

EPIISODE 030

REALM

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Mark Sloan, Mother

AND

Ritesh Gupta, Realm

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to The Follow-up, a weekly podcast that goes in depth into projects recently reviewed on Brand New featuring conversations with the designers, and sometimes their clients, uncovering the context, background and design decisions behind the work.

BRYONY GOMEZ-PALACIO

Hi, this is Bryony Gomez-Palacio and welcome to episode 30 of The Follow-up.

This week we are following up on Realm, an audio entertainment company that creates original fiction podcasts and audiobook series. Realm collaborates with writers, directors, artists, and actors from film, tv, animation, publishing, and gaming to create original characters and stories as well as official continuations of existing franchises and properties from Marvel and DC. This amounts to more than 1,000 hours of content across more than 60 series, enjoyed by over 1.3 million listeners worldwide.

The project, designed by New York, NY-based Mother Design was posted on Brand New on May 3, 2021. You can pull it up on your browser at bit.ly/bnpodcast030 that is B I T dot L Y slash bnpodcast030, all in lowercase.

This week we are joined by Mark Sloan, Head of Mother Design at Mother; and Ritesh Gupta, Head of Product at Realm.

In this conversation we start off by hearing about how well prepared Ritesh — representing his team — came into this project with a very good idea of what they wanted and what they didn't want. This preparedness, in the form of a 50-page slideshow, established a common understanding with Mother Design and set the tone for the collaborative process. Among other challenges, this also helped switch names once design work had already started and not miss a beat with a sound strategy in place. We also learn about how many of the design decisions were not only done because they looked good and felt right but because they served different inclusivity and accessibility goals. All while building up to one of the most fun wordmarks of the year.

Now, let's listen in as Armin follows up with Mark and Ritesh.

ARMIN VIT Hello, everyone. Things are about to get spooky in here as we talk about the spectral identity for Realm. Ritesh, Mark, welcome to The Follow-Up.

RITESH GUPTA Thanks for having us.

MARK SLOAN Thank you Armin, happy to be here.

ARMIN All right, so that our listeners can know who's who, if you can introduce yourselves with your name and title.

RITESH Hi everyone. My name's Ritesh Gupta, I'm the Head of Product at Realm.

MARK Hi, I am Mark Sloan, I'm the Head of Mother Design.

ARMIN Wonderful. Ritesh we're going to start with you. So, you joined Realm in 2020 when it was still Cereal Box. Did you join specifically to help them transition into a new name, brand, and positioning?

RITESH I actually joined in 2019.

ARMIN Okay.

RITESH So, I don't know if that matters. I did join actually a couple of years ago when it was Cereal Box. I joined specifically to actually rebuild

the website and the app. Build new features, fix broken UX patterns, that sort of thing. That was the initial public job description. But as I chatted more and more with Molly, the co-founder and CEO, I had mentioned that a repositioning and rebrand would absolutely need to happen; and help a lot with the growth of the business. And she already knew the value of design. She already threw out some potential collaborators, like right there on the spot. A lot of our investors also knew the value of design. So, it wasn't so much about convincing her that we should rebrand. It was more of a timing of when. So, it was just mostly just getting her word that we had a specific budget and it was okay using our team's time and energy to execute on one well. So, essentially my role expanded to reposition and rebrand, in addition to the normal quote-unquote product manager, product design role. And I encourage other folks in similar positions to do the same, basically grow the job description, say you're interested in more than the JD. usually helps with hiring.

ARMIN That's good actionable advice just to get things started here in the podcast. So, well done Ritesh in getting us in the mood. You previously did something similar with Pet Plate, helping them redesign by leading a team that consisted of RGA and Sagmeister&Walsh, which are major players. So, is this a niche that you're trying to create for yourself? A kind of nomad that helps companies transition? Cause it sounds like a lot of fun.

RITESH It's a ton of fun. I would say that initially... when I was thinking about rebrand and my role in the world, it was never a conscious decision to say, I want to be like this nomad, kind of like what you had mentioned, but now it's certainly top of mind. Basically, I want to make sure I make as much creative impact as possible—and rebrand is an amazing way to do that. I like combining that with product design. I never like having a rebrand, just putting, you know, quote-unquote the lipstick on a pig. In a way, I love when product and amazing visual design comes together. And I see them very much as one. So, yeah, I actually love it. But even if the creative opportunity doesn't present

itself, specifically as a rebrand, I do want to make sure that I'm on the same wavelength creatively as the people that I work with. And we're speaking the same language. And sometimes that involves education, which I'm happy to do. But if anyone ever needs a little, let me know, it's a blast. People tell me I'm a decent client and a decent collaborator. I have a very strong point of view on work. But as Mark had mentioned, as we're preparing for this, I usually come in with a very strong point of view that can be molded. And that's kinda how he describes me.

ARMIN Mark. How did Mother become involved? And how did you start putting up with Ritesh's strong point of view?

MARK [Laughter] Yeah, I don't remember specifically the sequence of events, but I know that Ritesh reached out to us through our new business channel. And I remember the first meeting we had very distinctly because he came in hot. He knew exactly what deliverables he needed, he knew exactly what he didn't need. And he seemed to have a really strong grasp on what our involvement in the project would be. It seemed like a collaboration, simultaneously. I mean, he was really looking for a partner, versus a vendor, and that was really appealing to us.

ARMIN And Ritesh did you have other design firms in mind? Because you know the design industry really well, or did you feel somehow that Mother could bring something that others couldn't?

RITESH It was an incredibly short list. I knew that there was very specific challenges that we had, and Mother with their approach, as well as the people... I was even before like signing a contract, I was like, Hey, who specifically is going to be working on this? I want to look at other work, like honestly, how they approach work. And Mark and Danielle and the rest, the team were very open about that. Whereas other firms are not necessarily. The other thing I'd created like a 50+ page Google Slides deck of here's aesthetics we like, and here's aesthetics we don't, and here's the reasons why. And that really allowed, I think, particularly

Mark, myself, as well as the rest of the team, both at Realm and Mother to speak a similar language before jumping in and getting married without kind of understanding like what we're kind of going into.

And that's probably a good time to kind of mention that it wasn't just me and Mark. It's not just the me and Mark show. This was a huge village to make it happen. There was the Realm team, Mother team, Felt Not Heard for sonic, a freelance lawyer, shout out to Erica Klein. Even our users. We did a lot of user insight. Our partners like VC Firms, all of them. It was the entire squad. It wasn't just us for sure. And I think given Mother's approach to all the work, it was important for all of us, all those stakeholders and whatnot to feel comfortable. And we felt incredibly comfortable.

ARMIN Out of curiosity. What did the lawyer do?

RITESH She saved our ass multiple times. When we're considering new names, when we're considering where this thing could be trademarked and where it can't be trademarked—essentially allowing us to grow internationally. So not just thinking about like a lot of startups do, not just thinking about what can we do the next couple of months and just trademarking in the U.S., she was checking all the major, other English speaking countries that we'd want to be in, even going down to like merch. And she'd also even say, Hey, this isn't available, but there's, you know, maybe an alternative way we can approach things in terms of names. None of those names we liked that she recommended, but it was awesome to have a collaborator like that, who is able to be with us the entire time. As we were crafting the work. We were showing her, making sure she was comfortable doing these checks and whatnot that she had to do. And yeah, lawyers on rebrands usually are kind of unsung heroes. Shout out to all the lawyers, the legal teams, and the business strategy teams for keeping our asses in check.

ARMIN This is the first time that a lawyer gets brought up and credited. That's a first for The Follow-Up. Mark, as you were learning about Cereal Box, and as you're going through this 50 page document that Ritesh has

put together, what are some of the first things that get you excited about this project? Or that you thought had the most potential to make this interesting?

MARK Well, I think first of all the people involved were very attractive to us. I mean, Molly being one of the Co-Founders. Very, very close to the work. And Ritesh, they formed this sort of power client duo that had the ultimate say in all the work. So, you know, in our experience, the fewer the stakeholders there are, the better the work has a chance to become. That's not always true, but as a general rule, that's the case. And they were just lovely, lovely people and really intelligent. So, that was very attractive. And also the 50 page document that can go one of two ways, right? You're either inspired by that, or confused, or disheartened. Thankfully we were inspired. I mean, what it did is it outlined more what they didn't want to be, and it sort of listed why they didn't want something that was just following trends, or something that leaned too heavily into the tropes of the subject matter that the podcasts are made of. You know, it's speculative fiction, right? So, it's science fiction, it's fantasy, it's horror. There are so many ways that can go and they wanted something that could span all of those genres quite easily. Something that was weird. The fact that weird was in the initial request... weird, witty, and welcoming. Uh, it seemed like it was right up our alley. So, yeah, that was the first time we've received such a lengthy document with who a potential client didn't want to be. I highly recommend it. It's a good icebreaker.

ARMIN Those three W's, were they in there from the beginning? The weird, witty, and welcoming?

MARK From the start. Yes. And obviously as the brand strategy was crafted, that evolved into its own thing, but those three words, we were always checking ourselves against.

ARMIN That's great, that's a really nice trio of words, not just because they all start with "W" and that's fairly pleasant, but they do set the tone.

And now looking at the work, all those three things are really well-represented there. So, let's start talking about the name. How did that come about? Mark was Mother involved in that part of the process? Or did someone else come into play?

MARK That was our small little team working in collaboration with Molly and Ritesh, and we love naming projects. To Ritesh's earlier point the lawyers are certainly either the heroes or the villains in that story. And in this case, we had one who was quite proactive and flexible. And the fact that we ended, or landed on I should say on a word that exists in the English language, it's a single word. We were all doing virtual high-fives when that happened. Many died along the way. It's a path littered with good, but not great options. And some great ones that obviously didn't clear legal, but yeah, I think where we ended up everybody feels great about.

ARMIN And was Realm one of the initial recommendations? Or did it come about after a couple of rounds where things had not passed legal.

MARK It was a few rounds in, I think it might've been around three name if memory serves, but we actually latched on as a group to a different name, which I won't mention, and selected that name and dove into creative development for the visual identity—with the other name. It was one of those strange instances where there was a crisis of conscience almost as we were pressure testing that name. It didn't feel as perfect as it could be, but we had a lot of design work that we loved, and we had to sort of figure out how to transition all those things that were loved visually into Realm.

ARMIN That's interesting. What made you settle on Realm. Not settle—settled is the wrong word— I didn't want it to sound like, oh, we settled for this sucky name, which is great by the way, but more... what made it feel right for you?

RITESH We actually spent a long time with Mother perfecting public facing copy that was very strategic focused. So, we ended up coming up with this

positioning that was essentially part podcast studio, part magical refuge. When we had something like that, that was so clear in terms of our positioning and clear to users, what our positioning was. The work started really getting more clear. So, once we started crafting the strategic line and whatnot Realm just was perfect. It described that we're a magical refuge, or a kingdom, a treasure trove of podcasts, you know, whatever you want to say. And it was so easy to spell. So, easy to say, you can do a lot of puns about it. There's a realm of possibility, all that kind of stuff. It just felt really, really good. And the name also had strong legs in the visual component. We didn't want a name that only felt good, just purely in copy.

We wanted it to be also very clear in the visuals. And we wanted the visuals to be very clear. We don't want to be over intellectualizing anything that we did, we wanted to be very inclusive and very, like you get it immediately. So, that's how we chose Realm and felt great about it. When Molly and myself were reviewing the stuff that Mother was presenting, we saw that, and we're like, yes! That's got to be it, please Erica, tell us that it can be cleared. That was how it felt. It was very much like we had an amazing list of choices, but that one felt good for so many reasons that we went into. We want it to be easy to spell. We want it to be clear when to present positioning. We want it to be one syllable ideally, et cetera, etc.

ARMIN Taking a step back a little bit before we keep going about the design, for you Ritesh, what are some of the challenges for Realm in running a podcast empire in today's culture? Because it seems like everyone has a podcast and then competition for listeners is more fierce than ever, even here right now, we're competing for people's attention to listen to The Follow-Up.

RITESH Yeah, a hundred percent. I mean, The Follow-Up is so clear in terms of the value proposition that you all give, so shouts to you. And I think that kind of gets to my point of there's a ton of challenges within the podcasting world. There's the meme of like, Hey guys, I know there's a

ton of podcasts out there, but another one's coming out and it's really important to differentiate and be unique. One thing to note is that we are actually specializing in fiction podcasts, which is a sub-category of podcasts. 95% of podcasts are non-fiction or conversational, whereas we're kind of occupying the very quickly growing, but small 5% of the total podcast market, which is fiction podcasts. Realm is very bullish on fiction podcasts for so many reasons. But the challenges are similar to movies and television, creating something original with an amazing story, amazing production quality, amazing acting, amazing marketing, it all kind of all has to come together.

So, the good thing is that audio is way, way cheaper to produce., and we have an amazing team. Challenges that we can very much overcome them. But it's a moving landscape. Lots of venture capital money is going to the space, huge upside to it in terms of what Spotify is doing and all these other players. So, we're very, very bullish on not any podcast, specifically fiction podcasts. And I think essentially we knew that we actually wanted to double down on a mission. We had a lot of messages, and a lot of features happening at the time and consumers were really confused. But we really wanted to double down on our mission, which basically was diverse and inclusive storytelling, from underserved creators and characters, as well as immersive sound effects. So, those were the two things that we knew we wanted to keep in the work. And Mother was very, very open to making sure those were continuously part of our DNA because we did definitely did not want to shed those.

ARMIN Got it. Now, Mark, it sounds like there was a little bit of, you know, if not cart-before-the-horse kind of deal where you had a name and then you tried—you had that designed, tried to fit it into this new name. But what did the first round of design exploration look like? I guess, for both the original non-disclosed name, and then how did you apply it to Realm?

MARK The first round of design with the previous name does not really represent how Realm looks now. I think one of the main characteristics of that work, which is consistent is the fact that it's character driven. The fact that the "R" is a thing, is a creature. And that was something that was in the 50 page document. I think Ritesh you might have called out Duolingo and a few others in reference to, I think Clippy from Microsoft made an appearance, just the notion that we wanted a character-based identity. And I think in the end, the way that that character moved the way that it sort of escorted you through this Realm, the way that it introduced you to new stories, the way that it served a UI function in app, that carried over; and maybe the color as well. I think also purple was one other piece of consistency aside from that, they feel very different.

ARMIN So, once you moved into Realm, did you present, or even with the other one, did you present multiple character options? Did you just land on this "R" looking like... when you mentioned Clippy, there's something Clippy-esque about the "R" in that it's just there, and it doesn't make sense, but in a way it sort of brings a smile to your face. It's also disconcerting to a degree.

MARK Yes. Agreed. Definitely. It brings joy and it it's sort of your guide throughout their world. There were multiple options. Absolutely. I think generally we try to go in with enough options that sort of represent the extremes of what we think is the correct way forward. The sort of stylistic variations and conceptual variations in between the guardrails that we've set up for ourselves. If there, if you have too many choices a sort of paralysis sets in, I think even after the name change, we came back with three very distinctly different ways in, and the version you see today is very close to one of those ways.

ARMIN And Ritesh, what are you and Molly thinking about these three options that you're seeing with Realm?

RITESH As Mother was presenting work, really the only feedback I was giving was on Zoom. Using the little Zoom emojis, just to have them feel, they're

not presenting to a blank soul-less client that has no emotions. I was making sure I was using heart emojis when I felt it was appropriate, that kind of stuff—I really love something. And then taking notes on the side. Every single one of the options that were presented, we all loved for specific reasons. The other options that we loved were very well thought out. They made a ton of sense strategically. And we're in this interesting scenario where all three of them kind of hit the brief of this kind of strategic thought of a magical refuge, part podcast studio, et cetera, et cetera. And it really came down in many ways to which one just felt, right.

That's a gut instinct kind of play. It was less strategic and more of what felt really good and what got us really excited. It happened to be option number two. I don't know if Mother y'all presented, you know, the middle option is the one that y'all wanted to do or whatever thing you're scheming up presentation-wise. But we loved the middle option. And actually, that was the riskiest option in terms of pushing the design. But it just felt really, really good. Molly and myself, when we were starting to talk about the work going through my checklist of does this feel right strategically? Are investors liking it? Are users liking it? We just kept getting yeses, love this, love this love this. The other thing that's interesting is that which a client usually cannot help, as much as I try to put guard rails on it, is this idea of pillow talk. This idea of sharing work with your partner, or your husband, or wife, or whomever. And that happened both for me, and for Molly. We were so excited about the work. It was certainly helpful that our partners loved it too. It was definitely not needed, but it was definitely helpful that that happened too. So, when we were looking at the work and looking at all three options and giving Mother feedback, we said, this is what we like about each of the options, but option number two, the one that we ended up choosing and were most excited about had the most like pluses in terms of like checking off as much stuff as possible. But it very much was a gut instinct thing. We felt it., we thought it was like really f'ing cool. Molly even said, I love that tote bag. Yes, tote bags are a meme in the rebrand presentations, but it truly was, this stuff could

be turned into merch. And that gave me, as her kind of employee, but also creative partner in many ways, that gave me a lot of validation in terms of how excited she was about the work.

ARMIN I'm still expecting a tote bag in the mail, soon... hopefully.

RITESH I can send you one. I know the exact Pantone... we're getting them in soon. I'm happy to send you one.

ARMIN So, from that second option shown, Mark how much did it evolve? How much refinement did it need to get to those really peculiar shapes that they feel at once, like they do not belong together at all, but at the same time, they're so perfectly matched, and curvy, and straight, and weird, and the counter spaces are all just right. How much of that was either a long process? Or just like, Hey, you just got it right early on.

MARK First of all, before I answer that a huge shout out to Kozue Yamada who was the lead designer on this. She's incredible and such a gifted designer. And I would say the first sketch was 95% there, but the last 5% is always what takes, you know, those days and nights of tweaking, and going to sleep, and looking at it again, and testing it in many contexts. There are three versions of the wordmark based on context, based on size. There was a lot of refinement to get it just right. But that initial burst of inspiration was very, very close.

ARMIN That's an interesting way of thinking about a lot of what with design, which is that the essence of something, is there at the beginning, like 95% of it is there. Getting that extra 5% 'till the end, that's where the blood, sweat, and tears come in and what makes or breaks a good design. So, I think here it paid off. I just love both the "R" and the full wordmark. But I also really enjoy the weird shapes that you came up with and those gradients, that in a way we've been seeing weird shapes in branding in the past few years, and we've been seeing gradients in branding for ever. You were able to bring them together in a new, interesting way that just felt original. So, how do you come upon this?

MARK One of the pieces of language that Cereal Box had on their site before we even started working together was “your portal to another world”. That was always in the back of our minds, like this notion of communicating a portal, either through the core identity assets or through the system at large. And I think specifically with regards to those shapes, yes, there are many shapes at play in a lot of branding projects right now, but it really made sense for them. To give them the flexibility across different types of stories, to be able to have a variety of portals. I think the gradient specifically, we just have to say James Turrell. I mean the ambiance and the mood that he generates with light was something that we really wanted to bring into this work. It felt like it matched the depth of the audio product itself. We needed something that could compete with the impact that the stories have on you when you’re listening to that. You know thinking about it in the context of, can the design system work in a passive way, as you’re listening? Can it remind you visually that you’re listening to something? Can those visuals link to what you’re actually listening to in a programmed way? It was all very exciting to us. At first glance you have a portal, but it’s something that continues to bring you deeper and deeper into their world.

ARMIN And they do support the wordmark in an interesting way. I really enjoyed the reference to Turrell. You know, when you think of his work, it’s more about lightness and the bright colors, but in this case, it’s the inverse, on dark. I think that’s what brings you into this spooky, spectral, keywords that I was talking about. Ritesh, on your end, how are you feeling about this? Like, is it too abstract? Like in your own words, is it too witty, too welcoming, and too weird?

RITESH No, it’s just perfect. It’s just the right amount of weird, witty, and welcoming. I think one of the things that I’ve loved at this position is that I’m overseeing product as well as this kind of rebrand. When we were looking at the work and thinking about how the work would be utilized, we had this deep insight that a lot of our users are listening to us pretty late at night. Some of them are listening to horror stories really, really in the late hours. And we needed something that was

actually very easy on the eyes. So, with this idea of inclusivity and being welcoming specifically, we wanted to actually have a dark mode by default, similar to Spotify. And we chose purple because it felt inclusive. It didn't feel too gendered in any sort of direction. And it really reflected a lot of the creators, and characters, we're supporting, and it also hit accessibility standards. So, when we're talking about a specific purple, there was multiple rounds of figuring out what feels right.

The other thing, going back to what mark was saying related to craft is we loved it. And we're like, oh, can you make three different versions based on size? That was a whole leg of work in itself because we needed logos to work in really, really tiny spaces in specific apps where podcasts—we can't the size, we can't control anything, we can only control the logo. So, it was really important for us to make sure that the work felt amazing, even if it was at 16 pixels all the way up to completely taking over your entire 27-inch iMac. Talking about that last 5% going to the finish line, that's where a lot of that effort and craft really especially came in. Making sure it felt really, really balanced and felt really great at all levels. So, thanks to the Mother team for that.

ARMIN And I think it's interesting how complex podcast identities have become. This has to perform on so many different platforms, for so many different people. Mark, is this the first time that you work on something that works on this range of platforms?

MARK I would say that the scale constraints are pretty consistent across the board with most of our clients, but it's definitely the first time we've worked in podcasts and it's why it was so attractive to us also. I mean, we generally like to not repeat ourselves, we're really inspired by projects that represent something we haven't done before. To your point, it needs to flex pretty hard when it's tiny. And I think one of the really exciting parts of the project for us was figuring out how the key

art and the thumbnails would come to life, knowing that they had a variety of different placements, and size, and styles of art working as we got involved and how that could evolve was really a fun process.

ARMIN And I think another challenge that was there that we haven't talked about is that, you know, you sort of have to also take a back seat to the podcast titles that you're showing and the creators behind them, but it also has to be able to every now and then take the lead and say like, Hey, we are Realm, we are the ones behind this great podcasts that you enjoy. How does that balance work? Both in the design and then in implementation?

MARK That balance is something that's increasingly something that needs to be negotiated with almost every client in a way, unless it's just a pure business situation where one thing is made, and your brand is the only one. Even in those cases, though, you're always trying to balance partnerships, and a certain level of co-existing with other brands. In this case, it was great because for the most part, they control their own platform. They are a podcast studio. So, a lot of the content is being created internally, even if there are external partners. I think achieving that balance was part of the consideration set from the beginning. It wasn't an afterthought. It was something that we knew they had control over. So, our conversations resulted in them taking action, controlling how those things looked.

ARMIN Ratsch, on your end, how do you modulate between those two things. Wanting to have Realm known, and then taking a step back and letting those podcasts titles be the center of attention?

RITESH In many ways, since we're a younger podcast studio than some of the other players, it's important for us to be known for quality. One good analogy is a24 in terms of movies like, oh, you hear that a24 produced it, there's a level of quality, or level of expectation you're going to get in terms of production, or story, or whatnot—just because they've been knocking movies out of the park consistently. For us, we want

to get to a level where it could be like podcast created by Realm, Oh, damn. I definitely need to listen to that. And we're getting there, which is really exciting. In order to get there, we need to make sure we're putting our shows first, as well as our creators and the characters, and let those speak for themselves and let those kind of percolate amongst the fan groups, and then let the fans talk about it and say, oh, by the way, this is by Realm. And hopefully would-be listeners eventually see Realm a couple of more times, and we've continued to be known for quality. But it's interesting because when you see you Realm in the capacity of, let's say an app like Apple Podcasts, or Spotify, or any other podcast player that some of our fans use, you don't really see Realm too much. You will see of course the logo and whatnot on the actual artwork, but it's very show forward. Very sub-genre forward. My point of view on the artwork is for the most part, the artwork needs to communicate the genre, and the tone, and the subject, or/and the place setting, and then have an indication of branding somewhere. And we usually have, and we've worked with Mother on the specific standards of what colors we should use, and where we should place a specific on the artwork, to allow for flexibility and make sure the branding is not too constrained, but allow the freedom for our team, including myself of which I helped do a lot of the art direction for many of our shows, to allow that to sing. And to allow that to do what it needs to do.

But also at the same time, we're starting to create merch and whatnot because people are starting to love Realm in itself. Exclusive, we're definitely gonna have stuff that is going to be appealing specifically to shows and whatnot, particularly with some of the ones that are some of our fan favorites.

ARMIN So, what has been the reaction like both internally from podcast creators, and the audience, to the new name and look?

RITESH It's been absolutely incredible. Very, very positive. The people that I work with on a day-to-day basis are some of the most important people to

be excited about the work. So, I was really happy when we presented our stuff at town halls and all-hands meetings, which typically happen every other Friday, and quarterly respectively. It was really important to get co-worker feedback throughout the process. And that can be scary as somebody who is working in the front lines with Mother and taking work back to 30 people. And they're all reacting on Zoom. Because there can be this idea of group-think where if one person says something poorly at the first, or a negative as the first reaction, people can start doing the same thing. And I wanted to avoid that. But luckily Molly and I were feeling so confident about the work, and our team is so genuinely honest and very, very nice, that they were just loving the work. And people of course say, you know what? We have this portal that actually looks like a gravestone... Well, is that a good thing? Is that a bad thing? Actually, it could be a good thing because we could use that portal image for horror. So, it's perfect. So, there's like these ideas that we started getting from coworkers that was very positive. And then users loved it too. We talked to our power users, we started putting the workout, started announcing it... It was very important for us to tell our very large user base, why we were changing. And we put out a blog post on our website that went over very well, and made it feel like we were actually improving their experience for them. We knew that there was accessibility issues with our old name, Cereal Box. People are confusing with Serial the podcast, the true crime podcast, people were confusing it with cereal that you eat during breakfast, lunch, or dinner, et cetera, et cetera. So, it was very easy to justify some of the decisions that we made. And then also of course, partners and even other studios have actually really loved it too. And I think we're starting to try to increase the level of design within the podcast world. And I think were the forerunners in it right now.

ARMIN That's great. Mark, you've hinted at a few things that you were excited about working on this identity. Like looking back to that initial meeting, going through the process of the names and redesigning stuff that you had already designed with that one name, what is the most exciting aspect of having worked on this identity?

MARK It's been an amazing project. I think probably the most exciting part though, is doing work that you're proud of, with people that you like, and that you're rooting for from a business standpoint. I think so often the design/agency/client relationship can become a purely transactional one, if you're not careful. It can feel like work. I think I speak for perhaps only myself, but the reason I got into design in the first place is because it didn't feel like work. It felt like joy, and fun, and problem solving, in the most liberating way. And when projects are handled in the way that this one was, that's the way it feels. It ends always in a good business result because those elements fall into place. And from the start we've been excited about Cereal Box turned Realm's proposition, and excited about the people behind it. And we've just loved the collaboration. And we're just excited to see their next phase of growth. The obvious design output is wonderful, but for us, it's about a process and a relationship that feels more pure than a vendor one.

ARMIN That's saying a lot, given Ratish's self-admitted strong point of view that you were able to enjoy the process. But it sounds like [laughter] he provided the right feedback, in the right way. Which is a challenge with a lot of clients that don't know what they want, or don't know what they don't want. You can have that feeling like, oh, they're just telling me what to do. Or like, no, they're just confident—they understand their product, they understand the client, and they are providing me with the tools to do the job right.

MARK That's exactly right. He was never overbearing. I mean, it was obviously, like I said, he came in hot with a lot of very strong opinions, but we also met him with our own, at the right moments. And he knew exactly when to say whatever you guys think, or I'm totally open-minded; he set the stage with a strong point of view and then allowed for the creative process to happen.

ARMIN That sounds like a great working relationship. So, Ratish for you, what is the most exciting aspect of this identity moving forward?

RITESH Oftentimes our team, specifically our production team, like our content and production teams, they say speculative fiction is like a mirror and a window. It's this idea of reflecting and also encapsulating a lot of ourselves. And I think our identity is really a great mirror and a window of our team, and our creators, and our characters. The fact that we're able to have an identity that is very mission driven, and supporting very diverse and inclusive creators and characters that people really love is really, really important to me. We could have totally easily gone the very vanilla road of creating work that felt very flat and was a kind of a Frankenstein of a lot of different people's point of views. And while we're inclusive of a lot of different point of views, we have a strong point of view in terms of the work, and everything from copywriting, how long or short a sentence should be, the words, the visuals, the motion, everything was very, very considered.

And so that to me is probably the most exciting aspect of this identity. As a client, it was very important for me to educate team members if they weren't self-proclaimed type nerds. Or even just claim that they weren't interested in design. So, it was really important when we started the process that I made sure that everyone felt very comfortable and also mentioned to them, here's what not to say, and here's what to say when we're asking for feedback. Don't say, for example, "I don't like that" or "make it bigger". It's really helpful to understand, specifically for creators, that are really talented, like Kozue, Mark, et cetera, is like more probing the questions of like, why did you make that creative decision? Or how did you arrive at the decision? Because it helps unlock a better conversation, and it doesn't put anybody on the defensive or offensive.

And so it was very important for me as kind of a vehicle through which—I was getting a lot of feedback, and communicating it, that I was not only filtering it, but also getting internal conversations that were very productive and were feeling very generative. So, once people started seeing the work and started reacting, considering how their feedback would be, it really allowed the work to be one additional level higher.

That allowed me to give even stronger feedback to Mother. What I'm saying, I guess in summary is a lot of it's on the client to educate themselves and have somebody who's kind of intermediary like myself to make sure that clients internally are educating and doing the necessary emotional labor that they need to do to make the work as great and make the relationship as amazing as it could be.

ARMIN Because oftentimes as mentioned, talking about working with clients, it's often they don't have the words to express what they're feeling about design. It's a really hard thing to do. So, having sort of that translator in you to have that feedback parsed into actionable items for Mother seems pretty great. And you know, you mentioned that you didn't go the vanilla route and this definitely is not vanilla, it's more like Rocky Road in combination with three or four different flavors, and they all added up to something that is memorable and unique. Even the comments on Brand New were like Wow! Like this is great! This is something that we haven't seen, or it feels fresh, or it feels innovative in a way that, you know, it could have been easy for you to just choose something that was safe, and simple, and got the job done. But instead to try to do something outside of the Realm of possibilities for a podcast production studio turned out great. So, I want to thank you Ritesh and Mark for spending some time with me to talk about Realm.

MARK Thank you so much Armin.

RITESH Thanks Armin.

BRYONY Weird, witty, and welcoming. Not since the world wide web have three "W"s yielded such memorable results. It was so great to hear how these three values were present from the beginning, how they informed the process, and how they are evident in the resulting work. While it's often the well-thought out strategies and the well-executed design ideas that make identity projects work, it's always good to remember that it's the cornerstone values that each company holds that will lead the way there. Speaking of there...

Today, thanks for listening. Until next time, we'll be here, we hope you'll be there.