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Marti Romances: [00:00:00] The path that we have chosen so far is not necessarily the best one or the worst when we could have made complete different decisions in a few years ago. That will have put us in a complete alternate reality.

[Music]

Rie Nørregaard: [00:00:14] This is Designing for Humanity, a podcast by SYPartners about designing a future that's made for all of us, and the best in us. I'm Rie Nørregaard, and I'm talking with some of the most interesting people I know about how we, as designers, can tackle the most complex challenges our society faces right now. How can we use design to reimagine the ways we interact with each other and with the world? I'm here to start the conversation about what new ways of thinking and methods are needed.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:00:53] I'm really excited to have Marti Romances joining me here today to talk about designing interfaces for futures that don't yet exist. Marti is currently the Creative Director at Territory Studios. He brings to life characters and stories in some of the world's most popular films and video games. If you've seen Guardians Of The Galaxy, Blade Runner [2049], or The Martian, you've seen his work. He uses design and storytelling as a vehicle for painting pictures of different futures, and convinces us, the viewers, to believe in them too. I can't wait to learn more about his creative process and where he gets his inspiration. Marti, welcome.

Marti Romances: [00:01:28] No, thank you.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:01:29] As someone who is tasked with meeting the vision of a director, production designer, and then actually filling out the rest of the picture that's on the screen, how does that come together for you? I remember you told me specifically about how Ridley Scott communicates his ideas in a really precise way that translates into a jumping off point for you and your team.

Marti Romances: [00:01:55] Ridley is one very specific example on how visually or with a quick sketch you can translate an idea that you have in your mind. He's a graphic designer. He started with

that. You can tell because all of the scripts that we have from him come with plenty of sketches next to each scene and not only for him to imagine a composition from a camera but also for us to understand how he wants certain graphics and how he imagines. Sometimes you just need to get into their head because what we're doing at the end of the day is translating their vision into the big screen. Ridley does it through pen and paper, and other directors do it other ways. Production designers, like Charlie Woods, who I had the pleasure to work with on certain Marvel films that we did, he's very good with words and telling you how he wants it and as soon as he sees a visual he will make sure that you understand that that's like, the color he wants, or that's the kind of shapes that he wants. Directors, production designers, they are different individuals and they play to different strengths.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:03:04] So on the other hand, when you do have real interfaces as your starting point, or with real data, how do you build on that? Like when you're working with NASA and when you're working on The Martian, and you do have a lot of design that reflects at least some part of reality.

Marti Romances: [00:03:25] In that case of The Martian, going back to Ridley, he wanted that to be precise. He wanted that to be something that even an engineer goes to the cinema, he does not feel like they are fooling him, you know? Is it something that can be real?

Marti Romances: [00:03:40] When we started you know getting in touch with NASA and getting all the references from them, we quickly realized that design was not one of their priorities. And I always say that it must be very difficult to have applied design to something that is created to be extremely functional. For us to apply that design into their systems in the most realistic way as a could, I think we discovered that that top layer covering everything also helps—not only making it nice, and making it look more consistent, but it helps to have things more organized to the eye and things like hierarchies help on flagging things out quickly.

[00:04:24] And again, we do this because we need to make sure that everyone in the cinema understands what's happening. And I think they can see some value out of that, and organizing that chaos that they have there. And we are organizing that chaos because it needs to tell a story for the audience, but also it needs to tell a story to an audience that maybe are not experts on what these guys are dealing with. Trying to explain something that is very complex to someone like my mom, who needs to understand what's happening when she goes to the cinema.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:05:00] And the systems are definitely not functioning, and everyone needs to get to the escape pods. Yeah.

Marti Romances: [00:05:07] Exactly. It's building that narrative through the graphics, and I think that's what really excites us.

Clip from "The Martian": [00:05:12] *Martinez, how long before takeoff? Twelve minutes. [Alarm sounds] Visibility's almost zero. Anyone gets lost, hone in on my suit's telemetry. You ready? Ready. [Explosion sounds] Commander, are you okay? I'm okay!*

Rie Nørregaard: [00:05:30] I know you fill in the blanks, and as designers we do that, right? Like when we are imagining something that didn't exist. And yet, you have to create something that feels right and believable to that moment, not necessarily real, to your point, but so how do you how do you do that?

Marti Romances: [00:05:46] Loads of research, especially with things that need to feel real. We learned a lot with The Martian, we learned a lot with this recent film that we just finished with Peter Berg. He wanted us to really understand how the highest tech in the military works for these drones, for everything.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:06:18] I think your work it helps create and fast emotional connection between what just happened, what's about to happen, what you need to understand about the situation. And it has to be highly visual because it's a movie.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:06:19] What did it take to make that sequence and the interface in Prometheus, for example, when Elizabeth Shaw has to terminate her unwanted alien pregnancy?

Marti Romances: [00:06:30] You can see that she's not comfortable with it so there is also like that human touch in the film when she's trying to do it and she does it wrong, and she's trying to do it again. You see how she's stressed in there for obvious reasons.

Clip from "Prometheus": [00:06:51] *I need Cesarean! Error, this med pod is calibrated for male patients only. It does not offer the procedure you have requested. Please seek medical assistance elsewhere.*

Marti Romances: [00:06:57] I mean, but that's the beauty about it. It's like a world is being created by Ridley, and for us it's always about the vision of the director.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:07:06] And a lot of times, you know, we strive for simplicity. And I think that's not the case maybe in the work that you do? Simplicity isn't necessarily the goal. It's something else.

Marti Romances: [00:07:19] Right. Let's start with something as complex as Iron Man. He is a human but he has developed the AI that helps him understand and helps him do everything through the through the suit, and that's Jarvis, and that's that assistant and superpowers. That's a machine, and the amount of data that a machine can digest per second is completely different to what a human can digest. So if a machine needs to be analyzing all the terrain and all that stuff, all that data needs to be fed up to that machine. And that's why some of those graphics have such an amount of data there and they are so dense. It's part of that character.

Marti Romances: [00:08:02] And in another way, we do have to create graphics that are not for humans and therefore they were not designed by humans, or maybe they were designed by someone from another galaxy. If we create something that makes sense to us we won't be answering the brief correctly, because unless there's a very, very similar way to do things in another galaxy, the natural way to perceive those will be done we won't be able to read them. So that's what would allow us to have a fresh approach every now and then to say, 'let's to create something that maybe makes no sense.' And that's what we did with the Guardians of the Galaxy that comes from elsewhere. That's very refreshing for us to be jumping between these different worlds.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:08:44] When we're working with design of interfaces and design of technology, at the moment we're often tasked with creating sense, making order, making meaning and simplifying the way of interacting with technology. But that's not always the case and the work that you do.

Marti Romances: [00:09:09] Well I think it applies to the work that we do, but also it applies to everything. Like, when something new is discovered it's because it's never been experienced, or it's

never been seen, or it's never been designed that way. We always use the process of getting inspired by other things that are not what we're trying to achieve. If you try to keep doing the same but better, we will never disrupt or you will never create anything new. Just doing it is the only way sometimes to realize if it works or not. Only by doing it you will be able to know if there is value there. And that's why sometimes it's very refreshing to be able to create things without having that purpose in mind all the time and invert that process versus functionality.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:09:58] Yeah exactly. So how do you set yourself up in that mind space to make things that are new and that have not been seen before, and that yet can be felt deeply by humans in this moment, or at least 12 months or 18 months depending on the schedule of your project.

Marti Romances: [00:10:17] Well I do think that everything is connected. I will start with my personal story about being surrounded by music since I was born because my dad is a musician. And just by analyzing some of the music—how it is composed, how a good composition will make sense and will be nicely and easily perceived, and how that impacts or how that is connected to composition in a picture or in a painting—that happens the same with composition in architecture and it happens the same with furniture design, fashion design, everything is composed in a way that is nice to the eyes. Nice to hear. Nice to digest for us humans.

Marti Romances: [00:10:57] Therefore, if I get inspired by the composition that a building has and that can inspire maybe my next design for a console operator, or something, maybe as something as simple as that will be disruptive enough because everyone who's being designing for that console operator, maybe all of the previous designs they were focused on previews console operator designs. And just by applying, again, the composition or getting inspired by something else and applying it to that field—you know, you could be looking at nature, you can be looking at patterns, undersea creature colors, I always like find very surprising, inspiring—only that will allow someone to apply like fresh ideas into the equation.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:11:45] One thing that I notice is that we seem to look to nature even when trying to imagine what it's like to design for an interface for cultures that we essentially know nothing about, that are not human or are not of this earth. We still look to nature as an important source of inspiration.

Marti Romances: [00:12:06] I think nature is it looks very alien to us every now and then. I think I was reading the other day that maybe they think that the octopus came on an asteroid and landed here.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:12:17] Well I love that idea.

Marti Romances: [00:12:18] I'll believe that, you know? They're extremely smart, clever creatures with completely different complexity. And we don't even know what's inside of this planet, we don't even know how our brain works at a hundred percent, you know. So maybe if we were looking deeper into some of these things we'll be able to understand more. And I think that's why you find things in nature sometimes that are really, really exciting to just like, digest and then transform them into a different feel and play with it.

Marti Romances: [00:12:28] I remember that for Blade Runner, everything that the artists were getting inspired by and everything was through different sections of fruit, and seeing the different layers and getting that in 3D and again just getting to that approach and saying, okay, all the graphics and all the treatments that we will apply will have that feeling of organic and especially because of the narrative about like the protein and how the protein processes things was very relevant in that case but even as something as simple as that—looking at segments of fruit and getting that into that screen design—you know, only that just gave a fresh take to that.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:13:32] With the new Blade Runner movie, assuming there was no reference in terms of data that existed, but you're still designing with reference in terms of... existence? Or...

Marti Romances: [00:13:45] So I think the interesting part is that we had to think in a completely alternate future, and therefore, even in an alternate present before that future. So that's very important when we're designing, again, for other than humans. They probably had different past, different present, and therefore, they will face a different future.

Marti Romances: [00:14:08] But for Blade Runner, the interesting part is that we had to go back in time and imagine that when we had cell phones, when we had internet, all of the sudden all of that, an event happened and all that stopped working. And then, trace a completely different alternate route to a different present, and therefore, from that present imagine an alternate future. So it's a

completely different branch of time and space, let's say. And that's, you know, that's a great challenge.

Marti Romances: [00:14:40] Again, sometimes I think the path that we have chosen so far, is not necessarily the best one or the worst one, you know. We could have made completely different decisions a few years ago that would have put us in a completely alternate reality right now, and therefore we would be imagining the future in a completely different way as well. So, I think having that open mind about what happened isn't necessarily what maybe could have happened, and just approaching this in a way that the opportunities are endless, and they are different. I think that's very, it's a very refreshing approach.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:15:19] It seems to me really essential to the skill that you cultivate to be able to do that continuously, right? Which means, doesn't hold on to any point of view or idea too specifically, but allowing yourself to be influenced both by what we can understand about ourselves, about the human brain, about technology, about the human condition right now, but not being attached to just one belief about the past and the future.

Marti Romances: [00:15:48] Well I think it's always funny right, when you look back. It's like, how were we doing it with that, you know? A good example, the keyboard. Like, the keyboard didn't change since its first existed. Right? It's still the same thing. Maybe one day, someone will invent something that's like, gosh how [did] we spend so many years with that keyboard? You know? So I think something like that is what we are discussing here. Like, disruption and getting to find the new next thing that will make our life easier or better.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:16:18] So you mentioned that working with Hollywood, working in film, allows you to look broadly and ahead, and to have no reference and to basically, you call it being disruptive or having new ideas. But at the same time, so much of the work that you do is in describing pretty dystopian futures, specifically in the future, and they really dominate, let's say, how we look at...

Marti Romances: [00:16:48] Right, that is true. (laughs)

Rie Nørregaard: [00:16:48] ... sci-fi. (laughs)

Marti Romances: [00:16:50] Yeah, people like to make films of how bad everything can go. But to me at least, how I see it, is that there's a new thing, it's that's innovation, that new light. And then someone sees the shadow, right? That's how I see it. Like there's the light, which is that big opportunity, like this new technology can help. And then we create that shadow. We project that shadow. Somehow, yeah it's true. Like the films focus on that shadow. To me, there's no shadow if you don't have the light. Without the new technology, without the new thing that someone invented, you know, that shadow won't be possible.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:17:31] Does it affect you as a team or as a person that you're deeply immersed in these worlds that are really challenging? Are you an optimistic person?

Marti Romances: [00:17:41] I am, yeah, I am. I'm always seeing the bright side of things, sometimes even too much. And it's true, it's so difficult sometimes with some of these dystopian films that we have to tackle. Or like, you know, even looking at realistic things, realistic scenarios that could happen with, you know, nuclear catastrophes or war. And we have to do lots of research on things that we won't, you know, you don't want to be seeing everyday, and sometimes we're a bit scared of like, maybe the FBI will knock on our door because our artists are looking at a lot at, you know, Russian spies…

Rie Nørregaard: [00:18:19] Well, to look on the lighter side of that, my friend and colleague Gabrielle Almon, who is an adviser to FEMA, has really seen and started to engage in including people who are able to paint pictures of the future for the purposes of recovery from natural disaster, et cetera. But also to create, to your point, alternate narratives. Different versions of what futures could be.

Marti Romances: [00:18:45] We did that a few times, and one of the projects that we were doing last year was Project Avatar, which is how you can, through telepresence, be manipulating a robot in Tokyo from here for a good cause. Or maybe you are the best surgeon in the world, you can have five procedures a day without having to fly everywhere, and it's like telepresence will help that. If it's a natural disaster or something, we can send these robots, and one robot could be a pilot and the same robot can then swap to a medical guy who can know how to operate right there. There's always that way of thinking like, these technologies could be amazing! But there are so many people that see, like, the other side. I guess you have to be real to both sides. New technologies can be used for good and for bad, that's always the case.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:19:38] Just like in the movies.

Marti Romances: [00:19:39] Exactly.