One Knight in Product - E119 - David Thomas

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SPEAKERS

Jason Knight, David Thomas

Jason Knight 00:00

Hello, and welcome to the show. I'm your host, Jason Knight. And on each episode of this podcast, I'll be having inspiring conversations with passionate product people. Now, when it comes to inspiration, sometimes we all need a little bit of help. If you follow me on Twitter, you'll know I'm a passionate advocate for mentorship. I've tried to do my part, but there are always more people looking for help. So because of this, I've teamed up with a buddy to help more mentors and mentees find each other. If you want to find out more, you can check out https://oneknightinproduct.com/mentor, where you can sign up to be a mentor and mentee, or both. That's https://oneknightinproduct.com/mentor. On tonight's episode, we think fast and slow and delve deep into cognitive biases in product design. We talk about what cognitive biases are, why they exist, how they manifest themselves, and how we might attempt to defeat them as best we can through thoughtful practices like participatory design, Red Team Blue team exercises, and the frankly horrifying sounding Black Mirror Test. For all this and much more, please join us on One Knight in Product.

Jason Knight 01:08

So my guest tonight is David Thomas, David's a retired singer, songwriter, movie buff and former theatrical actor who says he one won a breakdancing contest. But now he's dusted himself down and moved into content, strategy and experience design. David wants to help us all design more ethical products and tackle our inherent biases, which he has been doing with his own design consultancy, podcast, and his attempt at writing the Thinking Fast and Slow of product design, his book "Design for Cognitive Bias", which I promise I read on merit, and not just because I saw loads of other people read it and wanted to join the bandwagon. Hi, David, how are you tonight?

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David Thomas 01:40

Good. How are you?

Jason Knight 01:41

I am doing wonderfully. So first things first, you are the founder of the eponymous David Dylan Thomas LLC. So what problems does David Dylan Thomas LLC solve? And who is it solving it for?

D

David Thomas 01:54

Sure. So I go around, getting people excited about and giving them tools for more inclusive design. And that could be the, you know, UX team in a large company, it could be a university, it could be kind of conference, really anybody who's in the job of helping other people make decisions? I have tools that can help you do that more ethically.

Jason Knight 02:15

Yeah, so that's interesting. I was thinking about, like the types of company that you might need to get involved with whether it was, as you say, large companies or little scrappy startups or educational institutions or all of the above, like, Do you tend to over index in certain areas? Or is it literally anyone that has that kind of problem, you'll just work with them and try and give them some way to achieve what you just said.

D

David Thomas 02:36

I mean, it's all across the board. But my sweet spot is like the UX design or content team at a much larger organisation who sort of sees that there's ways that they could be doing the work more inclusively, more mindfully, you know, considering the the power that they have, and the way that they want to exercise it more responsibly. But like you said, like, the first workshop I did was with a startup. So it's, it really goes all over the place.

Jason Knight 03:01

But it strikes me that you've got two different types of problem. They're like in the big companies, whilst obviously they've got the bigger impact .. I mean, potentially, you've got the potential to do much more good, in a sense. But at the same time, these companies are almost certainly going to be more resistant to change, because they have a lot of this stuff kind of baked in already and a lot of process a lot of bureaucracy. Do you find it's like that? Or do you feel that these people when you do go into them, they're actually in a position to actually take some of that guidance on and actually start to make some of that change within the company that needs to happen?

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David Thomas 03:32

I mean, I'll be honest, it varies wildly, and it varies mostly based on how much fine they already have from leadership. I mean, literally, in my book, and in my workshop, it gives you tools for working with leadership, to you know, be more persuasive, and help arrive at some common

working with leadership, to you know, be more persuasive, and help arrive at some common ground to make these things happen more quickly and effectively. But yeah, I think that, you know, depending on how much buying from leadership to begin with, these things happen much more swiftly. I mean, the fact of the matter is, if main senior leadership decides they want a thing they can have that thing I'm reminded of when at the station, the network FX decided that their shows were basically all being show run by white guys. And behind the cameras, mostly white talent. The station chief said or the president of effects said, Look, forget this, you have to start having shows that are run by people of colour and women and that more or less happened overnight. Like there was no deliberating there was no okay. Well, we'll come back to what the plan was like. So I mean, the way these systems work, if the person in charge says it's going to be X, it's going to be X.

Jason Knight 04:31

Yes. Fair enough. And obviously, almost like the good side of HIPPO, like, highest paid person in the room, right? Like, actually, as long as the decision they're making is a good one. But have there ever been any situations where you've had to basically kind of pull the ripcord and just get out because there was absolutely no way that a company was anywhere near gonna go and do any of the things that you suggested or have you always are quite good, right?

D

David Thomas 04:53

I mean, I am more of a rabble rouser than a consultant, right? So I kind of go in and I get people stirred up about, wait, why aren't we doing more inclusive design, right? And then I kind of sneak out the back door. But, you know, I tried to do that responsibly give people tools to like work together. But it's not like I'm on site for six months to a year saying, Okay, I'm going to work with management to help you figure this out. So there's no scenario in which I have a ripcord to pull per se, there's certainly been companies in situations where it's like, I could stay in fight, or I could kind of move on to this better opportunity. And I think it's always a continuum. There's a point at which, okay, there's no more I can do here, it's time to go. And that happens. But just the fact that I am no longer at a company, one version of one version or another that happens over time.

Jason Knight 05:39

Do you ever get to check back? Or is it literally rip and run?

D

David Thomas 05:42

So the actual full time jobs I've had, I have been sort of had the opportunity to kind of look back and see, okay, this is the direction they took. And that was better. And that was worse. I remember, there's one foundation, I worked for a while I was trying to get them to do a sponsorship with this very cool podcast. And at the time, the structure was just way too conservative and way too tight. And it was just a losing battle. And I left and they came under new management years later, I was listening to that podcast, and it's like, sponsored by and oh, I used to work there, they finally did it. So eventually, these things can come around. But

for the most part, you know, my current work, it's more like, Hey, I'm gonna dip in here, try to give give you some tools to fight the good fight. And then, you know, occasionally do hear back from folks saying, "Hey, we're still working on this or that exercise you gave us, it's now standard issue". It's great to hear that about the book, because I might even have to go into the company. And it's like, Hey, we've been using this tool from your book. And it's standard operating procedure. Now, when we do product design, it's like, "That's great to hear". So it's still kind of, you know, it finds a way.

Jason Knight 06:47

But you're working, obviously, as we've discussed now around inclusive design bias, cognitive bias. And that's obviously stuff that you've taken through to your book. That's what we'll talk about in a minute. But before that you spent a while working in experience design content design for a design agency, did some work with some other firms, and then obviously decided to break out on your own. What was it that made you decide to break out on your own? And I guess specifically, also, what was it that really drew you into this space of focusing on things like cognitive bias and how you can combat that in product design?

D

David Thomas 07:19

So like the breakout element was really a function of the book taking off. And it became clear that there was an audience and you know, a sustainable business model for me to go out and say, "Okay, I'm going to go and talk about this thing at different companies and do workshops around that. And there's value in that enough value that it can sustain, you know, me and my family, to the degree that it needs to", and I'll you know, acknowledge my privilege here, I have a wife with a wonderful job, and makes a lot of this far more sustainable. You don't have to worry about things like health care and stuff. So I want to check that right at the door. But it was sustainable enough, there was enough demand, it made sense to just start focusing on that full time, as far as getting into cognitive bias in the first place. I mean, my mother was a psych major at UCLA, my wife is a paediatric neuropsychologist. So I've always been kind of brain adjacent and rural, been really curious about the brain and around people who are really curious about the brain. And so that was kind of going on in the background. But then I saw this talk by Iris Bohnet, called Gender Equality by Design, which I highly recommend you check out, it's on YouTube. And she starts getting into some of the intersection between what we know about the brain around things like pattern recognition, and what we know about bias, right. So you might have someone whose job is to hire a web developer. And when I say the words, web developer, the image that might pop into your head might be a skinny, white guy. And that's not because by any means, you think that men are better at programming the women far from it. But the pattern that you may have seen growing up in movies, or television, or even, maybe even some of the offices you've worked in, starts to make that equation. So if you see a name at the top of a resume that doesn't quite fit the pattern, all of a sudden, you're given that resume the side I so when I saw that something as terrible as racial or gender bias could occasionally come back to something as basic and very say, as human as pattern recognition. I decided, okay, I need to learn everything I can about cognitive bias. And I literally looked up on the rational wiki page of cognitive biases, one bias a day, and became the guy who would not shut up about cognitive bias, which I guess I still am. And my friends were like, "Dave, please just get a podcast!" And so that started me on the podcast, which eventually led to the book. And here we are.

Jason Knight 09:27

Yeah, that's really interesting. I think that for me, the idea that you're not in charge of your brain is always a really disappointing one in your brains. I think one of the most fascinating things that I've read, and I think I've read it before, but also in your book as well is this idea that, for example, your brain will basically pretend that you made a decision that actually has been detected that you couldn't have thought about in the time that it took to make the decision, which is just mind blowing, right? And the fact that you can kind of edit out old memories or edit what was good or what was bad in the past and not just edit it because you did that on purpose and you kind of lying to yourself, but you kind of know you are but actually your brains very explicitly lying to you about stuff. And it's this kind of mind blowing, no pun intended like to think that your brain is basically lying to you about stuff all the time. And I just think it's really, it's really interesting. So that must have been a fascinating journey. But did you have to like, do any study around that, above and beyond kind of doing the desk research that you kind of just talked about? Like, did you go into courses? Did you do any certifications or anything? Or was it been very much a kind of taken it from the kind of the layman perspective?

D David Thomas 10:38

Yeah, I mean, I used no tools that were not available to me either via the web or books. So I didn't ...well, the generous way of saying it is I didn't go into debt to learn any of this stuff. But I'll say this, it was validating, to be talking about these things with people who did go into debt to learn these things, right. So people who are professional sociologists and social scientists, we actually did a technical review with social sciences stuff friend of mine, Dr. Erica France, PhD, brilliant woman, and I was waiting for her to kind of come back and say, "Okay, you totally got this bias wrong. This actually is total fiction, that study was discredited, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah". And instead, she had like, one or two small notes, maybe clarify this thing here, I think, maybe use the wrong word there. Otherwise, it was a fun read. And I'm, like, read this huge sigh of relief. You know, it's like my web study was adequate to get this picture correct. But one book, I will credit in particular, around that part of how the brain you know, lies to us is a book called The User Illusion, by Tor NÃ¸rretranders, which is just brilliant, I'm still kind of picking it apart. But the basic upshot of it is that we think that we experience the world we're walking around looking, hearing, tasting, touching, experience, the world, as it is happening in real time, all that stuff, what's actually happening, or it would be more accurate to say, what you're experiencing is a television show that your brain makes about the world, right. And it takes all of this in and picks just this much of it's a process. And when it processes it, it like creates this fiction around it, that makes sense. And then because it takes about a half second for all that to happen, which technically means you're living a half second behind the time shifts it all back a half second. So you think you're experiencing the world in real time. So it's super devious, but also incredibly brilliant, and it's keeping you alive? Like it's doing all of this for your own good. But it's easy to forget that it's actually a TV show about the world. It's not actually the world.

Jason Knight 12:36

This made me think about solipsism and the fact that you're just a simulation. That's a whole different podcast, I guess what I was gonna say actually, and you've kind of touched on it a little bit yourself. The idea that, as someone that's kind of come at this without say, the

academic background, specifically, there's always the danger of particular cognitive bias, like the Dunning Kruger effect, which I know there's some kind of discussion about whether that's valid or not anyway, but this idea that you could have thought you'd knew enough to write the book and that it was all credible, and actually, half it was full of holes. So like, you've touched on that, like, was that a worry that while you were writing it like a big worry that you were just writing something that was going to kind of come out as junk?

D David Thomas 13:13

Oh, absolutely. And a lot of I'd say like 90% of the second draft was spent checking my sources, like if you've read the book, you know, every few sentences, there's a little like that link that's like, Okay, here's the study that we're talking about, right? So I had to go through and find all those links, and make sure, and one of the things you do find out I mean, this is why you factcheck This is why you bring in experts, like you know, Erica France PhD to like, check yourself because you on your own are going to be fallible, and even two of you are going to be fallible, but three of you four of you, right, as you start to bring in more perspectives, you cut down on that. But one of the things I found out is that my memory is horrible, which I knew, in general from studying the brain, but like, getting it personally, right, there was one study where I thought it was that people would watch video of people of other people saying their name. And half of those people were lying. Half of the people in the video were lying. And their job was to see if they could guess was lying. And when they would say who they thought was lying. They had it all wrong. But they were also hooked up to a galvanic skin response. And there's their body reacted every time somebody was lying. I'm like, "Oh, the body reacts to things that your brain doesn't necessarily register". So when I went to go find that study, I realised there is no such study, I had taken two completely different studies and put them together in my mind. One was around hearing people say your name, and one of them is you. And that's the thing that your skin can recognise and your brain cannot. And then there was some other study about people saying their names, but in any case, I had completely conflated these two and so I had to completely redo that story and be like, Okay, this is what the science actually found. So, even with all honest intent, like I wasn't trying to deceive anyone, I was really just deceiving myself. I was trying to tell a true good story. Right? But if you don't check, this is what happens.

 Jason Knight 15:05

Yeah, nice. Fair enough. I think it's always worth verifying, especially when you're making some of the wild claims. And something we could probably do a little bit more of, to be honest. But did you also worry though, that a book, like I mean, I remember reading, Thinking Fast and Slow, and it took me a while to read that it was quite heavy, quite a lot of it. And you kind of have to really dig deep into it, too. And really kind of think you have to think while reading the book. It's not an easily consumable book. Now, obviously, your book is I mean, I've read it, it was very, it's very short. It's very easy to consume. But was that a while he as well, like the fact that you're taking quite a heavy subject that, in some cases is working on deep psychological studies and deep neurological phenomena, and actually trying to make that consumable by basically a lay audience?

D David Thomas 15:54

That ... I mean, that's my jam. I mean, I've been I love Radiolab. I love Malcolm Gladwell, I love

sort of people who are very good at telling stories around complex things to make them more understandable. Yeah, and so like, so that's my chance to go in and just sort of be like, "Okay, here's, let's, let's try to figure out Maxwell's Demon in 500 words", right? Like, let's let's take these these these complex concepts and try to find ways to make them real, because at the end of the day, they are. Like, I think when we forget about some of these highfalutin concepts is real human beings thought about them. People who had to do their laundry and pick up the trash and eat and sleep and whatever. Or I guess sometimes that people do that for them. But people, like people who lived in this world and breathed our air came up with these concepts. And it made sense to them, somehow, it was relatable to them. And if like one human can make sense of this stuff, it is my argument that two humans can make sense of this stuff. Right? So it's like, what are the what are the sort of human things that this comes back to? Because we rarely think of things that are not in some way, fundamentally human? Right? We don't wake up in the morning and think, what has absolutely nothing to do with me that I can think about, right, like, so. So the odds are, if it's something that is meaningful, than it is meaningful, right, I can find the thing that this is really about, and that's kind of like, I think some of that comes from my content strategy background, where I'm trained to keep asking why? Oh, you want to do redo your website? Why? Because of this, yeah, but why? Because of that, yeah, but why? Like.... I'm trained, I'm professionally trained to act like a five year old, which means that I can explain it like a five year old. So yeah, so I actually welcome the challenge of taking something ridiculously complicated and breaking it down to ... yeah, but here's what that means on the street.

Jason Knight 17:39

Well, there you go. I think that's the most important part of all of this is, the more you can make it consumable, then the more it's potentially going to resonate with people and the more action they can probably take off of that as well, which is obviously the ultimate goal of the book, as you said, like when you're sending it into companies, or when people are getting it and trying to act on that. Like if they can't understand it, they can't act on it.

D

David Thomas 17:58

Yeah, I literally have a talk now called "That's Great, But How Do I Convince My Boss?" because I'll go to conferences, and you'll hear a great talk. And during the Q&A, I guarantee you one of the questions is, "that's great, but how do I convince my boss?" And the fact of the matter is like, you know, Chapter Three of my book is literally how you convince your boss, because it's all about stakeholder biases.

Jason Knight 18:18

Yep. Well, let's talk about biases. And hopefully get that into a form that all of my listeners, as intelligent as they are, can understand as simply as possible. Like they all probably and we all everyone probably has heard of cognitive biases, and has an idea about what they think they are, but in your own words, what are cognitive biases? And why do we have them?

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David Thomas 18:38

Sure. So bias is basically a shortcut your mind has taken just to get through the day, you have to make something like a trillion decisions every single day, even right now I'm deciding how fast to talk whether to bring my dog, what to do with my hands, right? If I thought carefully about every single one of those things, I never get anything done. So it's actually a good thing, that our minds are mostly on autopilot. But sometimes the autopilot gets it wrong. And we call those errors cognitive biases. So a fun one might be illusion of control, where if you're playing a game where you have to roll a die, if you need a high number, you tend to roll the dice really hard. If you need a lower number, you tend to roll it really gently. And everybody knows, it makes no difference how hard you roll the die. But in situations where we don't have control, we like to feel like we have control. And we embody that by how we roll the dice. So it's not something that you're consciously choosing to do. I mean, that's the unconscious part of you know, cognitive bias, but it is something that you're going to have a tendency to do kind of left to your own devices.

Jason Knight 19:42

Yep, that makes a lot of sense. But then if we then translate that into product design world, like what are some of the key examples of how cognitive biases which affect all of us, as you've just said, like how they can manifest themselves into how we design our products, either for good or for bad?

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David Thomas 19:58

Yeah, I mean, so there's an example of a lot of it has to do with just sort of things that you miss because you don't have that background. So one example Mike Montero talks about a lot is Twitter. When Twitter launched, there was no block feature. The people who launched Twitter were pretty much all guys. And he hypothesised...

Jason Knight 20:18

Just like all the other apps!

D

David Thomas 20:19

Pretty much. He hypothesises that if even one woman was on that team, it would not have launched without a block feature. But none of those guys that ever experienced harassment, and so would never have even occurred to them. That that would be a necessary feature. So a lot of it manifests in product design in terms of those folks had a bias to expect a certain type of user to use it a certain way that a pattern, right, they were adhering to, and without anyone else, basically to have different experience, especially around power to introduce oh, by the way, here are some other things people are going to do with your product. Right? They were blind to that potential outcomes. So when it comes to product design, what you mostly see is a lot of confirmation bias. Hey, I think I know the answer. Hey, I don't need to consider other answers. Let's just ship it.

Jason Knight 21:04

Yeah, you get the same with analytics. And, you know, I started trying to look through stuff. I said, Oh, yeah, no, I'm just gonna go and try and find stuff or you try and do discovery and you just talked to the types of people that that you think of, and they basically say exactly the same thing that you wanted to hear. And also, of course, in some cases, you can even lead people on with your questioning as well. And basically, again, you're just doing everything you can just to tick off that thing that you've already said in your head. So yeah, I can definitely see how confirmation bias is a thing. But another thing that you call out very explicitly in the book is what you call the most dangerous bias. And that's the framing bias. Now, for me that's like, well, and not familiar when you say it in the book, like there's this kind of concept that 5% fat is worse than 95% lean or 1% failure was worse than 99% success when all exactly the same. So like the concept makes sense. But what do you think is the most dangerous bias of them all?

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David Thomas 21:58

So the real reason there's two one is that it can be used to justify horrific behaviour, right? Even right now, as we're recording this, there is an invasion of Ukraine. And Vladimir Putin is framing it as "Oh, I'm saving people from Nazis", right? And in that case, I don't think it's really fooling anyone. But it's it's, you know, the idea is that I can justify something horrible by framing it a certain way, or I can exclude a conversation. So if I were to say, "Hey, should we go to war in April, should we go to war in May?" Right? I have now completely excluded the conversation on "Wait, wait, should we go to war at all?" Right? And that happens all the time, and leads to truly horrific outcomes. So there's that sense of of being the most dangerous bias, but the real reason I think it's the most dangerous bias. Going back to our conversation earlier, we think that we walk into a situation and we decide what frame we want to put on that situation, right? So I hear about the war in Ukraine, and I'm gonna put on my frame of pacifist and my frame of countries should be sovereign and blah, blah, blah, and then decide how I want to feel about that, or what I want to do. The truth is, you were already wearing those glasses before you came in the room. You did not decide any frames, you already have them on your head, you already have these fundamental assumptions you're making about any situation you're in, and you are blind to them, and you will act on them without realising you're already wearing those glasses. And that to your point before, I mean, I find that terrifying, that my brain is going to auto make these judgments and I didn't even realise it made them. So I'll give you an example. When white interviewers are interviewing black applicants, typically they will sit further away and ask fewer questions. And if you were to ask any of those interviewers, hey, when you woke up this morning, were you thinking, Oh, every time I have a black African, I'm gonna sit further away and ask your questions. No, that was not what they woke up thinking. But their body has made that decision. And it's coming from a place right, we can talk about the history that leads to that. But that is not something that is a frame that basically says this person is dangerous. Get them out of your office as fast as possible. That frame existed, they did not walk in the room and choose to put it on, it was there. That, to me is what is so dangerous. Because that kind of frame scales. It's relatively hard for me to say I'm going to fill every white interviewing position with someone from the Klan who explicitly hates black people, that's gonna take a lot effort. But for me to have media and narratives and history, that makes it the default assumption that black people are dangerous, that scales beautifully. And I don't even have to instruct that white interviewer to give that black interviewee less of a chance. They're just going to do it without me trying. Like there's something frighteningly elegant about that, right?

Jason Knight 24:41

Yeah, it reminds me of some of the implicit bias tests you see as well where you get the kind of black face / white face and then the good word / bad word and they start to mix around which ones kind of associated with which and track your response times to see like, whether your response to the kind of juxtaposition of the colour of the face and the type of the word kind of what the variance is in that and they can basically, or they claim to be able to detect implicit bias in there, which, again, is horrifying, because you look at one of those results, and you're like, well, holy crap, I was 0.1 milliseconds slower on the black guys and the white guys or whatever. And that's, you feel very bad about yourself. But I think you're completely right, the fact that it's just kind of priced in, right, like, there's, that's there. But I guess, it's interesting to think like that, that's a really hard problem to solve, right? Like, that's not something that your book can solve, or probably any book can solve. And it also feels like a thing that's going to take a very long time to solve to, like, shift that underlying belief. I mean, how many generations Do you think it's going to be before that starts to move away? Or do you think is always going to be there because people are always predisposed to react better to people that look similar to them, because of the biases that are built into the brains?

D David Thomas 25:56

So I would say something like with consistent concerted effort, maybe three generations to get that bigger scale, I mean, what you're dealing with, is capitalism, right? The racial biases don't come from nowhere. They aren't for fun. Right? And they're there to serve a purpose. I would actually, if you're curious about this, I would recommend a book and a movie, I would recommend the book The Half Has Never Been Told, which is about the economic story of slavery in the US, and Exterminate All the Brutes, which is about just imperialism and colonialism just globally. And both basically are different ways of saying racism is because capitalism makes it so because it makes money, right? Just to put it in plain language, you can make a lot of money if you convince a lot of people to take other people's stuff, and force them to work for free. Right? And that is a whole lot easier with racism, then trying to hire people and pay them what they're worth, you know, so, so and the scale in which you do that doesn't go away. It creates narratives that relies on narratives that just persist. So narratives like hey, black people are dangerous, you need to put them in chains. Hey, black people don't feel pain, like those narratives still persist today, even past when they were really useful when you had to use them for free labour. So like, so yes, that's why it's like generations and generations to kind of weed that out. And even to the point of you trust people that look like you, I think it's more again, something you've been trained to do, because you also find people who are more comfortable in environments where there are lots of different kinds of people. Right, because they've been trained to see monoliths as dangerous. So I think that's not a biological need so much as it is a socialised need. So even that I think could be overcome. But I like to think of it in terms of short term and long term, right? Short term, you have a problem, you have, the general you, you have a problem with thinking that...

Jason Knight 27:50

Haha, you can say I have a problem!

David Thomas 27:52

Yeah, you !I've just met you, but I think you have a problem! No, we have a problem making assumptions about who, what what a designer looks like, right? So I'm going to remove the name of the designer from that job application, because a the name isn't really helping you figure out who to hire, and be because of the patterns, your knee jerk reaction that even you can't consciously control, you're going to start looking at things that thing where it's, I'm just going to take that away from you, right? It's like an alcohol, it's like an alcoholic, I don't want you to go into a bar, you know, it's not that I don't trust you, or it's not that I don't think you're a good person, it's that you can trust you that how you're gonna behave when you get in that bar. So let's just keep you out of the bar, let's keep that let's keep you away from that name, because you can't be trusted with that name. So that's short term. For any number of reasons. That's short term. Long term though, we need to change the pattern, we need to do the point where you seeing that name isn't going to trigger a reaction of that person is inferior, that takes much longer, right, but But you have to do the work. And then even if you do all of that, but you don't change the system that is generating all of this bias, right? Then you're not really going to get anywhere. So really, we have to start talking about capitalism, we have to start talking about regulation, we have to start talking about, you know, what are we measuring? Right? Are we more interested in GDP, or you know, health and wellness, like all of these conversations have to happen before you really get to a point where people even have the mental bandwidth to deal with bias because frankly, at the end of the day, most people are just trying to get through the day. Like the question on most people's mind is the rent. Like, like me, it's nice for me to write books about cognitive bias, but the end of the day, if that doesn't help pay the rent. I don't know. I don't know what I'm doing.

Jason Knight 29:35

Yeah, no, I mean, yeah, I think a lot of people are just kind of making their way and not even saying that that's a bad thing. Like you say, it's like, people have to deal with what's in front of them, right? And not everyone can look so far ahead, because that again, exactly, as you said, but one of the things that you call out in the book, which kind of seems related to that is if we assume that there's this kind of system, one reflexive thinking where people are making these snap judgments based on the weight of society and all of the biases that they've kind of inherited, either biologically, societally or otherwise, then one of the things you recommend in the book is kind of taking it back to product design is trying to slow them down a bit. Trying to sort of stop them sitting or immediately knee jerking, and going for that reflexive thinking and trying to give their system to brain they're more consideration based brain a chance to actually override the decision. Because if I think back to Thinking Fast and Slow, if I remember correctly, which I may be editing this out myself as well, but like... it's all about like, you have this automatic reaction, but then your consideration takes over if you give it a chance. But if you don't give it a chance, then your brain will kind of try and pretend to you that it did consider it in the first place, and that you made a good decision, and that your brain made a decision for you when it really didn't, where you didn't. So I guess the question is, when it comes to inserting friction, so many people now are trying to make things friction less. They want everything, they want everything to be quicker. They want everything to be seamless, you know, Amazon, one click shopping style, all of that stuff. So why do you think then that is a good idea, specifically to put speed bumps in the way and like, how might that manifest itself in an actual product that we might think about?

David Thomas 31:22

So I mean, there are some decisions, you know, that benefit from speed, right? If I want to know my account balance don't make that difficult, right? But, you know, should I buy that $1,000 thing, maybe make me think about a little like, it's in your best interests to make me make that decision poorly, but it's not in mine? So or, for my... taking money out of my 401 K, if you're in the States, and that's how you are, you're retired taking money out of a retirement plan, right? That's a pretty serious decision, maybe put some speed bumps in there. So I am urged to talk to my financial advisor first, or whatever it is. But you know, the, the example I give is Patagonia, which I will credit Margo Blumstein with putting me on to that. Another great author, check out her work. But she talks about how instead of the Buy Now instant experience of hey, here's a jacket, just get it. Right, that you might get from an Amazon Patagonia tells you a whole story about that jacket. Right? And they will, you know, if you look at one of their pages for like one of their products, it's like a startups page. It's like, big, full with imagery, and this whole backstory, it's all rich, it's like, like, you're gonna get to know this jacket and give it a name. And then even once you say, Yep, I want that jacket". And it's like, "okay, but have you looked at these other sizes?" They looked like, "Are you sure?" Like, different versions of "Are you sure?" And then finally, you get to the buy button. And the reason they're doing that is because they don't want you to return that jacket. For two reasons. One, it's really not great for the bottom line. But two, it's terrible for the environment, right? Patagonia is very environmentally minded company. And a returned product literally doubles the carbon footprint of that product. Actually, if you buy a new one, it quadruples, right? Or triples and quadruples if you return it again. But yeah, so like, they want you to be sure, it is more important to them that you're sure than that they make the sale, which to me is kind of like the hidden story here. It's like what's more important to you than money? Alright, design for that. If I had to sum it up, right, right, that's where it is. It's like, what do you actually care about? If it's just money, I'm not sure I want you on the web. But if it's something that money can finance money can make more sustainable, but it is a human thing that you're trying to accomplish. In this case, closing people while not hurting the environment. Yeah, you know, okay, how do we optimise for that? Because if I just want to make money, a there are sort of more profitably as do that. I mean... get into the drug game. Like, you'll get profit margins, through the roof, or honestly become a hedge fund manager, like just, if all you care about is money, there's better ways to do it.

Jason Knight 34:09

Yeah, absolutely. Let's talk briefly about some of the ways we can try and be a bit more ethical than or as ethical as possible while designing our products and making sure that we're not building things that can manipulate people or be manipulated or exclude people. And one of the techniques you recommend is Red Team/Blue Team, which makes me think of those old Halo cartoons Red Vs Blue. But what does the Red Team/Blue team approach involve and how can you use it to help you make good decisions?

David Thomas 34:37

Sure. So Red Team/Blue Team is a kind of way to fight confirmation bias, right? So if you're designing a product and like this is, this is the product this is this is beautiful, this is perfect. I love it. Let's do this. You've probably you've probably probably bought into a few assumptions, right about that product. There's probably some blind spots you have because you're a person or your team is a team and they have certain things in common they're, you know, So the

whole point behind Red Team/Blue Team is you have a blue team who does the initial research. And maybe they get as far as a wireframe or a prototype. But before they go any further, the red team comes in for one day. And the red team's job is to go to war with the blue team. And they're they're fine. Every hidden assumption, every more elegant solution, every potential cause of harm that the blue team missed, because the blue team was so in love with their initial idea. And what's nice about this is, you know, it is a fairly cost effective approach. I don't have to go to my boss and say, Hey, we got to hire two teams now for every product, and they got to check each other's work every day. No I want one team for one day to make it a little less likely we're going to put something harmful out into the world.

Jason Knight 35:39

Yeah, that reminds me a lot of the book that I read, we were talking about before this, by Eva PenzeyMoog around designing for safety, where it's like, get an external arbiter of some sort to actually imagine that they were trying to harass people via technology. And all of the ways that they would do that. And obviously, it's not great, I guess, emotionally to try and put yourself in that space where you're trying to imagine how you might harm people. But at the same time, if you do get yourself in that space, then you're in a position where you can actually stop other people who do actually want to harm people from harming them, right. So it's kind of a, an unpleasant headspace to get into, but at the same time, still feels really valuable and something that people should absolutely be doing.

D David Thomas 36:18

Yeah. And it's it's our duty right in First off, let me just say Eva PenzeyMoog's book Design for Safety.. buy it now, it is amazing. But yeah, it's it's our, it's our duty as designers to put ourselves in that headspace. Because for every way that our products could go, right, there are at least a dozen ways it could go wrong. And we need to design for that as well. That's our responsibility.

Jason Knight 36:40

But you also called out the Black Mirror test. Now, I'm a big fan of Black Mirror , I think it's probably been one of the best shows that's been on TV for some time, if not ever, I think absolutely love the storytelling and the kind of bleak dystopic future, but also at the same time, the lessons that it can teach as well about like where things could go. But in the context of product design, how would you describe a Black Mirror test? And why should we use that?

D David Thomas 37:04

Sure. So, for those who are unfamiliar Black Mirror is a British TV show, that is basically a Twilight Zone for tech. You take some near future technology, and you tell a story about what would happen if actual human beings got their hands on it. And the results are always horrible. And I agree, it's a fantastic show. And then I think that anybody working on a new product by wash, you'd have to write a Black Mirror episode about it. But but it's really valuable for helping you think about it. Honestly, it's kind of a fun way, like you say it's an unpleasant space to get

to. But when you're telling a story about it, it almost becomes maybe fun is the wrong word. But something you can engage with a little bit more because you have to use your imagination. And yes, so I have an exercise in my workshop, where I say, "Okay, well, here's this fictional product, I want you to tell a story about that product, either intentionally or unintentionally resulting in harm for a member or members of society", right? And people... like, I've done this workshop many times, I have at least two seasons worth of Black Mirror stories now. From that unofficial writers room, that are all just many, many, many, many different ways that if I were just to pitch you, the product might not immediately occur to you. But as you just give it a minutes, it's like, again, slowing down given minutes to think about... "Well, how could this go wrong?" You realise there's tonnes of ways to exploit this. One thing that came out of that, and this is some advice I'll give our listeners here is like, if you are creating your product or service, make sure that you spend some time to think about three outcomes. How would a white supremacist use this? How would a misogynist use this? And how would someone use this to make money? Right? Those are... because those are three things that I guarantee you will happen. Look at any product that's ever existed, and those three things have happened, right? So do that work in advance to make it less likely or make it more difficult for that to happen?

Jason Knight 38:54

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I'm also curious as to whether we can get some of those episodes to Charlie Brooker, since he's taken a bit of a break on Black Mirror. And maybe we can get kind of a fan series or something. But touching on some of the similar themes to that, and you mentioned it a little bit earlier. And it's not a new concept, like lots of people talk about this, the idea of participatory design. And the idea, of course, then you're getting more than just those bunch of skinny white dudes into a room to build the products. And you're actually bringing in extra voices, maybe underrepresented people into the room so that they can have a seat at the table. And as you put it earlier, sort of disrupt the power structure and make sure that all different types of voices are heard. And I'll admit that whenever I think about doing that sort of thing, it feels like that's the sort of thing we absolutely should do. You know, we want to have diverse voices in the room so that we can make good decisions, and like you say earlier, if you get like that one woman in the room. Maybe the block button gets put into Twitter from the start rather than later. And I was chatting to someone recently. She's an accessibility expert who we kind of noodle a little bit on the same kind of theme like Should we have, for example, more, say blind people involved in product design so that we can make sure that they work for blind people or when you're talking about physical products if they have if you're looking for people who have certain types of physical disability to make sure that it's usable by those people as well. And one of the things that she said, which I found very interesting is that, yeah, that's great, and we absolutely should get people in. But at the same time, making everything the responsibility of the people that are being harmed by the decisions, is also a bit of a cop out. Do you agree with that?

D

David Thomas 40:31

It depends what we mean by making it their responsibility, right? Like, if you're going to say, hey, because I've been in the room where it's like, "Hey, you're the only black guy in leadership at this company. Tell us what to do about Black Lives Matter?" And it's like, I don't know you're paying me to do that. I know that I'm qualified to do that. I don't know that any one black person I don't know. Like, there is that which is no, let's not. But then there's like, hey, it is this

person's job to think about these things, it is this person's job to reach out to other people who understand these things. It is a profession, right? It is a body of knowledge that I have, and a body of experience. And really a set of biases. Like when I talk about participatory design, what I'm talking about is bringing in folks who are going to be impacted by a thing, and giving them power over that thing. Right? They're not saying "hey, thank you for your opinion, we're never going to talk to you again". But "no, this design isn't actually finished until you say it is". I mean, what I'm really talking about is democracy, let's like, just be honest. But that like I have no beef with that, again, assuming consent, assuming that it is this person wants that role. Right? And once that control over their destiny, right, because at the end of the day, like, like, I'll give you an example. There's some work that the city of Philadelphia did with the Office of Homeless Services, to improve the intake process for people experiencing homelessness. And the folks who are, you know, when you do participatory design, when the first thing you things you do is draw power map, and you say, who is least impacted by this doesn't care who was most impacted by this and cares a lot. That's your x axis and your y axis is who has a lot of power here at the top and who has no power? At the bottom? Right? And the people who end up in that lower right, really impacted but have no power. Participatory design's job is to say, "Okay, I need to put... I need to put you in that upper right, where you are very impacted but you also have a lot of say, because you have to live with this". Like, to me, that's the thing, the person most impacted by the thing has to live with the thing that gets made. So why shouldn't they have a say? Why shouldn't they actually be most of the deciding factor in that thing? And again, to be perfectly honest, getting us back to capitalism and a capitalist sort of framework, it makes no sense for them to have all the say because they don't have the money. They're not paying for the thing. They're not paying for the investment. Like I get it logically as an argument. They're not paying for the investment in the redesign of that intake service. Right, someone else's. Now since its government, it's the taxpayers paying for it. So it gets a little fuzzy. But let's say it's a private company building that thing. A private company invested a lot of money in that they should see a return it's there, right? So they should have all the say, but from a moral standpoint, or a human "we like humans" standpoint, the people who are going to have to live with that outcome and have no like, are not going to have an option. It's either the street or that building. Right? Maybe they should have the say. Right? And I don't know, like, I'm not sure how I see it as a cop out, to give them that say, or to at least offer the opportunity for them to have that say, and then again, pay them for that compensate them, whoever is appropriate for that say, right. We're not trying to extract free labour. But yeah, I know, I guess I'm having difficulty seeing how that's a cop out.

Jason Knight 43:56

I think it's more like putting all of the burden on that person or those people to be the only people that think about it, while rather than making that a shared responsibility for everyone to think about on the team, I think is where the original point was coming from.

D

David Thomas 44:10

Yeah. And I think it's more like the relationship is see it as, again, has more to do with power than responsibility, right? Because the team building the product is still the team building the product, not saying, "hey, person who is the target of oppression, build this app, good luck!", right? No, I'm saying "hey, I have a skill to give them more of like it says I have a skill set" is really honestly it's switching out the CEO for the person for the target of oppression. That's

really all it is. Because when a client relationship, right, or if I'm in house, I report ultimately to the CEO, I report ultimately the person who's signing my checks. Right. And they technically are the ones deciding is this design finished or not. Right? And so I am quote unquote, working with them. And no one considers that a burden on them. Right? To make the decision as to whether or not this product launches, right. So all I'm really doing. You're saying I'm still going to work on this thing. But instead of saying the person who signs my check is the one who decides if the practice done, I'm saying the person who has to live with the thing that's getting made is deciding whether or not it's done. Right? And that is... you know, is still a relationship. We are, that's why they call it co-design, and participatory, not like "shoving it off to you" design, it is it is going to be you're going to bring your expertise to it. Because you actually know what it means to be you. I do not. And I knew how to make stuff. Right? So we're gonna work together and do a thing. Like that, to me seems like and again, your mileage may vary, but like it's gonna it's going to on a case by case basis needs to be you know, negotiated. Because at the end of the day, these things are all about relationship. Anyone who's done a day of participatory design will tell you, it's all about relationship. But at the end of the day, yeah, we're gonna do a thing together. But in terms of the power dynamic, to me, that's the part that's important to keep in mind. The power dynamic has to default to the person who's the target of oppression, like, if you don't, you're just going to keep having what we've had forever.

Jason Knight 46:06

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. Talking about relationships... where can people find you after this if they want to get in touch chat about cognitive biases, or ethical design? Or maybe find out a bit more about the book.

D

David Thomas 46:18

So DavidDylanThomas.com is your one stop shop, you can reach out to me there, you can buy my book there. You can see my talks there. You can hire me to talk there. It's all there.

Jason Knight 46:28

International shipping is available.

D

David Thomas 46:30

Yes.

Jason Knight 46:32

But I made sure to link that all into the show notes, as well as all the book recommendations and professor recommendations. And hopefully you get a few interested parties coming your way to find out a bit more. Well, that's been a fantastic chat and obviously very grateful for your time discussing some very interesting and very important topics. Hopefully, we can stay in touch. But yeah, as for now, thanks for taking the time.

D David Thomas 46:51

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

 Jason Knight 46:55

As always, thanks for listening. I hope you found the episode inspiring and insightful. If you did again, I can only encourage you to hop over to OneKnightInProduct.com, check out some of my other fantastic guests, sign up to the mailing list or subscribe on your favourite podcast app and make sure you share your friends so you and they can never miss another episode again. I'll be back soon with another inspiring guest but as for now, thanks and good night.