good. Okay, people relate to it.” Then I start working with an editor. The editor is like, “You have more in your head that you have to get on paper.” Or I would write something down, and then I would sit with my editor again. She would say, “Well, are you saying that as clearly as you could say it? Maybe there’s an easier way to put that down, so people can get it. Or your structure, the way you’re structuring the work right now will make it very hard for people to follow.” Revisit that.

I’m thinking, this is design. This is like, I felt it was my first day in studio, my first semester when I’m shaping a piece of foam and I have 20 prototypes, or my first app I’m working on, and I have all of these screens, and I’m sitting with someone and they’re like, “There’s too many screens. You need to change.”

Of course, a part of me is thinking like, “This is really good. I really like this.” They’re like, “No, it’s not where it needs to be. People are not going to be able to cruise through this material and take things away from it yet.” The refinement process of bringing a book to life was just my first time as a designer working in a new material, or new modality, my first animation, my first app, or my first even 3D product, but it was at a whole another level. It was really hard, Tolu.

**[00:34:35] TG:** I can see that. I can’t imagine, because I mean, you have this high-level thinking of how you want to explain things in the book. I can see that it’s probably frustrating, but why don’t people get it? I explained it so clearly. Then, you have to think of people hearing about it for the first time. They have this perspective of, “Ooh, that’s actually really complicated,” or anything that you said.

**[00:34:57] DB:** Exactly. It’s almost the type of design process that lended itself more to shaping foam. I’ll use that as my metaphor. That’s the one that’s coming to me right now. It’s almost as if I could see what I wanted to put out there, but I had to really spend a lot of time carving away at it. In some ways, it also felt when I’ve worked on motion graphics projects to express a product in my head, I can see the product turning, and I can see it spinning. I could see where it needs to land. I can hear the music in my head. I can see what the screen needs to say.

I have to build it to get there. I'm sketching and I'm storyboarding and I'm doing different interstitials. I'm trying to get it to look like what I have in my head. Because the book obviously is word, as opposed to being all visual, it was a medium that I just was not prepared to do that type of refinement. If you told me right now, we're going to do something and design for fill in the blank, and experience an app, a product, whatever it is. I'm thinking like, "Great. Okay, visually, I understand what do I need to do to start moving images and graphics, and logos, and interstitials, and all these things all around to get to something that expresses what I have in my head."

Different story when I was writing, it was like, "You're going to have to do an outline for this chapter." I'm like, "Oh, I have all the content here." "No, no, no, no. You need to do an outline. Then we need to figure out how we're going to sculpt and mold what you have here into something that people can easily digest." Totally a new level of challenge, but rewarding.

**[00:36:44] TG:** I love the comparison you did to building something in product design, molding. Because I feel that's such a great analogy for how you were able to put this book together.

**[00:36:55] DB:** Yeah. I think, that's definitely the one that relates the most to probably all the audience right now. I mean, I'm sure everyone has had some experience where they're trying to shape something that they already have in their mind and they're grabbing on to every tool in order to do it. It's a very special feeling when you actually see it come to life.

**[00:37:16] TG:** I want to change gears real quick, basically, to just gas you up real quick. You also work at numerous companies, like Amazon, Facebook, Dolby, and IDEO, to name a few. Which project has been your favorite one so far?

**[00:37:34] DB:** Oh, great question. That's a tough one. Facebook was a six-month contract, which was absolutely incredible. It was with the AR VR team. I was able to work on a project that was ahead of its time. I really loved being with that team. Brilliant people. I would say, the most incredible project was when I was a full-time associate creative director at Dolby Laboratories. It's actually the opportunity I took that brought me out from Boston when I was still

at IDEO. That was a really hard decision to leave IDEO, because I'd only been at IDEO for a short time.

The person that I was working with at Dolby, I trusted quite a bit. I really thought the opportunity to reinvent the brand was going to be amazing. It was to this day, I still feel the Dolby cinema is probably the best project I've ever worked on, from the beginning to the end. It was rendering when I started. That was created by a studio called Eight Inc. Design Studio. Ultimately, it ended up becoming a global sensation. Now there's over, I think close to 300 or 400, somewhere in that range, Dolby cinemas in the world.

I remember opening the first few. I remember that experience. I remember winning my first red dot award for the design. I think, it's a special feeling to work on everything from the carpet selection, the material on the walls, to the technical aspects of the system that really brought that experience to life. It was really a game-changing experience for customers. There was nothing like that on the market. It still isn't anything like that.

It really brought the movie to a whole another level. Movies are this luxury that we get to experience, this entertainment experience in our world. It helps us escape. I think, there's a special place for that indulgence, especially for those of us who we don't get to travel perhaps, or we don't get to necessarily see a lot of different things in the world. Creating a space that felt so vibrant and invitational and welcoming. That was so amazing.

I worked on everything. The signage. I worked on the lighting. I worked on the stairs. I worked on the chairs. I worked on how people would transition from one place to the other. I worked on the content. I worked with AMC Theaters with their creative director, and their VP of Marketing. It was incredible. It was absolutely amazing to see something that starts as a rendering, over the course of a year and a half become an experience that's so big that it's hard to capture with a few images. You have to capture it with really great video. Otherwise, you don't capture it.

Even then, the feeling is like, "Oh, man. I really want people to be there. Otherwise, how can you experience it?" Now, as I walk through these theaters, I can always reflect back on how proud I am of that work.



**[00:40:51] TG:** Dolby too, is something that's so immersive, to where unless you're there in person, you can't really describe it entirely with words.

**[00:41:00] DB:** Yes, so true.

**[00:41:03] TG:** All right. Next, I want to get into listener questions. I asked on Instagram –

**[00:41:07] DB:** Let's do it.

**[00:41:08] TG:** - questions that you have for Donald. We have a lot. We may not get through all of them, but I'll also do some shout outs at the end. Here's what some of you guys have to say. First question is from Paul\_JNR. They asked, "How did you get big brands to contract you for work?"

**[00:41:27] DB:** Well, there were two levels. There's the individual level, where I was able to land a contract as a IC, and come into a company, like Facebook, for instance. Then, there was also a stretch of time where I had my own studio called Forecast Studios. We had contracts primarily with startups. Although occasionally, we would get a little bit of work with a big brand, and we would try to maximize that opportunity. The first level, the way that it happened is, I will say, primarily relationships.

One of the things I talk a lot about in the book, Tolu, and you know this already is the three C's of creativity; consciousness, connections, and community. I'm a firm believer that as you exercise your awareness, your consciousness, you build this ability to understand where opportunities might be, who you might connect with, you grow your network, and you grow relationships. From those connections, very often, you get brought into a community. You get brought into a place where someone who has a really great community wants you to be a part of it for a while.

That's what would happen. I would meet some really incredible senior leaders at different companies, and develop relationships with them. Start out, we'd have coffee. I'd share my work. I'd show interest in what they were speaking about, whether it was publicly, or whether it was what they would share in terms of on a blog, or on a LinkedIn post. We just got to know each

other a little bit. Over time, those people would occasionally reach out and say, “Hey, Donald. What are you up to?” “Well, I’m working on this.” They’re like, “Hey. Well, I got this over here.” I’m like, “Huh, that’s really interesting.”

Then I could make a decision. Do I stay where I’m at? Or is this really interesting and do I want to try that out? Often, my entries into some of these big companies, Amazon included, it’s happened, because I’ve developed a bit of a relationship with someone, and they’re presenting an opportunity to me and I get a chance to consider it.

The second one I’ll quickly share is all about credential. You build your credential as you showcase your work. People get a chance to know you for something. When I was at Skully, the startup that was producing the AR motorcycle helmet, I had a team of six people. We became known within the startup world, but then also beyond that, as a very good content team. We could produce some really intriguing content, that also at the same time was very scrappy.

When Skully unfortunately, shut down, the team was in a position to win contracts, because we had credential. People knew that we could deliver really great results. Often, what would happen is someone who knew of Skully, or who had left and gone somewhere else, Tesla, or some other startup, they would knock on our door and say, “Hey, what are you doing?” I would obviously present the work that we have previously done. Often, that would lead to a presentation where I learned to pitch. If your pitch was good enough, often, there were more yeses than nos. That’s the best way I can answer that question. There’s, there’s a couple of ways, but credential is big. Then also, relationships are big.

**[00:44:48] TG:** Couldn’t agree more. It’s all about connections. That’s how I’ve landed a lot of my freelance jobs. Also, it goes down in the LinkedIn DMs. Recruiters are always hungry for people. Sometimes that’s a great way to land a contract. Or just directly emailing the hiring manager, if you can find out who that is. Wonderful resource there.

Next question is from Gabby Seok. They asked, “How do you build more robust technical knowledge and vocabulary to help you design for different products and collaborate with engineering?”

**[00:45:23] DB:** Yeah, great question. Intuitively, I'll say, don't be afraid to work on very technical projects with technical people who may, or may not value your design expertise. It can be very daunting to work with people who have a tremendous amount of technical expertise in an area that you have absolutely no familiarity with. Perhaps as a designer, you could have questions about whether or not you're able to contribute.

I know I have. It's very, I think, easy to fall into this hesitation, if you will, about working with people who aren't designers. We get comfortable working with other designers, because we all speak that same language. We all have this creative energy that we exude into the world. We understand for the most part, where we're coming from. When you start to interact with developers, we start to interact with bizdev people, and obviously, there's quite a few technical bizdev people as well, you start to understand that you can get very nervous quickly, when the conversation doesn't quite make sense to what's being shared in the room.

What I encourage designers to do is learn how to work in the ambiguity with very technical people. Because often, that's where some really interesting innovation happens, right? Because they're very technical in the sense that they want to use what they know, in order to produce a result. They perhaps, might have a more linear way of thinking. Because it's new, and because everybody's trying to figure out how do we go about doing this, you could be the only person in the room who knows how to leverage a process in order to produce a really great result. You have the responsibility of introducing that process, whether it's pushing the thinking, through brainstorming, whether it's encouraging iteration, so that the team doesn't lock in on a specific solution.

You just have to, one, get comfortable being in the room. Don't be afraid. Two, absorb what you can and ask questions when you can, and don't be afraid to become a part of the conversation. You're not going to be the dumbest person in the room. Don't worry about that. I often would tell myself, "Okay, put on your super human cape and try to be the most creative person in the room, and try to get everyone else to be super creative." I can tell you, it's worked for me. It worked for me at Facebook. It's working for me at Amazon. Even right now with Amazon, I'm the only designer officially on my team of 20 people. Everyone else is in operations, they're engineering.

This doesn't go away. When you're doing some really cool stuff, sometimes you're in the room with people who only speak code, and you're showing up and you have screen flows. You got to get comfortable with it.

**[00:48:20] TG:** Yeah, the famous phrase of get comfortable with being uncomfortable. I couldn't agree more with everything you said. Also, too, I know how nerve wracking it can feel like when you don't know an acronym, or something that people use. Just say like, "Hey, what is that?" Feel free to interrupt. You could also send an email afterwards. If you're the only designer on the team, then of course, you have a say in the meetings. If maybe you're not the lead, you could just send an email to the lead afterwards and be like, "Hey, here's all the terms I jotted down I didn't know. Could you help explain that a little bit more to me?"

Next question is from Migi Garcia Dev. I think, this question is pretty much answered by the previous question, but they asked, "How much tech vocabulary do you need to be familiar with when doing UX design? Do you need to be familiar with databases and how to use them?"

**[00:49:14] DB:** Yeah. I think honestly, the nature of UX design is always evolving. There are some principles to absorb, but there certainly are some really great paths out there to continue to grow your experience. I think, just on the surface, there's plenty of courses that continue to offer opportunities to further your skill set. I often will spend time on different sites, where people are building different things, whether it's motion graphics for a particular experience, or looking at patterns for a specific app design. Now, I actually spend a lot more time thinking about VUI design, voice user interfaces, where you're able to, obviously, control aspects of an experience. Say for instance, your home be a voice.

There's plenty of information out there in terms of how to go about growing your expertise. You don't have to start from scratch. There's often websites that have patterns that have your starting points, and then you can build off of those. Yeah, that's what I would offer. You just have to continue to explore. It's a little bit more difficult as a UX designer to just pick things up by watching other people.

I was able to do more of that with industrial design. I think in terms of UX, it's critical to start to understand the research that has informed some of the decisions. Quick example, Tolu, of what

I'm talking about here to answer this person's question. Right now, I'm composing a study to compare whether it's better to use iconography, or numbers for a particular design. It's a physical design, but there's also an app component to it.

It's a bit of a complex experiment that I have to set up. It won't show up that way to the users who are going to interact with it. Because of the nature of this project, I'm doing some research to understand, okay, what has been done in this particular context, to help understand some AB testing between iconography and numbers? It's a growth thing. You continue to grow and develop your own databases. You can leverage those, and you can share those later with others.

**[00:51:28] TG:** Also, feel like a lot of the tech vocabulary, it's something you don't necessarily learn, until you're on the job, because it comes with the research and figuring out how that tech is applicable to what you're doing. I think, too, that's how you learn, right? Without the context, it's a bit hard to understand some of these things. I'll also put a link in the show notes. There's this website, strings.com, I think. They have a article resource that goes over a bunch of technical terms, mainly UX, but they have a section talking about APIs and things like that.

**[00:52:01] DB:** That's great. Yeah. Great resource.

**[00:52:03] TG:** Definitely. I've tried to share it with as many people as possible. It's just one that I wish there was more resources on. Next question is from Sean Tanico. They asked, "What advice would you give someone that is currently a UX/UI student with no prior design experience, that wants to be very successful within the industry?"

**[00:52:22] DB:** Yeah, great question. Again, I'm going to start to build off of the three C's again. First, is the consciousness. You're building this sensitivity to the desire you have to grow a career within the field. I think, that's important, because first, you have to start to maybe pay attention a little bit to what it is that is interesting about UX/UI. There's so much variety. Is it a specific industry that you see a possibility in? Is there a specific aspect of UX/UI that you're really fascinated by? Are you really fascinated by how physical and digital come together? For instance, are you someone who's fascinated in the future of an ATM machine, versus you're

super fascinated with maybe personal devices, or wearables? I think, that's really, really critical to think about, and to consider is, in terms of where you're fascinated.

Then from there, I think it's really important to think about your relationships, in terms of the people that you know. You can look into your LinkedIn, you can start there, and that's a great resource. You may even be on your Instagram profile. Scroll through that, see who's doing what. Often, we don't really do that. We put our heads in the sand, and we pop up and we see a handful of individuals who post the most. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but there could be individuals who are doing some really great work, and it could be very interesting to you. Perhaps, they haven't quite surfaced in your feet.

I think, it's good to understand your connections. Every once in a while, being at least once a month. I'm going through my LinkedIn and I'm just seeing what people are doing. What did this person post? What are they up to? Oh, this person's over there now. That's a great way as a relatively new designer. You might see something, because you've built your sensitivity, you've built your awareness, you're conscious of these connections.

Then I would offer up, think about the community that you want to be a part of. As a designer who's just starting out, often, we're very focused on our portfolio. We're very focused on what we can make and who knows us for our skill set. It becomes such an individually focused path that you can miss out on the fact that you are part of a greater UX community. I actually share at this point, Tolu, with a handful of interns at Amazon. We have this program right now, where we have about 30 or so interns. All fantastic designers.

One of the things I've emphasize to them over and over again, is that community is absolutely critical. You're a part of a group of designers, who have all come into this huge behemoth of a company together. Build relationships with each other. Share with each other about what you're doing. Or maybe you met someone in the company who's doing something in shopping, or devices, or VUI design. They're really amazing. They're doing cool stuff. Share that. That might be an opportunity for you to go over there and try things out. That's why I keep coming back to the three C's. It's one of the elements in the book that I think is really important.

Finally, I'll stop right here, Tolu. I'll just say, one more plug for the book. Get the book. These types of questions are fantastic, but often, we don't know how to ask these questions. Because we don't know the entry point. I think, Tolu, what you're doing with UI Narrative is brilliant, because this is a great entry point, right? You can ask that question. You can learn. There's resources. Now, I'm fortunate enough to be here and now I'm talking about this book. The book has answers to these things.

Get the book. Listen to these podcasts. That's so important. What drives me crazy sometimes with new designers is they're, "I don't know where to start." Well, I'm like, "There's a book, there's a podcast, there's places where you can go to get these answers." I'll pause there. I'm just very passionate about this.

**[00:56:29] TG:** The last question that I have here is from Lord and Xavier. They asked, "How did you decide which industry you want to build your UX career?" I think, you pretty much touched on this in the beginning. Is there anything else you want to add there?

**[00:56:44] DB:** Yeah. I think, one of the things that I decided on very early was that I was going to build my UX phase of my career with companies that were interested in growth, primarily because it would keep me very close to the emerging technology. I thought, if a company was very, very mature, and I joined a group within that company that was very mature, then the UX work would be primarily about solving existing problems. Which is good. Someone has to solve those. There are designers who are figuring out how to dress things systematically.

I also was interested in emerging technology. I wanted to make sure that the UX work I was doing was on the cutting-edge of technology. For the last couple of years, I would say, probably starting with the Facebook contract, I started really digging into how could I do UX for wearables? How could I do UX in the AR VR space? How could I do UX for emerging spaces, different types of environments, where it's no touch, and we have to use some other means of interacting with our context, voice or gestures.

I purposely have built the UX phase in my career, to focus primarily on staying close to emerging technologies and exciting brands that are all about leveraging emerging technology to deliver incredible experiences.

**[00:58:13] TG:** That's all the listener questions for this week. A few shout-outs. Gabby Seok, you had a couple more questions and Sean Tanico. I appreciate all of you guys, for just a huge turnout this week. Sorry that we couldn't get to every question. Thank you so much for everyone that participated in submitting a question.

As a reminder, you could be included in the next episode. Make sure to follow me on Instagram @UInarrative and Twitter @UInarrativeCO. I randomly ask questions that could be featured in an upcoming episode. I like to end all guest shows with a random question, completely unrelated to everything we've talked about today. What is your favorite smell and why?

**[00:58:58] DB:** Well, I'm sure the listeners have probably guessed by now, because I design movie theaters for so long. Hits popcorn.

**[00:59:07] TG:** It really did. It's a massagic smell, for sure.

**[00:59:09] DB:** Oh, my gosh. I was so busy with movie theaters for so long, Tolu, that I would dream about popcorn sometimes. Even now, it's horrible. I walk past the theater and it's 2 in the afternoon and I'm like, "I should not have popcorn," and I really want to go get popcorn. That's one of my favorite smells. That, and probably Christmas. Christmas has a smell, too. Fresh pines and all of the smells that come with the end of the year. I think, anytime I get those smells, I'm like, "Ah, it's the end of the year."

**[00:59:43] TG:** Yeah. All time beautiful and it feels good.

**[00:59:45] DB:** It feels great. Yeah.

**[00:59:46] TG:** Yeah. I would say for me, it would be cookies and baked pastries. I guess, food in general.

**[00:59:54] DB:** Pastries are definitely a go-to. That's probably third on the list. We share that, Tolu.



**[01:00:00] TG:** It just always makes me feel a homey feel. I don't know, I get those endorphins of happiness immediately when I smell cookies.

**[01:00:08] DB:** Yeah, I'm a huge fan of baked cookies. Anyone who knows me, knows that pastries are – That's my kryptonite.

**[01:00:17] TG:** Where can we connect with you online?

**[01:00:19] DB:** Yeah, I'm really easy to find. It's just my last name, @mrburlock on Twitter and Instagram. Definitely add me on IG. I'm trying to post more design and career-oriented things on that feed. I think before, I was using it mostly for forecast related things, and just general inspiration. Now that it's getting a bit more attention, and I'm trying to post things that are really interesting, tidbits from the past that people might be able to leverage. I'm @mrburlock, on Twitter, @mrburlock on Instagram. The book is obviously available on Amazon. You can also go to [theburlockgroup.com/book](http://theburlockgroup.com/book) and you can get a signed copy there. Hit me up on [superhumanbydesign.com](http://superhumanbydesign.com).

**[01:01:02] TG:** Awesome. Guys, if you have any questions, or comments about today's episode, make sure to tag Donald on his social channels. We shall have in the show notes. 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. Yeah, I appreciate you so much, Donald. This is such an interesting conversation.

**[01:01:26] DB:** Thanks, Tolu.

**[01:01:28] TG:** I've been wanting to talk about this for a while. I'm glad that I could have you on the show to dissect into it.

**[01:01:33] DB:** Oh, this was amazing. Thank you so much, Tolu. I'm really happy that we had a conversation today. I'm so happy to join the rank and file of some really incredible designers that you posted previously. It's quite an honor. Thank you. Thank you to the audience too, for listening in.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

**[01:01:53] 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](mailto:hello@uinarrative.com). Talk to you later. Bye.

[END]