I’ve been doing user experience design for the last 20 long years. Am I and expert? Sure. Do I feel like and expert? No. Engineers are constantly questioning my designs, my mockups, my reasoning. It’s like I’m the new guy here. Either way, I used to design great user interfaces with incredible experiences. My process has evolved a bit over time. Again and again I notice UX design is really two daunting tasks in one. The first, and in my opinion single most important, task is actually designing and creating the user experience. The second task is convincing all the engineers that this is how it needs to be done.

Over 30 years I’ve worked for about six companies and while at Lockheed Martin 9 years ago I built user experiences and interfaces that are still being used for space travel today. Even so, I find myself in heated debates with web developers regarding why we need a dropdown here instead of a radio button, or why this should be a modal instead of a separate page. With the way it’s done around many of the dev shops you would think all engineers are natural UX designers and that I’m the silly one for going to graduate school for this.

I’ve adapted over the last 20 years. Luckily for me many of my performance metrics are based on deliverables so I design what’s ordered and the KPIs are leadership’s worry. In a perfect world, I would be able to get everyone on the same page as me that way we could all create a more intuitive product but the reality is that you can’t just tell people who the user is in a presentation and have it stick. It simply doesn’t work that way. So, we get misunderstanding about the user and friction as a result. No surprise here, it’s been like this since the dawn of software engineering long ago.

Speaking of long ago, I started doing UX design right out of Carnagies Mellons graduate program in Human-Computer Interaction. Actually, I was in the first graduating class in ’97 in the first ever HCI program in the country. From there I went into the defense industry and created some fascinating user interfaces before being put into a lead design role for a few user experiences designs for appliances use in outer space. It was an incredible experience; the environmental constraints were fascinating to weasel my designs around and the challenge was out of this world (literally). But it was stressful so after sometime I went in to web development UX/UI and now I’m at a consulting firm where I help get companies through the rigorous user experience engineering process.

I’ve worked with tens of companies in software design consultancy alone and have noticed one huge issue that I call the one “barrier to design” and it’s the engineers. I know it sounds harsh but it’s true. I just can’t seem to get the engineers on the same page design wise, and they’re the ones on the ground level building the software so often times I find development at a standstill as engineers try and open dialogs with me or my assistants in an effort to change designs to what they think is better when often times it’s not. I know they mean well but they see it from a systems design perspective and not a user interaction perspective like my team and I do and that sort of thinking almost always results in a failed product.

If we could find a way to easily get this understanding of the user across to engineers that could solve a lot of problems for us. Often times my designs are planned and shared behind closed doors with my design team and the client’s leadership team. After that our designs are stored on Box.com where leadership accesses them to translate the designs into task requirements for their project management tool. A lot of the empathy gets stripped away right there as the design docs and user understanding is stripped away and narrowed down into checkbox tasks for developers to execute. Having weekly meetings with all 20 or 30 engineers, designers, and managers simply to remind them who the user is is not a very realistic solution but sometimes it seems like that’s what we need. I don’t want to conduct those meetings, maybe I could just have my assistant do it.

Oh, you asked about my hardware. I really don’t care what hardware or software I have or am issued as long as it works and isn’t slow. It needs to work and work fast, none of those loading screens I have things to do.