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Interview with Neil Cormican

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Neil Cormican is the design team lead for YouTube TV™- A newly launched live TV offering in the US by global giants YouTube™. Cormican shares experiences with his former classmate of his early inclinations to explore design as a teenager in Clarinbridge, Galway, Ireland and reflects on the path, studying Industrial Design(ID) at University of Limerick(UL)/National College of Art & Design(NCAD), Ireland, which eventually led him to his current work in San Francisco, USA with his design team in YouTube TV



Neil can you speak about YouTube and how it developed from a start-up in 2005 and then on to the Google™ Internet and media sharing giant that it is now?

It's hard to believe that YouTube has only been around for a few years... prior to that there wasn't any one destination to watch video online. If you wanted to share video you posted it on websites, blogs or in articles... and then hoped everyone else on the internet would find it. When YouTube appeared, it really struck a chord with people as there was now one place to share and watch video online. It started to build momentum and became a popular video destination. At the same time, Google recognising the importance of online video was exploring this space with their own product called Google Video. Susan [sic Wojcicki], our current CEO was working at Google at the time proposed to Google to buy YouTube. At the time, a lot of people thought it was a crazy amount of money, but it now looks like a steal. It's gone from that small start-up to the biggest video platform in the world. YouTube has over 1.9 billion monthly logged in users.

Does YouTube and YouTube TV have a design philosophy that you can see?

I wouldn't say there is a core design philosophy at YouTube, if anything we lean in on Google's philosophy of putting the user first. We dedicate a lot of resource to User Research to ensure that users hammer the products before we release them, so for example, just on YouTube TV alone, we tested it on over 500 people prior to launch and that's not counting all the Googlers and YouTubers that give us feedback.

As for a YouTube TV, one of the philosophies or principles we have been aligning to is to try to get the UI out of the way as quickly as possible and get the user into the content

When it comes to video products, people are not really interested in how beautiful the service looks, they just want to get to the content they want to watch as quickly as possible. For example, we measure how quickly the user gets from logging into the app to the first frame of a video, and obviously the lower we can make that number the better.

What is different about designing for TV is that the less your users interact, the better the service is.

That makes a lot of sense but to do that then the User Interface (UI) that is there for that first step has to be sophisticated in terms of being able to search, being able to access, being able to click, it needs to be super-efficient, is that correct?

Yes, I'd say that's a correct assumption. Our aim with YouTube TV was to reimagine the TV experience and build something for the 21st Century. So, first off, we leaned on the search capabilities from Google to help the users pinpoint that show they are looking for. Then we spent a lot of time tuning great personal recommendations and when you think about it, this is a pretty new concept for TV. TV services broadcast the TV channels and you just choose one, but we can really understand your viewing habits and continue to recommend the next best thing to watch.

I'm wondering how much of that is prescribed by the technology rather than the UI, if that makes sense?

I guess it depends on how you look at it... because what's interesting here is how the Software Developer uses technology and the Designer uses UI to find the best video for the user to watch. Like I mentioned earlier, a good recommendation service will pick the best video and play it right after, whereas it's our job as designers to design the best UI to present the next videos. We put a huge

amount of thought into that presentation such as the right artwork or poster, the fonts we use, the show description and the way we lay them out. Ideally, we want them to start watching a show and then continue watching and never come back in to the UI. This is something that YouTubeTV does well.

That immediately picks up on connotations of Artificial Intelligence (AI) or machine learning, without getting into the details of it I'm assuming that we're starting to see the early stages of AI in terms of how both Google and YouTube TV anticipate what the user is looking for.

Sundar Pichai, the Google CEO announced last year that Google will become an AI first company and use machine learning to help us create better experiences for all our users. This is very relevant for video also... when somebody watches a video there is a good chance that the follow-on piece of video is something that other people are watching and that they particularly like or are deemed to be the right piece of content to show next so it's definitely an important thing and it's definitely an important next step for Google.

YouTube TV comes a little bit later in the media streaming market. Can you explain how YouTube TV is different to the on-demand services and the TV services people currently have?

The first thing to point out is that there are two different types of streaming video services; there's the VOD services or Video On Demand which includes Netflix or the RTE player or even YouTube itself, basically all of the video is on demand. The content is available all the time and the user can watch it at any time whenever they want.

The other type is called OTT or Over the Top which is essentially getting your Live TV content over the internet. This OTT market which is where YouTube TV sits is only about 3 years old, whereas the Video on Demand has been around much longer.

So why is YouTube TV different to the cable TV service that people have in their homes?

Well first of all, YouTube is a software product rather than a hardware one. There are no set top boxes or satellite dishes, users access it all through apps on the phone, browser or the TV. It understands what you like to watch and can give you really good recommendations and we update it very often with new features so it's continuously becoming a better service.

Also, it is so much cheaper. Here in the US, people pay an extraordinary amount for TV, assuming you get all the add-ons it can be up to \$250 - \$300 per month and they get locked into very long contracts. We offer 50+ networks, those being the more popular channels for \$40 per month and we don't lock them into any contracts. Finally, we offer a cloud DVR (for recording shows) with no storage space limits, meaning there is no limit to how big your library of content can get.

It's not easy to keep a service like this running and we work very hard to ensure that the service is reliable. As the biggest video platform in the world, we have the infrastructure to be able to deliver what we think is the best and most robust TV service over the internet.

Can you speak of the importance of Live TV in the YouTube TV product?

People love the TV content, but the presentation is not always great, so when we built YouTube TV, we wanted to reimagine the Live experience. Live does play a huge part in our service. In fact, one of the early design principles we established was to push Live to the fore, we wanted to ensure that the user was always shown live video when navigating the service and this is something that distinguishes us from our competition. One of the reasons people love live TV is that they can browse through the channels and find something to watch. As they are flipping through, something will capture their attention, they will jump in and continue to watch, in many cases they don't even care where in the show they are. Live TV offers a serendipity that On Demand services never will be able to match.

Neil, can I move you on to yourself a little bit if that's ok? Because I think readers would be interested, what made you want to become a designer?

Like many kids, I loved drawing and Lego and from an early age. I knew I wanted to do something that would combine both. When I was about 9 or 10, I became fascinated with the design of cars, I would buy a monthly car magazine and then obsess over the concept renderings of the futuristic cars. When you think about it, there was not a lot of consumer magazines showing futuristic product design at the time. As a teenager, I became very interesting in oil and water colour painting where I would paint landscapes near home. It

was also around then I started taking vacuum cleaners and other household appliances apart to get an understanding of how they worked and in many cases, I'm not sure I got them back together. So, all along, it was the combination of how things looked and how they worked that led me down the path towards design and eventually on to the ID course in NCAD.

But those core principles that you learnt in Industrial Design, did they give you enough of a foundation in your thinking that you still fall back on them?

Yes. Looking back, it was an excellent design course and it still surprises me how much of what I learned is still part of my daily design process. We learned how to do some basic research and market analysis, design concepts, iterate on a design, prototype and test it and present it well and in some form or another I still use these on every product I design. I would have assumed that design methodologies would have changed over the years, but it hasn't, it's still basic problem solving.

Product Design is still about those essential core skills and most designers that you speak to learnt their trade through that core skillset or they found their own method because there's no single design method, but it's their variations on that methodology that pretty much everybody has a basis in. So could you point to somebody or something that's been a single biggest influence on your way of thinking at the moment?

Regarding the somebody, I cannot say there is any one Designer that has had a direct influence on how I design products. However, I have been very lucky to work with a lot of smart people from a wide range of disciplines over the years that have had an enormous influence on my career. They have taught me better ways to tackle problems, think differently, take shortcuts, manage people, influence others, present better and build better products. It's super important to find those people and learn from them.

As for the something, it has to be pen and paper. Perhaps this is one of those practices I learned in college that is not so popular any more. I see a lot of designers jump straight into Photoshop or Sketch to begin designing. I feel that creating a canvas that is the dimensions of the phone screen or browser is already restricting the output. Personally, I find that sketching is the best way to understand the

problem space and quickly get rough ideas together. I always carry some pens and a sketchbook to jot down the ideas, it's very throw away ... nothing too precious! It's an excellent way to see how something progresses.

You are now a manager, and probably have been for a while, so how do you lead, do you consciously lead a team of designers or did you just suddenly find yourself in that role?

I guess I naturally progressed into managing teams. I spent the first half my career working in as many disciplines as possible, such as a model-maker, prop maker, 3-D artist, animator, game designer, web designer, Interactive TV designer, mobile designer, broadcast designer, art director and creative director, all this time trying to learn as much as I could. This wide spectrum of experience became very valuable when I eventually started to manage design teams and products. It was important for me, and I believe for my team to have a leader that has a solid understanding and a practicing knowledge of design to offer solid critique and feedback of their work. I like to keep my design teams as small as possible ensuring there is a flat structure without hierarchy, this means I can get to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each designer, ensuring I am better able to utilize the resource for more efficient design as well as finding opportunities to provide better mentorship of each of them.

I was going to ask you; did you pick those people yourself?

Everyone has to go through a rigorous interview process to get into Google, but once they are through, I try to understand who is a good fit for the team. As I mentioned earlier, I like small teams so it's important to build well. I like to mix the team up with different types of designers. Some are able to think deep and wide to deliver well considered conceptual design work tackling complex problems. Others are super-fast, they are able to take on numerous smaller problems at once and race through them, while others are able to consider different parts of a complex system and connect the dots delivering a design that can scale to accommodate new features, screens or devices. In general, they have a wide range of skills also including interaction, visual, motion design and prototyping.

Keeping the team small means that everyone has a lot of autonomy and responsibility. In the first few weeks, a new team member can

expect to launch something significant to our users. All in all, we have a very scrappy design process, we execute incredibly quickly, prototype it, have it tested and then iterate on it until we are satisfied that the users can complete a set of journeys through the product. We never release something that we think isn't right!

Where do you see digital and physical product design moving over the next 10 years? Maybe you're a long way from where you started being industrial designer but 'digital' is maybe still the right word. Do you have a vision of where you think it's going to go or a crystal ball?

Having trained in Industrial Design, I always had a fascination for how physical objects would evolve over the years. One object that has had a very interesting progression I think is the TV, it started out as an almost round screen in a huge wooden cabinet. As video quality improved it began to find straighter edges and it was displayed in the 4:3 ratio of what was to become Standard Definition (SD) TV. For years, these SD TV's had very thick bezels and had very deep casing to hold the cathode ray tube. Once LCD was invented, the casing flattened out and the bezels got smaller and, of course, the video was displayed in 16:9 HD format. Now that we have OLED and 4K video, the screens keep getting bigger, the bezels are almost gone and our TV's are millimeters thin. As we continue on this path

the physical TV device itself will disappear and we will just be left with the video. Over time, as many of our physical objects disappear or merge together, voice will play a bigger role in controlling them.

Thanks Neil, finally have you any gems of wisdom you would offer new and aspiring designers on how to carve a career for themselves in the Digital Design space?

I guess the biggest lesson I have learned over the years is never to assume that you know how the user will use your product. We spend so long tackling the problem of a feature that it becomes normal to assume that everyone will get the solution. User testing can be a very humbling experience, it only takes 4 to 5 people to expose some very obvious issues with your design. Repeat this numerous times over the course of a product design and you can be confident you are releasing something users want and can use.

Image courtesy YouTube TV™

