Chris Strahl: Hi, and welcome to the Design Systems podcast. This podcast is about the place where design and development overlap. We talk with experts to get their point of view about trends in design code and how it relates to the world around us. As always, this podcast is brought to you by Knapsack. Check us out at Knapsack.cloud. If you want to get in touch with the show, ask some questions, or generally tell us what you think. Go ahead and tweet us @theDSPod. We'd love to hear from you. Hey everyone. Welcome to the Design Systems podcast. I'm your host, Chris Strahl. Today I'm here with Tim Banker, the senior director of Global Experience at Slalom. Welcome to the program Tim.

Tim Banker: Thanks a lot, Chris. Stoked to be here. Excited to talk a little bit more.

Chris Strahl: Yeah, this is going to be cool. I'm excited for this conversation because it deals with a couple of really hard problems. When I think about the three hardest technology problems that come to mind, it's naming things, it's DNS and it's date and time, and we get to talk about two of the three of those today because we're going to be talking about what it takes to take a digital product and globalize it. And so this is really interesting because oftentimes when we think about internationalization, globalization, the first thing that we think about in that chain of complexity is straight up translation. So how do I take something that's English characters and glyphs and translate it to some other language? Maybe that language has some confounding factor like it's Arabics, which it's right to left, but ultimately there's so much more to it than this. And I'd love to hear your thoughts on what does this complexity scale really entail?

Tim Banker: Absolutely, and I think you're a hundred percent accurate. People tend to think about translation localization as the starting point because that's typically the first problem that they have to tackle and then eventually get to things like number formats and how do you store that data in an appropriate way so that you can do that translation. But ultimately what we're trying, I think get to from an experience standpoint as design systems power much larger experiences is ultimately do we understand our customer and the cultural context, the situation that they themselves are in? Do we have empathy for them as people? And that takes a lot of sensitivity and focus to think about something that large of a scale.

Chris Strahl: I'm excited because we haven't really covered this much, and this is one of those places where I think systems thinking and design systems in particular have a huge advantage over conventional ways of building to really help solve this problem. Because to your point, we're not just talking about having the same words have the same meaning. We're actually trying to say what is the cultural context and the experience really feel like when I look at any given web project in a different global environment. So this affects companies both big and small. I mean, we have this thing right now where we're starting to do some business in Canada, and so offering French translations of our product is necessary in a place like that. And that's a very small example for a still fairly small startup

company. But there are also really big examples where there's organizations that are in every country in the world. And when you think about that sort of scale of complexity, the starting point for a lot of organizations is language. Talk to me a little bit about how you view language and the context of systems and the web.

Tim Banker: It's the foundation for how we communicate. And so it's super important to not only think about are we saying the right things, but do we mean the same thing? Do we have the same sort of philosophy behind the words that we are using? Because as you said, it's not just about language, it's about the situation that you're solving for. So you think about Hispanic and Latino communities in say, Florida versus la, those are very different contexts. And in certain circumstances for customer problems may require nuances beyond just language if you're truly trying to engage and communicate with those people.

Chris Strahl: And I think it also intimately relates to the type of experience you're trying to convey. A shopping experience may or may not deviate in the same way that a news article or an engagement experience like a social experience may differ. And I think that there are so many different cultural contexts and it is rooted in language and it is rooted in meaning, but there's so much more to it. And when I talk about it being rooted in language, you think about things like counting systems and how counting systems in French are very different than counting systems in English or dates where dates in Japan are completely unlike dates in the United States. And there's those fundamental disconnects, but then there are more subtle ones, and those more subtle ones are around. When we talk about the idea of a football player, the words that we use that represented direct translation can oftentimes be somewhat funny and misleading. A player in one language might be somebody that is actually taking the field in a football match. A player in another country might be somebody that has a potentially bad reputation at dating. And so just those different ideas, what does the word actually mean in that language is a fascinating sort of thing to unwind. How do systems help us with that?

Tim Banker: It's funny you mentioned that example because as you were saying it, I was instantly thinking of someone jumping on the soccer pitch. So like football in an American context versus in more of a European context. It's just a brilliant example of how we can be talking right past one another using the same words and meaning something completely different in our minds. I always like to give the example in talking through experience, strategy is quite often about making sure people visualize the same thing. So you go back and think through old school requirements definition, and you can say the same thing on paper. I give you an example, the dog crossed the road. What you think of and what I think of can mean completely different things. It could be a border collie crossing a country road, it could be a German shepherd crossing an interstate. And so those nuances come out more when you can really start to articulate and visualize those things and systematize those things so that you reduce the amount of assumptions that everyone's making along the way. And it speeds

things up. Because if you instantly have that foundation of shared language within a design system, you can accelerate the efforts of delivering the actual experience.

Chris Strahl: And I love how much culture sort of bleeds into this too, right? Because when you think about a dog crossing a road, a road looks very different where I live versus what a road might look like in a place like Western China or what a road might look like in Mozambique. I happen to have driven on lots of roads in Mozambique and they don't look anything like the roads that are in front of my house right now. And I would say that the idea and the concept of a dog that we have in the United States and that idea of a dog is a friendly family pet, that's also not a universal thing around the world. And so just that understanding of that cultural context is really fascinating. And as you expand that, you start to think about the more nuanced takes on it too. What is the different cultural implications of a website? Do you have any examples where there's a highly nuanced take on the differences of spacing or format in the way that people think about their experiences?

Tim Banker: Yeah, absolutely. I think we tend as a discipline to think about scaled design best practices and how design systems have evolved over time following the same path as how globalized companies have, which is primarily western philosophy to that growth. But you look at some of the patterns in Asian countries where you have a much more condensed super apps, you have spacing that doesn't make sense to someone that would normally think about things in a North American or even a European cultural context because they're like, well, why are you packing so much information into one page? But if that's the type of environment that you grew up in from a digital context, you have a very different worldview or an expectation around how things should look, should behave, and that ultimately has implications to how you think about systematizing those things in a globalized context.

Chris Strahl: So you're saying that the environment you grow up in terms of real space and how words and language and imagery and really context is used in that space ultimately relates to a set of online expectations and those online expectations aren't commonly considered when in particular North American western companies think about a global context?

Tim Banker: Absolutely. Chris, we tend to think of digital experiences as being this new thing, but we're just solving in a different medium for people. And there's obviously a lot going on currently around how do we solve for machines as personas thinking about ai, but really they don't have any feelings that are going to get hurt if you design for them poorly versus human beings being at the end of experiences. That's ultimately what we're trying to solve for and provide belonging and connection and engagement and all the things that we try to when we're delivering experiences.

Chris Strahl: I consider myself really fortunate to have been able to travel a lot and to see a lot of different cultures briefly firsthand and see just fundamentally how different a lot of contexts are from place to place to place. When we think about those groups of people that are underserved by simple translations or a broadly western experience that has been maybe ham-fisted, transformed as something that is relatable or readable by those people, what is the effect of that?

Tim Banker: I think ultimately, if you think really big picture, it's an equity question. Even the smallest decisions that you're making say in a design system about the performance of an individual component. When you think about it in the context of a civilian in a country with poor internet service, being able to have access to a service because of the performance of that component, it's a completely different context that you're solving for. And I think especially when it comes to civilian types of experiences, those are about living your life as opposed to purchasing a product. Those are not at the same level.

Chris Strahl: Yeah, it's interesting. I'm reminded. So I had this opportunity to work on this global design project in circa like 2012 or so, and it was really interesting because it had a significant user base in eastern Africa, western Europe, Australia, and Southeast Asia. And I got to go in market to every place except for Southeast Asia and see how people would actually use the experiences we created. And it was this really interesting empathy building exercise where I was in Nairobi and I got to sit down with a bunch of people, and this was fairly recently after the iPhone had become reasonably well adopted inside of Kenya, or at least by fairly affluent folks there. And I got to watch them try to use the web experience that we'd created while we were there. And it was interesting because people would pick up one cell phone and navigate a web browser to that experience, and then they get frustrated and pick up a different cell phone that used a different cell phone network that actually had better internet access at that moment, but may not have actually had better internet access an hour ago. And watching that sort of like, oh, you can't depend on this being one device or one login or any one experience for that single phone was totally fascinating in a use case I'd never thought about before. And that was my first moment of like, oh, globalization is way harder than I think that

Tim Banker: Absolutely, it speaks to the power of good research and contextual observation and inquiry. So yeah, absolutely. I don't know that I have the problem solved. I don't know that anyone has it solved at the global scale, but I think understanding it and being ready and thinking about ahead of time is something that even the smallest of companies and startups, if that's kind of within their ultimate vision, need to think about putting those foundations in place so that they're not having to re-architect or rethink their entire set of assumptions that went into defining the digital pieces that they're building.

Chris Strahl: Gotcha. So when we think about the big picture idea here, if we want to have this idea of inclusive, equitable experience for folks, we obviously need to think

more about how these experiences remain contextually culturally relevant to people, but ultimately that takes the form of lots of little incremental changes that hopefully are based in a design system. What form do these really take in your mind? Is this just about color type and then a thoughtful approach to content? Is it about spacing? Is it all of those things? And how do you relate that back to some of the decisions we make inside of our systems?

Tim Banker: I think the foundational elements are sort of an easier one to solve for, but getting back to your point around are we even representing the people that we're trying to solve for and with? So as some of the folks that I work with are trying to attest, as you think about the scale of a global company, are we in those markets that we're trying to serve from a team perspective? Are we in those markets from a design system team perspective such that you're in the same time zone and you can respond to questions that you're getting on the fly about consuming and adopting and using the design system assets? Those are tiered levels of ways to think about globalization. That's not just about the system itself, but about the people that are a part of that system.

Chris Strahl: And as we're really fond of saying design systems are for people, I think that Jean Ann was the first person to say that to me, and I completely agree with her. I think that what you're trying to say is that without people that have that in-market or contextual experience, it's really hard to design a system that's flexible or thoughtful towards those contexts.

Tim Banker: Yeah, I mean, we're flawed as people and we come with our own biases, so we can't completely eliminate them, but we can start to mitigate them by being a little bit closer to the problem we're trying to solve.

Chris Strahl: So when I think about something like that, it makes me immediately think about, well, what is the system or the process or the structure you could put in place that allows those people to have some sort of representation? Because I think that when you're a company, the practical solution, everything has to happen at the last mile. There needs to be some consolidation and some centralization of things like a design system. And so if you have a design system, what are some of the considerations you can make for a lot of these in-market questions or in-market considerations? What flexibility can you build into what you're creating?

Tim Banker: I think one of the first things I like to think about is don't treat the design system as one thing. It's not a holistic monolithic solution to all the problems that a company's facing. Think of it as a system of systems or a tiered design system where at one end you have things that may be true to the brand regardless of where you are in market around the globe. And then you may have certain things that, like for instance, spacing, you may define one spacing system for the entire solution set or ecosystem that the design system solves for, but you may pick certain portions of that spacing system that are applicable to different types

of experiences, whether they're marketing or content related experiences or transactional experiences or something that's serving a Japanese market. Those are all very different kinds of context, and you're using the same system, but you're apportioning certain design decisions or guidelines or contexts that are maybe more relevant for different audiences or problems.

Chris Strahl: I was thinking about Google's famous slash infamous, comfortable, cozy, compact. And then the fourth one that I would add to that would be Japan, the idea of how do you change that relative spacing. But it sounds like at the core of it, you're talking about creating systems that are logically extensible. So the idea of comfortable, cozy, compact that fits a western audience, but the understanding that your scale has to change potentially an order of magnitude on either bound, you may have something that is extremely comfortable or wide open, and you may have something that is extremely dense and compact. And that idea of how do you think about type systems or scale systems, spacing systems, dimension systems is probably the best word there, that ultimately have ways of extending beyond the scope that you initially think about.

Tim Banker: Absolutely. It's the type of thing where you're not trying to solve for every single combination of needs, but you need to understand directionally what are the different zones that you're solving for? And I think you put it nicely before of as simple as understanding the implications of right to left or expansion and contraction of content when it's translated, thinking about a German context where you tend to combine a bunch of words and it's one string, and so what does the wrapping look like? Some of those are the tactical things that unless you are familiar with the language and the nuance around that, it's harder to solve in a system kind of context.

Chris Strahl: It's my favorite headline test in a card component is does it work in German? Now, in speaking of German, I think it is interesting, right, because done well, it can create an entirely different experience. My brother happens to live in Leavenworth, Washington, and Leavenworth is a really interesting place because it is modeled as a Bavarian village in the middle of the North Cascades in Washington state. And what's really fascinating about it is it has some tenuous connection to Bavaria, but the reality is it was a timber town that was like, how do I convert from a place that is relying upon industry to a place that is more interested in tourism? And a big part about that was creating an experience that felt like you were visiting Germany but was within the boundaries of the North Cascades of Washington state. And they did a really thoughtful thing where they basically didn't just say all the fonts on the buildings have to be the same, or all the imagery on the sides of a building has to be the same, or all the language that we use has to be the same.

They actually really thought about what it was like to walk down a sidewalk in Bavaria, and they created that experience down to the signages, down to the storefronts, down to the way that people look and act inside of that town. It

feels like Germany or at least a pretty close approximation of it. And so my point in this story is that done well, you can convey an entirely different experience and meaning within a system that is not that initially. When you think about that relative to your design system experiences, what's an example of where this worked really, really well? Where did you create Leavenworth inside of a westernized design system?

Tim Banker: One of the clients I'm working with right now, it's fascinating. As you talked about the people side of design systems, they're thinking about how do they scale this to their AMEA and APAC teams? And one of the things we are considering is just a simple thing like rotating when the office hours happen so that different folks can join. But kind of building upon that, we actually have folks that are translating for those on the systems team that don't speak another language, for instance, Spanish, where the latam team is coming on, they have questions and they're trying to troubleshoot usage of the design system. Being able to do that on the fly and not have to rely on some kind of third party translation service and the time that it would take to go through the process of translating and going back and forth in teams or email, right? That's a huge time suck that pulls away from the ROI that you are trying to prove when delivering a design system.

Chris Strahl: Gotcha. So you have this system of systems model there that where that last mile of translation is really happening is a lot closer to that community that you're trying to serve.

Tim Banker: And again, it ties to the maturity of the team and being able to federate or almost have a hybrid kind of model where maybe you do things like rotations where someone from a product team comes onto the systems team or vice versa to help share the knowledge in both directions as an input from design system to the product. And this is how you use things and think about things in a systemized context, but also the other way around. So you're continuing to gather inputs from the world that you're trying to solve from a product context serves the design system really, really well.

Chris Strahl: It's really interesting to hear you talk about that because most of the time when we talk about rotations inside of federated design systems, we're thinking about it from a capabilities model. We're thinking about, Hey, we have this particular person that needs to understand more about how systems concepts work or this particular engineer that needs to be able to take this work they did and contribute it back to the system. And I don't think you're saying that's not happening, but what you're saying is the primary intention of that is to build empathy. It's about that empathy exercise without local market more than it is about that capability and that ability to rotate in and out folks with different functions and capabilities. That's almost like a secondary effect to the empathy.

Tim Banker: Absolutely. You're building relationships, you're building that shared knowledge through, like you said, sort of the smaller decisions that you're making versus here's a big bang approach to how we're going to go about things differently.

Chris Strahl: Has that work and that empathy exercise that you're working with with these larger global customers, has that bled into practices that are more local? So folks that are predominantly western United States based, do you take a different approach to those systems now because of this experience working globally?

Tim Banker: I think so. I think it's more about incorporating comfort with failure. So if a centralized team is recommending something, say, Hey, put it to the test, give more users access before something goes live, trial it out. What's the designer experience? What's the developer experience before you publish the next version? I think that willingness to be wrong helps on the empathy and vulnerability front and allows for deeper trust within the team that hey, it's like everybody can be wrong. We're all humans and it's a matter of how do we create the right environment to learn and have that sense of failure.

Chris Strahl: So when you think about that relative to companies small and large that are facing this problem, what advice would you give a small organization that's just taking their first step in globalization and maybe contrast that to some of your biggest customers. I mean small works with gigantic global companies. What's the difference in those steps look like?

Tim Banker: I mean, a small company is probably leveraging somebody that's both building the design system and implementing the design system through a product experience. So they have constraints of how much of a scale and an impact that they can have, but I think there's certain things that you can understand to just map out here's the ecosystem that we're trying to solve for and what are the potential cultural differences amongst those different products that you might not be thinking of. One of the questions I always love to hear is who isn't at the table? So from a representation in diversity perspective, just asking yourself that question so that to your earlier point you can start to ask the team what are the right questions that you're maybe not necessarily thinking about just based on your own biases, worldviews, et cetera. That would be the one thing that I think is applicable to small and large companies. But on the larger end of things, when you think about maturity is are you in a enterprise context, comfortable starting to loosen the rope a little bit, still maintain a high degree of quality, but enable teams in other regions to own a piece of things, whether that's expanding on your contribution model or thinking about someone that's maybe more of an advocate or champion on the product side of things, starting to be your go-to within that region for system type questions.

Chris Strahl: It's interesting. So when you think about that systems, so systems model, you mentioned what you're really advocating for in terms of maturity is the empowerment of the people in that last mile, so to speak, and it's less about the

changing of the system in that last mile. The systems can remain consistent. It's a lot more about how do you actually empower the voices, the humans on the other end of that?

Tim Banker: Yeah, because then the feedback loops gets smaller, you have more passionate contribution and growth because they're, like you said, closer to the problem, you get more effective and timely execution and ultimately tighter connection between the system and the problem that the product is trying to solve for.

Chris Strahl: It is interesting, the idea that systems could inhibit by not having a flexibility in that last mile by being rigid. I think that there are times where design systems, despite my obvious love of them, are a bit of a double-edged sword. When you think about the idea of design systems is a tool for control, it seems like that control, if that power structure is centralized in a place that is not contextually relevant to the last mile of who's being served or that cultural context, you run the risk of alienating or not serving that particular group of people.

Tim Banker: Absolutely. You're systematizing on the one end of things, biases that could cause harm on the other end of things. Smaller decisions that may affect the business or create sort of cracks in the foundation or the death by a thousand paper cuts kind of effect where you sort of lose trust and applicability to the product. And that's when you start to see teams create their own design system. It's like, well, I'm not going to use the enterprise one totally far off from the use case I'm trying to solve. I'm going to go create my own. And then you get to this problem of fractionalization and having to rationalize the mess in the future.

Chris Strahl: So Tim, this has been a fascinating conversation about a topic that I personally love a lot. I'm really curious, when I talk to folks like you that spend a lot of time thinking about these global systems, I always wonder what the future holds for you. When you think about the wave that's happening right now where products are moving towards these more systematic ways of working and ways of being built. I do think that there is an innate risk of us institutionalizing or systematizing our own biases. What does the future look like that does feel more globally empowered, and how do you think about us working towards that together?

Tim Banker: I think two things. One is around use of existing design systems and hopefully them getting better over time, but also us thinking about what's different enough for, in our context, we need to have our own sort of custom elements of the design system that kind of either build upon or are solving a different problem than maybe that third party design system. I think the second thing is in the context of what a lot of people are thinking about around the future of design systems and providing context in the tools of use where those design system consumers are, there's a lot around headless documentation systems and whatnot. So it's not only understanding how do you make the design system itself more friendly in a globalized context, but what are the tools and the

situations and processes that those consumers use and how do we get the information and knowledge learned as over years of developing a design system out to those consumers outside of the context of the design system, really truly federating and deploying the knowledge assets.

Chris Strahl: Yeah, it's interesting that you're talking about both the content of the design system and the system itself being thought of in a more global context. And I think that that's something that we don't talk enough about in the industry is to think about the idea of yes, the content, of course the content, but also the way we use the system is also important to make sure that we're empowering the right people to make decisions in their local market, in their local context about what the right way to be inclusive of that group of people is

Tim Banker: A hundred percent. And those are the big hairy problems that we don't talk enough about because they are so challenging and require a lot of systems thinking so excited about the future.

Chris Strahl: Awesome. And you have a couple of resources you're going to be sharing with us in the show notes that kind of talk about approaches that you all take to this. Yep. So much appreciated for all of the conversation. Again, a topic I'm super personally excited about, so thank you so much for being on. I really appreciate you and let's talk again sometime.

Tim Banker: Sounds great. Thanks a lot, Chris.

Chris Strahl: Awesome. This has been the Design System podcast. I'm your host, Chris Strahl. Have a great day, everyone. That's all for today. This has been another episode of the Design Systems podcast. Thanks for listening. If you have any questions or a topic you'd like to know more about, find us on Twitter @theDSPod. We'd love to hear from you with show ideas, recommendations, questions or comments. As always, this pod is brought to you by Knapsack. You can check us out at Knapsack.cloud. Have a great day.