Episode #48: Myths and Truths of EE with EllisLab

Lea Alcantara: This is the ExpressionEngine Podcast Episode #48. I'm your host, Lea Alcantara, and I'm joined by my awesome co-host, Emily Lewis. This episode is sponsored by EECI 2011. EECI is up for its 5th season and this time it's returning to the United States of America the most significant conference where ExpressionEngine developers, designers and users will run from October 19th to the 21st at the Invincible Dog in Brooklyn, New York. A few tickets are still available, so check out EECIConf.com for more details.

Emily Lewis: The ExpressionEngine Podcast would also like to thank Pixel & Tonic for being our major sponsor of the year. For our podcast today we are talking with James Mathias, EllisLab's chief creative officer. Welcome, James.

James Mathias: Thank you.

Lea Alcantara: Hi James.

James Mathias: Hi.

Lea Alcantara: So how is it going? How long have you been CCO for now, like as of today?

James Mathias: So I started on June 6th.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: So it's just a little bit over a month.

Lea Alcantara: So how has that been going for you, like it must have been a huge change from where you were before? Like how's that working for you?

James Mathias: Well, you know I've been doing basically the same kind of work for the last eleven years and I can honestly say that aside from the time that I worked on my own as a freelancer, this is probably the most fulfilling work that I've been able to do.

Lea Alcantara: Oh, that's excellent.

James Mathias: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Why would say that? Like what is different now than before?

James Mathias: I get to be in charge of the denying stuff, right?

Lea Alcantara: Okay.

James Mathias: Yeah, when I was doing freelance, there wasn't any bosses or managers or middlemen, right, so it's just me direct with clients and I could really lead that and charge better than I could if I had an agency or at my recent job, which was working at Amazon. So, here as a CCO, I really do have the final say on design and experience.

Emily Lewis: And speaking of that final say, I noticed that one of the first things you did when you joined EllisLab was start the EllisLab user feedback. I guess it's like a little micro site?

James Mathias: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: What prompted you to put that together?

James Mathias: I'm an enormously strong believer in that as a designer and as a developer. I have a very "in the forest staring at trees" be with things whereas a user or somebody who is not a power internet user or another designer or developer, just ordinary people like my mom and my sisters, they are going to have a more overarching view of the forest that I don't have because I'm down in the mucky muck with the other developers and designers, and so it keeps me grounded.

So the first thing I wanted to do out of the gate was to show to the community that I wasn't going to just come in and start moving furniture around without first figuring out why the furniture was where it was, and I really wanted to get that feedback from the community and it's been extremely helpful to me hearing people firsthand as opposed to getting third-party information. A lot of the stuff is stuff that's been being requested long before I came along by the community and there were some people that were concerned that I was asking people to repeat themselves.

In reality, what I was trying to do is hear from the horse's mouth as opposed to playing telephone with the rest of the team and hearing what their take on what somebody's complaint was. When I can hear it firsthand, I can then take that information, distill it down into what they are really asking for. Somebody says, "The CP is broken." Well, why is the CP broken? There are all kinds of opinions around that, but if I can hear people's real complaints firsthand then I can better get to the real solution, or at least to the solution that is going to be more universally accepted.

Lea Alcantara: So in terms of that then because you didn't want to just make assumptions or hear third party, et cetera, were there any surprises based on, let's say, before you established the EllisLab user feedback? I'm sure you've had some biases or your own ideas over what is priority, but based on the feedback, did some of those assumptions changed? And what were those assumptions?

James Mathias: Yes and no, so a lot of my complaints are going to be extremely similar to the complaints of the other people that are participating in the feedback machine because they, like me, are designers and developers, so they've

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got clients who have complaints. And the complaints are mostly coming from that user side, so the thing that I knew coming in was that the CP works really great for you once you've learned it.

Lea Alcantara: Okay.

James Mathias: So it's got an extremely hard learning curve, but once you've learned it, you pretty much are bought in and you are like this is the greatest software to build websites with, and I know I'm not alone in thinking that. But when you hand it off to your client, it's a totally different story because now you've got to train them and show them how to use this really actually difficult to use piece of equipment, and so then that's where a lot of these of those feedbacks coming from is from ways to make this experience of using this better for the actual person who is going to be using it the majority of the time, which is the end user or the client.

I knew that coming in and I'm not surprised to see that that's the majority of the feedbacks. There are some things that are surprising to me with requests that seemed very developer-centric or selfish.

Lea Alcantara: Okay.

James Mathias: That's a little surprising to me just because I just assume everybody is working for the client because the client pays our bills, but clearly, there is going to be the thought that really we don't do that. I'm not going to name anything specific.

Emily Lewis: Well, that almost references our last podcast when we were talking about add-ons that have functionality that we'd like to see in the core. Some of the things like the one Lea mentioned about changing the title label.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: That's definitely for a client focus thing, but I have to admit a lot of the things that I'd like to see are definitely selfish for me to make my life easier, but that's very interesting. I was wondering based on that with people talking about functionality that they would like to see as part of the core. Is that something that the user feedback micro-site is a place that people can go to say additional things that would like to see? I mean, is EllisLab using that as an evaluation point to see what changes might happen or is it really for you to stay engaged in communicating with the community?

James Mathias: So currently, in its current state it is basically a one-way communication. In order to get something added to it, you just need to email me and then, of course, I'll have conversation with you back and forth. Sometimes, people email me stuff that right off the gate it's perfect. It's a perfect idea. It's a perfect suggestion, so we just throw it on there, and then we give them that link so that they can share it to get more people to vote on it if they feel strongly about it. And then some other times, I'll get an email and it would be very broad or big and so we just distill that down a little back and forth until we get an item that we can actually add because we want to keep everything brief and clear on the feedback machine. We don't anything to be super broad or super scope creep if you will.

Eventually, once I get some additional time, I would like to add a submission form to the feedback site, so the people can just submit things, and of course, that would be moderated by me because we are again want to keep it brief and keep it concise so it would have to be moderated, and we also want to add the functionality to show visually when something has made the cut and that's going to be added there.

Emily Lewis: Implemented, yeah.

James Mathias: Or not necessarily implemented, but is now in the backlog. It's now on the roadmap and there are quite a few things on the feedback machine currently that has made the cut. They are on the roadmap and so the visualization of that is probably going to be the next thing that I work out on the feedback machine site.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, and it would be great for the community to see that it starts with their feedback as it moves to the roadmap and then eventually into core. That's pretty cool

James Mathias: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: So I know that ExpressionEngine, the website, has kind of like that roadmap page.

James Mathias: Yes.

Lea Alcantara: So are you trying to integrate the user feedback with that?

James Mathias: Yeah, that will eventually all be on the same site.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: And we are going to move it. It's all going to be on EllisLab as opposed to being on individual product site.

Lea Alcantara: Oh, okay.

James Mathias: So yes, we are going to move that. I think the name of that page is – I don't remember – but we are going to definitely move that page. I know which page you are talking about. We are going to definitely move that into the feedback machine website at some point as well.

Lea Alcantara: You see, I was going to say that's part of the problem. It's like I know that that page exists, but I keep forgetting that it exists. So sometimes, I know one of the complaints within the community is like, "Well, I don't know what they are doing. I have no idea what the progress is." While behind the scenes, there is probably a lot of progress happening but people don't know where to look to see that is happening.

James Mathias: Yeah. And I think that that's one of the main things that I'm trying to change with the whole perception of EllisLab is that it feels very much one sided. So you give your feedback or you send in your request and you might get a response, and this is prior to my coming on. You might get a response. It might make it into the roadmap, but you will never know until it's in an actual release, and then even then you might not know because it might not make it on the change log because it might be so small. So that's one of the main things I wanted to change. I feel strongly that as the CCO my job isn't only to make the product stronger, but to also make the website stronger.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: And also make your experience with the company itself stronger because that's a user experience as well. It's not so much a visual design element as much as how do we communicate with each other. Something that I learned to doing freelance for seven years was clients don't really care on this stuff if it's going to take you longer to do it as long as you communicate that with them in a timely manner. You don't tell them the day before you are launching, "I need ten more days."

Lea Alcantara: Sure.

James Mathias: But you tell them a month out, "This has actually gotten larger than we originally estimated and we are going to need more time." And the client is not going to put that on you. As far as I'm aware, there are no real Web emergencies. We are not saving lives here. We are just building software and websites. People get pretty pumped up about it, but I think proper communication solves some of that.

Lea Alcantara: Sure, we asked the community to send us a few more questions. Some of them might not be necessarily related to the design or the creative direction, but perhaps some functionality. But I was wondering if you could possibly answer some of them.

James Mathias: I will do my best, yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Awesome. So one of the questions is does EllisLab have any plans to implement proper preview functionality into EE? I think that's one of the frequent questions right now.

James Mathias: So like when you…

Lea Alcantara: When you edit something, yeah.

James Mathias: Yeah, when you are editing something, you want to see it. It was in its template.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: Like in the website, without affecting the website?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: Yeah, I believe that that is definitely something that we want to put into the software. It's something I will definitely be pushing for. It is not currently on the roadmap as far as I'm aware.

Lea Alcantara: Okay. I guess in terms of the roadmap and then in terms of the EllisLab user feedback as well then, can you give us hints over the stuff that is on the user feedback that has been placed on the roadmap a little bit that has been accelerated?

James Mathias: Nothing has been accelerated from the user feedback machine. The main focus right now in house is file manager and getting that right, and it's a hard problem to solve. Brandon Kelly's Assets set us back a little bit, I think,

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in terms of what it is that we are going to have to bring out in order to compete, but I think that we can do it. I think that it's going to be an integrated file management solution that you are not going to need anything else.

Lea Alcantara: Now, that's exciting.

James Mathias: To be able to accomplish it.

Lea Alcantara: So that's an interesting comment you made where you mentioned Brandon Kelly's add-on and how EllisLab is thinking of it as, "Well, how do we position ourselves so our software right off the bat can have maybe even better functionality or better user experience than the third part add-on?" So do you currently as the CCO look at, let's say, really popular third party add-ons as competition or do you look at it as…

Emily Lewis: Inspiration?

Lea Alcantara: Exactly.

James Mathias: Yeah, so I think that would be wrong to not look at Assets as competition.

Lea Alcantara: Interesting.

James Mathias: We are selling a piece of software with base functionality and then Brandon creates an add-on, whatever it is, or Low or whoever does creates an add-on. And to me, an add-on should just add functionality, but some of these add-ons are becoming something where people feel the need to have to have that in their install. And I don't think that that necessarily a bad thing and I think that there are a lot of add-ons out there that really should always be add-ons. They shouldn't be part of the core.

Lea Alcantara: Sure.

James Mathias: We don't want to bloat. We don't want a Photoshop, right?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: We want a lean, easy-to-use system, but we also want the base functionality. I personality think file management is a base functionality. It's core functionality. And I think Brandon Kelly is a nice guy and I think he's doing a great job. I think that the way that Assets was approached is a good UX.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: I think that there are some inherently wrong things about it, like mimicking Finder.

Lea Alcantara: Sure.

James Mathias: Finder is a great tool. It's a great UX, but it's unfamiliar to a large portion of computer users.

Lea Alcantara: Sure.

James Mathias: So it's not necessarily the best solution, but in terms of creating something that can compete with Assets, I think that that's a foregone conclusion. I mean, if we put out a file manager or we enhance the file manager that we have, we do have a file manager. It's missing some features that people really want and that's where Brandon's Assets comes in as competition because he has added these features that people had been requesting.

Lea Alcantara: So that…

James Mathias: So that…

Lea Alcantara: Sorry.

James Mathias: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: So that just makes me wonder then because I was wondering on this in the last episode, what is EllisLab's official process in figuring out whether or not a third-party add-on needs to be integrated into EE, either as base functionality or perhaps there is a UI or UX inspiration or whatever, like what is the official line in regards to that?

James Mathias: I don't think that we currently have an official line. I think that that's going to be something that I'll need to define going forward. But no…

Emily Lewis: And will the feedback machine be part of that, you think?

James Mathias: Yeah, but don't get me wrong. If there is a million votes or five stars or something that's clearly not core, it's still not going to become core. It's like there are just things that aren't core functionality to building a website. There are things that everybody wants to use and there are things that people that make things easier. I don't want to say anything specific because I don't want to have to then eat if have to later, right?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: But there are just things out there that are very popular that people use on a lot of things, but still they are not core functionality, so it's not something that we would look at integrating into the core. But that's not to say that we couldn't take inspiration from those add-ons and change the way things are being built right now.

Lea Alcantara: So then in terms of that, will you also be deciding whether or not, let's say, for example, with SafeCracker, you guys decided to just buy it out and integrate it pretty much as is and then implement it and update it yourselves instead of keeping it separate. So what's the thought process in terms of like whether or not you will develop your own proprietary solution just like file manager, like you guys aren't buying out Assets. You've decided, "I'm going to make something better or whatever or more appropriate for EE," versus just buying a third-party add-ons solution.

James Mathias: Right. So I can't really speak directly to the SafeCracker because that was before my time.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, sure.

James Mathias: So how that decision was made I don't know. I do know that we do not have any current plans to buy any other add-ons and make them core. I think the difference specifically between Assets and the file manager is we've got a file manager. It just needs features and it needs a better UX, whereas with the SafeCracker situation, as far as I understand, the safe forms were completely broken from the transition to 1X to 2X and that would have been a lot more work to fix that than it was to just buy SafeCracker and implement it. SafeCracker already worked and it was a thing that people needed now.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: It wasn't something that we had some leniency and a few spreads to get done, like the file manager. The file manager is something that we are iterating on, so there is a version of the file manager in the current software that's, I think, good, but we can iterate on that and build upon that and make it better. SafeCracker, on the other hand, it was completely broken and people needed it yesterday. So I think that's where that decision was made to go in that direction.

Lea Alcantara: So then in terms of iterations you are mentioning, obviously, at least based on the recent blog posts, you guys are going to be a lot more frequent with bug fixes and changes and stuff like that. But what I'm curious about is, since your hire, will we start seeing like more UX, UI like tiny changes here and there as well? Or like any of the UX or UI changes will be more like sweeping changes in larger version changes?

James Mathias: Yeah, so most of the things that we will see in between now and 3 are going to be small iterative stuff.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: With 3, and don't quote me on this, but 3 will probably have more sweeping stuff, just because we have more time between now and then.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: But the smaller releases in between now and then will be iterative. There is going to be, you know, the file manager is one of those things. It's not going to be Assets, right?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: But it's going to be better and it's going to be iterative and over a couple of releases, it would just get better and better. But yeah, most of the stuff will be small. We've already made a few small changes like removing the Accordions, but that's not released yet, but we've removed the Accordions.

James Mathias: Yeah. That was a pretty…

Lea Alcantara: That was a pretty big one.

James Mathias: Yeah. That's a big one, but it was small to implement.

Lea Alcantara: Okay, excellent. So basically, the iterative changes we will actually notice like is what I guess I'm asking because as a designer I make iterative changes here and there where I notice it.

James Mathias: Right.

Lea Alcantara: But perhaps, overall, people don't notice those tiny tweaks here and there, but you are saying that, for example, most people will definitely see the Accordion changing.

James Mathias: So most people will see that change for sure.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

James Mathias: And there are going to also be changes that most people probably are going to miss. For instance, in the last version released, there was a slight color change to the buttons, the secondary buttons above the template manager and anywhere else those buttons appear. I made them look less disabled and more like real buttons.

Lea Alcantara: Okay.

James Mathias: And that's not something that anybody has mentioned at all. So I'm pretty happy about that because it means that it was small enough that it didn't make an impact on anybody's work flow, but it was large enough that I haven't heard anymore of these looked disabled complaints out there.

Lea Alcantara: Cool. Emily, do you have anymore questions?

Emily Lewis: Well, we still have a couple of questions that our listeners have asked I wanted to throw at James and see if he could throw us some thoughts. We've got a question from Mark Dobson. He had asked if EllisLab has any plans to update the forms module to allow for the use of native EE tags into regular templates.

James Mathias: I can't speak to that in terms of whether or not that's on the roadmap or not. That is definitely something that I would like to see, but in terms of being a priority, I'd think it would be fairly low.

Emily Lewis: And for questions like that or things that people are looking for, would you just recommend that they hit you up on that feedback site?

James Mathias: For sure, yeah.

Emily Lewis: We will definitely have a link to that with out show links.

James Mathias: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: We've got one last question from the public. Todd Richards has asked us on Twitter, are there plans to enhance the member management module in the future? Specifically he was wondering if it was something that was being considered to add a user to multiple groups so that he can display content based on groups.

James Mathias: Good news, that is on the roadmap.

Emily Lewis: Excellent!

Lea Alcantara: Yay! That is one of my favorite feature requests

James Mathias: Yeah, that's in there. That's definitely something that we want to work on and get out there for people.

Lea Alcantara: Well, actually there is like a second part of that question that I'm curious about because there is a lot of third-party add-ons that are just coming out right now and that's been in there for a while regarding members as well. Member profile templates, any comments?

James Mathias: Member profile templates, I would like to see them moved out of their special templates area and put into the regular template, but I don't believe that that is something that has been discussed yet. I know that the multiple member groups is a large undertaking and so I don't know if both items will be something that would be reasonable to fit into a single release. But it's definitely something that I would like to see. I think that's something that maybe a lot of people don't understand about the software is that we can't make these enormous changes back to back in these short time periods because these are large, like the multiple member group is a very large undertaking, and I don't think it's going to be super fun. But there is definitely going to be pushed from my side to make sure that those templates could move into their proper place, and I would say so much the same thing about the form templates. I don't like that all that stuff is separated, but like I said before, I think that that form templates are seen as a lot less of a priority. But we've got infinite time, I don't plan on going anywhere and we can just continuously make this software better and better.

Lea Alcantara: All right, I think we got through the majority of questions from our listeners and some of our own questions. We would love to thank our lovely guest, James Mathias, for being with us here today and answering all our questions. Thanks, James.

James Mathias: Thank you.

Emily Lewis: Thanks for joining us.

James Mathias: Yeah, thank you. I really appreciate it and I had a fun time blabbering on.

Lea Alcantara: Awesome. So hopefully we might have you again next time or another time.

James Mathias: Anytime.

Lea Alcantara: Awesome.

James Mathias: Anytime you want, I'll hang out and we can talk. You guys have pleasant voices.

Lea Alcantara: Excellent. Okay, thank you very much.

Emily Lewis: Thanks.

James Mathias: Thank you.

Lea Alcantara: Awesome, so before we go, I would like to thank our sponsors for this podcast, which include EECI 2011 and Pixel & Tonic.

Emily Lewis: We would also like to thank our partners, EllisLab, EngineHosting, as well as Devot:ee for plugging the EE Podcast.

Lea Alcantara: Well, so if you want to know more about the podcast and upcoming episodes, please follow us on Twitter @eepodcast or visit our website at ee-podcast.com. We do have schedules up, so if you want to see what the upcoming episodes are going to be, make sure to go to ee-podcast.com/schedule. So this is Lea Alcantara.

Emily Lewis: And Emily Lewis.

Lea Alcantara: Signing off on the ExpressionEngine Podcast. See you next time. Bye-bye.

Emily Lewis: Bye. Bye.