EPISODE 55

[INTRODUCTION]

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[00:00:26] TG: 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]

[00:01:41] TG: Hey, y'all, welcome back to the UI Narrative podcast. I'd like to start off the show today with some podcast reviews, some shout outs. So the first one is from NuttyBunny275. They said, "As a college student exploring different careers in tech, I thank you for this podcast."

The next one is from KatNNG. They said, "I've been looking into UX research and came across the podcast with Morgan. And it was so informative and inspiring. I love how they not only inform about the UI/UX field, but also shed light on the POC experience. Great podcast. Love it." Ariel Cole said, "I have really enjoyed listening to the UI Narrative podcast. As someone new into the UX field and not knowing anything about it before, it serves as a good resource for foundational knowledge and confidence building. Confidence and knowing that every path in UX is not conventional. And this is what makes it fascinating field to be in. Tolu is also super personable and generous with her knowledge. I wish everyone had someone like her when marking a career transition."

Thank you so much you guys for your reviews. If you're loving what you hear on the podcast, make sure to leave me a review on Apple Podcast. You can also tag me @uinarrativeco on Twitter, and to share your opinions about the latest episode you listen to, and also what types of topics you look forward to hearing on the show.

Alright, let's get into today's topic. I've been doing a lot of reflecting as the end of the year is approaching us. 2021 is almost gone now. And I've been thinking about the things that I wish I knew before I became a product designer several years ago. And as some of you know, I started out my career as a graphic designer in 2014. And then progress into web design, and then heard about UX design, and realize that was what was missing in my life.

So in the total time that I've been a designer for almost eight years now coming up in 2022, as I've been reflecting on all things about UX that I had to figure it out on my own. And I'm pissed that there are just so many things that they don't teach you in any education systems like a program, or a course, or a college, or a boot camp. And I just want to go over like top 10 things that I had to figure out on my own from real-world experience over the years and hopefully prepare you for what to expect. And if you're just getting started or you're looking to like level up for promotion at your job, maybe you have like a year or two or wherever you are experience-wise, I'm hoping this episode can help you with that. Because there's just a lot for me to vent about and for you to learn.

And I'll be mentioning the job title product designer a lot in this episode. But understand that I also mean UX designer and any type of like designer position within UX. Most of the struggles I

face are the same for researchers too. And just basically any UX role, I feel like there's just a lot of things that you just cannot learn until you are in it.

So I'll be counting up to a list of 10 things that I came up with. So let's start with number one. You need to be assertive in order to progressing your career. So as UX designers, product designers, and basically any UX role, you will face criticism about everything you work on. Stakeholders and non-stakeholders will be opinionated, but you will have to learn to set expectations with your clients, bosses, coworkers, and most importantly, yourself. Yes, like you got to have a one-on-one meeting with you, yourself and you. And first thing I struggled with was the confidence, which you can build over time. If you're really struggling, reach out to other designers, researchers. Or you can DM me or email me at hello@uinarrative.com or on Instagram @uinarrative, Twitter @uinarrativeco so you can have someone to talk to about this stuff, because I know how it is especially being a POC designer, researcher, you can feel quite alone in it.

So yeah, the biggest reason you may not feel confident is if you're not properly prepared for your meetings. So to properly prepare for meetings, I always have talking points. And I don't care if this meeting is only like 15 minutes. I only need to write down like two bullet points for that meeting. But like if I don't have any notes prepared, then my mind could easily spiral to not getting the information that I need from that meeting to do my job properly.

So preparation for each meeting looks different. But some key things to remember are you may need to educate the people in the meeting on what UX even is and why your job matters. So you also have to be empathetic, because it will help the project run smoother if everyone understands who does what. So expect to be called on even if it's your first meeting ever. In most cases, unless there are multiple designers and researchers on the team and they are all at the meeting and you're not the lead, and then the project manager and the developers or whoever else on the call, they'll be looking to you for direction in most cases. So prepare your own agenda for each meeting. Regardless of if you schedule it. Just prepare to facilitate the meeting because designers and researchers typically are the leaders of the meeting. So yeah, prepare to debate.

Debate rates is such a strong word I feel like. But mainly like prepare to articulate your design and research decisions. But turn it into like a conversation. Some people will try to press you to make it an argument. Really, it doesn't have to be an argument. You should only push back when necessary, but leaving your personal views out of it. So present your design strategy or research strategy by showing like your logical data on why decisions are made to advocate for your users. And it can get uncomfortable because people will disagree. Which is why you should prepare your talking point. So I always do this.

But it's always okay to say I don't know, too, but I can find out and get back to you later. And I swear, like some stakeholders just like to hear themselves talk. And that's okay. Let them talk and let them have the last word. But don't be afraid to say no if they're wrong about something. That's why you're hired. So you got to do that job.

I had some prior experience as a graphic designer in college doing public speaking for presentations. But it's different when you have to convince people why your ideas are the best ideas to spend their money building, or why your research will provide value to build a profitable product. So you better have that presentation ready to go. Or if you're doing like a file walkthrough, have your Figma file or whatever design tool or design software ready to go.

Basically, have those notes for all the points you need to address. You've got to get comfortable presenting your work out loud every day. And if you can't get over this, you will struggle for the rest of your UX career, because this will not go away. It's only going to become more and more of you needing to speak as you level up in your career. So you got to start practicing now in front of a mirror. And if it's an interview, practice with a friend or a family member. You got to convince people why your design ideas are the best ones or why your research was impactful. So yeah, just practice it every day. Practice talking to people that aren't designers or researchers. You got to get comfortable with being uncomfortable, because baby, that's the rest of your UX career.

I got to tell you, I used to hate being put on the spot at meetings. But now you ain't going to catch me off guard, friend. I'm prepared. So you got to be prepared to. I'm just trying to get you in the right mental space. I know how it can feel really like intimidating and you can feel like shy and all this other things. But the more you practice that, I promise, like you'll get better at it.

Alright, let's move on to number two. The tech industry is always changing and I need to be in a constant state of agility to stay relevant and grow. So with this one, don't get attached to the design titles or tools. Instead, understand how you work best so you can adapt to any UX job that you have. My title has changed from UX/UI designer, web designer, UX designer, and now product designer. But the main task of the job have not changed. So don't get attached to the title that you have. Learn what your skills are so you know how to utilize them in your position. Check out the T-shaped skills episode I did to discover what yours are. And I'll link that in the show notes.

The UX tools have changed several times. I started out in Photoshop. And that was like in college, when I was doing web design, doing like slicing of images and stuff. It was so complicated and stupid. Then I went to Sketch, and now I'm in Figma. So yeah, don't get attached to the tools, but understand like what your process is, and what you need to get the results. Because those skills are transferable. And most UX tools don't have that huge of a learning curve.

New UI and UX patterns will change or be updated over time. And there are modifications or new rules created as companies creating new technology. For example, social media looks way different from how it did a decade ago. And there are new usability practices that have been established by companies to create better products. So not all UX practices will be the best for everyone 10 years from now. But that's where you, the UX-er comes in, to bring new ideas for customer retention and better product experiences. So you'll always be learning and growing.

And another thing, there are so many jobs within UX, like writing, UI design, research, interactions, business, products. And when I first heard about UX, I didn't know about UX content, UX architect, and so on. So I don't feel like the first option you choose in UX is the only thing you can do. Try it out at your first shot. And if it doesn't work out, good news. Like you already have your foot in the door in the industry. So you could try something out in UX just so you know that that is an option.

Alright, let's move on to step three or number three. I wish someone told me to keep updating my portfolio. I especially think this is important if you plan on freelancing part time or full time, or

if you're trying to move jobs every like couple few years. I've worked on so many projects that I will probably never put in my portfolio because I didn't take the time to jot down notes for a case study. And now that it's been like a couple more years since I've worked on it, my knowledge about it isn't as strong about like all the details for what I did and for some of those projects. So I don't have access to the files anymore, too, or like a backup on my computer. And I honestly don't care anymore. Because I'm not currently looking for a job or a freelance gig. But don't say you'll do it later, because you'll forget all the details, you won't be able to tell as good of a story. And like for designers, go back and update the UI design in your case study as you improve your skills.

And I know that it's painfully annoying to like write like a weekly summary about your project that you're working on. But it'll save your ass later like if you need to quickly leave your job or find a freelance gig, because you already have a head start on the copy for the case study, which in my opinion, is the hardest part. So just keep that in mind with every project you work on. Being prepared to put it together in a case study later on.

Alright, so number four, you will wear multiple hats. So it's okay to not know. And I really used to be out here thinking I need to be good at everything. And I quickly learned that the only thing that I need to be good at is like a handful of things, because I know like a lot of these UX jobs expect you to have multiple skills. But I don't need to know everything because it's impossible.

I focus on building my T-shaped skills, like strengthen like visual design and some broad skills like interaction design research and additional skills that I had already obtained from previous graphic design jobs. As a reminder, T-shaped skills means having a deep expertise in one particular area, but a broad experience across the field. So the vertical bar on the T represents the depth of related skills and expertise in like a single field, whereas the horizontal bar is the ability to collaborate across disciplines with experts in other areas to apply that knowledge in areas of expertise other than yours. So check out that T-shaped skills podcast episode I said. I'll have it linked in the show notes. And that way you can learn how to create your own.

So for the skill sets that I didn't learn, I leaned on team members with those abilities. And I think employers intentionally look for candidates with skills that other employees don't have. So the team as a whole is dynamic. So yeah, for skills I like, I work with people on the team that have

those skills. And in most cases I learned a thing or two from them. So you're not expected to master everything. Researchers don't have to memorize every single research method. You won't even be using them all starting out . You'll most likely like have a handful of the most common ones that work for your job. And designers, stop trying to always reinvent the wheel. The wheel works fine. Think of features that make it better. And I think I have a topic for this one on the list too. And I'll dive into this a little bit later in the episode about like how to copy UI patterns properly.

Also, it's okay to say like, "I don't know, but I'm going to figure it out." There have been multiple times when a client has asked me for like a specific dataset or what a user flow would look like. And I don't have that put together just yet. So I pull out the, "I don't know, but I'll get back to you after this meeting with an update."

You're not going to know all the answers all the time. And I have to get comfortable with that. It's impossible to have like every single detail always memorized. Because there are a lot of moving parts when creating a product. There may be an answer you're waiting on for someone to be able to finish your next phase in the project. So it could be holding you back from answering a question to the best of your ability. And you have permission to follow up later on tough questions you don't have an answer to.

[BREAK]

[00:16:11] TG: 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]

[00:17:06] TG: With the many hats that we wear, I wished someone would have told me about all the pointless meetings, I would stress to find meaning from. And it's okay to decline meetings that are waste of your time. Just you know, I've done this several times. I've even had a conversation with like project managers, bosses to ask them if I actually need to go to the meeting, or if they can handle that, because meeting fatigue is a thing, like back to back to back.

And if you don't get any say like in the meeting that you can decline, make sure to plan breaks in between meetings if possible to like scream in your pillow, meditate, eat. Yes, y'all, eat. Please plan your lunch breaks on your schedule. And don't make it optional. Don't do it. Okay?

So one more thing to touch on here before we go to the next topic on the list. The job descriptions in UX are a bit like ambiguous. So you'll really have to like grill them on what your job will actually be like in interviews. Ask them like what you'll be working on specifically, like when you start there. And why do they even need a new team member on the team, right? So they should be eager to tell you all this stuff.

Alright, so number five is experience does matter regardless of the job guarantee. You'll see for boot camps, online, or universities. So the more senior that I've become, the easier it has been for me to land freelance gigs. And I'm at the point where companies are reaching out to me now for like full time roles and etc. And I did not have this privilege when I first got started in UX. I did have an advantage though.

So since I was a graphic designer, with a great mentor to help me land my first UX role within the company that I was already working for. So I'm not saying all this to like glow or bum you out like if you're a junior UX-er with no experience. I'm saying this to motivate you to do what I'm about to tell you to do so you can stand out. So the best way to get experience if you've never worked a UX job is to find a local business in your community and offer your UX services for a free or low price. So you'll get experience working with a real client that you can put on your resume. And that puts you ahead of the person with zero experience. So employers are looking for what you've done and what you know. So I think this will really help you out.

And don't get me wrong. You can land a job without working with a real client first. You'll just need to do like even more work there as far as doing an amazing job showcasing your skills of experience in your portfolio and resume and in interviews demonstrating that you're a fast learner and your agile.

Next one is number six, and this one is specifically for the designers listening. You won't be designing all the time and following a smooth design process from start to finish. I think it works for researchers, too. So everyday looks different as a UX designer. Not everyday is coming up with like new UI designs, which was annoying for me at first, because like, formerly, as a graphic designer, I was literally like sketching and drawing new ideas for logos and print work every day. What you learn in UX school is not like the real world. You don't always go in order of what the design process is. And sometimes you jump around. You don't really do like user personas and wireframing, because you just fit in where the need is. And it's not always like this linear process.

Some days, it's tweaking UI design for weeks until the deadline. And sometimes it's just going back and forth with stakeholders and meetings and emails until they agree on a direction. So since we're talking about design here, I think it's important to know how to copy UI patterns properly to increase your work speed. So UI patterns examples are like how the menu tab bar is displayed on the bottom of a mobile screen like for apps that you use. And for web, how the navigation is usually on the top of the web page.

Following UI patterns helped me become a dynamic designer that can adapt to quick turnaround deadlines without stressing about it. And I look at real products for inspiration on what's working well with the UI pattern and start designing with that UI pattern as inspiration. I don't design without some sort of reference for inspiration. And the more that you do this, the bigger of a UI pattern collective that you'll build in your head. And I'm at the point now where I can reference functional design ideas within my head without having to look at reference first all the time.

So when you're starting out in UI design, use existing design systems from real products in your portfolio and side projects to understand how to create a functional one. So check out the

website designsystemsrepo.com for web design system integration, and mobile.com for mobile UI iteration. And I'll link both of those in the show notes.

As you're looking through UI patterns, pay attention to products that have common UI similarities and use that in your design. You don't always have to reinvent the wheel, like I said before, to be different. Start with something that already works and build upon that. So also, if your designs are functional, talk to the developers and make sure you're creating something that works. Book a 30-minute call as soon as you have your first high fidelity UI screens put together.

Number seven is your designs don't have to be perfect for beneficial feedback. You just need to be able to ask the right question to make the right decision. So don't spend multiple days on something and then get feedback. I don't want you to cry when they tell you everything is wrong. Get feedback early, so you're heading in the right direction.

And for the time that you're not, it's going to take you like a week or two as a catch back up. So I was working like this when I was a graphic designer too, because there were too many times when I would love my designs and then get my feelings hurt in meetings, because everyone hated them. Which is why I decided to go the route of showing as many ideas as I can initially so I can get feedback quickly for the right direction, and then spend the rest of my time eliminating and fine-tuning other ideas. Because designs will always change. The research direction to provide value to the project will change.

I've mostly gotten over that feeling of this is the best idea I will ever have. Instead, I consider it as this is today's or this week's best round of ideas. And I would love to see what people think about this direction so I have an idea of what I should focus more on to provide the best value for this company. There are some designs I look back at with a cup of tea in my hand and just deep breath, because I think I'm this shit. And this looks great. And I'm glad the client chose it, because, I mean, I hated my previous versions in comparison. So you got to love the problem, not the solution, because typically there are several ways to solve a problem. The client will choose what they like the most at the end of the day. You can give the best recommendations, but they will be the ones that choose. And users can change stakeholders' minds about the product, but the stakeholders can change the objective of the project.

Since we're on the topic of stakeholders, let's go on and go to number eight. This next one is you'll be collaborating with a lot of people. So everybody is in your business. But I mean, like they have to be, because your decisions are going to dictate a lot of the product decisions. You are the person they will look to for direction. And I wish someone would have prepared me for how many meetings I would facilitate and all the people I will be delegating. And they should teach us more in bootcamps. I should make a bootcamp. That's another topic.

In some cases, you'll be organizing who needs to do what and working with the project manager to help them understand what you need. And hopefully you won't have to do the delegation and a project manager will take over that, or your boss. But always be prepared to present or give an update in every meeting you're invited to. Like I said, with that first tip about being assertive.

Alright, so number nine, the more you immerse yourself in UX, the faster that you will learn. So when I first got started in UX, I was moving faster than some of my colleagues were way more experienced, because I stayed curious. And I was constantly learning new things like animation and stayed up to date with new user interface products being released and learn about like new UX patterns being introduced for UX news. I will go to websites like Verge for tech news and like the NN Group for UX research. And I'll have those linked in the show notes. But I think it's good to have a basic understanding of like what new technologies are being created out there. So you at least have an idea of what to expect in the future of UX industry. It just helps you stay more competitive to even just have a basic knowledge about what new technology is being created.

And now, number 10, the last one, stop comparing yourself to other designers and researchers. So you're on your own UX journey. And that person you're comparing yourself to is on their own journey. Something that I like to tell myself when I like reflect on previous work that I've done is it's okay to hate products that I previously made. It doesn't make me a terrible designer. I created what I thought was best for me for the time. And features change in design, and UX practices will evolve to something better.

So when I first started out, my designs were absolutely ugly. I hated them. I still hate those so ties if you get so. But that's okay. This is what I'm trying to tell you. It's okay that your designs

are ugly. And now I have to ask you, what are you going to do about it? There will come a point when you make something and think, "Damn, this is hot shit. I'm a pronoun. I love this." And then the user will be like, "I hate it." But that's okay, too. You're still a good designer. You're still a good researcher. It happens. We don't always get it right on the first try, which is what I'm trying to get you to see. Like, if you do, then I would say like you're not trying hard enough. You're not asking the right questions. You're not getting beneficial feedback that helps you push the product to a better place. It's always going to be a bit messy regardless of how much experience that you have.

Most designers that are really amazing have been designing for years and practicing. And most researchers that are fantastic interviewers have been doing this for years. It takes practice and resilience to get to that point. But don't let that hold you back from getting starting in UX. Lots of companies need people at beginner level, middle level, senior levels to help them on projects. So you're doing great by trying your best every day. So stop comparing yourself to others. I become a better designer ever since I started focusing on how I want to improve my skills during my dream.

Alright, so that's the end of the list. That's all the things that I wish I knew before becoming a product designer. And I feel like I should do like another episode on this, because I want to talk to you more about like my journey to ending up a senior product designer at Not Dev, and how I'm able to like occasionally do like freelance projects on the side with this job too. I have announced that on the podcast, I believe, way back. But I want to go through like my thought process for those that may want to do like the same path as me or they're interested in working like two jobs at once. There's a lot of pros and cons there. So yeah, I'll definitely be talking about that in the next episode, which will also be a solo one.

I want to leave you with this quote, "Remember why you started." So that always keeps me going on days. I feel upset about a client sidetracking me with a new feature that they want to add to a product when we're already at capacity for a future release, or like a meeting that went way over the time. Come on, y'all. I just think about how I started to make people's lives easier using everyday products. And I wanted to create generational wealth for my family by having a high paying job. So what's your reason for continuing your journey in UX? Reflect on it for strengths. They're in your entire UX career. And it can change. Give yourself space to let that

change of why you started or why you're continuing to go on, so that way you never feel trapped in whatever you're doing. You're always doing it for the right reasons of whatever benefits you the most and makes you happy in life.

You can always email me at hello@uinarrative.com, or DM me on Instagram @uinarrative, or Twitter @uinarrativeco if you have any questions about this episode, or you just need a friend to vent about where you're at in your UX journey. I can't wait to hear from you. So yeah, talk to you in two weeks, my friend. All right. Bye, y'all.

[OUTRO]

[00:30:37] TG: Thank you for listening to the UI Narrative podcast. If you like what you hear, make sure to show this podcast in 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.

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