EPISODE 30

[INTRODUCTION]

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[00:00:24] 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. And I'm your host, Tolu Ajayi. Let's get started.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:00:53] TA: Hello everyone, welcome back to the UI Narrative Podcast. Today, we have another special guest.

Maya is a self-taught product designer, artist, ex-civil engineer, mental health advocate, Spanish language learner, and aspiring writer. She currently works as a lead UX Designer at athenahealth.

Over the past few years, she has embarked on a self-compassion and acceptance journey that has led her across the globe. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, doodling, designing class, building websites for non-profits, mentoring junior designers and perfecting her chocolate chip cookie recipe. Everyone, please give a warm welcome to our Maya!

Maya, let's start off at the very beginning. How did you first get into design? Tell us a little bit about how you've got to where you are today, and basically when you first sparked your interest in design.

[00:01:49] MR: Yeah, that's a great question. So, I guess we'll have to go way back in time. I've always been a creative person growing up. That was a way that I dealt with my emotions. I would just doodle or draw them out to understand the world around me, which led to some pretty funny creations that my mom has kept until now. That hobby continued with me.

I think growing up, I definitely was pretty good at science and math. So, my mom specifically pushed me in the direction of engineering, pretty typical if you're good at science and math, you might as well go for it and make the most of it, as well as live up to your potential is something of course that have both positive and negative connotations. For me, that manifested as going to college for engineering. I got a degree at WPI, Worcester Polytechnic in Massachusetts in in civil engineering and it was this kind of a roundabout way ticket to design.

But I guess, in that role and during that learning, I did learn problem solving, which is the key factor within the design process and something that has always stuck with me. So, in terms of what happened post-graduation, well it kind of snuck up on me in the sense that I didn't know what to do with my life. I had gone to this small school but didn't have many options outside of engineering and I have this degree in civil engineering now. So, I began working as a civil engineer. I worked actually as environmental engineer at this small consulting firm where I designed and managed and watched as we started treatment plans for buildings and things like that which was quite literally stinky going onsite to a plant, but also, just really boring.

So, I had a hint. I kind of figured that I wouldn't like engineering when I was in it. I didn't really like many of my classes but felt very stuck which I'm sure many people can relate to, designing your entire life at the age 17 or 18 years old. So, when I was an engineer, I kind of stumbled upon designer, UX design, and product design in a strange way. My roommate actually had a graphic design degree and was working as a graphic designer, which has now become like a UX designer and then gotten a job at ESPN.

She was kind of an entryway where I saw work that she was doing in her post on Drupal and I thought they were really cool. I just started reading books, I thought maybe I want to go and try it. Maybe I want to go to all different things. I looked back at the course that I really liked in high school which was anthropology, and I was like, "Why did I like anthropology?" And I was like, "Well, I like thinking about how other people think and how cultures come to be."

So, I was reading a lot of books like behavioral psychology books and all of this, long story short as well as the intersections in the world of tech and going to a school where a lot of my friends went into the world of tech, I stumbled around and finally found UX and product design and I was reading the intro books, doing a startup or just the philosophies behind IDEO and I was like, "This really resonates with me. I feel like it is combing what I learned in college of problem solving." But in a creative way, which is something that I'd always been missing and like I mentioned, growing up as an artist and person that likes to create things. It felt like the merger of the two and I thought it was pretty cool that it was such a budding industry and that I could potentially teach myself and jump into this design role where I now am today.

[00:05:17] TA: I really believe that anyone who has the skills needed for UX design can make career pivot from any industry that they are in. I think that a previous work history is a valuable thing to have no matter the industry.

You started off as an environmental engineer, which skills have you used since becoming a UX designer?

[00:05:38] MR: So, I mentioned, the problem-solving piece and think that's true. I feel like as an engineer, you are taught to look at a problem and figure out a solution. So, back in college, I think one of the key things we learned was how to find data and look at the data you're for and combine it in different ways so that you could find a solution to a problem. So, it's very methodical, very straightforward thinking that follows a specific path, a specific set of steps.

So, that key piece was definitely huge in burning from engineering to my role as a designer, as a very logical thinker and I like looking at big problems and making sense of them. And then I tie the other piece that I brought from engineering especially consulting was all those soft – they call them soft skills which is a terrible word for it, but being able to communicate your ideas effectively and when I was working as an engineer, I had to call a lot of the folks on the grounds, like the plumbers, electricians, all the subcontractors to see what they were up to and making sure that things were going smoothly.

Just all that coordination of project management, staying on budget. Presenting my design work, another thing that I had to do was I was designing these – we started treatment plans which is very plug-and-play because there's a lot of technology out there and whatever the town, we work with municipalities mostly, wants to use is what you use. It's very plug-and-play but with that, I had to present my designs in front of a group of people, a group of townspeople who were all voting whether to do this project or not.

So, all of those "soft skills" were definitely transferable into my design curve and I'm actually really grateful that I had the opportunity to do all that cold calling and presentation stuff, because it's made me less nervous when I now need to do that in front of larger groups or scarier groups of people.

[00:07:32] TA: Yeah, the soft skills are supper important especially communication. I feel like if you're not able to truly explain the reasoning behind why your product design idea is the one they should move forward with, they're never going to trust your opinion. So, you got to be able to communicate well why they should make certain new work changes, UI changes and design. So, definitely, any type of soft skills where you've used communication, I feel are really valuable.

[00:08:00] MR: Totally, I couldn't agree more.

[00:08:02] TA: You were one of the 30 speakers at the recent event, Black Designers Ignite 2020 and you spoke a little on how you battled with depression, but you're still deciding on your own future and chasing your dreams. Can you tell us a little bit about how you manage depression and imposter syndrome while chasing your dreams?

[00:08:21] MR: I'll let you know when I truly figure it out. But I can't look at it and go sigh. I guess for the imposter syndrome thing, being a POC especially in the tech world can be pretty intimidating. I think for that piece, this is kind of funny admit, but you know why not, is I will sometimes have these moments where if I'm really nervous, it's usually before I have to give a presentation or like you just mentioned, communicate your design decisions and why you chose move in the direction that you did. Well, I'll just sit there for a second and number one, think of all the people that came before me to help me be where I am today and feel grateful for that. Just kind of sit in that presence but also what would a white man do in this situation, right?

Well, they would be confident and they would own their work, and they would just do the dance thing. So, that's what I'm going to do, right? I'm just going to get it done and I can do this and just remembering, I'm here for a reason. Everybody gets service and everybody has that imposter syndrome, but I did lot of work and they chose me to work on this project or be here for a reason. As long as I know that I did my best, then I did my best.

For the depression piece, that's a great question. I'd say that has really been a roller coaster of therapy, different medications, and just open honesty. About five years ago was when I got really honest with my close friends and just told him what I was going through, because before that, I had kept it very close to my inner circle of like my family and my significant other. So, once I got honest at least least with my close friend circle, it was a relief but also, they were able to open up to me too. It was a moment where we broke this next level of trust, but also, now, I know, if they ask me, "Are you okay? How are you doing?" They really mean it. It isn't just like a greeting. They're genuinely asking me and so I will take a second to pause and be, "You know what, I'm doing pretty good" or "You know what, things haven't been going too well" and honestly, you just asking me and giving me a second to pause has made me realize that.

But yeah, don't get me wrong. I'm still very figuring out what managing my depression means to me and the big thing that this pandemic actually has taught me is just the value of rest. I'm the type of person at least in the BC before COVID times, I used to plan every second of a every weekend, day, and wonder why I was exhausted. It was like, "Well, I'm running away from myself but also I'm just doing so many things."

Especially now, I'm trying to listen to my body more and rest when I need to as well as I've just been reading tons of books and have opened my eyes in a lot of ways. I spoke about this in my night talk a little bit where just reading this book was the mindful way through depression, was the way that I realized that I've been depressed for as long as I can remember, and I made the joke that these aren't personality traits. These things that I can actually work through and potentially there is, light at the end of the tunnel which is dark, but I guess in a twisted way is good.

I can become better maybe or find a balance or at least understand why am feeling these feelings. And then I've also just been reading a lot of books on self-compassion suggests show empathy towards myself. We all tend to have pretty harsh critics. I know I do at least, and it is very hard. This is something I have been working on a lot to truly defuse that especially or at least recognize when I'm doing it. Sit there for a second, of course be mindful as a person that likes to be going, going, going, being mindful is difficult. With that rest, actually, has really allowed me to dig into some poetry. So, I'm named after a poet. I'm named after Maya Angelou, I think because my brain was always going so fast that I was always going so fast. I couldn't sit there. With poetry, the words, you really have to let them soak in and then think about what they mean to you.

So, with this rest, I have actually had the mind space to revisit some poetry which has been interesting. I wouldn't say that I've tried to write any poems that are any good, maybe with my journaling, you could call some of it that, but yeah, those are kind of the things that I've been doing most recently. But I will follow up with you if any of the sticks or what kind I'll be doing moving forward.

[00:12:38] TA: I feel like the pandemic has force a lot of us to just stop and have more time to think about things that we may have not thought about as much, like in the car ride or in the shower, those moments where you don't have something to distract you as much. Being at home all the time, definitely forced me to be in my mind more than usual. It's like I am frequent daydreamer, but I feel like even more than usual I'm daydreaming even like in mid-conversation and things like that.

So, something I have battled with is I have mild depression, but working through that feeling of feeling like an idiot. That imposter syndrome, I feel like it never goes away. But it's just a matter of being able to manage it and being able to address it when you see it's happening and continuing to tell yourself, you're not the thing that you're thinking that you because your mind will continue to play tricks on you, to try to make you feel like you are that thing.

[00:13:40] MR: Definitely.

[00:13:43] TA: If any of you listeners are also like battling with imposter syndrome specifically relating to being the designer in the field. I would say, check out my episode about how I manage imposter syndrome.

So, let's talk about education. Getting education cost up to thousands of dollars and you discovered UX design was your jam after getting environmental engineer degree. And correct me if I'm wrong, but you probably had some school debt to payoff.

So, going back to school was definitely something you had to be passionate about to spend the extra money. Talk to us about your experience getting an education for UX design. What resources do you use? How did you go about it?

[00:14:23] MR: Great question and you are correct. I did have a decent amount of student debt when I got out of school. So, it is pretty tough to graduate with a degree, be working in the field, which grateful for the time and the fact that I had a job, but to realize that you really hated and you have control over your own life, and so you can change that. Now, where do you even start and just like you mentioned, within the UX design world, you can come from any background and I really feel like that helps the industry and just makes the industry a bit more diverse because so many are people coming from so many different places.

What I did was I looked at all the different boot camps out there and I got all of their syllabi because they were all free. I attended all the info sessions that I could find, that were free, all that stuff, all their syllabi, and I cross-referenced them, because I was like, "I cannot afford to pay $20,000+ to attend one of these boot camps." And also, I was a little bit wary and also, no offense for anybody who's attending any boot camps, I'm sure they are great programs, but I was a little bit wary because I was like, if I'm going to be spending that much money and I won't have a degree from an accredited university, which you gives you a bit of something behind it, I was nervous as to what would happen afterwards.

So, I stole all those syllabi – well, I asked for them, they are free. I cross-referenced them and I found all the overlapping topics and I created my own study coursework. So, for about nine-ish months, I had to dedicate a lot of time to this because changing your career is no joke. So, one

day a weekend was basically spent to studying for the entire day and the other day I could do whatever I wanted as kind of like a treat to do fun things and see friends.

So, one day a weekend, I spent studying after work. I try to do as much as possible interspersed. It was definitely exhausting. I quit like a lot of different activities I was doing after work. The only thing I really kept was going to the gym like three times a week or something like that. Previously, I had been volunteering as a coach and doing some other stuff.

So, I stole the syllabi. I found the different topics from reputable resources online, so whether it would be like the Stanford d.school, MIT, the IDEO website and all those stuff that they've got there. Those are just all the big names that are popping into my mind. There's of course Coursera and lynda.com at the time which I now believe is LinkedIn Learnings. So, all those kinds of reputable sources, I use those – Norman Group, they're all popping into my head now.

I use those different sources to kind of clubber it altogether to study that. So, I was studying and I was doing always practice things for my portfolio. I was talking to the friend that I mentioned who works at ESPN and she was reviewing some of my work for me, which was great, to get some feedback. I volunteered with some random friends from college who had this – I can't even call a startup, but to talk it up, I'll call it a startup. It's basically a group of them doing this email campaign, but that was my key into doing some user research. I was like, "Hey, do you know who's reading this? Have you done any surveys?" And they're like, "No. We haven't done anything." And I was like, "Hey, do you need somebody to redo your website?" And they were like, "Sure." Because they were just doing this for fun too. They were a great chance for me to just mess around a bit, because it was very low stakes. I was volunteering with them. So, they didn't really care what I was doing and they were just doing this for fun too.

From there I was able to get some practice with user research and doing surveys and looking at that data. I was also attending meetups whenever I could. So, I was living in the west at the time and I'd drive like the hour into Boston after work to meet with folks, like ladies at UX Boston events and other UX events that were free or either not too expensive to just meet people and be like, "Okay, is there anybody else like me that's transitioning from a very outside role to UX." It took me a while. I found a lot of graphic design UX folks which is great, but there are a lot of similarities. I finally found someone who transferred from pre-med into UX. I was like, "Okay.

How did you do it?" And at that point, this is 2017, she was kind of, "Okay. The market is pretty competitive right now and a boot camp does help you out. So, I would consider really looking back at those bootcamps." I was like, "Okay. What can I do?"

So, I went online and at the time, General Assembly, of course, one of the more well-known boot camps offered this $800 all online six-week program, I was, "All right!" They say if they get to you, make it. I'm going to do this program and just put Gen Assembly on my portfolio or on my resume, and hopefully people will think that I did the $20,000 how over expensive the most expensive program was.

I did that program, the online one, and I'm glad that I did it at the end of my studies, because it was probably around the nine months mark, because it was very, I wouldn't say low-tech, but the guidance that they gave you was very low. I did have a mentor. I met with him once a week, but all of it was self-guided and honestly, just made me feel like, "Okay, cool. I studied the right things." I had a project idea in mind and already had been working towards it. I had low fidelity mock ups. It just kind of helped me glue it all together to be cool. I studied the right things, awesome.

So, I finished up that boot camp and I think it was a couple months after that, I got hired at my first UX job which was with this consulting firm called Genero Digital that I just recently actually left for this new job at athenahealth. I do believe that the boot camp may be helped in the end. I don't know. Sometimes it's right place, right time right with hiring. I was sending out something absurd which I'm sure your listeners can relate to, those looking for jobs for like ridiculous amounts of applications, getting all those auto rejections back and anything. I was applying to internships, anything that was basically paid that would get my foot in the door. I don't remember. I think my cover letter at that point were just really long and rambly. Maybe my former thought it was funny, but long story short, I was hired as a UX designer for a consulting firm. So, it works.

For folks out there, feel free to do that exact same thing, take all those syllabi, put it together, it is doable and you're welcome to reach out if you have any questions or need help with that.

[00:20:47] TA: Kudos to you, putting all of that together on your own. You pretty much created your own self-paced course, which I think is amazing. And then, also still going to General Assembly and I feel like General Assembly's online course, I also took, the UX Circuit and I feel like it's worth it if you specifically want training on something, but you don't need that hand-held approach. Definitely, it was worth it for me, because I had all the visual design knowledge, because I started off as a graphic designer. So, it's like I didn't needed any training on that. I just needed to know about the processes.

And even, there are still some stuff, I was like, "Well, I could've just, you know." Probably read this somewhere, but it was nice to have someone saying, "Okay. This is the step-by-step process of how you should get it done." Because when you have a full-time job, it's easy to feel discouraged and be like, "I don't really want to do this." When you had that deadline, it kind of pushes you in the gear to get things done.

[00:21:50] MR: Definitely. If you talked to any of my friends during that year, I had all the doubt and all the imposters – I did not think I would actually be able to pull this off. So, I completely feel you, and yes, I would agree. If you don't necessarily need that hand-held approach or you feel pretty confident in at least one of the areas like visual design, it was helpful for that reason.

[00:22:13] TA: I feel the course you take doesn't matter as long as the work that you create in the course is tailored towards the job that you want. If you aren't getting – let's say for instance, you're a taking a course that's solely like UX, but then you want a job that includes UR, like you're not going for UX research or something. That's where you're making a mistake as far as taking that type of course. Being real specific, looking into the curriculum, as Maya did, go to those free workshops or whatever events they have to where you can get that syllabus for free, see what they're talking about, see if it's stuff that is tailored towards the job that you want, and from there, you could start building your own self-paced course and then maybe join that course if you feel it's what you need.

[00:22:59] MR: Totally, yeah. I would wholeheartedly agree. But you can do it, I promise.

[00:23:05] TA: Let's take a short break.

[BREAK]

[00:23:07] TA: Are you ready to become a UI or UX designer or researcher? I'm now offering consultation calls. We're getting started in UI/UX design. In this call, we'll talk about your strengths and I hope you discovery how to get started in the tech industry.

Before our call, I'll send you the career pivot to UI/UX design, 16-page guide for free. In this guide, I got over what to expect, education, software, portfolio and the job market. You can book your call at uinarrative.com/workwithme. Once you're on the webpage, choose getting started in UI/UX design to book your appointment with me. I cannot wait to talk to you and help you find clarity on which UI or UX path is right for you.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:23:55] TA: So, every black designer listening right now can probably relate to being the black token person or diversity higher. I know I have been winged and go there for this episode, but in your medium article, what are you? A woman who contemplates life as a token POC. Can you give us a peak and tell how life has been for you as a mixed person of color, and what it's like being the only black person in the room? Have there been any differences in navigating corporate America as a black engineer versus as a black designer?

[00:24:28] MR: That is a great question. Yeah, I really thought about this one because my immediate gut reaction was no, and like, "No, it's all sunshine and rainbows." But no, there's always the struggle. It's funny that you brought up that article and going into some detail about what it was growing up and as a mixed person of color, my mom is 100% Polish and my dad is black, so that's an interesting story in itself of what that was like and I really thought about this.

So, for a little bit of history for the listeners, I grew up a mixed person, but I was in this program called the METCO program. It's a busing program in Massachusetts. It is literally to desegregate schools that still exist. It's been in practice for 50 something years. Basically, what it was, as I was bused from my home in Springfield, it was about an hour and a half because it took forever, one way, to get to this predominantly white school system called East Longmeadow and that is where I went to school, and my sister started first grade, and I started in third grade. Why I am

mentioning this is because I've just always been one of you, which is sad but also, I think helps and also helps folks understand my story a little bit.

Going to a predominantly white school was helpful in a lot of ways because there is the sad statistic of the fact that there was more money in that town, so there were more resources so the schools had less students and had more student-teacher interaction, and I really felt that it helped me excel and learn quite a bit. But on the flip side of course, I'm dealing with all of the microaggressions not just from – or even just plain aggressions, not even just the level of there was – I guess for numbers.

So, in my graduating class of 300 students, I think there were five total black people and one person who is Latinx named Miguel. Of course, we were all grouped together and asked if we were related all the time, but then there was the added layer of the fact that I was on the black kid bus of the school bus that then brought us from the inner city to East Longmeadow which added kind of like this other layer on top of it of friend's parents, not thinking it was safe for them to come to my house, and just having to ride that bus and the fact that – when I was in high school, lucky enough my parents or at least one of them was able to come pick me up after they got out of work at around you 6 or 7 PM. So, I was able to do some afterschool activities while others, they just didn't have that luxury. So, you miss out on decent chunk of school by being in this program potentially.

But where I am going with this is, I've always been one of you. So, I'm kind of just used to this world in a sad way. It's funny. So, my new manager brought this up to me in my first one-on-one with her was, "Hey, you are the first black hire to our team and I recognize that, and I don't want you to feel you are tokenized or that you have to do the work for everyone else."

[00:27:46] TA: [inaudible 00:27:45].

[00:27:47] MR: I know. This is my first one-on-one with her and I was like, "Okay. This has layers." Number one, "Thank you for bringing this up. I appreciate it." Number two, "I'm glad that you recognize this and that I now feel comfortable to be able to come to you about this. This is our first meeting." And then just, "Hold up. Am I even going to recognize when this is happening to me?" Because that's what I actually mentioned her, I was like, "I have been conditioned for so

long to brush things aside or just take a deep breath and trudged on through that I might not even notice. Can you tell me if you think that I'm taking this up?" And this is something that I am working on and I'm trying to be more cognizant of, is the fact that, because I've always been one of you, I've been put into these roles to educate folks and on one level, I don't – and this is just me personally, on one level I don't necessarily mind. It completely depends on the context, the person, the level of familiarity I have with this person. Are we friends? Is this just a casual conversation and I'm mentioning my point of view that happens to be educational for you? Versus the opposite of truly being asked, "Maya, as a black person, what do you think about this so we can creepily stare at you as you answer these questions", which has been a factor within my life.

So, it's great that you ask that question, what's the difference or is there any difference between being a black engineer or a black designer. I say, "Not really. You're still moving through spaces that are predominantly male and then also predominantly white." So, that has its own ticks and consequences. And the same is true for the spaces that I've been in the design world. However, I am from Massachusetts. I still live in Massachusetts. I am from New England so it's not that diverse of the place, however, my new company, athenahealth, I'm pretty excited. They have director diversity inclusion and there's all these things happening. There are meetings that are happening monthly that are supposed to be open to discussions that I confirmed with my manager today.

There was one last week and I was a little nervous to go, because when you just don't have the energy to walk into a meeting where you don't know what you're walking into, like it's supposed to be open dialogue where everybody is sharing, everybody is talking, but am I really going to be put on a pedestal to share my story?

She explained it to me today. She was like, "No. I'm the moderator. There are questions. I will call on people and things like that to get responses and you do not need to feel like you need to answer anything. You can come and listen. You can just not show up. You can do whatever you want, but I'm talking all of my direct reports about this and I really want people to go." And so, I was like, "Okay. All right. Danny, I can get behind this."

So, maybe this is a new chapter and maybe if you check back with me in a couple months, because I've only been in this job for about three weeks now, I can tell you that things are a bit different, a bit more inclusive than my previous roles. But prior to this, I'd say the struggle is real and you just do your best work and hope that that speaks for itself.

[00:31:05] TA: Yeah, I had to ask because coming from a different industry, I have been a designer my whole career, so that's all I know. It's just interesting seeing a black engineer coming from that industry into designer like if it was any different. Good to know.

[00:31:25] MR: That might just be my experience. There's the National Society of Black Engineers and there's all these great programs and my school had a BSU and all that good stuff. So, it could just be where I ended up, which was this small environmental engineering firm in Massachusetts where again, I was the only person of color, but there was about 100 employees and similarly in my last design firm, the consulting agency, it was myself and I guess they were counting all of our developers from Costa Rica, so maybe that counted as "diversity". So, now at athenahealth, it's trending differently. So, we'll see.

[00:32:08] TA: I have only worked on one team that had a black designer and he left a couple few months after I started. That was it. I was still happy to. That was kind of my selling point of like, "I want to work here." Because when they give you the company tour, "Oh, there's a black guy. What? Okay." And we did the look like, "Hey!" And then it was like, "Bye." But at least we made good friends with each other. We're still keeping in contact and stuff.

Next, I want to talk about your article, *Design Thinking as the Scientific Method*. You mentioned how design thinking is similar to the scientific method, but with different words. Can you take us through your thought process for who you came to this conclusion?

[00:33:00] MR: Definitely, yes. So, as I mentioned my engineering background as well as my love of science and math as a kid, I did a lot of science experiments from volcano, your classic volcano with baking soda and vinegar to a whole bunch of weird complicated things I had to do in college, like turning copper into nickel then back into copper.

Anyway, we ended up with more copper than we started with, and they were like, "That's not possible by the laws of physics. You can't make more matter out of less matter." It doesn't make any sense.

Anyway, long story short is I'm very familiar with the scientific method and in my mind, the scientific method is about researching, defining a purpose or question, hypothesis, design and conduct an experiment, data analysis, draw conclusions and then you repeat that whole thing. So, when I was learning about design thinking, the empathize defined IDA prototype test implement, I was like, "Are you guys just conducting experiments? This sounds eerily familiar to the tried-and-true scientific method." So, the way that I anchor myself to this day and when I was reading about it was to think of it as the scientific method. And how this has helped me is when you're in the throes of design challenge or project, it is very hard especially when you're dealing with a lot of unknowns to anchor yourself.

So, if you are empathizing with your users, you're doing the background research, you're figuring out what is this problem space. To me, that's the same as doing the research on whatever experiment you're doing. So, if you are defining that purpose as the same as defining the purpose or the question and also can have the hypothesis tied in there, this is the stuff you kind of skip in thinking because you don't already want to have a solution before you get started. But I think, honestly, all these designers really do have a hypothesis of what the final design is going to be. It sways, and maybe you have four different options, but you have a general ideal. So, to me, I'm in the hypothesis step, we're pulling together whatever we need for this experiment and that your experiment could literally be a design research session where you're watching somebody walks through your application that you built or designed.

It also could be literally a whiteboarding exercise, that's an experiment in itself, you're watching how a group of people come together to share their ideas and see where they land and see what conclusions you draw from that. So, it has helped me also anchor myself in not just where we are in the design process, but also if I have multiple experiments going at the same time and this is where I'm going to sound a little crazy, but I feel like, as least myself, as a designer, I tend to like UX my life. So, one of my big projects that I was on at my old company, one of the big things I was up against, not just like building this product for the client, but also how can I can UX my team so that we work together in the best way possible.

I was working with a designer, another designer, we just have very different personalities, which is great to be cognizant of yourself your own biases and how you communicate, and honestly, that was an experiment and itself, it was like, how do I build trust with this person? How do I communicate effectively with this person? So, that was great.

Also, I had this project manager that had previously told me that she didn't trust my decisions and that was a whole bunch of drama. So, I was walking into the scenario nervous. I was like, "Okay. We need to be a unified front so that we can produce this product for this client." And so, there was an experiment going for me within my own team. Like I just mentioned with that other designer, I was like, "Okay. I'm going to try this communication method today" or "I'm going to have a meeting where we talk about how we communicate best". I was essentially leading this project, so I was like, "I'm going to extend an olive branch and I'll let him take on this complicated functionality that I already have an idea about, but I want to see where he takes this and then we can work together on this."

So, what I'm saying is I feel like I run a lot of experiments at the same time and again, I'm going to sound a little bit like a crazy person, but it helps anchor myself into where we are in that design thinking process, and also because it's something that I have done for the majority of my life, the scientific method, these experiments, and now, I have just given words to them. It feels comforting. It's just something I know that will work. It's scary in the interim and the uncertainty and the unknown, but if I just follow these steps of trying to process, I will end up somewhere at the end, which is the same with design thinking but that's just a newer idea and process to me. So, to anchor it in the scientific method just just helps me understand it all and work through it.

[00:37:52] TA: I love how pulled from previous knowledge in processes and connected the dots of how it works within UX. Regine Gilbert also talked about how – she started off like a fashion design major and talked about how the fashion design process is inspiration with boards, fabric swatching, sketches, illustrations, pattern making, making the garments, and then fitting the garment. So, basically, it's that circle but then, it's similar to the UX process of researching sketches from this prototype being user testing and then UI design.

So, finding that connection of processes within where you currently add, I feel like is so important to connecting the dots of you have some of those skills that you may not even realize that you're already doing at your current job, that is totally transferable into UX design.

[00:38:45] MR: Totally. Yes, 100%. I mean people have been designing and building and creating things forever. There's going to be some overlaps in the past methodology and in the present methodology. So, definitely, don't get tripped up about the terminology that will come, but if you can anchor the ideas or the processes that you just mentioned, things that you've done previously within your career or even those "soft skills", it's the same. It's really mostly the same.

I like to say, people like to make things fancy with fancy words. It's the same. Honestly, you will probably go further and do better if you can simplify it especially if you're working consulting or even if you're not, even if you're just working across teams with engineers or newer designers or project managers or product managers, being able to simplify what you're saying and just for instance, like playing English, is crazy helpful no matter what. Whatever language you speak is is crazy helpful no matter what, because at the end of the day, you're just trying to communicate ideas altogether as unified force to build something interesting. So, yes, totally wholeheartedly, there's a lot of transferrable skills.

[00:40:05] TA: You mentioned to me like how you don't consider yourself a writer, but I found your writing to be something I was simple and easy to understand. What was the first thing that encouraged you to start writing?

[00:40:18] MR: It's really funny. There are two things that I have done this year that I never thought that I would ever do and one is, you mentioned, in my intro about learning a language and the other is becoming a writer, which is still kind of funny to even say it like that, which I guess is just the imposter syndrome talking.

So, yes, I am a writer. I have written some things and I have posted them for people to read.

[00:40:40] TA: Claim it!

[00:40:41] MR: I claim it, yes, for sure. Also, anybody posting on medium, it makes it look nice and it was super easy or whatever blog or platform you want to do, just do the things that you want to do. Okay. I keep going to like a pep talk about that, but I will start with my writing.

So, the first article I wrote was the *What Are You* article. It was definitely a response to everything that was going on just a few months ago with that the beginnings of the process, and everything that happened surrounding George Floyd and just everything. We all know. We do not need to dive into that. But I read an article about being a tokenized black person within their friend group. I wrote it as a journal entry. It was just nice. I felt like when I finished it or when I had finalized it, had a few iterations, it felt like I just got this weight off my chest from all the conversations I had had about people asking what are you from all – my entire life, it felt like – well now, "Oh, you want to know, here's this article." I don't even have to explain it and I mentioned turning the tides with this new job at athenahealth, and I keep mentioning my new boss, but she sent me an email was like, "Read your article, sent it out to the entire team." This was three weeks before I started. I was like, "Okay. All right. The entire team has read this." I can just skip over that question. This is scary, but also great.

So, that was the first step into writing and I talked to a couple of friends, and my friend Elisa, who is my best friend, she is the one who really encouraged me. I was like, "Hey, I'm thinking about writing this." She was just like, "We need all diverse voice right now. So, I highly encourage you to write it. Even if nobody reads it. Even if I just read it. I have another perspective, I know your story and I know you'll have something good to say." That's just a little bit of encouragement, I was like, "Okay. You're right. Diverse voices, I'll put it out there. Maybe nobody reads it, it doesn't matter. I wrote this for me."

That was the key thing behind my first article about *What Are You*. The other one about the scientific method, that was just something that I've been thinking about for a while and I was prepping for all these interviews that I was doing. And so, I was like, "I should write this down. I need to write this down and just see if anybody else agrees with me or wants to read it." So, in a similar fashion, "I'll just submit this to one of the media publications, which is UX Collective." Literally, they were like, "We'll tell you within two days if we accept it or not." I was like, "Cool. There's no stakes to this. If you accept it, you accept it. If you don't, I'll still post it." This is amusing. This is a way of almost a notetaking thing for me for when I do have these interviews

or if want to explain this further. Similarly, "Here, read this thing I wrote, so I don't have to explain it again."

So, that was honestly just the thinking behind that. They were very much not particularly planned, getting things off my chest, and just being able to express some things super randomly. Even now, somebody asked me to write an article for what they're working on, and was like, "Can I have three weeks to think about what to write about?" Because the other were just very spontaneous. I needed to say kind of thing.

So, thank you the kind words. I try to be direct into the point and I don't think I was particularly funny in either of those articles but I like to think them a little bit funny. I like to think that I least got my point across, and similarly, something I have been working on in life in general, which is not evident from this podcast is how can say and explain an idea more concisely, which is something I have had to grapple with of course learning another language. I don't have the vocabulary, so I need to simplify all sentences down to their essence to get my point across for somebody to understand what I'm trying to say. That's another key thing with my writing, is I want somebody to able to read it pretty quickly, because sometimes those longform things are great, but they can be overwhelming.

So, I'm like, "Can you read this within like 10 minutes? Take something away from it and maybe remember it, maybe not, maybe share it, it's all good either way." So, if anybody out there is thinking about writing something, please do it. We need all diverse voices possible or anybody's voice really to hear your story and please share your story if you want to.

[00:45:04] TA: Yes. I don't know if you've had this realization after you've written something, "Man, I had a lot to say." I feel like at the beginning, I haven't written an article, but that's how I feel whenever I do a solo episode. It's going to be 10 minutes and it ends up being 30 minutes or something. "Wow, I had a lot in there to say."

It feels kind of scary when you see the blank canvas of, "How, am I going to fill this out to be enough content." But once you get started, you start to be, "Oh, there's thing too." Connect the dots of a bunch of other things and you're like, "Wow, I didn't even realize I had a lot to comment on."

[00:45:50] MR: Yes. For sure. Especially when I was writing that *What Are You* article, all of these are just memories bubbled up. I don't even know where they came from and it felt like all the stuff I've been holding onto. And don't get me wrong, have I let go of all that? I don't know, who knows? We're all dealing with our own trauma and our stuff and our own baggage and everything. But in that moment, it felt very freeing to just let that go. I don't call people out by name, but maybe if they read this, they would it was them and maybe they would realize all the stuff I said, or maybe they would read it and realize like that they'd done similar things to other people. It was also the timing of everything.

First of all, all of our white friends reaching out to us in that time because of all the Instagram post about how they should do so, but at the same time, random people came out of the woodwork to ask me about the article and some interesting things came out with in my family, not dramatic, but just some of my white family members of my mom's side of the family just had those moments. Especially, my mom has a whole bunch of much younger half siblings, and a couple of them came to me and they were just, "Wow, I never realized that my sister, my mom had this whole other thing she was dealing with." Nobody follow, right? This topic, it doesn't necessarily come up over Thanksgiving dinner. It's nobody's fault, but just kind of, "Woah, this is a whole other side that I didn't realize that my sister is dealing with, as well as I didn't realize that my niece is like me and my sister were also having to deal with."

You can go into all the layers of what that means, it has been a good connecting point in a strange way of – we've talked a few times since then about the article, but also just how are you doing? Before that, we might have reached out to each other as often or built these friendships and I'm grateful in that way especially for them and for myself to bridge that gap that I didn't even realize was missing, but now, it's nice to feel closer to your family members and get some of that out there and hopefully they now feel comfortable talking to me about it, because at this point, I don't mind.

[00:48:05] TA: Let's take a short break.

[BREAK]

[00:48:07] TA: Did you listen to this episode before it launched? My e-mail club members are the only people who get access to this behind-the-scenes information. They're the first to know when I launch new products, post a new blog post, and they also get access to new episodes before anyone else. This weekly e-mail is a way for you to see the behind the scenes of what new things are coming to UI Narrative. I also share my weekly UI/UX inspirations, tips and challenges, so you get to see what my creative process is like each week.

This next episode is about – Oh, wait. I can't tell you. You have to join the UI Narrative e-mail club to hear more. You can join at uinarrative.com/emailclub. I have a lot to tell you, so I can't wait to talk to you soon.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[00:48:54] TA: So, you just started a new role at athenahealth. So, I'm sure the whole interview process is really fresh in your mind. What was the most challenging question they asked you in the interview process?

[00:49:05] MR: That is a great question. So, the interviewing process is exhausting in normal times, and then pandemic and everything else in the world going on was exhausting, and I'm so grateful that that is all over and best of luck to anybody out there who is going through the grind right now. I feel for you.

I would say the interesting part about that question is it wasn't necessarily a question that was the hardest part for me that I can think of. A lot of it was repetitive, like explain your design process, walk through a project you have done, and by the time I've done like the sixth time, I just used the same presentation every time or tweaked a couple things here and there. But the part that got me was actually during the athenahealth interview I had, it was grueling. It was half day, back to back to back, and usually when you're in person, you can sneak to the bathroom, I don't know, do some power poses, take some deep breaths. But when it's back-to-back Zoom calls, you know that they're waiting on the other line. Don't get me wrong, they were very nice. Everybody was like, "You need to go to the bathroom. You need to get water." And I'm like, "Yeah." But I would run and do it and come back because I knew they were just sitting there waiting for me to come back.

So, it was a grueling day and it was within our three-four or four, this one person just walked through my resume or at least that's how it felt to me, it was like, "You don't have that many years of experience. Explain to me what you bring from your engineering job to now, how many projects have you worked on within the UX world? What was your role with it?"

It felt very line by line and every single time I answer, it just felt like I was failing a little bit more. I don't know if anybody has been in that or you have been in that situation where you're just like, "No, this is not going well. There's no way." Which on one side, I feel like you have the option to to lose your cool and kind of coy it. Now, what did I think was a combination of exhaustion and just like, "Okay. I've been in stressful situations before with clients or people. Let me kind of go on autopilot professional a little bit and we're just going to make through. Whatever is say, I'm not going to really judge myself for. I'm just going to see how this goes."

So, I answered all the questions. I hopefully said things that were coherent. I also think it's very important when interviewing to be yourself. So, in that article I mentioned kind of being unapologetic to myself now and so I tend to laugh at myself. I try not to take myself too seriously. I'm sure I said some silly things and was like, "That made no sense. Can I restart?"

[00:51:41] TA: I love that.

[00:51:42] MR: That happened and then I had another session, another hour-long session after that and I generally don't even remember what I said during that last part, because at that point, I was like, "There's no way that I got this job. I don't even know how I'm even still here." And that actually ended up being the Athena job, which I know is like when you have kind of maybe a not great experience starting an interview, how do you know that the job is going to turn out okay. Well, I trusted in the woman who is now my boss. I have mentioned a few times in this talk because I've had candid conversations with her and she seemed awesome. And this person that had kind of grilled me would be a little bit of an indirect person that I wouldn't need to work with all the time.

At the same time, I doubted myself, maybe I did a good job. They thought –

[00:52:30] TA: Imposter syndrome might be in you.

[00:52:32] MR: Right. Imposter syndrome or maybe they value that I laughed at myself and just restarted and being myself, or maybe I said things that were coherent and made sense. So, that was the toughest part for me was just this unexpected – I thought it was going to be more of a back-and-forth conversation where you can ask questions, but it ended up having to walk through my resume and it was just tough. But if you keep your cool, things might work out and then on the flip side, I had an interview, a same thing half day in-person interview that I thought went amazing and I did not hear back. I didn't get the job.

So, you never know how folks are going to interpret your work or what you've gone through or your experience or your personality, and at the end of the day, trust your gut and your decision on the job you take, because I really was nervous at my old job because it was a bit rough. Of what I was walking into into new job, but I trust to make it out with manager and I thought that workspace would be interesting working in healthcare. So, that's where I ended up where I am.

[00:53:34] TA: Next, we'll get into listener questions. I asked on Instagram Stories what questions do you have for you as a designer. @a_r_paperstacks said, "Do you ever feel overwhelmed when working on a project?"

[00:53:50] MR: Yes. I'm sure when you read that question, you were like –

[00:53:54] TA: Yeah, I do.

[00:53:57] MR: Almost, always.

[00:54:00] TA: Every day in my life. Come on.

[00:54:05] MR: Yes. Are you talking about just in this exact moment right now? I closed my computer at 5, but I'm still nervous – yes, so as an anxious and depressed person, yes, I feel overwhelmed always with all things. But in terms of projects and sort of how I work through that, of course, one thing that I mentioned was that scientific method and relying on tying to process that I did previously. I think another thing I tend to do is whenever I'm feeling really overwhelmed

in a problem space or with just tons of questions or things buzzing in my brain, I go to pencil and paper. I go to the easiest lo-fi. They're basically mind maps. I kind of like data doodles as an alliteration a little bit better, but basically, they're like these diagrams that again, look a little crazy. What is it? A beautiful where he let goes on the chalkboard or has that crazy –

Anyway, if you look at them, I don't know if the make sense since to anyone but me, but once I've got it outside of my body, I feel better. So, even if it's just organizing the information or if I've written out all the questions, I can circle which ones are the same group them. It's all about just organizing that information so that I can move forward. And then I think on the other piece of what I would do when I'm feeling overwhelmed is one of those people that – probably because of my anxiety, I really don't like procrastinating. It makes me more anxious to procrastinate, which is like, "Lucky you, you don't procrastinate." I do procrastinate on something. So, don't get me wrong. Especially in a work setting, I'm the type of person to just ask for help early.

I will admit that I need help or I don't understand, think something or something is going to take longer than I thought it would, because in my experience, in my experience, it's always better to kind of just be upfront and own your own mistakes which I think is probably true across most things. But in doing so, I'm able to communicate with folks, like I'm feeling overwhelmed, I don't really know what to do, what do you think I should do and this could be to your manager or even just a friend or whoever you feel you can confine in, or if you're working on a project with a team, you should probably communicate deadlines and things like that to your PM.

It's all those those things combined, scientific method, my weird doodle mind map things, pencil and paper, as well as just over communicating if I need more time or things aren't going as planned or I don't understand. I'm a big fan of saying, "Hey, can you say that again with different words because I'm not an auditory learner." Especially if there's no like visual aids or we're just having a conversation, we'll need somebody to repeat whatever they just said with different words, then I can be like, "Okay. I think I got it." And then I'll repeat it back to you and you could be like, "Yes. You got it."

So, it's all those little things that help me feel less overwhelmed, but I definitely still feel overwhelmed.

[00:56:54] TA: Yeah, I definitely recommend to ask questions early. I'm one of those people that have had to retrain myself to not do things the hard way, because I like to just try to investigate and figure it out myself. And then the day before it's due, I'd be like, "Actually, I don't understand anything. I couldn't figure it out." Over the years, I've learned to ask early.

So, as soon as you get the information on the project, if you don't understand something, ask them right then and there. If you don't understand a word, don't feel like you're stupid. You're going to have to learn it eventually, so better ask it now and get that over with. Yeah, ask early.

[00:57:34] MR: And finding that balance especially as I started this new job is tough. I'm starting out in more of a leader role, so that's new. I'm kind of like, "Okay. What expectations does my boss have for me? What should I figure out and what questions can I ask?" But at the end of the day, I just need to ask the questions. I can just use the "I'm new" excuse, I need to use that. That only last for so long. I need to get rid of all those points I have that I'm like, "I'm new, can you explain this me" or "I'm new, can we walk through this together", when the reality is, "I'm not sure what my responsibilities are and hopefully by chatting with you about it, I can figure that out." So, yes, totally all about asking questions early on.

[00:58:21] TA: That's all the listener answers for this week. 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 will be featured in an episode. And we answer your questions live on the show.

All right. So, I like to end episodes with guests with a random question that's completely unrelated to what we've been talking about. I know this will throw you out. So, in another dimension, humans are now pets. What would be your treat?

[00:58:55] MR: Okay. In another dimension or this dimension, I don't know. What timeline are we on, because I don't like it. The matrix? I don't know.

So, my thoughts of course immediately go to food which is of course what you would think, because of treats. I even mentioned in my intro that I do love chocolate chip cookies straight from the oven, Toll House, Chocolate Chunk, Melty. I was about to make some, but ran out of

time this afternoon because it's starting to get a little cold here in New England, and I'm like, "I need more chocolate in my life."

So, probably, a freshly cooked chocolate cookie. However, if I didn't choose a food, then I would probably choose a trip to a tropical beach. That sounds lovely as a treat.

[00:59:46] TA: For me, it would probably be pizza. I really love pizza. I don't know if dogs can eat pizza, cheese. I know some animals can't eat certain foods, but maybe I would – I didn't say a dog, I said pets. So, I'm a pet that can eat whatever I want and I choose pizza. I didn't even think about destination. I would want to eat pizza in Italy because I've never been in Italy. So, I would have authentic pizza living my pet life.

[01:00:17] MR: That sounds lovely, yeah. I guess in my brain, I was still a human, but just that was a pet.

[01:00:25] TA: New traveling pets. They have Instagram and everything.

[01:00:28] MR: That's true. That is true, yes, for sure. Awesome. Yes. Pizza in Italy sounds lovely.

[01:00:35] TA: Where can we connect with you online?

[01:00:38] MR: You can find me on Twitter, @merhinehart. My personal Instagram is mayarhinehart, so first name and last name. And then my portfolio, if you want to check out any of my work or get in contact with me, it's just mayarhinehart.com.

[01:01:02] TA: All right. Make sure to tag me @UINarrative and Maya, @merhinehart if you are interested in becoming a UX/UI designer or if you know anyone that is, we would love to offer them support to get started.

I appreciate you taking the time to join us on this episode, Maya, and I know listeners have learned a lot from you as far as how they can make a career pivot to UX design no matter what industry that they are coming from.

[01:01:32] MR: Yes. Awesome. Thank you so much for having me. This was a blast and very low-key and it's been great chatting with you. Also, thank you so much for having this platform to not only feature designers like me, but other folks and share your wisdom and all the things that you have learned to our listeners or your listeners. So, I appreciate it. Thank you for having me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[01:01:57] TA: 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 at UI Narrative, or Twitter @UINarrativeCO. I also respond to e-mails at hello@uinarrative.com.

Talk to you later. Bye.

[END]