

# Immersion, and socially responsible design



## an interview with Marc Rettig

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**Gerry Gaffney:**

This is Gerry Gaffney with the User Experience podcast. My guest today has a background that includes among other things anthropology, linguistics and software development.

He is a co-founder of Fit Associates, which is based in Pittsburgh in the USA.

Marc Rettig, welcome to the User Experience podcast

**Marc Rettig:**

Thanks so much, Gerry. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Gerry:**

Now, you've said that you don't want your company, Fit Associates, to be either a research firm or a design firm. Can you please explain that reasoning to me?

**Marc:**

A research firm... To stereotype, a company comes to them and outsources some amount of research and then, again stereotypically, they deliver a research report which way too often gathers dust. So, by saying we don't want to be a research firm – we do actually a lot of research and we have a lot of strength in that, but we didn't want that to be the only thing that we did.

Similarly, with a design firm. There are a lot of firms that outsource design services, and we wanted to work with clients who are looking to own the creative process, who are looking to have a group of people internally that have lived through the decision making that goes into the product and are going to maintain the quality of experience.

So we say, we want to be a “make a difference” firm. When my co-founder, Jenna Date, and I first started Fit, we noticed in discussion how rare it is for the good idea to actually ship into the hands of people that need it. It's relatively common for somebody to have a good idea; it's relatively rare for that idea to ship intact in an appropriate form. So we wanted to engage with that; we wanted to make products better for people.

**Gerry:**

Now, you've talked about companies owning the creative process, and that's a subject that's pretty close to my own heart, but do you find that that's more common nowadays, because you still get a lot of clients who just want something designed for them, particularly I guess in the web space, where they almost abdicated responsibility. Perhaps there's an element of fear, or something about the unknown. Are companies becoming more in owning that creative process, do you think?

**Marc:**

Well, I think they are. I think it's still all over the map. Our work has actually had more to do with physical products than the web although we have done some web-related work. It may not just be fear. There are some people trying to make good decisions about what is their core capability, what is the core to which they should be dedicating their efforts. I would say that as people understand more and more how the web experience can be part of the overall customer experience, that more and more companies are seeing it as really to their core so far as delivering quality to customers.

**Gerry:**

What sort of products do you generally get involved with?

**Marc:**

We're fairly agnostic about that, because really our offering is to help understand, to help build bridges between the product team and management and the people whose lives are going to affect their decisions. And also, and we can maybe talk about this later, there's a lot of bridge-building usually to do inside these companies.

But just to give a list, we've worked with kitchen appliances, laundry, intranets, electric cars, medical devices for people that have sleep apnoea, mobile applications... that's part of the list.

**Gerry:**

And I guess it's true to say that what you're trying to do is to help these organisations both to understand their customers now and into the future, and to translate that understanding into not only new designs but new ways of organisational behaviour. Is that correct?

**Marc:**

Yes. You know, in the last decade or two it's become much more common for people to do some kind of customer research as part of the product development process. And we're really just trying to ask that question: What difference do you want to make? Do you know? What difference is worth making? And the answer to that may be partly in terms of customers' lives; it may also be partly in terms of the business itself. It's becoming more in vogue - it's not mainstream yet but it's becoming that way with the sustainability movement - to talk about triple bottom line where you're looking at the financial bottom line as well as the environmental and social bottom line. So our best customers, the customers for whom we're a good match, are aware that their decisions make a difference in people's lives and they'd like to improve that.

There's lots of companies who will help translate research into design outcomes, and we think we're really good at that, but we also want to pay attention to the social context as well.

**Gerry:**

I guess a lot of people would have a degree of suspicion that some of the talk about sustainable design is really about green-washing. We see, for example, the petrochemical giants doing quite a bit of advertising about how green they are. Any thoughts on that?

**Marc:**

There certainly is a lot of that, and there's reason to be sceptical or even cynical. But I do believe, and I don't think I am saying something controversial by saying that we in the middle or the first fourth or something [laughs] of a pretty fundamental shift from "dig things out of the ground and manufacture something and ship them which later get buried back in the ground"

## UXpod

to something where we're concerned about the impact on the environment throughout the whole product lifecycle... Maybe it is controversial to some whether it is a matter of our survival, but it's hard to deny that the shift is happening.

So it's not just sustainable design. It's a shift in product strategy and in corporate strategy and in manufacturing processes and in priorities and measures of priority.

### **Gerry:**

And what typifies or exemplifies an organisation that's ready to make those sorts of changes? You work with some pretty big organisations – Nissan Motors for example and some other pretty big clients. Is there something that you can point your finger at and say that the reason why we like to work with this organisation is: X?

### **Marc:**

It's hard to find, especially in bigger companies, one where the whole company is making this shift or is at the doorstep or has agreed, you know, it tends to be some people within the company or some groups within the company. More and more companies are appointing senior people responsible for sustainability, but that doesn't mean that the whole organisation takes it seriously or that they're thinking beyond recycling or green buildings or something. They may not be yet questioning the materials they use in the products. But we sometimes use the phrase "conscious organisations"; we say that we like to work with conscious organisations, by which we mean they're at least aware that their choices are having an impact on the world, and a social impact, and they would like to improve those.

They see those as valuable. And most often, we engage with some group within the company – it may be one product team, it

may be one division, it may be the design group within the organisation who are advocating further shift within their company. And we support them, we become their partner in that.

### **Gerry:**

You were doing some work with my friend and colleague Daniel Szuc at Apogee, based in Hong Kong. You had some very interesting techniques, and you were doing some immersion work.

Now, I know some of the work you did was client confidential, but can you tell me about some of the techniques that you used.

### **Marc:**

In the particular case of Nissan, we were working with what they call an exploratory group. It's a combination of strategic planners and car designers and engineers that are charged with looking 10 to 15 years out.

Nissan has already declared a shift across the line to electric vehicles over the next decade or so. This group... the way they work is they pick a theme or proposition and look at it for a year. So the first part of the year is really coming to understand that and the second part of the year is exploring through design what sorts of products might address, might be appropriate for this future they've come to understand.

So in this year, they were saying, well, the meaning of owning a car looks like it's changing. For one thing, owning an electric vehicle is quite different from owning something with an internal combustion engine in it, partly because what it means to fuel it, but also because it's going to go obsolete every couple of years as technology advances. They also were hypothesising that we're seeing a value shift as part of the larger forces at work in the world from "I" to "we", a little bit more

## UXpod

willingness to take into account other people's good as well as your own, and a shift from the focus on getting more stuff (straight materialism or consumerism) to "give me good quality of life".

So, how do you research what that might be like in ten to 15 years? The other ingredient is that they were looking at world markets, developing nations especially. These are Los Angeles people, they grew up in the US, they've been living there. What research will shift their frame of mind so that they are actually conceiving something that's appropriate for China or for India or for Brazil?

We've always had the problem of really bringing research insights to life within an organisation, it's one of our biggest challenges. So, at their request, we basically skipped the research and just took them there. We took them for over a week to Copenhagen, which seemed like the edge of a future, of this shift for desire for quality of life and social consciousness, and we took them for ten days to Shanghai and Hong Kong, so that they could get first hand face-to-face feeling and empathy for what it's like and how, for example, cultural values in China are reflected in technical products.

### **Gerry:**

And did they cycle around while they were in Copenhagen?

### **Marc:**

Yes. We rented bicycles, we had dinner with the Danes, dinner with families. We met with a member of city council. We did all kinds of things to take our best shot to become, I mean, immersion isn't just a title, it's a real goal. And the same in China. We had dinner with people, we rode in traffic, we walked endlessly. We did on the street interviews... in Copenhagen especially just bumping into people and asking them about

their car and how they chose it and what did they think of that guy's car over there. So it was actually quite intense, we wore ourselves out.

The outcome, the thing that excited me was, about two or three days into the trip in Shanghai, this group of people, who are charged with creating new cars looked around and said... they looked at the pollution, and they looked at the traffic and the lack of parking, and the load on the infrastructure, and at the millions of people still in line waiting to buy a car, and said "Making more cars for these people is the wrong answer. It would be wrong to do that". And [they ] began to talk about what it would mean to be a sustainable transportation company, as opposed to being a car company.

Now that's different than the corporation making that choice, but here's an exploratory team shifting their basic question, and shifting their own assigned job assignment because of being immersed. And, to repeat myself, I don't know exactly what research outcome would have led to that same shift.

### **Gerry:**

That's a pretty amazing outcome I guess. To sidetrack, you did mention in an email that a client who makes medical appliances switched their focus from the devices themselves to the quality of life issues. That must be pretty exciting, when you achieve that sort of fundamental change.

### **Marc:**

It's very exciting. That's why we're in business, is to make a difference. And in the case of the medical products company... I'm thinking too many things at once... This takes time. We've worked with this medical products company for over three years. At the beginning... you know, it's an engineering culture with a new internal

## UXpod

industrial design group, who for their first year was just seeking to be understood, and seeking to have a voice in the product groups. And they did all kinds of great things to demonstrate their value; mostly tactically. And by the second year it made sense to go do some field research.

They make products for people who have sleep apnoea, who need to wear a mask at night to breathe and to sleep well. So we went in and spent time with families where someone in the family has this device, and came to understand that the value... You know, they were doing a great job engineering-wise, the mask fit and the pumps are quiet and the hose is flexible and so on. But there were things about self-image, there were things about the relationships within the family, that had a tremendous impact, just changed life by this device coming into the home, that represented strategic opportunity for the company.

The shift that we're talking about, to thinking more about quality of life rather than engineering metrics, is not an altruistic shift, although it makes people feel very good to have those kinds of goals as part of their job. They're looking for new sources of competitive advantage.

### **Gerry:**

If I put my cynic's hat on, the things that you've been talking about all sound fantastic, but a lot of the clients that I work with want to know about ROI [return on investment] and I can hold out some vague future for them, but unless they can measure it then they're not going to buy into it. Do you have to deal with that, and how do you deal with it?

### **Marc:**

It does sometimes come up. Typically we have internal champions, internal managers among our clients who are themselves

responsible for that sort of question all the time. I don't think we change that story.

I'm familiar with the discussion that you're referring to. It's like, isn't research added cost, what's the payback on research, but as far as I'm concerned, we should be managing to the same ROI goals and conversations that already exist. Peter Merholz and Adaptive Path actually talk a lot about this kind of thing, where you identify the existing metrics and you say yeah, we're going to help you achieve. I would also say that we do sometimes identify new metrics of quality or new sources of return, when we have a chance to work early in the product cycle. It's not always the case.

But I don't see research as an add-on. I see understanding customers, and having clear understanding between the product team and customers as being kind of a basic thing that any company should desire if they're reaching for quality.

### **Gerry:**

I'm going to hit you with another question without notice here, Marc. You talked about, in the medical company for example, the design team needing to demonstrate their value. And I guess this is something we see a lot – a user centred design team or usability team or design team or whatever it's called, and they're often somewhat on the outer, they're not recognised as being key to the way the organisation develops. Do you have any specific advice for what strategic steps those sorts of groups can take?

### **Marc:**

Yeah, I think so. I know that, in particular this group spent a lot of time weighing how they would split their time between responding to often what were very short-term requests... Often, when a company is not familiar with the capability of the design group they come to them with what

## UXpod

amounts to drive-by design: “What should the label on these buttons be?” Or “What colour should this be? We’re going to ship, we’re going to manufacturing in three weeks.” We could make web examples of that too. So they chose to just respond to some of those, and say “we think the label should say this, and by the way, we’re only partly sure about that answer, and here’s how we would be more sure, if we could have gotten involved in the process earlier.”

So they just had honest conversations, but whenever they could they actually did their best to contribute real value to that team, rather than being... you know, designers can sometimes be perceived as being kind of snobby about it: “Well, I’m not going to answer that question because you didn’t ask early enough.”

The other thing that has proven effective over and over again is not specific to design, it’s just to talk about the social side of what’s going on inside the company. Who are the stakeholders or the customers of this group? Who could be? Let’s go talk to them one at a time and just understand their job. It’s... what’s the design process, it’s start by understanding. So go talk them, and don’t even try to sell design, just understand what’s important to them, understand their language, understand their pains. And do that to a dozen, two-dozen up the organisation and across the organisation, and you’ll start to have a feel for... right, it’s customer research on the part of the design group.

And out of that can come a plan, basically a work of communication design: OK, this guy is suspicious of us, what can we do about that? This guy doesn’t understand but he’s very excited, maybe we can bring him in to help... The answer is probably different for different relationships, but you can at least now know what program of

bridge-building you need to engage in to move all those relationships along.

### **Gerry:**

You’re fortunate enough to work with some very significantly funded organisations. Nissan Motors is obviously not short of a dollar, generally speaking. Is it possible to do good user research on the proverbial shoestring budget?

### **Marc:**

Yeah, absolutely. On the opposite end of the spectrum we worked with a start-up that was making a new mobile, cell phone application. There was five engineers and a founding manager. And we only had a week with them, so we spent a day or two discussing process with them and really understanding their application. We only had a week so we taught them iteration. We said “today you’re making prototypes”. They mocked up their existing application on sticky notes, stuck to the screen of cell phones and they went home at night and tested it with three people. And they came back the next day and [laughs] revised their design, and made a new sticky note prototype stuck to the screen of their cell phones, and went home and tested it with – you know, it was their girlfriend, it was their dad, it was whoever they could find. And at the end of that they actually decided that they were building the wrong thing, and backed up and reconceived what they were doing...

I think the moral of that story is that so many teams don’t spend enough time with the people that will really be using the stuff. And it really doesn’t cost, in most cases it costs very little to just go be with them. And it doesn’t take very much training to ask good questions, or to pay really good attention. And that’s really what this is all about, getting real first-hand empathy going between the people making the design, the



people making the products, and the people who are going to live with it.

**Gerry:**

Well, Marc, I know that we've just dipped into a few topics today that obviously you could talk about at length...

Marc Retting, thank you very much for joining me on the User Experience podcast.

**Marc:**

Thank you so much. I enjoyed it.

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