 INTERVIEW with Harry Brignull

**Harry Brignull is a user experience consultant**

**based in the United Kingdom. He has a PhD in cognitive science, and his work involves building better experiences by blending user research and interaction design. In his work, Harry has consulted for companies including Spotify, Smart Pension, The Telegraph, British Airways, Vodafone, and many others. In his spare time, Harry also runs a blog on interaction design that has attracted a lot of eyeballs. It is called 90percentofeveryt ing.com, and it is well worth checking out.**

**What are the characteristics of a good interaction designer?**

I think of interaction design, user experience design, service design, and user research as a combined group of disciplines that are tricky to tease apart. Every company has slightly different terminology, processes, and approaches. I’ll let you

into a secret, though. They’re all making it up as they go along. When you see any organization portraying its design and research publicly, they’re showing you a fictionalized view of it for recruitment and marketing purposes. The reality of the work is usually very different. Research and design is naturally messy. There’s a lot of waste, false assumptions, and blind alleys you have to go down before you can define and understand a problem well enough to solve it. If an employer doesn’t understand this and they don’t give you the space and time you need, then you won’t be able to do a good job, regardless of your skills and training.

A good interaction designer has skills that work like expanding foam. You expand to fill the skill gaps in your team. If you don’t have a writer present, you need to be able to step up and do it yourself, at least to the level of a credible draft. If you don’t have a researcher, you’ll need to step up and do it yourself. The same goes for developing code-based prototypes, planning the user journeys, and so on. You’ll soon learn to become used to working outside of your comfort zone and relish the new challenges that each project brings.

**How has interaction design changed in the past few years?**

In-housing of design teams is a big trend at the moment. When I started my consultancy career in the mid-2000s, the main route to getting a career in industry was to get a role at an agency, like a UX consultancy, a research agency, or a full-service agency. Big organizations didn’t even know where to start with hiring and building their own teams, so they paid enormous sums to agencies to design and build their products. This turned out to be a pretty ineffective model—when the agencies finish a project, they take all the acquired expertise away with them to their next clients.

These days, digital organizations have wised up, and they’ve started building their own in-house teams. This means that a big theme in design these days is organizational change. You can’t do good design in an organization that isn’t set up for it. In fact, in old, large organizations, the political structure often seems to be set up to sabotage good design and development practices. It sounds crazy, but it’s very common to walk into an organization to find a project manager brandishing a waterfall Gantt chart while ranting obsessively about Agile

(which is a contradiction in terms) or to find a product owner saying in one breath they value user research yet in the next breath getting angry with researchers for bringing them bad news. As well as “legacy technology,” organizations naturally end up with “legacy thinking.” It’s really tricky to change it. Design used to be just a department. Nowadays it’s understood that good design requires the entire organization to work together in a cohesive way.

**What projects are you working on now?**

I’m currently head of UX at a FinTech startup called Smart Pension in London. Pensions pose a really fascinating user-centered design challenge. Consumers hate thinking about pensions, but they desperately need them. In a recent research session, one of the participants said something that really stuck with me: “Planning your pension is like planning for your own funeral.”

Humans are pretty terrible at long-term planning over multiple decades. Nobody likes to think about their own mortality. But this is exactly what you need to do if you want to have a happy retirement.

The pension industry is full of jargon and off-putting technical complexity. Even fundamental financial concepts like *risk* aren’t well understood by many consumers.

In some recent research, one of our participants got really tongue-tied trying to understand the idea that since they were young, it would be “high risk” (in the loose nontechnical definition of the word) to put their money into a “low-risk” fund (in the technical definition of the word) since they’d probably end up with lower returns when they got older. Investment is confusing unless you’ve had training. Then, there’s the problem that “a little knowledge can hurt.” Some consumers who think they know what they’re doing can end up suffering when they think they can beat the market by moving their money around between funds every week.

Self-service online pension (retirement plans) platforms don’t do anything to help people make the right decisions because that would count as advice, which they’re not able to give because of the way it’s regulated. Giving an average person a self-service platform and telling them to go sort out their pension is like giving them a Unix terminal and telling them to sort out their own web server. A few PDF fact sheets just aren’t going to help. If consumers want advice, they have to go to a financial advisor, which can be expensive and doesn’t make financial sense unless you have a lot

of money in the first place. There’s a gap in the market, and we’re working these sorts of challenges in my team at Smart Pension.

**What would you say are the biggest challenges**

**facing you and other consultants doing interaction design these days?**

A career in interaction design is one of continual education and training. The biggest challenge is to keep this going. Even if you feel that you’re at the peak of your skills, the technology landscape will be shifting under your feet, and you need to keep an eye on what’s coming next so you don’t get left behind. In fact, things move so quickly in interaction design that by the time you read this interview, it will already be dated.

If you ever find yourself in a “comfortable” role doing the same thing every day, then beware—you’re doing yourself a disservice. Get out there, stretch yourself, and make sure you spend some time every week outside your comfort zone.

**If you’re asked to evaluate a prototype service or product and you discover it is really bad, how do you break the news?**

It depends what your goal is. If you want to just deliver the bad news and leave, then by all means be totally brutal and don’t pull any punches. But if you want to build a relationship with the client, you’re going to need to help them work out how to

move forward.

Remember, when you deliver bad news to a client, you’re basically explaining to them that they’re in a dark place and it’s their fault. It can be quite embarrassing and depressing. It can drive stakeholders apart when really you need to bring them together and give them a shared vision to work toward. Discovering bad design is an opportunity for improvement. Always pair the bad news with a recommendation of what to do next.

**NOTE**

**We use the term *interactive products* generically to refer to all classes of interactive**

**systems, technologies, environments, tools, applications, services, and devices.**