



CTRL+CLICK CAST #27 Perch CMS with Drew McLellan

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Lea Alcantara: You are listening to CTRL+CLICK CAST. We inspect the web for you! Today we're talking with Drew McLellan about the Perch content management system. I'm your host, Lea Alcantara, and I'm joined by my fab co-host:

Emily Lewis: Emily Lewis!

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Emily Lewis: CTRL+CLICK would also like to thank [Pixel & Tonic](#) for being our major sponsor.

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Lea Alcantara: Speaking of Pixel & Tonic, there's a lot of exciting updates with Craft. They just [released Craft 2.2](#) with minor improvements, but it includes a new position select fieldtype. I actually saw a preview of this fieldtype when Brandon tweeted about Craft's partnership with Mijingo for creating feature intro videos, and their Matrix did had the positioning icon. I saw it immediately. I'm really excited about the feature Mijingo vid because that's essentially what helped Emily and I get started on Craft in the first place.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: So on top of that, for devs who want to extend and create third-party add-ons for Craft, Pixel & Tonic also published a complete class reference, which I think will be a great resource and that will be linked in the show notes.



Emily Lewis: Awesome. Yeah, I love Mijingo. It's becoming my sort of go-to place for tutorials. I feel like they're affordable. We bought one last week. What was it, on Grunt and Gulp?

Lea Alcantara: Gulp, yeah.

Emily Lewis: It's under \$20 or something like that with their back-to-school special discount, and I can't wait to get into it because everyone is talking about Grunt and I haven't even touched it yet.

[Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, I know, like anything that helps make us do our job faster. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Especially the tedious things would be great.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, definitely. So how was your weekend, Lea?

Lea Alcantara: Pretty good. Actually, a friend of a friend is in town and I played tourist a little bit to Seattle.

Emily Lewis: Oh.

Lea Alcantara: And it kind of reminded me that I'm still new to Seattle, you know?

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Sometimes you just get stuck in the neighborhood you're in and the stuff that you know.

Emily Lewis: Oh, lovely.

Lea Alcantara: Because we kind of essentially had a tourist from out of town, I got to explore things that I never really explored because I don't feel like I'm a tourist anymore.



Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: But I'm like, "What, this exist in my city? [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs] I know, I'm in the same boat. I've been here for eight years now in Albuquerque.

Lea Alcantara: Wow!

Emily Lewis: And I really only go exploring when people come and visit me. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah.

Emily Lewis: My sister is coming again for Thanksgiving so I think we're going to head north in the state and explore like towns, some of the old Indian communities and things. There's this like village where all of the – I don't even you can call them houses, but where people live are like curved into the side of a mountain. I forgot the name of it.

Lea Alcantara: Oh, fancy.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, so I'm the same way. I only explore [laughs]. I only explore my now home state whenever someone is visiting. When I'm here, I just go to the store, go to the Farmer's Market, that's it. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, like all your favorites, right?

Emily Lewis: Yeah, right. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah. So like I went to Pike Place Market, and I feel like...

Emily Lewis: Oh, you have been?



Lea Alcantara: No, no, I've been a gazillion times, but there are still certain things because it's so huge and there are so many stores.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: It's like there are still certain things that I didn't even know was there.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Because it's just so much, and then somebody else will be like pause, "Let's take a look at what is that over there." And I'm like, "Oh, I had never seen that before in my life." [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Well, good, I'm glad you're still exploring and you still like it.

Lea Alcantara: Oh, of course. Seattle is amazing city.

Emily Lewis: Oh, that's awesome. Well, I'm glad it suits you in the type of weather that you're comfortable with.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Because I love Seattle as a city, especially there is just a lot to do there.

Lea Alcantara: Oh yeah.

Emily Lewis: And of course, if you're a web geek, it's a great city to live in, but I can't take the weather. Like almost an hour or two hours after I arrive, I'm like, "Oh."

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: To be fair, summers are great there. I have visited it in summer, and they're great.

Lea Alcantara: Oh, sure. For sure.



Emily Lewis: All right, well, let's get to today's episode because I'm pretty excited about talking about a CMS that we haven't yet explored on this podcast, which is Perch. Joining us today is Perch lead developer, Drew McLellan. Drew is one of the founders of edgeofmyseat.com, an independent software company and the maker of Perch. Drew is a front-end and back-end developer, and an advocate for standards and best practices. He's also the publisher of the [24 Ways](#), the advent calendar for web geeks, which I personally look forward to every December. Welcome to the show, Drew.

Drew McLellan: Hi guys, thanks for having me.

Lea Alcantara: So Drew, can you tell our listeners a bit more about yourself?

Drew McLellan: Yeah, so I'm based in the city of Bristol, which is in the southwest of the UK.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: When I'm not in my computer, I like to do things like photography. I'm a bit of a self-photography geek. I do sort of music-photography concerts and that sort of thing, and I also like to get out on my bike and cycle, but I've not been doing that in the last three weeks because I had a pretty big crash.

Lea Alcantara: Oh no.

Emily Lewis: Oh.

Drew McLellan: So [laughs]... so I'm currently injured. I basically came off my bike and did pretty much the same thing that pro cyclists, Mark Cavendish, did on the first day of the Tour de France this year, which is sort of dis-located my collarbone.

Emily Lewis: Oh.



Lea Alcantara: Oh, no!

Drew McLellan: So yeah, I'm in a pretty bad way at the moment. I'm on painkillers. So that's...
[Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Oh my goodness.

Drew McLellan: I figured if it's good enough for Mark Cavendish, it's probably good enough for me.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: That's one way to look at it.

Drew McLellan: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Did it affect your ability to type? Are you able to type okay like code, right?

Drew McLellan: Yeah, I'm able to type okay. Yeah, which is the important thing. That was pretty much the first thing that I thought when they told me how bad the injury was in the hospital.

Lea Alcantara: Oh my God.

Drew McLellan: That was kind of the first thing, because I was like, "Oh, I can still type, I'm okay."
[Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs] So you mentioned photography and music. Do you mean you go to concerts and do photography, or do you also play music?



Drew McLellan: Yeah. Well, I do play. Well, I used to play music quite a bit. I'm a bass guitarist. I got quite to high level when I was at school doing that, but now I just do photography at sort of concerts and in festivals as well just for fun, yeah.

Lea Alcantara: I feel like Emily and I should do a survey of all our guests who say the same things.
[Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Everyone says music and photography are their top...

Drew McLellan: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: I don't even think hobby is even fair. Some people are pretty serious about those things.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: But other than web development or design, photography and music are almost, I'd say, 90% of our guests, it's got to be that high.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Drew McLellan: It's an interesting combination of something creative and something technical meeting.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]



Drew McLellan: It's the same for web design and it's the same for photography and it's the same for music. It's a technical ability in gear and gadgets and things to geek out about, and then the creative outlook of producing something with that technology.

Emily Lewis: Right, and the possibility of mastery, you know?

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: To seek mastery in those areas. I think it's really cool. I personally really dig photography, but I'm not at all musically inclined despite what I do in the shower when I sing.
[Laughs]

Drew McLellan: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs] So let's take a step back and start talking about your company a bit, edgeofmyseat. Before we get into the technical stuff, I'm kind of curious where did you get that name.

Drew McLellan: So the name came from just a brainstorming session where we're trying to think how do you name a company that does sort of web stuff.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Drew McLellan: I know you guys, I guess, are very familiar with this particular conundrum, having just rebranded yourselves.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: We didn't want anything that was particularly tied to anything very specific that we did, so we don't want to be Something-Web-Development or Something-Web-Design or anything too tied to a specific area of work. Basically we were just looking through, and I was looking through



some bags of some CDs and it's basically a song title. There's a song by an artist called Thea Gilmore. He's based out of Oxford in the UK here, and it's called *Edge of my Seat*, and I said, "How about edgeofmyseat?" And yeah, we just went for it. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Awesome. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Do you think that when we were talking with Carl Crawley, he said the same thing, he didn't want his company name to be something tech, something development, something whatever.

Drew McLellan: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And that was exactly our thinking, it does I think help you stand out from the whole XYZ web development studios of the world.

Drew McLellan: Sure.

Lea Alcantara: Well, and also especially considering the evolution of your own company like choosing a name that's got web design or tech kind of thing pigeonholes your company name and focus to just that as opposed to like being able to expand to other things, for example, creating a product like Perch.

Drew McLellan: Absolutely, yeah.

Emily Lewis: So how much of your company focuses on developing Perch versus like client services work or consultancy?

Drew McLellan: So for the last 18 months, so since about January 2013, we've been a 100% on Perch.

Lea Alcantara: Oh yeah.



Emily Lewis: Oh wow!

Drew McLellan: We're still taking on client projects because we were originally a web development company or sort of almost like a consultancy company. We would partner with design agencies. We would partner with guys like you where we would have somebody else with the strong design expertise and then we would bring the strong technical expertise and team up and work on sort of big projects. So we were doing that since, well, this is actually our 13th birthday today.

Lea Alcantara: Oh wow! Yes.

Emily Lewis: Congratulations!

Drew McLellan: So it's 13 years ago today we launched the company, and we were doing that for years and years and years, and we launched Perch as a sort of side project. We just spent a few evenings and weekends working on it before we launched, and then we were running it for about, I guess, 3-1/2 or 4 years. We were running it as sort of side project, and it was gradually becoming more and more and more of the thing and taking out more of our time and something that we wanted to dedicate more and more of our time too rather than the "we were going to getting a little bit bored with client projects." [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs] Fair enough.

Drew McLellan: And Perch was just demanding more of our time. There were things we wanted to do with it. So yeah, in about January 2013, we decided we weren't going to take any new projects. We'd round off with the things that we had ongoing, fulfill the commitments that we had, but then once they were over with, we'd focus 100% of Perch.

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Emily Lewis: [Agrees] Wow!



Drew McLellan: So yeah, that's what we do now.

Lea Alcantara: Well, 18 months is still pretty recent development, I'm curious to know what you think about the difference between designing and developing a product like Perch versus client-facing work. How has it been vastly different?

Drew McLellan: I guess the thing when you're developing projects for a client is that once you finished the project and you've delivered it, you've helped one client.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: So you've spent maybe three months working away at something and it's really great and it helps one particular business do something, and that's great, but that I guess the difference with a product is if you invest that amount of time and then added new features to a product and launched that, then you're helping maybe hundreds or thousands of different projects and hundreds of thousands of different clients benefit from that work.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: So it's quite fulfilling in that way. It's always nice to help one client when you really know their business and you've been working with them and you can see the impact it has, but it's also really great to have lots of customers who are using your software and you know the impact it's having for their clients and for their business as web designers.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]



Drew McLellan: So working with clients, it was good to see the benefit, but to be honest, because we were partnering with design companies a lot of the time, we were one step removed from the client.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Drew McLellan: And we wouldn't always really feel or we wouldn't feel that they'd really benefitted. We wouldn't have that direct communication. We wouldn't know how well and what we've developed had helped their business. So that was a bit frustrating. The fact that we've got lots of customers now, we get good feedbacks from our customers. If we launch new features, we see how they benefit from it and we get that really close feedback loop, which is terrific, so it's really good from that point of view. We really enjoy it.

Emily Lewis: So why did you create Perch in the first place, like was it to scratch an itch that other CMSs didn't?

Drew McLellan: As a sort of development company, we were building lots of big bespoke CMS projects for people so we had like our own sort of framework that was underlying all the projects, but we built a whole lot of the bespoke stuff for each client, and these were big projects, so they'd be months of work and thousands of pounds of development, and then we'd get those same clients come to us and say, "Oh, we've got this small project. However the budget is small as well. To match the size of the project, we've only got a few hundred to spend or whatever. Have you got something that will help us?" And we didn't because we couldn't sort of undercut our own prices and give them something really cheap for a small project and something expensive for big projects. We thought, "Well, we actually need something that takes the ideas that we've been working on with this



big system and distills them down into something really small that may be even a lot of our clients could just install themselves. They wouldn't even need our time to do it for them."

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: So that was the idea behind Perch, it's just something for smaller sites that don't need big bespoke content management work.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: That somebody who's like a technical web designer, somebody who knows HTML and CSS and isn't afraid to do a little bit of PHP if they need to, that person with that sort of skill set would be able to just install it and get it up and running without the need of a dedicated back-end web developer to help them. The other thing we were seeing was web people had sites that's essentially static. In fact, when I started developing the first version of Perch, which is where it's on a project that was almost completely static site. It had every page that was art directed. There was no technology behind it. It was just built out with flat HTML and CSS that we were about to launch, and the day before launch, the client said, "Oh, we'd like to have a new section on the home page that we can update ourselves." But there was no easy way to do that. so we thought, "Wouldn't it be great if there's something you could just drop into the page and start managing content just in that little bit of a page without having to fit the entire site into a content management system?"

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: So that was sort of the germ of the idea on where we started with Perch.

Lea Alcantara: Well, I'm curious then in term of you built it out and you guys have been building the bespoke things. Did you ever consider or did you ever tested out other CMSs before deciding, "No, it's better for us to build our own."



Drew McLellan: The time that we decided to build our own, because we were thinking of targeting the sort of smaller sites, there were lots of CMSs out there that targeted small sites, but they were all Software as a Service.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: So they are hosted things like Cushy CMS. I don't know if you've come across that.

Emily Lewis: Oh. [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: And that also has a model of you log into their site and you give them your FTP details, and that sort of connect into your hosting, fetches the files, manipulates them and puts them back. A bit like Blogger used to do back in the day if you remember that.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Drew McLellan: So things like that, that existed, they had that sort of Software as a Service model, and the particular time we were starting out, services like that seemed to be undergoing a lot of downtime, and of course, that's frustrating for people's clients. If you're a web designer and you've given that into your client and that service is unavailable, it kind of reflects badly on you and the client gets frustrated. So there wasn't anything that we could see other than WordPress that enabled people to install stuff, though small, and sort of quick get going on their own site.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: And as good as WordPress is, there are a lot of disadvantages and shortcomings when it comes to building a site that isn't just completely a blog.

Emily Lewis: Right.



Drew McLellan: We've had a lot of chats with web designers and people that we know just on Twitter and in our local community who kind of frustrated with using WordPress and were looking for something different, so we offered them something that gave them a bit more, have the sites that weren't just blogs. So that was kind of what we keyed in on. It's something that you could install yourself on your own server and something that wasn't just completely based around a blog. I think installing something on your own server is quite key for the way a lot of web designers work. Typically on smaller sites, the client will come and you'll quote them how long it will take to build something, and you build it, and then you send them an invoice, and then unless they'd actually want revisions done into that, that's pretty much the contact that you have with that client for a little while.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: So having a CMS that you just pay for once and you just install on their hosting and away they go, you can build them for that upfront. It doesn't introduce any complications into that relationship.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: You don't have to think about, "Oh okay, now, I've got something else I have to bill them for every month, or I've got this other service that I'm paying for and I've got to work out which of my clients pay which proportion of it." It's just simple. If you're doing lots of sites for lots of clients, it's just a really simple way to work, so that was kind of our thinking behind it.

Emily Lewis: Well, as you just described it, it makes me wonder, is that who you're really targeting Perch at, designers, developers like Lea and I, or is it something that it's not necessarily targeting them, but more for our clients' users?



Drew McLellan: So I guess we've got sort of three people we targeted at. Obviously, when we're designing or making design choices about how the features in the software work, we think about the client, the end user, but really our target customer is, yeah, people like Lea and yourself, Emily, who are doing projects for clients, and maybe people who aren't core back-end developers, but are more mixed, a bit of front-end, a bit of back-end, a bit of design, sort of small business generalist-type web designers who know what they're doing, who've got good taste, they don't want to put out really bad markup or don't want anything that's just really ugly in front of their client, or people perhaps who care about web standards. It's that sort of audience that we're thinking of, who chooses what he's churning out sites because you guys care into that, doesn't it?

Lea Alcantara: Sure.

Drew McLellan: But people who are producing lots of sites for lots of clients over the course of the year, they'll do a good number of sites. We're thinking of those sort of people.

Emily Lewis: So with that in mind, when you began development of Perch, was it something where you reached out to colleagues to ask what the kind of features they were looking for in a small CMS, or was it something that you developed initially, put out there, and then based on use, you then added to and tweaked?

Drew McLellan: Well, it was really interesting, because we've been building bespoke CMSs for our clients, and our clients were web designers. When we were doing the services business, the person paying our invoice was the web designer, not the end client. So that kind of put a quite interesting dynamic on things because I think that from a developer point of view, there's sometimes a tendency to think if a designer asks for something and they're just collaboration on your team, they're asking for something that helps them control the design or anything like that, if it's difficult to do technically, there's a tendency just to push back and say, "Well, that's going to make things hard." But when that



designer actually is your client and they're saying, "Oh, this is what we need," even if it's a hard problem to solve, you kind of get on and solve it.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: And that was just the situation that we were in, so we've actually been developing CMS software through iteration over lots of different projects and lots of different situations. It was designed to really help designer produce a website and we knew the requirements that designers wanted. We're talking about things like not controlling any of the markup that goes out. That's all completely down to the designer, not presuming there's going to be a header and a footer and a sidebar, and those sorts of things. As a developer, you might just assume from looking at sites, but actually working with designers, you find out, "No, every site is different," and they need complete control over the structure of the page and that sort of thing. So we were able to take a whole load of those ideas and distill them down into how we built Perch. So I think the first version, I think we spent about six days, like three weekends getting to Version 1.

Emily Lewis: Oh wow!

Drew McLellan: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: That seems fast to me.

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Drew McLellan: Yeah, it was fast, and we just put it out there. We just spent our own weekends doing it. We haven't invested a lot of money. We had spent a bit of money on getting the user interface designed, the control panel, and we had spent some money on sort of legal stuff, having our license agreement drawn up, but other than that, we haven't really spent anything, and so we just



launched it and crossed our fingers and thought, “Well, if this works, it works and we’ll carry on, and if it doesn’t, we’ve not lost much.”

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: And we’ve basically just been iterating on it since then, taking feedback from customers. We sort of weigh up what we’re asked for with what we believe the direction of the product should be and try and come up with them happy and work through that maze and just keep making the product more useful and better for people without adding loads and loads of stuff that not everyone is going to benefit from.

Lea Alcantara: So speaking of that, especially because it’s based on feedback and things like that, as Perch has evolved, has it become better suited for a particular type of site or project or even content author?

Drew McLellan: So we always thought that Perch be used on small sites, so sites for like a local restaurant or a bed-and-breakfast place or maybe a club in a community hall or a place of worship, or those little sites that the bread and butter of awful lot of web designers. They are just producing lots and lots of those for lots of really small clients. So that was the ideal site that we had in mind when we designed it. But what we found very quickly was the people, yes, they were using it for those sorts of sites, but they were also using it for much bigger sites that just didn’t have complex needs.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Drew McLellan: So they might have an awful lot of content, but they don’t really need to do anything particularly complex with that content. It’s just only needs to be managed, and they were finding that Perch worked really well for that, so we’ve always tried to keep that sort of core idea of the fact that this should work for really small site and shouldn’t add loads of stuff in the way. If you just want to



produce a small site and get out the door quickly, Perch shouldn't get in the way if you're doing that. But then if we tried to add in features that enabled people to work with bigger sites, so we're on Perch Version 2 now. We're actually on 2.6.

When Version 2 launched, we redesigned the control panel interface, just to help it deal with more content because that was the limitation. It wasn't the sort of technical sort of infrastructure dealing with lots of content. It was just fitting lots of content into this interface that's the difficult thing, so we redesigned that, and yes, the sort of sites that Perch probably isn't suited for are things with really complex requirements. So we have stuff like membership features, but if you're building a big membership site, just like membership is the core idea, then perhaps Perch isn't the best thing for it. There are better things for that.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: We've got some e-commerce stuff. If you want to produce a small site and sell a few items through PayPal, for example, Perch is great for that. But if you're producing an online store for a big retail company, it wouldn't be suitable. We're just trying to keep the features quiet, simple and do the 80% of what people need, and if you've got requirements beyond that, then you're better looking at something that's more dedicated towards the task you've got in hand.

Emily Lewis: That actually leads me to a question that I had prepared myself to ask, which was about your 38 first-party add-ons, on which are free.

Drew McLellan: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: So is that why you chose that model for some of those features, to keep things simple in Perch? For example, you have an add-on for a blog, which might be something that would be just a standard out-of-the-box in another CMS.



Drew McLellan: Right, yeah. It's absolutely that. I think most people familiar with using a bit of software from it being quite young and then over time just more and more stuff gets added in and before long, you're finding it slow and it feels bloated. That's the word you often hear. They'll say, "Oh, it's so bloated now. It's really slow. I wish it would go back to how it was." And so we wanted to make sure that we kept Perch really fast and really simple because if you have loads of features in something like a CMS that you're then putting in front of your clients, if they don't need those features, they'll be distracted by them.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: And if you add complexity in there, they have to learn how to use the more complex features, so basically we wanted to make sure that Perch still work really well for those really small sites, but then if you needed something like a blog, you could just download and add it, and if you need a PayPal shop, you could download and add it, and if you needed membership stuff, you could just download and add it, and so you could basically custom piece together your own solution.

Emily Lewis: Well, and beyond that adding features and functionality to the core simple, I was even commenting to Lea before we got you on the call this morning that the control panel is really simple. By that, in a very good way, it doesn't give you four different ways to get to one thing. It's clear where you need to go to do the tasks you need to do. It doesn't have a lot of complexity in the user interface, which speaking to what you were saying, it makes it easier for the content author.

Drew McLellan: Yes, and that's very deliberate, so that when you log in, what you see is your content. You see your site and it's easy to find where something is to edit, and you're not distracted by lots of other things. You haven't got to understand lots of constructs. You haven't got to understand where things go. You can see the structure of your site and to drill down into it, find the page you want to edit and just edit it. That's sort of the idea there.



Lea Alcantara: Well, that kind of leads me to ask a little bit about documentation, because good software, good websites, it should be fairly clear what to do, but obviously not everything is clear. I feel like Perch has a lot of documentation including video, and I feel like that is rare. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Because documentation takes a lot of time. So has documentation been a priority from the beginning for Perch, or did it just grow based on the growth and evolution over the years since launching Perch?

Drew McLellan: Yeah, documentation is so hard. It's so hard to get documentation right.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: Because you have users of different experience.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Drew McLellan: And you have users of different learning styles, so the documentation that one person wants as their ideal documentation is completely different from what somebody else will want.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: So some people will just want like an API references, and other people will want working through it, and others will want a video. So I'm kind of the opinion it's impossible to produce a perfect documentation because what's perfect is different for everyone. So what we've tried to do is have a variety of different things. So we have a complete video tutorial that takes you all the way through building a site, and we have this sort of documentation for the template system and all those sorts of things, and in fact, we're just recreating it all at the moment.



We're about to launch a new documentation system with mostly the same content, but we've sort of restructured it so that we can produce it quicker. Our current documentation site is built on our old content management system platform that we used to use for clients, which is fine, but we're finding we want to be able to produce docs for the next version of Perch and have those all ready to go and just launch them, and so we're actually switching and having them as markdown files. We're using Jekyll to produce the static site with that which may have been a bad decision already, but we'll let you know on that one. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: So yeah, it is difficult, and we just try. We've kind of had this policy of having no frequently asked questions, so if somebody comes and asks us a question and we've heard that question before, that's a failure on our part. We try and make sure that if somebody has got a question, we'd make a change either in the document or in the product to make sure that nobody else ever has that question again, and again, that's an ideal scenario, it doesn't often happen, but we try to make sure that the same things aren't coming up over and over again, because if they are, then there are lots of people getting frustrated over the same point, and we need to fix it.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: As a new developer to Perch, I found the documentation really refreshing in comparison to some other CMSs and the lack of depth of documentation maybe.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]



Emily Lewis: But it reflects that commitment that you just described because I started writing questions as I was going through the steps and then I looked at the documentation, “Oh, it’s already answered. Oh, that’s already answered.” [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: So my questions were answered following not only just a text documentation, but then I was also going through the videos and it made it a really nice install and then a really nice initial setup and getting familiar with it. I walked away without really any major questions, which kind of was a first. [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: That’s really good to hear. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: But as you mentioned, it’s so difficult to do this. How much time do you guys set aside? How much resources do you set aside to create this type of documentation, and how do you plan for it?

Drew McLellan: Well, yeah, it’s difficult because the documentation comes in sort of batches so when we have a new version of the software, there’s a new load of things to document, and it’s something actually we’ve struggled with a bit in the past when we launched Perch 2, just because it’s like a two-person company. We just took on too much when we did that. We had a new website, a new version of the software. We switched payment providers. We had new documentation and a new documentation system.

Lea Alcantara: Wow! [Laughs]



Drew McLellan: And we just did far too much all at once, and it nearly killed us. [Laughs] So we try now to do things a lot more incrementally. As I've said, we're just making that change now to do any managing documentation in a different way so that we can make incremental changes as we're writing the code. As we're writing features, we can write the documentation for them ready to go rather than having to do it in a great big blog once the software is launched. So yeah, it's difficult. I wouldn't recommend it necessarily the way that we do things to anyone else. We're just sort of still figuring it out for ourselves and we keep changing direction every year or so. So it's definitely a hard problem, but it's good to hear that perhaps it's working. [Laughs]

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Emily Lewis: Well, I think it's one of those things, like Lea said a little earlier like documentation is one of those areas where there's no guarantees. You invest in something, a new CMS or some type of software, and the documentation, I mean, for me, my experience is, it often doesn't live up to what I need, and so it was refreshing to see how much was already available. But I think that sort of speaks to the fact that Perch is not brand new. It's been around for a while.

Drew McLellan: Yes. It's just over five years since we launched. So it still feels new to us, but actually I guess we're quite well established now.

Lea Alcantara: Especially in internet years, five years, that's ancient now. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Well, speaking of documentation, that kind of leads towards support.

Drew McLellan: [Agrees]



Lea Alcantara: Because before anyone contacts you, the first level is check the documentation and see if it's already been answered, et cetera. There are actually two parts of the support questions really. First of all, Perch is priced for website, and that includes support. How does that work for you? How does that pricing model worked for you? And do support request ever get to the point where it actually negatively affects the profits from that initial purchase?

Drew McLellan: It hasn't done yet, mainly because as we just said, we try to have good documentation. We try to make sure that people aren't coming back with the same questions.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Drew McLellan: We kind of figured that support is our problem to deal with. It's not something that the customer should have to pay for because...

Emily Lewis: I like that. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: As a customer, I like that. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Drew McLellan: Well, I think if you're charging the customer for support, then actually from a business point of view, the incentive is on you as a software developer to make really bad software.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: Oh right.



Drew McLellan: Because the worse your software, the more the customer has to pay for support. When support is free, and we're taking the cost of support, it's in our interest to make the software as good as possible and the documentation to be as good as possible so you don't need to ask us for help.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Drew McLellan: And if you don't need to ask us for help, like everybody wins.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Drew McLellan: So that's kind of the approach we take with the support. I mean, I guess I probably spend maybe three or four hours a day doing support, but in that time, we'd get everybody a response usually, well, often it's within minutes if I'm at my desk, and certainly we try within a couple of hours to get people responses. I think the only exception to that is when we've both been on like an airplane. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Sure.

Drew McLellan: And then somebody might have to wait for seven or eight hours for a response, which we think is terrible, but when you sort of look at the sort of industry standard, that's not too bad. So yeah, we like the onus being on us to have to provide good support, and if it got to a point where it's costing us lots of money, we would know we were doing a bad job so we have to make a change to make sure that people weren't asking us for support because they could find the answers themselves.

Lea Alcantara: Interesting. But with that, it comes obviously prioritizing support requests. Do you have any particular system or way where you're like, "Okay, this one can wait maybe an hour, but this one I need to respond to ASAP."



Drew McLellan: No, it's basically all of them I need to respond to ASAP. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Okay.

Drew McLellan: So I kind of take the opinion that if somebody has got a problem and have got stuck to the point where they're needing to post and ask for support, then I'm holding up that day with bad software. I don't want that to happen. So I make sure that I can answer their request as quickly as possible. So the prioritization is just first come first served.

Lea Alcantara: Oh.

Drew McLellan: When I take a break from writing code or whatever, I go into support and I just clear the support. I just work through from the one that's been there the longest to the most recent and again I'll answer them and we need to move forward, and if that means I spend the rest of the day in support because there are some tricky problems to solve, then that's what happens, and we get people answers.

Lea Alcantara: Do you have any guarantees for support? Especially if there is, say, an "enterprise client" and they're really very anxious about something, do you only provide email support or would you pick up the phone?

Drew McLellan: We have the support forum and so basically it's either that, and then for private, we have the email, so when people dealing with sensitive information and that sort of thing, they don't want public.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: Right.



Drew McLellan: We prefer people to post in the open forum because then the answers to their questions help other people who search in the future, but we don't have any sort of extra levels of support for enterprise customers. We don't have any guarantees other than we will try and help you out as quickly as we can and do as good a job as we can.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Drew McLellan: And so far that's been fine. We haven't had anyone approach us and asks for a particular agreement or anything like that, and I guess we'd have to cross that bridge if and when we come to it, but we just try and help people as quickly as we are able. Again, we don't have published support hours, but generally if we're at a computer, we'll make sure the support queue is cleared on that, so that's seven days a week, Christmas day, everything where [laughs] we answer the support questions.

Emily Lewis: So I wanted to bring up this subject of the templates. I did my very first Perch install this weekend, and mostly just got myself familiar with it. I went through all the tutorials and things, but one thing that really stood out to me, especially as a front-end developer, and correct me if I'm using the wrong terminology, but you have a Perch tags, that `<perch:content/>`. Is that a Perch tag?

Drew McLellan: That is, yeah.

Emily Lewis: So the syntax, it looks just like HTML. You've got angle brackets, attributes, values. Was that intentional to sort of appeal to someone like me, the people who would be developing the templates, or was that just the default underlying language you are using?

Drew McLellan: Now, absolutely, it's deliberate choice to try and make the learning curve as shallow as possible.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]



Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: Because if you're building websites, you know HTML. You know how to build an HTML tag, therefore, let's just use that structure to do our template tags.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Drew McLellan: Really, with Perch, everything starts at the templates because I don't know about you, but when I'm looking at a site I need to build, I need to content manage, say, if I've got like a list of product or something, I'll look down, I'll say, "Okay, well, the products got a title, and it's got a price and it's got an image and a description." And I'll look and see what the various things are, and then, of course, the next step is to work at how you get that into the content management system.

So what we've done with Perch is basically taking the HTML presentation and turn that into the description of what our field's need. So instead of having to go somewhere and define that you want a price field and a title field, you just drop it into your template, and then that shows up as something you can edit. So the front-end code defines what data you capture.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: It defines your schema in sort of database terms. So our templates do like a double duty of both describing the data that you're capturing and how it should be output to the page.

Emily Lewis: It was probably the thing that surprised me the most in a really pleasant way. It instantly appealed to me. I was like, "Oh, I can write that. That's easy." And that it made sense to me because the syntax is so familiar for what I've been doing my entire career, and I also loved that. I love HTML and when I say I love HTML, I love it.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]



Drew McLellan: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: I love working in it. I was like, “Oh, I don’t have to go into the control panel and set up these fields. I’m just in my markup throwing in some tags that I’m comfortable with, and then they’re in my CMS.”

Drew McLellan: Yeah, absolutely.

Emily Lewis: It’s really nice.

Drew McLellan: That’s completely the idea there. It just comes from this idea of semantic markup and the fact that if somebody say heading, you’re going to use the proper H whatever tag to describe it. Well, it goes a step further and you can tell the content management system from your markup what you want that to be. So we just thought it was kind of a natural way. The idea of using HTML style tags actually I had borrowed from – do you remember the old blogging system Textpattern?

Lea Alcantara: Oh yes.

Drew McLellan: I use it. My own blog still runs that because I don’t have time to update the software on that blog.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: But the idea of using tags and like HTML style tags comes from Textpattern, so the full credit to Dean Allen there.

Emily Lewis: It was nice for me to see this and have that sort of instant comfort and goes like, “Oh, this is not going to be hard at all, like I just had to sync.” One thing that I think is a challenge when you pick up a new CMS is getting comfortable with the syntax, you know?



Drew McLellan: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: It's not that concepts of a CMS are hard, it's what are the right things I'm supposed to type with the right characters and everything to make it do what I want, and this was instantly comfortable, and I was not familiar with Textpattern so I thought it was extremely clever and thought you were very brilliant. [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: So I have another, not really a question, but just a comment. I have sort of already mentioned it earlier, but I just wanted to say again how much I really liked how clean the control panel was, and one of the areas that really stood out to me was in the rule for user permissions, privileges.

Drew McLellan: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: It's just so simple. It's really just a clean page. You go to it, you can set up a new rule and use the checkboxes to say what the privileges are. It's just so simple and clean. It was a really refreshing experience.

Lea Alcantara: And I have got a question in regards to that user interface. So Perch is run by you and Rachel, right?

Drew McLellan: That's right, yeah.

Lea Alcantara: So which of you is responsible for the actual design of the interface of Perch?



Drew McLellan: Neither of us. We outsourced the actual design to a really good friend and former colleague I used to work in a design agency, so I used to be like the developer guy in the corner of the design agency.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: And a couple of different jobs in the past I worked with this guy called Nathan Pittman who's a really great interface designer.

Lea Alcantara: Oh, we know Nathan.

Drew McLellan: You know Nathan, great.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, yeah.

Drew McLellan: So Nathan runs a company now called Nine Four and so he's gone out on his own and so we contract our interface design work out to him and he does a really great job. He's doing it right from the very first version all the way through. So yeah, that has gone well. Anything that's good is Nathan's work, and anything not so good or looks a bit bad is where I haven't quite got Nathan's designs right. [Laughs]

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Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Interesting. So with that sort of relationship then, how often do you need to loop him in when you're creating or tweaking the interface or adding a new feature?

Drew McLellan: He's basically designed us a system to be able to implement things.



Lea Alcantara: Oh.

Drew McLellan: So fortunately, I don't need too often to go back to him, but for example, recently we did a big release that added an asset manager to Perch, and I knew that we didn't want to do a sort of really traditional sort of yellow folder tree Windows 95 style browse feel or image kind of interface. I wanted something a bit more modern, more sort of phone like, a bit more app like, and so I went to Nathan with the brief and we collaborated quite a lot on that and went through lots of different design iterations and came back with a new interface design for how that would work, and that would work with the sort of an off-canvas asset manager that slides in and you can pick your own, and then it slides back out and it's so quiet. It's so quite modern and nice, and there's no way I could something like that on my own. [Laughs] I need somebody who knows what they're doing design-wise to help me come up with solutions like that. So yeah, it's really great relationship working with Nathan.

Emily Lewis: So before we finish up the episode, I'm just curious, we had mentioned earlier you've got 38 first-party add-ons which first-party you guys developed and maintain, right?

Drew McLellan: That's right, yeah.

Emily Lewis: Do you work with any third-party developers to enhance Perch or create add-ons for Perch?

Drew McLellan: There are a few different third-party developers who are building things. The problem at the moment is that there's no central place to find them, and that's actually something that we've been working on. We've got just about ready to launch is sort of an add-on directory or add-on store. I think that the last thing we need to decide is what it's called. So it's sort of an add-ons directory which is going to list all our first-party add-ons so we can move them out from where they're listed on the website at the moment and move everything into this sort of one directory. So it will



have all the first-party add-ons, and then there's a system for people to submit their third-party add-ons into that. So you'll be able to find everything in one place.

So when we launch that, which should be within a few days of this going out hopefully, there's a tremendous opportunity I think for third-party developers to get in there early and have stuff listed while it's quite quiet. While it's mainly first-party stuff, there's going to be a really great opportunity for people to sort of establish themselves, and with that, we've been working quite hard on revising our API and adding out some new things to make it easier for third-party developers to build things. So in the most recent version, we added lots of hooks and there are others like an events system so you can have your add-on be notified if some content is changed and the pages have been published and all that sorts of things.

So we've been adding that in, and really trying to improve the API and we've gotten new API documentation that we're going to launch at the same time as the directory. So, yeah, at the moment, it's more quiet than we'd like with the third-party add-ons, but I think there is tremendous opportunity and we're trying to make it a really great place for people to be able to write their code and share it and possibly even turn into a bit of a side business for them to be able to sell things.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: Because after five years, we've gotten an awful lot of customers, and so it's great.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Drew McLellan: It's going to be a real opportunity I think for enterprising people to tackle the sort of things that we wouldn't necessarily do as first-party add-ons, the more niched things or integrating with more specialist services or maybe taking one of the simple things we've done and doing a super charged version of it.



Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Drew McLellan: So I think there's going to be lots of opportunity there. It should be quite exciting over the next few months, I think.

Emily Lewis: So beyond that add-on store, is there anything else exciting on the radar for Perch?

Drew McLellan: There's a new version of Perch we're working on called Perch Runway.

Lea Alcantara: Runway?

Drew McLellan: Yeah, where we've sort of preannounced that and we've got a public beater program that people can sign up to which we've said sort of this autumn or this fall, we're going to be making that available for people to start testing with, and the idea of Perch Runway is it is for those bigger sites, and this is coming back to the idea of not wanting to make Perch really bloated, but still wanting to respond to the need that people have. They really love Perch. They're using it on smaller sites, and now, things are going full circle and they want to use it on bigger sites that have bigger requirements, but they really like the way that Perch does things.

So Perch Runway is kind of like a super set of Perch, so it's built on top of Perch and it's a whole lot of extra features that's targeted towards bigger sites. So it does things like have support for CDNs, so pushing all your images onto something like S3 or something like that, and instead of being reliant on physical pages in your website, it's all rewritten URLs and has a routing system for that. So it's for those sort of bigger sites. It has more workflow features. You can see who's edited what and when and all these sorts of things. So it's stuff that bigger sites want and bigger organizations require, but still the same simple Perch philosophy in how content should be managed. So that's quite exciting, we're really looking forward to that. It's sort of the thing that is going to appeal more to people who



are on the developer side than the designer side. I think it sort of leans more that way, but I think it's going to be a really good complement a product to Perch. I think people will like it.

Emily Lewis: Exciting.

Lea Alcantara: It sounds great. So before we finish up, we've got our rapid fire ten questions so our listeners can get to know you a bit better. [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: Okay.

Lea Alcantara: Are you ready Drew?

Drew McLellan: I'm ready.

Lea Alcantara: Okay, Question 1, Mac OS or Windows?

Drew McLellan: Mac.

Emily Lewis: What is your favorite mobile app?

Drew McLellan: At the moment it's the Philips Hue App, which I can use to control the light bulbs in my living room.

Lea Alcantara: Right, yeah. I've heard of those.

Emily Lewis: Wonderful. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Right. What is your least favorite thing about social media?

Drew McLellan: The how easy it is to complain. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]



Drew McLellan: Without filtering yourself, and I know I'm as guilty of that as anybody, but yeah. Hey, it's very easy just to vent and complain when perhaps it would be better to just take a step back and calm down.

Emily Lewis: What profession other than yours would you like to attempt?

Drew McLellan: Well, I mentioned or I sort of did a little bit of talk about it. I think I quite liked to do that, but before I got into the web I was trying to be a sound engineer. So maybe that.

Lea Alcantara: What profession would you not like to do?

Drew McLellan: Oh, I would like to do tech support. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Wait a minute. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Who is the web professional you admire the most?

Drew McLellan: I think probably after all these years, Jeffrey Zeldman, still. I think Jeffrey is a good friend, and I think he is very selfless in the way that he helps other people to shine and so yeah, he's been a big inspiration. He's a really great guy. So it's Jeffrey.

Lea Alcantara: What music do you like to code to?



Drew McLellan: Oh, I like sort of funky stuff and things that I can just let flow through the background. I listen to a lot of Ani DiFranco, so I mean, I listen to that a bit. I don't know. Not quite calm, quite angry.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: Somebody's angry music.

Emily Lewis: Angry feminist music. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: Yeah, but that's good. I'm into that, so yeah.

Emily Lewis: What's your secret talent?

Drew McLellan: Oh, I don't think I have any secret talents.

Emily Lewis: Do you have a known talent? [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: [Laughs] No, I have no talent.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Oh.

Drew McLellan: And I think I really have no talents. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]



Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: I do, I play the bass guitar. How about that?

Emily Lewis: Okay. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: What's the most recent book you've read?

Drew McLellan: I've been reading an awful lot of cycling autobiographies of pro cyclist and recently retired pro cyclists, so an awful lot of those. Sports biographies, I never thought I'd be somebody reading sports biographies, but here I am and yeah.

Emily Lewis: And lastly, Star Wars or Star Trek?

Drew McLellan: Well, I've never seen Star Wars.

Lea Alcantara: Oh.

Emily Lewis: What?

Lea Alcantara: What? [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: Yes, yeah.

Emily Lewis: No.

Drew McLellan: And the only Star Trek I've seen is like the really old Captain Kirk stuff. I think I just really hate space. Space is all...

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: So I just don't go anywhere near it, yeah. Neither of them.



Lea Alcantara: Oh my gosh, that's amazing.

Emily Lewis: Oh, that's my now favorite quote from the show, "I hate space." [Laughs]

Drew McLellan: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah. So that's all the time we have for today. Thanks for joining us, Drew.

Drew McLellan: No problem. Thank you for having me.

Emily Lewis: In case our listeners want to follow up with you, where can they find you online?

Drew McLellan: They can find me on Twitter. I'm at [@drewm](#) and my blog is allinthehead.com.

Emily Lewis: And how about finding Perch online?

Drew McLellan: So on Twitter, we're [@grabaperch](#), and we're at grabaperch.com.

Emily Lewis: Awesome. Thank you so much, Drew. We're so glad we finally got you on the show.

Drew McLellan: Thanks guys.

[Music starts]

Lea Alcantara: We'd now like to thank our sponsors for this podcast, [Pixel & Tonic](#).

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Lea Alcantara: This is Lea Alcantara ...

Emily Lewis: And Emily Lewis ...

Lea Alcantara: Signing off for CTRL+CLICK CAST. See you next time!

Emily Lewis: Cheers!

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