Chris:

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Hey, everybody, and welcome to the Design Systems Podcast. I'm your host, Chris Strahl. I'm here today with Jenny Yep from Atlassian. Jenny, you were on the program about two years ago. Welcome back. I'm so glad to have you back. I love these moments that we get to connect around this fun inflection moments in your life.

Jennie:

Thanks for having me. It's good to see you again.

Chris:

So, tell me what's transitioned for you in the past two years. A lot's changed, and I think that this is... it's interesting. You have a new title, you've got all stuff in your personal life happening but tell me what are the highlights?

Jennie:

So, we actually did talk about two years ago, and I looked at that and I was reflecting. I was like, "Wow, the team has grown. My role has changed. I'm having a baby. Letting go of my other baby, my design systems baby." Yeah, our whole direction for the design system has gained a lot of momentum because we have a new vision and strategy. That's what I've been focused on the past two years. Instead of executing the day to day, we've been slowly building upon that foundation that we talked about the last time we chatted.

Chris:

Yeah. So, last time we talked, you were in a role where you were predominantly working on the execution of a design system in... Yes, a leadership role in design, but still one of those roles that was predominantly focused on how do I build this thing. And now, you're a design architect, and in that design architect role, you look a lot more towards the strategy of where's all this going? How does this represent strategic value for Atlassian?

The last time we talked, the big focus that we had was on a lot of this idea of how do you tell better stories? I believe you just either just launched or were about to launch this new foundational part of the design system, and you're gearing up for what that means to the business. You've gone from this one transition point of this older more legacy design system to this new one. And now, once again, you're at this transition point where you're going from this role that was predominantly about let's build and execute a mature design system into one that thinks over a much longer time horizon. Tell me about that shift and what's gone on there.

Jennie:

It's been a big shift in altitude and roles for me. So, back then, I was a lead designer leading a project. We really set the foundation for Alaskan design system with combining everything into a new home. And so, that set and help me understand a big broader view, and I think I was already touching on a whole bunch of systemic things. We needed to invest in accessibility, redoing all the foundations and all that kind of stuff. But I think what I learned a lot from that is we hadn't built the best strategy back then because I was involved in that first iteration of our strategy. But what I learned is that was really just a whole bunch of us getting together, a whole bunch of leads getting together and creating a wish list. And so, I called it our 10 year wish list because it was like 58 things long and we didn't really have any tactics or strategy of how we should go about them.

And so, actually it's some of the things that we talked about in that last podcast we failed at. I think I had a said, for example, we're investing in the foundations and we're like, "Oh, we're going to do color and spacing and type and grid and layout, redo all of them." We were trying to do them all at the same time. And I think we had also touched on like, "Oh, we're going to try and do accessibility." And so, I think we had just too many things not really focusing on what can we strategically attack first to get us going and lay another foundation to keep building upon. So, been learning a lot about strategy and what a good strategy is.

Chris:

I don't think you'd be the first team of ambitious driven people to have a list that was maybe a little too big and a little too ambitious. When you think about organizing and organizing people, one of the things that is really important is that process by which you gather consensus around what you're building and why you're building it. But then, when you think about how and in what order, that's where things get muddier usually for most people. And that sounds like a lot of the transition for you has been, it's a little less about defining what this is about and a lot more about why we're building the things that we're building, and why we're tackling it in this particular set of priorities.

Jennie:

Yeah. So, I think right after we had chatted, I was thinking a lot about how do we... And this is why we had a bad strategy too. It's like you have a 30 person team. If everybody's looking at different directions, how can you get them to see and believe in the same thing and go in that same direction, right? I think that's when COVID was we're becoming very remote-friendly, and we did a whole team-wide workshop across three time zones to establish our values and principles. The whole purpose is that I know people were always like, "Oh, you need to start with design principles to align something." But basically, that was our foundation, and we were able to grab everybody's input, you co-create this together, so everybody's bought in together as well and believes it. And so, we always say, the values are what we believe in, and then, the principles are how we go about and behave to bring that stuff to life.

So, that set our foundation for these three pillars that we were calling them. So, we have three values and they're paired with three principles and they're foundational, harmonious, and empowering for everyone. So, they actually fall into these buckets of we want foundational parts, we want really strong foundations. Like I mentioned before, we wanted to invest in them harmonious, falls into the product space. So, we were saying we want to build and mature that into something super harmonious. Everything we use should fit together, work well, so it has a seamless experience, has a great API, et cetera. And then, the third one is empowering for everyone. So, this is where it comes into the people part of things. We're thinking about people, what are the methods and systems we can provide them to build their own local systems to scale up to systems instances into a platform? We distilled everybody's

thoughts into these three buckets, and that's how we've been getting everyone to align in the same direction.

Chris:

Yeah. I love the idea of you want to pair a method with an action. It's interesting, right? Because it's similar to how we think about our core values because you can't tell everybody how to interact in every single context and every single interaction. You want to create some rubric or guidance for them. That concreteness of knowing that there's an intent and then, there's an action that represents that intent. My big question for you is, has that worked? Have you felt that sense of alignment really become present in the organization after that workshop?

Jennie:

So, we kept building upon that. It's funny, I feel like we did all the workshops in the wrong sequence, but they all ladder up and down now because after that, we set off to establish a new vision and strategy. So, it's exactly what you're talking about. We created a framework, and I think the thing is when everyone is not speaking the same language, I realized all we really needed was creating that framework, so they could actually see what we are seeing as well. And then, to help them apply that framework is how we can get everybody to execute and be on the same page and to help bring that vision to life. So, the values that I mentioned, those three pillars, they actually also fall into our three horizons of four strategy and our vision as well. So, everything maps up and down.

We have this pyramid that we always use as a visual, and it goes from aspirational stuff, so it's vision, where we're going, values, what we believe in, our mission, why we exist, and the middle is our strategy so that we're saying, "This is the direction that we're going in and these are our guiding principles." And then, the very bottom of that is execution, which is, this is how it'll become tangible. These are the plans, action plans. This is what the team is empowered to execute and come up with their roadmaps to bring to life.

So, I think since we established that framework, it helps everybody see the same thing, and it helps us keep and create boundaries. And I feel like boundaries is super important for systems as well. Especially, in enterprise scale where there's so many different local design systems, there's so many different teams. As we've scaled from five products to now over 18 products, we can't do everything within our small team anymore, so we have to figure out what are the methods and methodologies and ways of working that we can establish to help scale all of our thinking out to help other teams. Also, operate and build their own systems the same way.

Chris:

I love the idea of you're basing this a lot in empathy. That ability to create that shared understanding between people that are all about moving in the same direction with this. And I think it's a really great way to get alignment is to think about the phrase, getting others to see what you see. It boils down very nicely the idea of how strategy should function inside of an enterprise organization. How has that been for you to let go of this day-to-day work and be able to focus on that? I mean, obviously, it's a big shift in your day-to-day, but do you find yourself still pulled towards that execution side or are you really, really excited to lean in more deeply in that whole building alignment and building a strategy and building a vision for the future?

Jennie:

Vision is a tool for alignment. I think everything in all those shifts that I was talking about, one of my mantras for the past year was also, let it go, let it flow. So, I learned a lot about...

Chris:

Is that Frozen? Is that the song?

Jennie:

It is.

Chris:

Yeah. There you go.

Jennie:

It is. But if it's in totally with everything. But basically, really understanding... And this is what's been a big shift as well, is we built a business case. We got reinvestment to build a team and grow the team and double the team from two to four teams. And so, with that, say, before I was sole lead designer, now, we have multiple leads across all the four teams. So, then, if I'm operating at a different level, at the architect level, then, I need to let go of the day-to-day. And so, I think it was really hard at first because I was very much into execution and everything, but when you think about it as you let go of those roles and responsibilities in the day-to-day, you're making room for them to grow as well.

And then, I actually have space and the mental, and also, I have a whole other group of leadership that I work with now compared to the team. And so, I'm learning new things as well, so I'm also growing. So, letting go of that execution bit is okay because you're actually executing in a different altitude and communicating across and up a little bit more versus down.

Chris:

I like that idea of thinking about a different altitude. Not least to which is because my altitude has certainly changed over the years and changed as just being a part of a startup CEO. CEO of five person company is very different than a CEO of a 15 person company, very different than a CEO of a 50 person company. And one of the things that I've noticed personally with that is when you get that next level of investment in whatever system it is you're building, the challenge is yes, finding the right people, yes, determining what to work on, but actually, getting everybody to work together, actually becomes a harder, more complex problem than the thing you're trying to ultimately reach as an outcome. And having somebody that is able to guide that and create that alignment becomes an essential role largely because you double the size of your team. Well, that doubles the problem space and doubles the number of opinions and doubles all of the other complexities of just getting a bunch of people to work well together. And it's an interesting shift from this execution mindset of, I need to be in the code, or I need to be in the design files, or I need to be in the system that we're creating. To one that is all about, let's make sure that we're all able to work together to build this thing together.

Jennie:

Yeah. There's a thing called Brooks Law where it's talking about the number of people, and as you keep exponentially adding more people to the team, all the lines of communication, double, triple, and so, that's exactly it. It's like we've doubled the team. It's almost like there's different crafts within the team

now. So, there's like an operational craft, so business and operations. And then, there's another craft of design systems. So, there's also, we call ourselves the crafties. So, I'm the design architect, there's an engineering architect, the content lead. So, we have that triad, and a product manager and a PGM. The PGM and the PM sit across the people and business and operations team too. So, that team is also a head of design, head of engineering product and PGM that are shared.

So, if you can imagine there's two tracks now co-leading the team. One's really focused on vision and strategy of the product. The other one is really focused on people, operations, and business, getting investment, getting buy-in. And then, we work together and we're a bridge and a bench leadership bench together. And so, say for example, the business case stuff that I was mentioning, the people on operations track, they're working with execs to be like, "Hey, we need buy-in and we need investment to grow the system and grow the team because we can't do it with such little people." "Why? What's the ROI?" Da da da.

And then, you have the group of crafties who are the subject matter experts who are working day-to-day and really good at executing, helping craft, and provide that data for the ROI and stuff like that to help support that business case. So, you can see how we can partner together to co-lead the team.

And so, now we also have four little mini subteams that are executing on the vision in different parts of the strategy. But that's how we split up that responsibility because as we've scaled, it is like letting go as well. Before, when I was the only lead, I was like, "I have to do everything from all the details to all the way all up to the big picture stuff." And then, now, we have four subteams and you have a couple lead designers and lead engineers per team, then, they can create the roadmaps. They're empowered to lead those teams and do the details as long as we're all aligned and going towards the same direction.

Chris:

Yeah. No wonder you talked about boundaries being important because you have a fairly complex org design for this, and as long as you're able to define what swim lane or bounded set of decision making people have ownership over, I imagine that's very effective because you have a lot of empowerment at the individual level or at the lead level to make decisions. And then, you have that supportive decision making structure between the four different groups of people.

Jennie:

Yeah. I think R&R is roles and responsibilities across the different layers is super important. So, we've been trying to make it more effective. So, every subteam operates the same at least because it doesn't make sense for them to make up their people and processes and stuff. If we want people to also swap around to be able to jump around teams or streams of work, they should also be pretty much the same. So, it's meta because it's applying systems stuff to the line system team as well.

Chris:

Yeah. The more time I spend in the world of design systems, the more meta it all gets. We now have a very mature design system for our design system software that powers other people's design systems.

Jennie:

Yeah.

Chris:

So, you mentioned a minute ago your three horizons of growth. Just to get a sense of when you talk about strategic thinking inside of your organization, you think about those three horizons. What do those horizons look? What timescale and what level of detail you're looking at across those timescales?

Jennie:

So, the three horizons of growth is what our strategies modeled after, yet again, another framework. It's not a brand new framework. It is called the Three Horizons of Growth and Innovation. The interesting thing is taking that apart and looking at how they apply in different ways. So, basically, we're saying it's a three to five year vision. There's different ways to look at it. There's now, the next, and the future. And then, it's really interesting because we can break that down into say a 70%, 20%, 10% investment across the team. And so, the most important thing about that is that we're always looking and working in each horizon a little bit and thinking about that. So, that's its always evolving and moving towards the next horizon.

So, say, our first horizon is called Harding the UI Foundations, I mentioned this before. We need to redo all the subsystems, the visual foundations again. It's almost been two years. The color system has rolled out. Dark mode is coming, new theming system. So, they laid a foundation basically for a new design token, infrastructure, and the theming system. So, we actually have a light and dark mode coming out. And then, that laid that foundation for the next foundation, which is spacing. And so, the spacing team kicked off and they're able to build upon what the color team built to start building towards what we're calling primitives, which is building blocks. So, everything keeps building upon each other, so that horizon run one really focuses on, we want to modernize and rebuild the infra and architecture and stuff. Horizon two, like I mentioned before, is productizing the system. We want to turn it into a world-class product. We want to make all the parts of it fit together and they just work. The APIs seamless across the whole system is both 60 plus components. And then, we want it to help make the experience across all those 18 products in Atlassian, harmonious. It has to feel Atlassian, it has to use the same foundational systems and build upon them, so they fall into the three pillars.

And then, the third one, third horizon is called systems of systems. So, 10% of our time is thinking about systems of systems, which is, how do we scale what we've built in Horizon one and two out to empower everyone, empowers that third value to be able to build stuff for themselves. We split the team into that 70, 20, 10. So, we have two or three teams on the foundation. We have one team on what we're calling maker experience, which is we're making it super easy and harmonious. And then, that crafties' team that I mentioned, that leadership team, that 10% that's looking at the vision and future and strategy and stuff systems of systems. So, we're working across and up with other teams outside the team to talk about their local systems, how can we standardize, what should the boundaries of a local or versus other systems and create systems of systems.

Chris:

So, who are those other teams? Is that folks at the product level? So, are you talking to somebody at Bitbucket or Jira or something like that?

Jennie:

Yeah. So, there's different layers as well. So, we have our core team, and then, there's actually a platform layer, so there's shared experiences across products. So, cross product collaboration requires notifications or something. And so, they have teams powering that as well, so they have platform teams, and then, we have the product teams in the outer layer. So, we are talking to all of them.

Chris:

Got you. So, that platform team represents the integrated workflows between the different applications and then, those actual individual product teams then, and everybody implements the design system.

Jennie:

Everyone builds upon our design system.

Chris:

Right. That's probably a better way of putting it because you're a foundational system, and then, they have their own implementations that they build on top of that.

Jennie:

Yeah. So, it's like, they're building their local. We've been calling them local systems. So, Jira is huge. So, since they have a whole family of Jira products, now, they're setting off to create Jira design system because we have a Jira platform team because it's so huge that they've formed a platform team to help them. They come to us and they're like, "Okay, we're interested in building the Jira design system. We know we want to use design system, Atlassian design system as the base. What are your best practices? What are the methodologies you guys have been using to apply to say build our Figma library? What's the API or the architecture? Should we use the monorepo, da, da, da. Documentation, what are the best practices for writing great docs that are effective," et cetera.

And so, my team, when I asked them to think about horizon three systems of systems, I'm like, "So, you guys have finished this chunk of work? How can we tie this in a nice bow to think about how can we teach this to others?" Because I think usually people are just like, "Okay, we finished tokens or something. Let's write about it really fast and write some directions and ship it. Here's the docs." That's it. But then, the internal stuff, all the operations of like, "What is the concept model of tokens? How do you think about when to make a token? How do you name a token? When do you scale up to component level tokens or something?" All the other product teams aren't the experts. So, if you guys are at the subject matter experts, how do you multiply that model out to them?

Chris:

So, with the time we have left, I wanted to think about you're in this strategic three to five year planning cycle. A lot of this is about the structural aspects of the design system and reaching a level of maturity that I like to think about as, I mean, I don't know, the promise land. Once you actually have a design system that's in place, it's well adopted, it's effective at delivering better products, what do you build on top of that? And in the context of knapsack, I oftentimes talk about this is getting design systems, infrastructure, and tooling in place is the first step to a more interesting set of strategic work. And for us, that's things like generative design, and that's stuff how do you leverage data about your components to have better decision making around building the right products? What do you think about this at a strategic level once this foundation stuff in place? Of course, there's the renewal and there's the continuing investment in it, but what are the big things that you're looking forward to taking on as you execute on the strategic roadmap?

Jennie:

Yeah. So, you're talking a little bit about the strategies that live within Horizon two and three for us. So, the data and stuff that you're mentioning is our strategic themes we've been thinking about is that second one is really meeting the makers where they are. So, meeting the designers and developers where that they are in their workflow. So, we want to provide the best experience for them of using the system. And so, that means we need to not only provide those methods and systems to help them build their own, but how can they just be super effective, be in the zone, be really happy and want to use it. So, it's creating and cultivating this culture around championing and really loving using that tool. And then, there's a third horizon. So, the themes around there is that conceptual model of what is a design system at Atlassian. What are the boundaries? How do we establish what belongs in the system and then, their local systems? But then, the other part of it is this thing, and that's the generative part.

It's not the same as generative design, but we're thinking about this theme of continuous evolution. So, everything that we're building, all the tools that we're thinking about, we're thinking, how do we incorporate automation into it? How do we establish something? We also have this thing called pervasive IA information architecture that we want to make and establish across all the touchpoints of the system, but we also want to create, say, an API reference for all developers or designers creating their components. And so, we're thinking about all those methods and systems that contribute to automation, you adopt it once... Build once, use forever, but adopt it once, evolve forever.

For example, the tooling side for the developers, they've been investing in code mods, so this thing automatically takes you forward. That's the theme we're thinking about. And so, that's how all of them come together for us to form systems of systems. It's cultural part where we want to get people to love it and want to champion it. Then, there's a tooling part where it's more automated and takes you forward, and helps you evolve with us. And that's why it's so hard to describe systems of systems for us because it's a combination of all the things, and it's really based on how we all work and interact and build those relationships with people to want them to invest and adopt and build it with us.

Chris:

Yeah. It's funny that you talk about it like that too because one of the things that Evan and I used to talk a lot about was design systems and all the things that you build on top of them have to feel natural to the people that use them, and it has to be a path of least resistance. It needs to feel like this is the easier way and so much easier that it doesn't make any sense to continue with old habits. And that's a really challenging bit of complexity to hit on. And it does involve a lot of human empathy and the ideas of how people work. Because for most people like tools and processes, they're religion almost.

There's this deep attachment to the way that things are, or feeling comfortable or knowledgeable in the way that you do something. And the things that we're talking about implementing systems of systems and different tools and automation, it changes all that for people. And that can be really terrifying. And so, when you think about the human adaptation here, what is on the strategic roadmap beyond the tools and the ideas to actually get people to be really excited about this stuff? You talked a little bit about having two teams and one team was about that evangelization. Is that the method that you get people to convert, or is it something more organic than that?

Jennie:

That is one of our things too. It's building an advocate's team that can focus on evangelization education, upskilling education, just full-time empowerment. That's future feature but it really is just building relationships with people. There's different ways. So, personally, I've been working on a vision video, so it's like we've created this vision strategy, we've been trying to evangelize it, and then, how do you distill

all these complex dense topics into something that's inspiring and want to get people to use the system. So, I have all the different teams as they're launching tokens and spacing and color and stuff. They're engaging each team that comes to us, each product team to pilot with them to, here's how you use tokens, here's how you apply them, here's how it makes your life better. And those teams become so... They're just like, "This is amazing." So they become our teachers.

And so, I've been talking about fishing a lot because of that quote is like, "You give a man a fish, you feed them for a day, and then, you teach them how to fish, you feed them for a lifetime." So, we've been using that analogy to how can we just again, multiply our methods and our mindsets to others? And it's really just working with them, co-creating with them. When we pilot with them, we build a relationship. They love using it. We listen to their feedback, we evolve it. They feel bought in. It's culture, cultivating culture, and super interesting. And so, that's invisible systemic underlying thing that is hard to shift without doing all the work before. The vision video that I mentioned is more of a tangible thing. So, it's just how do you tell a story to really show the future about what's coming and really get them excited. So, we also spend a lot of time honing down those super complex topics because it's like, you introduce something like design tokens to this 10 year old system, return 10 this month also.

Chris:

Wow, it's amazing.

Jennie:

Yeah. And so, it's how do you introduce. I think I talked about how do you slip new foundation into old house last time? And it is just been, how do you introduce something so common to us in design systems like design tokens to a whole organization that has no idea what that they are? So, we have to think about interesting ways. It's almost like marketing. We're doing some internal marketing as well. Yeah. So, it's a combination of all those things.

Chris:

Well, Jenny, I love this conversation because it's just shown how much you've grown and changed over the past two years, and I want to just extend a personal thank you. As last month, we crossed 100,000 listens. You were one of the first guests to be on this show, and just want to say a very heartfelt thanks. Those early interviews, different and maybe rougher as they were really paved the foundation for this podcast, and you were a big part of that. And so, I look forward to having you back again where we can talk about the next evolution sometime in the future.

Jennie:

That's so great and congratulations. I'm really excited for everyone.

Chris:

Awesome. Well, hey, great to have you on. Thank you again so much.

Jennie:

Thank you.

Chris:

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 short ideas, recommendations, questions, or comments.

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