**Episode 4: Vee Rogacheva**

Welcome to Long Overdue: Libraries and Technology. A podcast for librarians where we explore the impact that technology has had on the library industry, look at current technology trends and explore what the future could hold.

**Kim Cadieux**: My name is Kim Cadieux. Today we're talking to Vee Rogacheva, the user experience designer at OpenAthens. Our conversation today is about user experience design theory.

**Vee Rogacheva:** If you really want to solve a problem for your audiences, you need to go in there and talk to them, and it's as simple as that. And there's many ways you can talk to your audiences.

**Kim Cadieux:** Hear more about you and your background and how you got interested in user experience.

**Vee Rogacheva:** So before joining the OpenAthens team, I worked for another of the Edge Server brands and I was more of an advising role, where I used to work with local government and charities here in the UK to help them design and build user-centered services for their audiences. From one thing to another, from the OpenAthens project, for that, the work I'm doing for them is really good. So I started doing more of the OpenAthens stuff, talking to more libraries, meeting more publishers, so eventually, I jumped ship, starting working for OpeneAthens.

But before that, my pre-UX time, I spent as a marketing person. My background is in marketing communications and that was my first career. I worked both for agency and our clients. I have experienced in a whole spectrum of marketing activities, like events, and advertising, and marketing strategies, but I did somehow ended up specializing in brand evolutions, so I was involved in a lot of rebranding and website redevelopments and crafting of new strategies over the years. During one of those redesigning projects, I got to work with a UX designer, which inspired me to start a new career in design thinking and human-centered design.

**Kim Cadieux:** Oh, that sounds really interesting. What are the responsibilities of a user experience designer?

**Vee Rogacheva:** The user experience designer is essentially responsible to make sure that the team is working to provide a solution to a genuine user need. I know it's a bit vague, but this is the one thing that I truly own as a UX designer. So to do that, I use a human-centered design framework, which is three very simple steps. So you start with a discovery, then you experiment, and then you move to the implementation phase. So during the discovery, I talk to users and I learn a lot about the way they do things and the things that they're struggling with. And then I bring that insight back to my team and we work in cross-functional teams to experiment with different solutions to that problem identified during the discovery. And then I work with the team during the implementation phases, where we monitor how successful we were coming up with that solution for that genuine problem.

**Kim Cadieux:** So I wanted to talk a little bit about the difference between UX, user experience designing, and user interface design.

**Vee Rogacheva:** There's a common misunderstanding and quite a prevalent use of the two terms as interchangeable, but they're very different functions and they do very different things. So the UI, or the user interface designers, are focused on the look and feel. So elegant design, smart animation, bouncy buttons. These are all the result of the craft of the UI designer. Their focus is on answering the question, how to make it easier for the user to engage with specific functionality. UXers, on the other side, so user experience designers, ask the question why, why the user would want to use that functionality at all. Does this functionality solve a genuine need? Does the user appreciate it? Is it valuable to them more than something else? The UXer is the 'why' person, the UI designer is the 'how' person.

You can see a lot of designers going by UX, UI. UI follows from UX quite naturally, and I think a lot of UX designers have background in UI, which mainly comes from graphic design, and that kind of leads to this confusion and slight merge between the two roles. But ideally those two roles work very, very tightly together to deliver the best possible result. In smaller teams, this is sometimes one person. In larger teams you can have a split of the two roles but also additional roles, so you can have specialized UX researchers, for example, who go out in the field and do the actual research, or you can have user journey mapping specialists. And then UI specialists, that are very focused on the actual execution of the software.

And again, I'm talking about software design here because this is the context that I have experience with, but UX can be applied to any product. That human-centered design framework applies to any product or any problem, for any challenge. Using that simple framework, you discover what the need is or what the problem is, you experiment with bunch of solutions and then you implement the one you think is going to make the biggest impact.

**Kim Cadieux:** Thanks for mentioning that because UX, you do think of software, but it really is about everything you do.

**Vee Rogacheva:** Absolutely. And there is a separate kind of parallel space to UX design, which is service design, which again uses exactly the same framework but it really captures the whole process. It's... Experts in that field would work on projects that involve physical interactions with their audiences. So for example, walking into a bank, what is that experience like? Checking through a airport, how does that look like? I find this fascinating because there's so much more elements to consider. The experience when when it's human-to-human can be so much more intense than human-to-technology. But the space that I am in is obviously human-to-technology, even though there's a bunch of other humans on the other end.

**Kim Cadieux:** So let's talk a little bit about your methods and how you actually gain user insight and learn what they do.

**Vee Rogacheva:** As I mentioned before, this is really the very first step in any problem-solving process that someone can take. This is really where the process begins and that is how you drive this human centricity within your product and within your solutions. Because if you start with the idea without any touch with your audiences, you're risking of inventing something that the audience will not adopt, they just won't be interested in. But if you really want to solve a problem for your audiences, you need to go in there and talk to them and it's as simple as that. And there's many ways you can talk to your audiences. In the context of libraries, they're quite lucky in a sense that users come in the library, so within that physical space, libraries can really reach out and talk to their patrons about their needs and their preferences. And there's so many examples out there for libraries who are doing great job in that.

**Vee Rogacheva:** My favorite way of research is something called guerilla research, and what that means is you just draft a bunch of questions and you go out, then you stop people in their tracks and you interview them. Without any screening or preparation, you just literally stop people in whatever they're doing and ask them a couple of questions. It does sound a bit intimidating, but it actually once you start doing it, it becomes really natural and most cases, people are really happy to help. It's always great if you offer them a bit of incentive, a free cup of coffee or hot chocolate goes really far when you do guerrilla research. But the insight that comes from those interview is really, really valuable, so that's just one way.

I keep hearing, for example, libraries tend to use something called cognitive map, which I find quite an interesting way to research user behavior and user preferences. This is when you ask your users to draw a map of the library and their favorite places of the library. In a digital context, you can ask them to draw the library portal for example, and your favorite places around there or the places that you really don't like. And that really gives you an idea of how users see the library and what are the services that are really well-used and well-recognized, and which services are just completely invisible, they will just not be in those cognitive maps. You will not find them there.

**Kim Cadieux:** Okay, so you just start with a few questions. You approach people, see them doing their library stuff and you'll start with a few questions. Do you record these to document all this stuff, or what do you do?

**Vee Rogacheva:** Some people use voice recorders, I don't. To record someone, it's ethical to ask for their consent, and sometimes that becomes a bit of a barrier for them to talk to you. Not because they're not willing to talk to you, but once you start talking about consent and "I will record and store your voice," it just bloats the conversation a little bit.

So what I do instead is I try and take notes, but most importantly, I really pay attention to what they're saying. So my notes are just bullet points to highlight my text from the conversation. And as soon as the conversation is done, I spend the few minutes immediately after that to offload. So everything I heard, I will go and record manually, on a piece of paper, as accurately as possible without reflecting on it, just literally dumping it on a piece of paper. Again, this is my preferred way. Other people do it differently and recording is definitely an option. But I think that when you take notes when someone's talking, this is just a nice way to really demonstrate that you are very interested in what they're saying, and that you appreciate what you're hearing. It's a way to exercise active listening and that can be seen as a genuine part of the communication with them, and it's an easy way to build trust with your users, and they will then open more to you and give you even more information that you probably wanted.

**Kim Cadieux:** So what happens once you get back to your desk. You're done with your visit, and what do you do now?

**Vee Rogacheva:** I make myself a cup of coffee. I sit down and reflect and think about it. If we're doing this as a team and doing those type of exercises, I really recommend that people who are not researchers or not UXers get involved, and you do that as a team, because you get different perspectives. So if we're doing this as a team, we will get together in a room and we will cover the walls with sticky notes, with bits and pieces that we think are really interesting lines of the conversations we had that are worth exploring further, or just straight out insight to how we can do things better. But what we are looking when we're analyzing those conversations is any trend. So any patterns that we could recognize from the different users experiencing the same issue, for example, whether that's positive or negative. And we try to ignore the individual problems.

A good example of that is if a user is having trouble using the library portal because they're not sure how to use the username and password, or where to get it from. If that is the experience of one individual, that is a user problem, one problem. But if you see that happening again and again and again from the different end users you were talking to, then that is a system problem. That is a trend and that is an opportunity for improvement. So if more than one person are experiencing the same bump in their journey, that is where the team should concentrate, to eliminate that friction and make the user journey as smooth as possible.

**Kim Cadieux:** At OpenAthens, do you act as the user interface person as well as the UX designer, or do you have somebody, like, separate?

**Vee Rogacheva:** We don't have a separate UI designer. I do some of the UI design, but a very, very high level. We are a specialized tool, so interface design has a very functional purpose. It doesn't look to necessary to create the motion, for example, or convey a brand messaging. It is literally just to signify the functionality. So, is this a door? Yes, no. Can I open it? Yes, no. So in terms of interface, I definitely touch bits of it, but it's quite organic, we work closely with the development team to shape how things end up on the OpenAthens portal.

**Kim Cadieux:** So how do you test your designs? You've gone through your whole method and all that, and finally release something. So how do you go about testing it?

**Vee Rogacheva:** Well, that's the exciting bit. Research is again, it's just a starting point, this is the part of the discovery phase. But then when you move into the experimentation, that's when you get to try different ideas. So understanding what the problem is, coming back to your team and articulating that problem, the team will come up with a bunch of possible solutions. And as part of my job, I need to test those.

And there's a number of ways, again, you can test, but the easiest thing to do is really to go back to the user, show them your solutions and ask them what they think. And this is mostly what we do within OpenAthens. So once we design some kind of solution, we build a prototype, which is realistic enough just to give us a feel for the user's reaction. And then we show that to the user and ask for their immediate feedback, and whether what we've created has actually achieved the goal of solving their problem, or we are creating more confusion, or it's not helpful enough, or maybe they'll come up with another idea that we could build on or integrate within that prototype.

So in that phase, we're very flexible around the solutions we're putting in front of users. And when I say flexible, I mean, we try not to become emotionally attached to them because those solutions, those ideas at this stage may not be the right thing to do. In testing, we can find out that we have failed, that our solution will not work, or certainly will not work in the way that users understand or appreciate. So we try to hold those idea quite loosely and test them with users, rather than just get one idea and throw it into production.

**Kim Cadieux:** So sort of like you just released a little beta version or something like that.

**Vee Rogacheva:** That's even before the beta version. The prototyping phase, in many cases, it requires no code. So it will be mock-ups, some people use PowerPoint. If it's a fairly basic mock-up, you don't even need a specialized tool. But there's plenty of prototyping tools where you can craft quite a sophisticated, very realistic prototypes that can simulate the whole experience very, very closely. So I use Adobe XD, which is the Adobe product especially for UX design and rapid prototyping. But there is different products out there that are great for doing just that.

The reason for that, again, is once you commit to code, once something goes into production, and even if it's just a beta, it's already a big investment. And I'm not talking only money, I'm talking time, energy, passion. The team has built something and if that's the wrong thing, it's very, very difficult to let go at this point. Very few betas are actually dropped. Most of them will continue into alphas and then will go live, even though the team may have learned in that process that that particular solution actually won't work that well. That's why it's so important to iterate on a piece of paper, starting from sketches, building up a prototype, showing it to users before you write a single piece of code, before your team really commits to that solution and to building that specific solution for your users.

**Kim Cadieux:** Is it hard to find a balance between the user needs and the business needs or do you just feel like user comes above all else?

**Vee Rogacheva:** As a UXer, I'm really tempted to say, user comes above all. But the reality is that UX operates on the intersect between the user needs and the business needs. If we are looking only at business needs, we'll most likely fail because there'll be no market, nobody will want to buy that. If we are only looking at the user needs, the business may not be sustainable, so it has to be a balance. Too much focus on one over the other may lead to unexpected decisions, and kind of, investment made in direction that that's not necessarily a optimal one.

Of course, this is a ongoing balancing act, there isn't a sweet spot that all businesses just pin down and that it's, they know where they operate. It's very different for the different businesses. And I was at a conference recently, they were talking about this balance between user centricity and business value, and whether user centricity has to be actually at the core, and then the business value wrapped around it. Or is it just the two, kind of overlaying each other. And again, it really different for the different businesses and of course, the different product. OpenAthens is a specialized product. We know who our customers are and we work to deliver to their specific needs, but of course we have to have in mind the business impact of that, and we have to be able to make that product and proposition sustainable, and in a good place where we can continually deliver good services and good products to our users.

**Kim Cadieux:** So speaking of OpenAthens customers, what kind of libraries? Is it mostly academic?

**Vee Rogacheva:** Talking to libraries and visiting libraries is one of my favorite things working for OpenAthens, I absolutely love it. I visited some of the most amazing spaces out there and I'm always fascinated by the different libraries and how they're so different from one another and they all have their own character. It's great. It's like meeting a different people, almost, even though it's a building and some books and probably a whole team, it's not one person, I tend to meet quite a lot of different roles within the library. I've only joined full-time the OpenAthens team four months ago, so my focus has been somehow more on the academic libraries, but I am very keen to start conversations with corporate libraries as well, because their needs will be different than the needs of the academic libraries.

There's a raft of needs within the academic libraries and we can't just paint them with the same brush. You will come across different needs if you're talking to a larger institution, for example, a large university with a number of campuses or international campuses, to talking to a small college, for example. Their needs are quite different, their expectations are quite different. As OpenAthens, we have to cater to both, and we have to cater to both in a way that they both feel like our solution is designed for them. And that's quite challenging, but equally that's what makes it fun for us.

**Kim Cadieux:** Speaking of the differences, I know you go to libraries around the world. I was wondering if there are any surprising differences based on geography or library size, what do you think?

**Vee Rogacheva:** There are certain similarities you can see, but there are somehow regional differences as well. I can pick on some of those, particularly between the UK and the U.S. They approach research in a particular way. For example, they know they have to look for peer-reviewed content, that's the first thing that came across really strong when we started talking to students in the U.S. Something that in the UK, just, nobody uses that word at all. They don't say peer-reviewed content, it's not in their dictionary. I mean, I'm sure they know what it means and I'm sure they appreciate the value of one content over another, but they don't necessarily search for that, whereas in the U.S. students just straight said, "Oh yeah, we are looking for peer-reviewed content," and we start at the library portal. Whereas in the UK, students will say, "Oh yeah, I'm looking to solve a problem or to answer a question and I will start at Google."

**Kim Cadieux:** Right? Yeah. Google is just a habit. I mean, I tell my kids every day, "I don't know Google it."

**Vee Rogacheva:** This is not to say that students in the U.S. are not using Google. I think everybody's using Google, we have to be realistic about it. It may not be the ideal or the desired user journey from a library perspective, but Google is the answer to most of the questions in our day-to-day lives, so expecting that students will suddenly not use Google, I think it's unrealistic. So we just have to embrace that and just design for their needs in that environment.

**Kim Cadieux:** So as far as some differences, I was wondering if you've noticed differences, maybe not, because you've gone to a lot of academic libraries and maybe have not hit the corporate libraries yet, but I was wondering about the differences between like Baby Boomers, Generation X, Y or the Millennials or Z.

**Vee Rogacheva:** Absolutely. All of us. We sit in front of the TV and we hear something on the news and then we open Google to find out more about that thing. Why when we go to university, suddenly we are expected to do something different? And a lot of people just don't, they continue with the same way that they would search for everything else. Splitting the different generations is acknowledged by UXers but it's not that heavily used. It's more of a marketing way of thinking about segmenting the various audiences. In fact, the generations are created quite artificially and if you try to pin down the ages, for example, of a generation, it's really very difficult. You could find sources saying all sorts of dates for when a generation starts and when it ends. From a user experience point of view, again, we're looking for trends and we're looking for trends with current users. We're looking at students using a academic library. Then whatever generation those students are, they're using the library website, the library portal, the library resources, and that's what we would concentrate on.

In talking to users, UXers almost ignore their age, we're looking for patterns in the way that they use the certain technology or service, and how they interact with that. And age is almost a secondary thing, it is certainly not the leading thing and UXers rarely think of their users as different generations, because we know that within generations, you have different skill sets. So for example, someone from my parent's generation may be really bad with computers, but there is plenty of examples out there of people who have bought their own tablets and they're surfing the web and they're doing just fine with all the applications that everybody else is using.

So generation and generational differences are really secondary from a user experience point of view, saying that we are concentrating on the use and the ability of person to use the service, and we design for that.

**Kim Cadieux:** All right, so I know we have a project, quite a big project going on with OpenAthens, EBSCO and GALILEO. So I was wondering if you could tell us about GALILEO, what it is and more about the project.

**Vee Rogacheva:** Yeah, sure. GALILEO is a consortia of libraries in Georgia, and it covers the entire state of Georgia. So all libraries will, regardless whether they're university, school, or public libraries, are members of that consortia. So the project works at a consortia level and will eventually implement OpenAthens as access management solution for all the member libraries. So we're talking about roughly 2000 libraries across the entire state, which is extremely exciting for us. We are really buzzing ever since we started working on the project, because providing or allowing access to academic content to the entire state of Georgia is something that really moves us and really gets us out of bed in the morning.

**Kim Cadieux:** Did you get a chance to go over to Georgia and do some of your methods and all that over there?

**Vee Rogacheva:** Yeah, that's how the project started earlier this year. I went to Georgia, the GALILEO team is actually based in Athens, Georgia, which we know is quite ironic, called OpenAthens and they're based in Athens, and I've spent some time visiting libraries, their representatives and it's different consortium members. So we visited a couple of universities, a couple of colleges. We met with children quite early in the education system, and we visited some public libraries. And this was really important for the whole team. This is what gave us that wider context of the project and allow us to understand GALILEO as a structure but also what the individual institutions, individual libraries are trying to achieve, and what's the relationship between them and their patrons. So that was a research piece that we completed at the very beginning of the project, and it's part again of that cycle of discovery, experimentation and implementation.

So on the back of that discovery piece and we came back here in the UK, and we realized we had to make some enhancements to the product, because of the scale of the consortia and the way that GALILEO works with the individual institutions. They provide technical support on a very high level, meant that we'll have to tweak the product a little bit in order to fulfill their requirements, in particularly, in terms of supporting the individual institutions.

So we started with a couple of ideas, we validated some with them and we pressed forward, and we thought, because of the sheer size and scale of the project, we thought the best way forward will be to select a couple of pilot institutions where we can work with them directly. Take them through the whole process of OpenAthens onboarding, so we as OpenAthens can learn from that process, validate some of the decisions we made so far, test whether the enhancements we've done deliver as expected, before we move on with the project and kind of step back in our... more of a supporting role, whereas you guys at EBSCO will be leading the implementation after the pilot phase and we'll be supporting you as we do it, or other U.S. customers.

**Kim Cadieux:** I've been a part of that, a little bit, and it's been very exciting.

So I wanted to ask you about artificial intelligence, and what are your thoughts about how humans interact with machines as artificial intelligence becomes more popular? It seems like it would be a really exciting time for UX designers.

**Vee Rogacheva:** Oh, absolutely. We are already leaving that time when artificial intelligence is out there. It is really all around us. You don't necessarily think about it in this way, but there's numerous artificial intelligence algorithms that every one of us uses every single day. You don't know necessarily that it's artificial intelligence, you may not call it an artificial intelligence. A lot of people are quite confused of what that is, but in essence, it's just a bunch of smart algorithms and there's, for example, a lot of people use Google Assistant. That is, their algorithms for natural language processing are powered by artificial intelligence. The Netflix algorithms, they're artificial intelligence too. Every time you pick some of those recommendations they're showing you, you are using, interacting with an artificial intelligence. You don't even realize as a user you're doing it, but that is what is happening. And one that's probably more relevant in the library learning environment is, a lot of people use Grammarly in their daily lives to help them type, highlights any typos, and does a spell check as you go along. The whole product is more or less a bunch of algorithms helping us to write.

So artificial intelligence will become more popular, but I think it will also become more human because now, it feels very remote, very distant, even though it's there, we're using it on a daily basis, it still feels like this technical, super complex thing that nobody can quite grasp. But, things are moving so quickly in this space, there's absolutely no limits to what can be achieved, actually beyond the limits in solving problems for our users are the limits of our own imagination, not the limits of technology and the ability that technology provides.

**Kim Cadieux:** All right, so this is one we're asking everybody. What book are you currently reading? And I was wondering if it's digital or a physical book?

**Vee Rogacheva:** I like physical books, especially when I'm reading for fun. Nothing really can really replace that tactile experience of turning a physical page, holding a real book, I really enjoy that. But I am a slow reader and I have to find other ways to learn. So I'm listening to audiobooks as well, and at the moment I'm doing both, which can be a bit confusing, because I'm reading one book and I'm listening to another. Not at the same time, but sometimes can listen to your chapter in the morning commuting to work, and then I can read a couple of pages before bed, so it can get a bit confusing.

At the moment I'm listening to Radical Candor by Kim Scott, which is about providing feedback to people in your team or people that you care about, and providing feedback in a way that will help them improve. I'm halfway through, and I think it's great. I'll probably buy that one, and read it as a paper version as well.

And the book that I'm physically reading is Thinking, Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman, which is about understanding and embracing human behavior. Not changing it, but embracing it, and understanding why we behave the way we behave.

**Kim Cadieux:** Oh, that one sounds good. I might have to check that out.

**Vee Rogacheva:** Oh, please. I can't recommend it highly enough. It's amazing. "It is full of wisdom", is one of the reviews for the book. It's absolutely true.

**Kim Cadieux:** Thanks for checking out Long Overdue: Libraries and Technology. If you like what you heard, be sure to tune into the next episode. ISBNice talking to you!

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