

The Tim Smal Show - 21 March 2020 transcript

Andrew Maunder, a digital product designer in Berlin, talks about the no-code movement.

Tim Smal (host): Hi there and welcome to the show. My name is Tim and my guest today is Andrew Maunder. He is a product and experience designer based in Berlin. Over the past decade or so, he's been using a variety of human-centric design approaches to craft digital experiences that delight customers and solve business problems. Andrew, welcome to the show.

Andrew Maunder (guest): Hi Tim.

Tim: How are you doing today in Berlin?

Andrew: I'm doing well, thanks. It's a home office day, so both myself, my wife and my dog are all at home. So, besides the overcast weather and the current COVID-19 things going on with Corona, yeah, otherwise all - it's kinda good. It's kind of fun being at home and not having to worry with running around on public transport and things like that. So given the situation I think all things are pretty okay with us, pretty good.

Tim: Great to hear it. Now, Andrew you did a PhD in human-computer interaction and that sparked your passion for designing mobile applications and services. Can you tell us about your studies and how you moved into the field that you're working in now?

Andrew: Yeah, for sure. I started, I guess, as a teenager becoming interested in computers. We had a computer at home - of course back then it was mostly for playing computer games. But, in the mid-nineties, my dad upgraded our computer with a sound card and CD-ROM and made it this more multimedia, enhanced, sort of computing experience. And that really got me interested in, essentially the extended features of using a computer and what kind of immersive experience it could create.

Round about the same time, one of our neighbours in the neighbourhood that we lived in, started running an internet service provider from his house, which completely blew our minds. And he offered us a connection to his network at just a couple of bucks a month. And so we had access to broadband internet in the mid-nineties in South Africa, which was quite a thing. And I think that combination of sound, digital media, CD-ROM's at the time, and the internet, really got my mind hooked onto what kind of interactive experiences you could create on computers.

It sort of got my attention and then when I started university, I was really on a mission to try and find a way to get into the sort of interactive multimedia field. But because I went to university and did a Bachelor of Science, it wasn't a direct road there. But I was interested in design and so what I did was I tried to figure out a road to get to the interactive multimedia space.

And essentially what I did was I studied scientific computing. So I majored in physiology with this interest in the human body, but then also in an emerging field called ergonomics, which is essentially the study of how the human body relates to a working environment.

And I had applied to do my Honours in ergonomics at another university called Rhodes. I got accepted for that, and essentially as I was about to leave for that, one of my professors

said to me “Hey, you know that ergonomics in South Africa (at the time) wasn't a huge field” and he said “well, why don't you rather stay in Cape Town, work with me and we can look at an emerging field which was called 'everyday usability' and essentially human-computer interaction”, which was his field of study and he said “that's, kind of, the digital equivalent of ergonomics”. And I was like “Woah okay, that sounds pretty interesting.”

And at that time, more and more people in South Africa were buying cell phones and starting to use cellphones as part of their daily lives. And that was my professor – that was his area study, was sort of, human-computer interaction but with mobile devices. That became my main topic during my honours degree and then when I started my masters, I really focused on that. And then my masters, sort of, morphed into my PhD and I spent four years looking at the design of mobile services and particularly how designers apply different design processes to achieve that and to make design services that are locally relevant and appropriate.

And that was kind of - yeah, that's how I got into the field.

Tim: Wonderful. So, over the last decade or so you've certainly been involved with a number of different projects that I imagine range from working in rural areas of South Africa to academic institutions and corporate companies in Germany, for example. Would you like to talk about your journey working in this area over the last decade?

Andrew: Yeah. Like you said, I've been fortunate enough to work on quite a variety of projects over the years, ranging from designing multimedia services in rural areas, where connectivity and bandwidth availability is quite limited - to working for banks and startups in a whole variety of different companies. I've always tried to focus on mobile service design. And really, the first – probably the first two or three companies I worked for – that was their major, major focus.

So, in the late-2000's I worked for a company called Mxit, who created a mobile application for feature phones at the time, and their main application was an instant messenger. So that was really a good look into the early days of technology impacting society in South Africa. And that was really a privilege because we had five million people logging in every day and as a young designer coming into the industry, you know, being able to design changes that five million people will see the next day when they log in is quite a... responsibility. So that kept me on my toes and that was my first, sort of, foray into designing products at scale. Nowadays designing internet services for millions of people seems like the norm, but back then, you know, scaling products out to millions of users wasn't an everyday thing. So after my studies that was, sort of, the first major project I worked on.

Yeah, then after that I was fortunate enough to co-found a startup that we received some seed funding to do, which was again a mobile service. And in that case, it was designing a digital marketplace for tradesmen to market their services within their local neighbourhood or local digital neighbourhood. It was a 'Twitter' for micro-ads in some sense - you could think of it that way. That was really interesting. I think your first startup happens in a blink of an eye - but that was really, a really great experience to take a new product to market and to learn about all the nuances of an early stage business.

And then after that, I did a lot of freelancing and consulting on quite a lot of new product developments, so I wouldn't quite put it as R&D, but taking new products to market and working with teams and product owners who want to take new features and new products

to market. So that's kind of, really, over the last ten years, really been the focus of what I've been doing, is really mobile and new product development.

Tim: Awesome. So in the last decade you've been doing some really exciting work. Perhaps you could tell me more about some of the projects that have been particularly exciting for you to work on. And then also lead into a discussion about what it's been like working in Berlin for the last year or so, as opposed to say, Cape Town in the previous few years.

Andrew: Yeah, sure. I've worked on quite a few interesting projects, but probably the most interesting in the last while, was I started working in the digital finance space, in particular a digital finance product that was running in Zambia, Mozambique and Malawi. It was a mobile-based service that essentially started as a money transfer service, where a person in a, sort of, a rural part of Zambia could go up to a kiosk, deposit cash and then that money would then be sent to a family member or a business connection in another part of the country, or in a, or in another country.

So that was, sort of, my first digital finance project that I worked on, but I really enjoyed that time. It was about – I worked on it for about a year-and-a-half to two years. And I was fortunate enough to be able to work on a mobile wallet project and to design that from scratch, which was really, really cool. So it extended their money transfer service to enable users to be able to store money digitally on their account. And what was great about that, like I said, was I managed to be part of the team who designed the product from scratch. But also it was challenging in that, the digital service wasn't just aimed at a particular type of mobile phone, like a smartphone - it had to work on all types of mobile phones, including older feature phones. That was a challenge because I had to adapt it for an older mobile technology called 'USSD'. If you remember on older phones, the sort of, very rudimentary, sort of, numerical menus that you used to engage with when you dialed a, what's called 'a short code' – so the sort of, 'star 1-1-1-hash' type of code.

So yeah, so that was really interesting. So working in an another country – like I said in Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. But then also working on services that I had to adapt across to work on different types of mobile phones. So yeah, so that was, that was really interesting. And also understanding the digital finance ecosystem, the product had to also be compatible, all work together with their - some of their other newer products that they were designing like a micro loans product and things like that. So these, sort of, complementary services that had to connect to each other and stuff like that. So yeah, it was a really interesting time designing a – I wouldn't say a complex customer experience, but certainly a customer experience that had some complex elements to it, like I said – it had to work across different types of devices, it included a human interface at a kiosk and a digital interface. Plus, yeah, I was designing for an ecosystem that I was quite unfamiliar with. So yeah, it was an interesting project.

And then if I had to transition to my time here in Berlin... My wife and I moved here – we had been talking about moving to a new country for a while, just as a, sort of, a life experience. I had lived and worked in the UK for about six months, but besides that I travelled quite a lot and worked in other countries, but I had never lived for long periods of time in another country. And we decided that at the end of 2018 was a really good time to do that. Yeah, so 2018 was really a transitional phase where I started taking less contracts to give myself some time to look for work in Berlin. So I managed to secure a job at the end of 2018 and once I had locked down the job, it all kinda happened quite fast and I moved over shortly after that in November of 2018 and my wife came over in December of

that year. And I got a job working for a startup here in Berlin. It's a startup that works in the academic conference space and they provided a range of digital services to support the academic conference space.

Obviously moving countries, there are quite a lot of new things to get used to. But for the most part, the startup I worked for had a very diverse international team. Yeah, it was a reasonably smooth transition. Berlin is quite easy to navigate – even if you can't speak German. And English was the language of business at this startup. So, yeah it was actually quite a smooth transition and I felt quite comfortable and welcome in the team. I think in terms of transitions to a new work environment, it was quite smooth and I've enjoyed it thus far.

Tim: Great. Well, it certainly must have been to your advantage to have worked in a number of different countries on different projects. So your work experience covers so many different phases of product design. You work on user research, concept development, information architecture, interaction design – so there's a lot of different areas of focus for you. I know you're quite into visual design – the UX side of things. So, in terms of all those different areas of focus and working with many different researchers and designers, developers, data analysts, all over the world – if you were to summarise an area of your work that you're really passionate about, what would that be?

Andrew: Yeah. Right now, certainly the area that I'm most interested in is the prototyping side. So that would be where you've got an initial concept and you want to create, sort of, an immersive prototype that your team members can try out, so it can help communicate a concept or an idea. But also where you can get other people (external users) to try out. I think prototyping is an area that I'm – it's probably my favourite part of the design cycle. It's the part I enjoy the most. And the reason why... particularly, I would say – I can say having fun at the moment is, the range of tools that are available now just make it so easy to rapidly prototype.

There's a movement that I've been keeping my eye on for the last 6 months or so - it's called 'the no-code movement'. So 'no-code' really is: the evolution of the tools where you can quickly create a, for example, a website without having to write code. So a very simple example would be products like WordPress, Squarespace, Blogger – those kinds of things, where you can use a visual user interface and create a website for yourself.

So if you think back to the mid-nineties, to create a website you'd have to know how to write some HTML – basic HTML code to be able to get a website live. And then in the early 2000's, there were products coming out that would allow you to design and publish a website without having to code. But what's interesting in the last year or two, is there has been a massive shift in gear, in terms of the number of tools that are available. So for example, now you can create your own basic Android app that serves multimedia, without knowing how to code – there's some really nice online tools for that. There's a tool that I actually used at the end of last year – the product's called “Webflow”.

Right. So Webflow I used recently to create a new website for my client, or for the company that I was freelancing for. What was interesting about that is, they have a visual interface for designing and creating and publishing a website. But what makes it interesting is that, the content management system that underpins this Webflow is really, really powerful and really easy to use. But what it allows you to do, is it allows you to link or connect parts of the website to this content management system in a more flexible way than you could with products like WordPress, for example, and in a more powerful way

than with products like Squarespace. So it takes the best pieces of all those online web publishing tools and it makes a cleaner, more powerful tool.

And what's interesting, [is that] it also encourages a designer to think more like a web developer. So, it's just super, super powerful and probably the next iteration of that is a product called "Bubble". So Bubble is an online tool where you can actually build what's called a "web app." So you can – instead of just creating static web pages that connect to a powerful content management system, you can start visually designing web apps that have logic built into them. So you can start defining business rules and stuff like that.

And then probably the next, or the additional piece of that puzzle is: There are loads of independent services now. So for example, there are online services that provide a payment interface or a profile service that you can then, without having to know how to code, connect to your Webflow website, for example.

So this interoperability between services is now becoming possible without having to code. And I think that becomes super, super powerful. So for example, you take a product like "Stripe", which is a service that provides a really robust, powerful payment service that you can connect to your website, that's designed in Webflow, which is a really powerful front-end web design tool, where you can do really advanced interaction design and connect it to a CMS – all without having to code. And there are other services, for example, where you can host videos behind a pay-wall, creating subscription services – all without having to be able to code. And all of these services can interoperate really cleanly.

It's absolutely phenomenal. I don't think – I mean, I know I say this every year, but it really is the best time to be an interaction and UX designer now, because the number of tools that are available to quickly create prototypes and even quickly create working, deployable web services and websites – we've never lived in the time like now.

And I think, maybe just to summarise... The reason why this is such a fundamental, game-changing time is that: Over the last five to ten years, designers – UX designers or interaction designers – they've had to hand over a lot of their designs to a software team to build it for them, which requires a lot of communication, a lot of documentation. And it requires teams to really synchronise, you know. Development teams that have to synchronise with design teams and that's challenging because, if I think about, for example, the micro-finance product I worked on – a design teams' design cycles are not necessarily in sync with the development teams' cycles. So the things that the development team want to work on first, or what they want to work on now, might not be the things that a design team has available or things that are ready. So for example, I might be doing some field research and the particular feature they wanna build is not ready yet. So the way that would have to work in the past was I would have to then negotiate with my product manager saying, you know, "That stuff that the 'devs' want to build, it's not ready" and there'd be a lot of negotiation and trade-offs and – a lot of basically, complex communication. When now we're heading towards a phase where design teams can actually build the front-ends themselves. They can start to, almost – we might describe it as 'decoupling from a development team', for a lot of the front-end products and they'd be able to change them and modify them when they want to – rather than having to, sort of, lodge a request or a, what you might call a 'development ticket' with the 'dev' team. It just simplifies things so much, I mean – the next five years are gonna be, there's gonna be a massive, massive shake-up in how digital teams work and it's gonna be fantastic. I mean, I've been waiting for this for ten years.

So, it's yeah – the whole 'no-coding movement' is certainly something to keep an eye on, if anyone out there is interested in digital products and UX – not just from a prototyping point-of-view, but also from a deployable, real front-ends and real services point-of-view. And especially for startups. Especially if you're working in the new product development space, these tools are – they look fantastic. I unfortunately haven't deployed a service using a product like Bubble yet, but it certainly looks like it's moving in the right direction and the tools look reasonably intuitive, given the complexity of it. And the ways that you define logic within the app seems really good. So yeah, it's a really good time.

And I think that's why prototyping and the actual building of things that people can interact and test – and do that very rapidly, is certainly one of your most powerful tools in a design process. Because getting feedback from real customers, as quick as possible, has always been the route to creating great products and great experiences. And the quicker you can do that, the quicker you can hone in on the best design.

And it's essentially – I mean, what we've been trying to do for the last 15 years. I think we just now have better and better tools so we can move, fast and faster because, you know, markets are changing quite a lot. And also designers are designing for international markets and environments where they don't know and don't have a lot of, necessarily 'on-the-ground experience,' so being able to build prototypes quickly and get feedback fast is changing that and making it a lot easier to build good products.

Tim: Great. Well yeah, thanks for joining me today Andrew. For the folks out there, you can get in contact with Andrew at his website www.theplatformstudio.com – he's currently in Berlin. So if you're in the area why not connect with him. Go for a drink, shoot the breeze and you never know – you might be hanging out with the future CEO of... well, who knows what the company will be. But anything is possible in this lifetime, right?

Andrew: That's correct. I mean, if our friend can be the CEO of Siri – anything is possible.

Tim: Great. Thanks a lot again Andrew. I hope you have a great time there in Berlin and I look forward to seeing you in the flesh, sometime in the future.