

Design Notes Episode 09 - Cameron Koczon

Google Design Podcast Transcript

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- Liam Spradlin: Design Notes is a show from Google Design about creative work and what it teaches us. I'm your host, Liam Spradlin. Each episode, we talk with people from unique creative fields to discover what inspires and unites us in our practice.
- Cameron Koczon: Product design is very difficult and it is a hard thing to learn, because you can't learn it unless you design a product from scratch, launch that product, and then - ideally - try to change it and make it better. So that's like trying to get good at playing the guitar by playing one C chord a month. It just takes for freakin' ever to get good.
- Liam: That was Cameron Koczon, partner at New York-based engineering and design studio Fictive Kin. The studio's worked on everything from the redesign of Tavi Gevinson's Rookie Magazine to Brooklyn Beta, a conference that - according to Fictive Kin - brought together some of the nicest and most talented designers and developers in the world. In the interview, we explore what it means to own your content online, how designers can make products that foster genuine human connections, and the opportunity we have to change the world by focusing on the impact of our work. Let's get started.
- Liam: Cameron, welcome.
- Cameron: Thanks for having me.
- Liam: So, to get started, I want to know about your journey. So, what do you do now, and what was it like to get there?
- Cameron: I run an agency in Brooklyn called Fictive Kin, um, there's 25 of us. Journey started out in, uh, California. Um, I'm from San Diego. Uh, after college, I went to business school and went straight through to business school. Going to a business school, straight through, is a little bit weird because you're 21, and the average age is more like 28, 30, and if you, uh, how- how old are you?

Liam: 27.

Cameron: 27-

Liam: (laughs).

Cameron: Okay. You ever hung out with like a 21 year old as a 27 year old?

Liam: No.

Cameron: It's like terrible-

Liam: (laughs)

Cameron: So I was the annoying one, and uh, it was lucky to me that, uh, my college roommate also went to graduate school at the same time, but he went for engineering, and he was actually, he worked on the touch screen, on the first iPhone, very cool guy. Um, anyhow, because of that, I ended up hanging out with all engineers instead of business people. I have a lot of MBA friends, but mostly, I was hanging out with engineers, and after school, I just never wanted to do finance. I always wanted to start my own business, and I joined my friends, in starting an agency, like a mechanical electrical engineering agency called, Pocobor, which is RoboCop backwards.

Anyhow, I- I sort of got two lessons out of that. Um, the first lesson was, it's very fun to do your own business. It's very fun, I think, to work with your smart friends, but then the second thing was, you know, I don't really know much about engineering, and so, I can't really add a lot of value and I was doing a lot of like, sales and things like that, but even then, when you don't understand the technical underpinnings of something, it's quite hard to sell it great.

So, some other friends of mine from high school, they were starting a start-up in Los Angeles and it was a web start-up, and I knew how to do front-end development and I knew enough about product design that I wanted to go down and help, and I went with my friend Evan, who's another college buddy. And uh, went down to LA and did a start-up with them, and I did also realize, oh, I like the web. I'm quite good at it. Um, I was working with my friend Evan who still works with me now and we had a great rapport, and he would be ... We basically built the whole thing. and so, I was able to sell early, a very good vesting schedule, and I was able to make a bunch of money. This was long time ago. Now, 10 years

ago now, or something like that. And then I used all that money to hire all of my favorite friends, and I started a company, uh, with them, called Fictive Kin, which just means people who are not related to you by blood, but they're basically family. So these are people who I've known for a very long time, and so, that's ultimately how I got here. I think I maybe went too far back to be honest, but like (laughs), that's how I came with the starting of the company, and then how the company unfolded is like a totally different thing, 'cause it's eight years old now, the company.

Liam: And uh, maybe we'll unearth some of that. So uh, I want to get into the topic of how we interact with the web and online content and stuff like that, and to do that I want to explore some of Fictive Kin's projects.

Cameron: Sure-

Liam: So I'm really interested in the redesign of Rookie that you all did, um-

Cameron: Yeah-

Liam: So just tell me a little bit about that.

Cameron: we used to run a conference called Brooklyn Beta, and Tavi spoke at our conference, and we developed a relationship with with her, and with, uh, Lauren Redding who's over there also, we're very open about why we've done what we've done, and I think that's like a very healthy thing and I love the purpose of Rookie. I also loved the site. I think that they were doing tons of amazing content and it's impressive how far they got with how little. I mean they had, uh, a non-responsive site for a market that is teenaged girls, and it was like, people, uh, were dying for it. They love it, but we met them through the conference. They needed a site, and we really wanted to help them with it, but didn't haven't any money. So we talked to MailChimp to design it with them, and the challenge was ... Especially around then, everything was like very Mediumy, medium.com. You know and everything-

Liam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cameron: Looked like that, and I think even they had a temptation to look like that, and maybe, like, almost like grow-up a little bit. They didn't want to ... Explicitly, that was the goal. It's not Rookie's growing up. So uh, the fun part for that project or one of the most fun parts was keeping this very cool, funky aesthetic while at the same time, making it more modern.

So I think we did a really good job. We worked with the team and, like, they helped and it was very collaborative and I think we ended up with something that was good. I'm, like, the actual results were good, like, page views doubled the next day, and, you know, it's a very outspoken, super sharp community and I was very nervous about launching a redesign of their beloved site, but it was all positive.

Liam: So, in trying to keep this very fun, unique aesthetic that Rookie has. Um, what were some of the constraints on the design?

Cameron: Well, there was some constraints, there were some business goals. Those aren't that fun, but a business goal was very explicitly increase page views because they were changing their advertising model and they had, had an advertising partner before, but page views were starting to matter more, um, and so, we had to do some technical work so that they were registering that correctly. Um, we did a survey of I think about 1,500 of their readers all filled in this type form, and we got basically what they liked and what they wish existed, and so, we built to that. So there were some constraints and sometimes we had to go away. So there was three articles a day was the default, and that was a requirement to us, that we needed to move away from that, but other than that, like, people loved the changing backgrounds all the time. They loved the illustrative style. Basically, we got a ton of awesome feedback from them, and we just did what they asked, You don't usually get to start with, like, here's an existing beautiful thing, we get to preserve it. Here's a very open awesome community, they're telling us what they want. All we have to do is not fuck it up.

Liam: I want to get into a piece that you wrote several years ago, in which you said that, uh, "We were on the cusp of an overhaul in the way in which we interact with online content," and in that piece, you described the concepts of content shifting and content liberation-

Cameron: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: And so, briefly, what are those concepts about?

Cameron: The content shifting one, you could think of like, Pocket, right? Like you just sort of move it over, um, whereas, I think content liberation is more like what Pinterest does. It sort of completely removes it from its context and essentially hides that context, and gives it a new life. So it's hard to trace back the origin story of a particular piece of content whereas shifting ... You can really easily know where it came from, but you're moving that

experience and shifting has all kinds of really interesting implications because most media publications, they're not really caring about your reading experience.

I think everybody's experienced like the- the assault of all the pop-ups etc. etc. So if you just shift those letters over to another place, you can read it great. You're like, I just wanted to read those words. Thank you for writing them, which isn't very collaborative between the reader and- and the- the publisher, but that's what I think people use these things for.

Liam: We talked about how Rookie has this very strong aesthetic of their own, and the community loves that, and it's something that you wanted to preserve. So I'm interested how those two concepts relate to that project.

Cameron: In both cases, it involves a shift in thinking about what is the center of gravity for an item. In the case of Rookie, I think they have something very special, which is different. Most apps out there are content driven apps. If you want to go see square photos, you go to Instagram. Like the content is there, and you bring the people to the content.

Whereas Rookie, they have the community and that's the center of gravity. The publication's there, but really it's a very powerful community, like, that is a deep network of people and you could bring them their own little mini Pinterest. You could bring them their own little mini, you know, Instagram. You could bring them anything. You just bring the functionality to them. And that article was called, Orbital Content, and I believe that ... You know I still believe it, that your content should revolve around you and you give that to whoever you want.

Like if you had been using Snapchat for a while and you just decided you want to go over to Instagram and bring all that stuff with you, you should've been able to go, "Here you go." If I want to leave Bank of America and go to Wells Fargo, I can move my money and come over here. Whereas my content, it's all very blurred. It's mine. I made it, but you kinda own it, and maybe we kind of have a shared ownership, and it's a really peculiar arrangement, and you can kind of lock it down.

So those two, I think are related in that way and I like those kinds of things.

Liam: So there, there's uh, the aspect of these concepts that affects the way that we experience consuming information, like in the case of a really cluttered news site. You're taking the letters and reading them in a more

sane calm environment, um, but also, the aspect of how we interact with our own content, and like, how that ownership is negotiated.

Cameron: You own yourself. You own your community. This to me is like, the power of the internet, which we do not ... We just totally are like ... We don't really care about the internet. Like, we're just going to create little mini internets elsewhere, and so, I think that anything that empowers an individual or a small group of purpose driven individuals, even if that purpose is just taking naps and having pizza, like I'm into those kinds of things.

Liam: I'm into those things as well-

Cameron: Yeah-

Liam: (laughs).

Cameron: Yeah. Yeah.

Liam: So I would also like to explore, like, moving beyond the current state. How do you think this manifests in the future, uh, or where do you see that going?

Cameron: It's kinda like saying, "How do we get people to floss? How do we get people to save or put money into their retirement?" People just don't like to do what's ultimately good for them in the long run when there's an easier option. We talk about it at our company, like, actual closeness versus a sort of generic connectivity. And I think that people are very connected, and that opens up all kinds of opportunity for closeness, but it doesn't get generated. So I think, if we could figure out a way to create real intimacy, then that would be something. I can only identify the problem.

Like here, I can give you another way to think about the problem. So there's a study, they talk about rats and they would give rats Diet Coke. Some rats get the Diet Coke, some rats get regular Coke. And the Diet Coke rats get like, way fatter and shit because their body perceives that they were given sugar, so it does all these things, but it didn't get sugar. It didn't get what it thought it got, so then later on, it goes double-down for sugar. So they were tricking their body into believing they got sugar, duh, duh, duh.

So I think that something like a typical social network gives you the Diet Coke equivalent of a friendship. A real friendship is on a road trip and you're out and you're doing something, and doesn't even need to be that idyllic. It could just be a drink after work at the end of the day, that is a real bond, and that is like the regular Coke. You got your sugar, you don't need any more. The other ones are like false sustenance, that I think makes people binge or crave for it, but there's no way to binge friendship. I can't go to you and make you be my friend.

Liam: So theoretically speaking-

Cameron: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: From a design perspective, like what- what kinds of things can designers do to try and like build this genuine relationship.

Cameron: That's a great question. That's a great question. So you can do a couple things. So one, I think that if you err on the side of creating tools, utilities ... You're going to be in a good spot. You can count on it, cause you can also trick yourself. A way that you can't trick yourself is a tool. So like Google Maps, I'll plug ... We'll plug Google-

Liam: (laughs).

Cameron: Google Maps is a tool. Google Maps isn't saying like, "Hey, how did you like ... Do you want to like rate your cab ride here?" It's like, "No, I ... Thank you for getting me here on time, Google Maps, and I don't need to talk to you anymore, I'll talk to you later." And I think those things, they pop-up, they can bring us together and they can be valuable utilities. So like, We think about timeless tools. So things that have been around forever, calendars, lists, maps, things like that. Those are things that can be very actually quite personal. They can be social. They can be fun, but if you just treat those things as like, your foundation, you're not inventing a new need. Like if you're inventing a new need, I think maybe you're- you're part of the problem, If you're bringing people together. Like, there's something kinda cool there. Like bring 'em together, do something nice. Like, I don't want a futon anymore. Thanks Craigslist, I don't have a futon anymore. So I don't know, things like that, I think ... Designing tools is awesome and I guess if you put a point system in, then I think you're probably also creating a problem.

So me sharing a photo, I share a photo and I just like, I don't -- This is my photo. I don't care, whatever, but like, if there are people you share a

photo, it doesn't get enough likes, you take the photo down. You thought that, that was a cool photo to show. You wanted to share the photo, but you didn't really want to share the photo. You wanted to collect little hearts. That says something about the tool. It's not a photo sharing tool, it's a heart collecting tool, which is a little casino that you put in your pocket and you carry it around. It's no good.

Liam: I'm also interested in a piece you wrote about, um, the fact that it's an important time for design-

Cameron: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: Or it's design's time, like-

Cameron: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: Uh, you wrote about how Design is in the spotlight or all eyes are on design-

Cameron: Yeah-

Liam: It's, um, finally people are recognizing this. It's like a very integrated piece of a product. But you also said something that really stood out to me in that piece, which is, uh, you worry that design is being set up to fail-

Cameron: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: What do you mean by that?

Cameron: So what I mean by that is I'm a business guy. I have an MBA, but when I ran Brooklyn Beta, it's designers and developers. We're bringing designers and developers together. I co-ran it with a guy named Christian. Um, the developers all thought ... Oh, Cameron's a designer, 'cause I know plenty about design, and then, the designers all thought ... Oh, Cameron's a developer, 'cause like they both knew I knew a lot, but I wasn't quite right. And I was like, I got you. I'm right in the middle here, I'm a business guy, and so, I hang out with a lot of business people. I hear business type chatter. And I saw a lot of attention on design and it became something that VCs were talking about, business leaders talking ... you gotta have it. You gotta get yourself some design. Get a guy who looks like Yves Behar, bring 'em in, have 'em put some sticky notes up and all that kind of stuff ... I can tell you designer after designer after designer who would be designer number one at a start-up, that really

made a lot of its headway early on because of design, and that person maybe got like, .2% of the company, that then got sold for \$30 million. It's like, you did it, and somebody else made \$30 million. I want you to at least make \$1 million, that would be nice. Um, so I always felt like designers were taken advantage of, and what, in a way that engineers weren't, 'cause engineers had more examples. They had like Paul Graham. Engineers have kind of like an attitude about not getting taken advantage of, and designers maybe ... I don't know what the constitutional difference is. They sort of were more going with the flow. So I thought, here's a moment for you to like go for it, but I think what happened more is, because design is more accessible than engineering, I can't go pretend to set-up server. Like, I just didn't set up a server. Because of that, I think business people just grabbed design. I think business people just call themselves designers all the time, and then they go around and you'll see like some design thought leaders ... It's like show me your coolest design.

And they're like, "Oh, you know back in what was ..." You know, it's like what? You're not a designer, but you're just saying it and now you're leading designers, and of course because you're a business person, you're wildly opinionated and you think that your way is right, and so, now you're designing, like, shitty stuff.

So I don't actually think it worked. Design, the word, is now everywhere. Good job the word design, but designers, the community, I don't think they're getting much from it and I don't think that those of us on the receiving end of designed products are also getting much from it because those people didn't actually get to the position that they want.

Liam: The setting up to fail that you mentioned-

Cameron: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: You think happened?

Cameron: I believe that, that happened. Yes-

Liam: Okay-

Cameron: Absolutely-

Cameron: Just in terms of the upper bounds of Where- where designers could be in the organizational chart-

Liam: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Cameron: Mills Baker... He has an article. I can't remember what it's called, but it's something about designers seat at the table or something like that. It, that's the easiest read to make the point and that was already like, that was only like, two years after the thing I wrote, and I think he makes the point excellently. I wish I could remake it, but just read it. It's great.

Liam: So essentially, there's this idea that design is important, but yet-

Cameron: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Liam: The actual recognition that, whether you acknowledge it or not, design is foundational and present everywhere has not been made?

Cameron: Well design is objectively important, but what design is, has not been internalized. So people just say ... And in that Mills Baker article, he uses Path as an example. And like, I feel like, what business people took away from it, is like, if you make the coolest button that's an add, you know, you hit a button and circles fly everywhere and it's like, that's design. Like decoration, right? That's very, um, I'm going right into what all designers say all the time: Design is not decoration, it's foundation.

It's not the ... It's not the molding on the building. It's the underlying architecture, like, it's b- the blueprints down, that's when you're really doing design and that is from the beginning. You can't go to a building. I can't change the underlying structure of this Google Office. This is it. If I want to do that, I have to rip it down and put it up, or I put up something new somewhere else, and so, that kind of design is absolutely ... It's just not understood.

Liam: Is there a way that practicing designers can, subvert this and inject the understanding of design into the kind of like framework where designers are co-founders and things like that?

Cameron: I think actually making an alternate thing, um, and there's all of these blind spots. It's like, every time somebody decides to make a start-up or make a new product, they go look in the same lame-ass town in Northern California, Palo Alto. I lived there. It's not cool. And they go and they ... "Oh, they figured it out. Let's copy that." If you go to Berlin, they're copying Silicon Valley. Like, electronic music in Berlin and electronic music in Detroit, these are different. They have their own movements.

Why is it that there's not a cool set of Baltimore start-ups? And that could just mean start-ups for Baltimore, or like something where when you open the app, and you're from Baltimore, but you're in San Diego or something, and you go "I bet somebody from Baltimore made this?." Why doesn't it ever sound like somewhere else?

Um, and I think if, it's cool if you go small then I ... You got a shot. Like, if you're going for a million dollar business, instead of a billion dollar business, maybe designers just make 1000, \$1 million businesses, instead of trying to make the next \$1 billion business, maybe that could do it, but you have to go small, strategic, and don't look at, don't look at any examples. ... That's what a designer is supposed to be able to do: break it down to its component parts, come up with a plan, and put it together the way that's best suited for the job. I think that probably would do something.

Liam: So I- I want to ask, a more general question about how your work or process has changed over time-

Cameron: Mmm-

Liam: And where you see it going, uh, in the future.

Cameron: Well, we get better. So that's interesting because product design is very difficult and it is a hard thing to learn because you can't learn it unless you design a product from scratch, launch that product, and then ideally, try to change it and make it better. So that's like trying to get good at playing the guitar by playing one C chord a month. It just takes for freakin' ever to get good. So it's neat every time we come at it fresh, that we get, uh, better, um, and get a little bit, uh, wiser about it, but the process itself, I don't think that there's a way to change the process of making a product.

It starts with some kind of discovery, some kind of researcher planning period, like, measure twice, cut once, that kind of deal. Come up with a plan. Make the simplest version of that plan, and then, put that into people's hands as quickly as possible, and then make it better.

I will say that there's a bunch of stuff that's changed environmentally. We made an app long time ago called Gimme Bar. We made this to do list app called, Teux Deux. When we put Teux Deux out there, people were like, "Oh, cool. A new app." And it didn't matter that it was buggy. There's like news that there's this new app. Let's try this new app out today.

That's our Tuesday activity. Now, nobody wants it. They don't want your fucking app, at all.

So you really can't just go like ... I think that there's ... Like, a good startup mantra of like, fail fast or you put it out there really quickly and it, MVP, and then you iterate or whatever, but I think that if you MVP these days, you didn't really give your idea a chance. You have to get somewhere further.

Like, there's not that many new things on your phone, or my phone, or anybody's phone. So I feel like the things that have changed are all around, which is environmental, which is basically ... You have to show up ready to roll, if you want to have something cool. We have a lot of internal projects that are various degrees of completion, that five years ago, I would've put them out, no problem, but now, I just test them with 50 trusted friends who understand what we're doing and have a little patience, and like, 'cause like if this isn't fun for us 50, then we're not gonna tell another soul. Once it's fun for us 50, let's see if 500 people find it fun, but we'll never like launch it, 'cause you only get to that once.

Liam: And so, you kind of determine it's staying power beyond a week during that process.

Cameron: Yeah, for like months. I could show you some stuff in my pocket right now that I'm like, man, I really want to like this thing, but we totally haven't figured it out. Like I don't like it that much, it's only okay. So what, am I gonna go out there and tell the world, like, "Hey, we made an okay app." Nobody wants that. So like, I spend much more time, like, trying to figure it out and we keep it really low-fi. Like, we have learned some stuff.

So the first one is, We do this with clients, it's an exercise. So clients will very typically show up with a long feature set, and while sure, I could get a ton of money if I make your whole feature set. Like it's not gonna work and you're gonna hate me at the end, and that's no fun. So what we say to them is, take all your features and pull a feature out, and if what you have left is still a product then that is not going first. So if we go to Twitter, you go to Discover, you pop that guy out and you look at it. You're like, is it still a product? Yes. Discover is not core. Okay, what about these trending tags over here. If we pull 'em out is this still a product? Yes, this is not core. So even though you might argue that it's better or worse or whatever, it's not core. So the only thing that's really core on Twitter is writing a tweet, submitting a tweet, reading some tweets.

So we would do that first, as quickly as possible, and even before that, we have a jokey-thing. The very first thing we always make is just called a Seinfeld, which is an app that does nothing. You can sign-up. You can make an account. You can log-in, log-out ... You literally can't do a god damn thing, and so, it's like okay, cool. Done, that's check one. Check two is that core app that I described, and then we can get more strategic about how we kind of sweeten the pot with other features and stuff like that, but features tend to have to fight their way in, instead of us building them and taking them out.

Liam: Has this process kind of developed, out of the transition from every Tuesday there's a hot new app, to like, nobody cares about your app?

Cameron: Actually, I think it probably developed out of client work because, you know, in the early days, we would do client projects for people where maybe it's an individual, they did like a friends and family round ... Maybe they got like \$80,000 together and when somebody's sitting next to you, and they're telling you that, like, their mom went into their savings to get like money to give you... You take on that burden a little bit, and so, you try to get as clever as possible about, um, how to build something. So it's like, okay, let's make the simplest thing... And by doing the Seinfeld we all now have accounts. So anything new, we're all already trying it. There's no new feature that we're not already trying, then we look at the core, and at any point, you could say, you know what? I don't think we have something.

So it's kind of more being clever about how you spend money. You don't assume that you understand at the beginning what the product is. So if you make a big list ... Oh, this is what it is, and then you make all that. Now, you have to pull stuff out and put new stuff in. At every step along the way, you assume, I probably don't know, but it does need accounts. Okay, cool. I was right. It needs accounts. I'm in here. Okay, now I can write tweets. It's like, oh, I knew I was gonna need to read tweets. It's like, okay, cool. Now I can read tweets. And at every point you can say ... Cool, it still feels like we're on- on the path.

We used to get these beautiful design comps. I'm like, oh, yeah. Build that. It's like, you know, think of it like dating, right? Oh, this person's gorgeous, and then, you hang out with them for a few times, and you're like, inside of them is shit, and like, you have the same thing with an interface. It's like, this looks beautiful. Like, a dribbble interface looks beautiful, underneath it is nothing, you know?

And so, you- you sort of say to yourself, this- this product needs to win as the product. So it did change. We do also do like, on our own work, we do not make it look good, we do not brand it. We make what we call a blueprint, and it's like, all Helvetica. It's all blue and it just, it has to land on its own merits, its own content, things like that.

Liam: I was going to follow-up about the blueprint concept-

Cameron: Yeah-

Liam: How do you like tame the impulse of a designer...

Cameron: Some designers like to do the product side a lot, and some designers like to do the visual side a lot, and then I don't let the visual people see it usually (laughs).

You can feel it in the air though. There is a point at which it's kind of working, but actually, the lack of appearance, it's like... Also dating - you're an amazing person, let's say you want to date, and then you show up, but you're like, you didn't shower or something like that. At a certain point, your product is looking at you, and you're like, you're kind of a slob, and I can't even ... Now, I can't even look at you, like uh, objectively. So let's make you a little bit better, and then, so you can sort of like ladle it in, little by little in that way.

I shouldn't say I don't let them see it. They're all in the office. They can see it-

Liam: (laughs).

Cameron: They're full grown adults, but uh, uh, ideally, um, we sort of ... Ideally, they agree. I don't know. We have to ask them, but I think that, the people who are more visually inclined agree with the process, and then, uh, once they get it, it's like they can jump in and it's a lot of fun.

Liam: Got it. Cool. Well thanks for joining me.

Cameron: Yeah, sure.