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CTRL+CLICK CAST #59 - Overwhelmed by Code with Susan Robertson

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Lea Alcantara: From Bright Umbrella, this is CTRL+CLICK CAST! We inspect the web for you! Today, special guest Susan Robertson joins us to talk about some of the challenges we face working in an industry where there seems to be some new trend or technique every day. I'm your host, Lea Alcantara, and I'm joined by my fab co-host:

Emily Lewis: Emily Lewis!

Lea Alcantara: This episode is brought to you by Craft Commerce, a brand new ecommerce platform for Craft CMS. If you're a web shop that likes to create custom-tailored websites for your clients, you're going to love Craft Commerce. It's extremely flexible, leaving all the product modeling and front-end development up to you, and it's got a simple and intuitive back end for content managers. To learn and download a free trial, head over to craftcommerce.com.

[Music ends]

Emily Lewis: Happy New Year, Lea.

Lea Alcantara: Happy New Year, Em!

Emily Lewis: And happy New Year to all our listeners. We're back from a much needed break last month, refreshed and excited to kick off our 2016 season. Our first guest this year is Susan Robertson who's joining us to talk about feeling overwhelmed by code, how to find focus on strong work when there is some new workflow approach concept that becomes the thing to do.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: You hear about it in blog posts, at conferences, on Twitter, everywhere. Susan is a front-end developer currently working with Fictive Kin. She focuses on CSS, style guide, responsive dev and accessibility, and when she's not coding, she's writing, including contributions to A List Apart and the Pastry Box. Welcome to the show, Susan, and happy New Year!

Susan Robertson: Happy New Year to you guys, and thanks for having me.

Lea Alcantara: We're glad to have you on the show, Susan. So can you tell our listeners a bit more about yourself?

Susan Robertson: Sure. I live in Portland, Oregon, and I do a lot of coding by day and by night, I do a lot of drawing and reading.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Very fun. Very cool. Did you read any good books over the holidays?

Susan Robertson: I'm actually reading about economics right now. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Oh. That sounds relaxing. [Laughs]
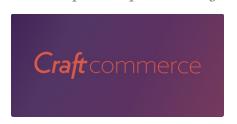
Susan Robertson: Yeah. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: It's a bit of a new topic for me. So yeah, but it's been interesting so it's kind of totally different than the web which has been good for me.

Lea Alcantara: Cool.

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Emily Lewis: Yeah. Well, I've been thinking about that a lot lately myself trying to find something to fill my free time with that has absolutely nothing to do with what I do for a living.

Susan Robertson: Yeah. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: It's a good thing.

Emily Lewis: So before we get into today's topic, I'd love to know how you went from being a freelance developer to working for Fictive Kin, why the shift?

Susan Robertson: I worked for a startup called Editorially that shut down almost two years now.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And when I left there, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. We had really great founders who put the employees front and center so I was lucky enough to get a lot of offers and a lot of people wanted to talk to me, and I decided to freelance right off the bat because I had enjoyed Editorially so much and the team was probably my best working experience. I didn't know if I could recreate it.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

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Susan Robertson: So I freelanced for all of that year, the rest of that year, and then when I came into the 2015, so in 2014 I freelanced, and in 2015 I was still freelancing, but my pipeline wasn't quite as steady, and steady income became a little bit more important to me because my partner and I, we trade of who has to be the steady earner, so that one of us can take some risks and try some new things and it was his turn to try some new things.

So I decided to look more for full-time work, but I was a little selective, and I actually contracted with Fictive for a few months before I decided to go full-time with them. So in March of last year I started contracting with them, and I transitioned into full-time in June.

Emily Lewis: Nice, cool. You know I think you're the second person we have talked to recently who talked about that sort of trade off with their partner. I wish I could remember who it was that said they had taken some time off. Was it Luke Holder, Lea?

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, like right before he started coding for fun, I guess.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: I think that's interesting. I need to talk to my partner about it. [Laughs]
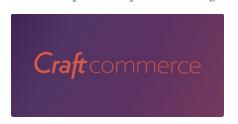
Susan Robertson: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Yeah, we've been doing that pretty much. We've been married eleven years, and we've done it almost the whole time. I wasn't coding when I met him, and right after we got married I went back to school to learn how to code, and then when we moved to Portland, he went

back to school for what he does now, and so as we've kind of had the back and forth going the whole time.

Emily Lewis: Nice. So Susan, I was really excited to book you for the show because this topic today I think is an excellent way to kick off a new year. Overwhelmed By Code is an article you wrote on A List Apart last year, and when I first read it, I instantly connected with it and it just sort of sat in the back of my head ruminating on it because last year, and I mentioned this in our Year In Review episode last month, I didn't really try to learn anything new last year.

I tried to really just focus on what I already knew and become better at those things, which is extremely hard to do when there's always something new we can do. So before we talk about that sort of process of feeling overwhelmed by all the new things out there, could you summarize that piece a little bit for our listeners, and why was it something you wanted to write about?

Susan Robertson: So that piece came out of talking with a friend of mine. We were in a private Slack channel, and he said something about trying to learn – I don't remember what it was – and he listed off, I mean, the way I started that piece is I was talking to a friend and he listed off all the things he wanted to learn and it exhausted me.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: Because he literally listed like probably, I'd say ten things, and I looked at that and was kind of like, "Oh, I don't really want to learn all those things. I don't know that I'm motivated to learn all those things anymore."

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: And so that's kind of where the piece came from, and how do we keep going on a day to day without feeling like we're getting left behind, without feeling like we're never going to get another job because we look at job postings and what they ask for is absolutely ridiculous in some cases.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: And so it kind of came out of that, and I'm kind of with you, Emily. I don't always want to learn anymore either. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Part of it is just exhaustion and not wanting to spend time that I'm not working and working, you know?

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: I don't have to drive to spend my weekends in front of my laptop anymore like I did when I was initially learning.

Lea Alcantara: Sure.

Susan Robertson: It was actually just this past winter break would be my tenth year anniversary of teaching myself CSS.

Lea Alcantara: Oh wow!

Susan Robertson: And I spent an entire break working at my job that paid some bills and at my computer learning and reading books and trying to figure out how to do things, and yeah, that drive is kind of a little bit gone.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: And so that's kind of where the article came from, and the response to that article probably is the biggest response I've gotten to anything I've ever written, just because I think a lot of people feel the same way, and I can't imagine personally starting in this industry today.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Oh, right.

Susan Robertson: Because I think it would be incredibly overwhelming to start today with all the things that you're told to learn.

Lea Alcantara: I just find that so interesting because we always make jokes about these job listings, like they're essentially a joke essentially in and of itself, and people always say, "Well, just ignore it and apply anyway," but when something is written down and they're saying, "You need to do this," a lot of people they assume that like a 100% of everything in that list needs to be done and dealt with and not only has to be there, you have to expert level at them, you know?

Susan Robertson: Right.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Susan Robertson: Yeah. I mean, job postings, in my opinion, have become wish list more than reality, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Right, right.

Susan Robertson: If they could find that unicorn that could do all of those things, that's what they will ultimately want, but they probably know that's not possible, but they're listing it all as a potential, and so yeah, I mean, when I had applied for jobs in the past five to six years, I am one of those people who were like, "Well, I can't do it all, but let's just throw the hat in the ring and see what happens."

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: But yeah, it is very overwhelming and intimidating at this point. I mean, when I started, I just learned HTML and CSS, that's it, and that's how I made my living for a long time, and then I moved on to learn more and more and more, but now, I mean, with frameworks and all the other things thrown at you, I can't imagine. It must be much more overwhelming. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Yeah, "the something new and shiny that always comes out for the latest thing that everyone needs to try it" reminds me of the dog character in (Pixar's) *Up*.

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

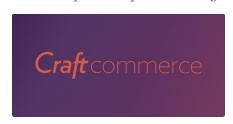**Emily Lewis**: It was like, "Squirrel, Squirrel, Squirrel."

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, yeah, yeah, totally.

Emily Lewis: Squirrel.

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Completely. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: You know? [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Completely, yeah.

Emily Lewis: Do you think that's just like the nature of working in a tech-based industry where tech is just constantly evolving?

Susan Robertson: I think some of it is the nature of it. We get a lot of influx of young people in our industry who have a lot more time and so they talk about this stuff more.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: They write about it, they blog about it. I mean, once you get a little bit older, you may get married, you may have children, you may still be working in the industry, but you're probably not out there with what you talk about publicly, even though you're probably doing great work.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]
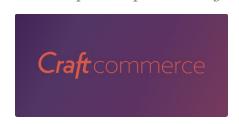
Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: And so I think a big part of it is that we get a lot of influx of new excited people who haven't been in the industry for ten years who want to talk about this stuff,

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And so that's one reason, but I currently work with a team that's filled with people who have worked a lot of years on the web, and we are very hesitant to chase a new shiny.

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Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: Because if they chase the new shiny and then it's blown up in their face kind of thing.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: Like it didn't work out and things had to be rewritten and reworked.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: But it is very tempting when you're new to the industry to see the new thing and want to try it. If that's a JavaScript framework like Ember or Angular or be that a new framework for CSS or whatever that may be rather than constantly than concentrate on kind of the foundational stuff because that might be boring.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Or even the whys like, you know.

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: It's just kind of like, "Oh, it's new. I'm just going to try it," but people aren't questioning as to why they should even try it too, which is I feel like the danger of a lot of frameworks, right?

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Susan Robertson: Yeah, I totally agree. One of the things that made me feel better about not always learning the new shiny stuff was when I started at Editorially. I took over for Ethan Marcotte, who's one of the co-founders and had done the front end up until I started and he was stepping out of the day-to-day role which was why they brought me in, and he didn't even use Sass for his CSS, like he was using it in that he had a bunch of partials that were .scss, but that was just to compile inside of the Ruby pipeline. That wasn't really…

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: He wasn't doing anything else, and if someone like Ethan can do really great work and just write CSS and that's like no big deal, I think that's really great, and people really love his work and talk about his stuff a lot, and so that made me feel better about some of the choices I might make where I do use Sass, but I'm not a crazy guru on Sass and I only use certain features of Sass because I learned how to write CSS in Object-oriented way and SMACSS way and frankly, I'm faster just writing straight CSS than trying to use all kinds of functions and other things that makes sense in Sass.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: So that kind of helped me realize that you can do really great work and not need to use all those stuff either.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: You mentioned a couple of times really great work, and that's something that I feel like is one of the shifts that happened for me because I feel like right now where I am in my career, where

Lea and I are together with Bright Umbrella, we're doing really great work. Because of that, I don't have time. Like I don't have time for anything else, I want to just focus on the really great work.

But then I think back six years ago when I was starting to sort of I guess build my reputation in the industry, I was working for someone else. It was, at least for me, a typically day job where I had a lot of time to putz around because I was fast at what I did and they just never had enough work for me, and so I could get into things, and my boss encouraged me to blog and so blogging wasn't even in my own personal time and I remember like I guess as I was writing my book or after I had finished writing my book and there were some new things related to icroformats that were coming up pretty regularly, and I would literally jump on it that day and start experimenting and trying and then writing a blog post about it.

I can't even imagine doing that now. That would take me completely away from the client work that I'm doing and the production work that I'm doing. But back then it was kind of like that younger developer mentality, I was excited. I was enthusiastic. I was really trying to connect and learn, and I don't know, maybe show off a bit at the time, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Right, right.

Emily Lewis: I tried this cool new thing, aren't I awesome? And now, I just wanted to do great work. That's all I want to do.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, and I do think when you're younger, you're trying to build a reputation.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: You're trying to get known. If you have like ambitions of speaking at conferences, like blogging and writing about things, those are all great things. If you're a freelancer, it

can be very helpful to write and speak because your name can get out there and it could lead to work. So yeah, I feel like that's all pretty valid and a lot of people do that, and I mean, I started writing with A List Apart when I was freelancing, and it was a way for me to get kind of my name out there a bit more and to get better known, to be regularly contributing to that website, and I still write for them because I like it, and I really enjoy it and I do have a job now where it's not a big deal if I take a half hour or 45 minutes to work on edits or something like that during the day.

I can actually fit a lot of my writing and not on the evenings and weekends, but not everyone is that lucky, so I kind of shut my machine and leave my office at the end of the day, but I've still been able to fit in some of the other things that I like to do that aren't considered kind of my traditional job role, and I work for a very small company, so it's not unhelpful for the company either to have my name connected with – my bio says I work for them and stuff like that as well.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: As we were just discussing all of this, we've kind of mentioned a few times about, you know, when you're younger or this, that or the other, and the definitely contributes to it like when you're new to the industry and/or when you're younger, you want to grab every shiny new thing, but I think that what we're kind of forgetting and just the general industry is forgetting is that ten years isn't long in the general industry. The web is such a young industry, and like in just my own personal opinion or just my own observation is perhaps part of the scrambling or panic to…

Emily Lewis: Squirrel.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

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Lea Alcantara: The panic to learn something new is because it's such a young industry, you want to get in front of it so you can establish your expertise, you know?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Like saying you have one-year experience in the new technology because you started right away will give you an edge over somebody who just started just three months ago or et cetera and so forth because, you know.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: While this length of time in general is actually quite short in web time. Ten years might as well be thirty, you know?

Susan Robertson: Right. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Those kinds of things. One month might as well have been six, you know, those kinds of things.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, yeah, and I should say I know plenty of people who have been in the industry as long as I have or even longer who are continuing to do kind of groundbreaking, interesting work and talk about it, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: But I will say that most of us folks who have been around a while have a more flexible, like they're not in working in office 9 to 5 jobs.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right, right.

Emily Lewis: Well, and they also tend to command money at conferences.

Susan Robertson: Exactly.

Emily Lewis: Which still boggles my mind, but… [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Yeah, I mean, conference speaking and writing books and running private workshops for businesses might be the way they make their living.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And so, that also gives them more time to think about and kind of play around with new concepts and new ideas.
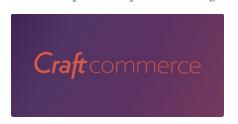
Emily Lewis: So we've mentioned a little bit about some of the cons of like getting involved in something new and shiny, like choosing some awesome framework only to find out that the frameworks no longer support it in two years and it's got a bunch of bugs and all that other stuff. Are there any other cons you can think of with pursuing that constant whatever is new?

Susan Robertson: I think the only other one that comes to mind for me is really, probably not knowing it as well so your code might not be as clean as you want, might not be as compact as it could be, which could have performance issues.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And a lot of times accessibility gets kind of like thrown out of the window with new stuff because it's not a shiny thing.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: And it may not be supported as well, so you have the chance of not supporting everyone as well as you could.

Emily Lewis: What about pros? I mean, I think none of us would say that innovation is a bad thing, so what are some of the pros of having all of these new techniques or a new framework or a new approach for our industry or for individuals?

Susan Robertson: I think the biggest pro is usually when something new comes up, there's a community of excited people about it.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: So if you are trying to learn it, there are people to help you and there are people who will kind of take the time to write about it. I mean, Sass is kind of not new anymore, but when Sass first came around the bend, a lot of people got excited about it and that community is pretty large now.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

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Susan Robertson: And they have a conference and they're really doing a lot of work on that stuff and they're trying to make it better and they listen to the feedback of the devs using their tool, and so I think that that can be one of the definite pros of using something that's newer because you have a lot more people excited about it and wanting to work on it and wanting to make it better.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: So another example of that to me is Marci Sutton did just a ton of work on Angular to make it accessible, to make it easier for devs to just have it out of the box, there's some accessibility built in.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: So when the new stuff comes out, sometimes folks grab a hold of it and like it enough to work on it and contribute back into it to make it an even better tool and to make it really great.

Emily Lewis: Right and really invest in it.
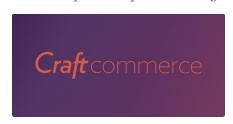
Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: And I feel like that was reflected even, we just compiled some stats about our 2015 episodes, and our top most downloaded episode was on the newest thing.

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: The web components.

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And it kind of shocked me…

Emily Lewis: Which is not accessible…

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, exactly. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: But it shocked me actually. When I was looking back, I was actually shocked that web components out of all the episodes, because we had a variety of really interesting useful episodes, that that was the one that people pressed the download button for the most.

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: I'm fairly curmudgeonly is how I think of myself because I'm fairly slow, you know?
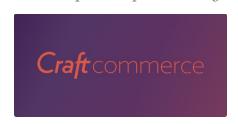
Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Like I listen to your podcast where they're talking about basically doing your CSS and React.js and React.js components.

Lea Alcantara: Oh yeah, yeah.

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Susan Robertson: And Jeremy Keith was on it and he was like, "Why are we doing this?" And I was like, "Thank you, Jeremy."

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

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Susan Robertson: You know, like, "I love you, Jeremy." Like I'm fairly slow with stuff, I want it to be around a little while.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: Just because there's a pretty decent body of stuff for me to read before I dive in.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And web component is something that I haven't even touched yet because of that.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: Like you said, it's not accessible. It's not something I'm going to use in my day to day right now, and that the stuff that I focus on is can I use this in my day to day.

Emily Lewis: I think that's the voice of reason that I feel like we just need a little bit more of. Whenever the newest thing comes out, I almost feel like there's should be some fine print, "Take you time before you put this in a production site. Don't forget about accessibility. Don't forget about the

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fundamentals. Maybe you shouldn't do this if you can't write good, valid semantic HTML." You know what I mean? [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Like your fundaments is in first.

Susan Robertson: Well, Tim Kadlec actually wrote on his website a follow-up article to mine where he basically said that like, "If you don't know what to learn, focus on the fundamentals." HTML is never going away. CSS, Base CSS is never going away.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: Plain vanilla JavaScript is probably here to stay, so focusing on those three kind of front-end tools, that's not a waste of your time.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: But isn't this a bit of a Catch 22? We're saying, "Oh, let's wait until people use it," but then people need to use it for us, people who are waiting… [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Lea Alcantara: We need to see them fall on their face and write about the falling on their face.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: So we don't do it.

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Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: So it's kind of like do it so I can learn from you. [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Yeah, definitely. Rachel Andrew has been doing a lot of interesting work on Grid, with the new GridSpec, and what's been interesting about that is all behind flags so you can play around with it as much as you want in Chrome if you turn on the flag for yourself, but it's not going to work anywhere else and you definitely obviously can't put it out in production.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: So a lot of work she's done, and she's been kind of cheerleader for devs playing with this to give feedback so that when the spec is finalized, we as developers have had a chance to talk to them about it and make it better.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And it has gotten a lot better over the last two years and it's really in large part due to Rachel going around and talking about it at conferences, even though you cannot use it in production at all. So you're right. I mean, you kind of have to have someone doing some of that work so that others can kind of piggyback onto it and figure out what's going on, but it's hard. It's also hard with browser makers. They don't implement things the same.
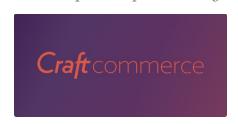
Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: Flexbox is just a fantastic example of that in how you need gazillion different prefixes to try to cover the stuff that is supported and stuff like that.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: So it is a very much a chicken and an egg, you have to kind of wait for the browsers to at least implement something so you can play with it in one browser to learn about it and then figure out how the other browsers are going to implement it so you could use it across the board.

Lea Alcantara: As we were talking about all of this and we're talking about the pros and cons of the new and shiny and being overwhelmed by code, I feel like part of the issue in how we all start becoming overwhelmed by code and like essentially losing sight of things is the rise of the expert beginner. I just read this article that was on a site called Daed Tech, and the full title is How Developers Stop Learning: Rise of the Expert Beginner, and the quote that resonated with me was,

"Advanced beginners can break one of two ways, they can move to competent and start to grasp the big picture and their place in it, or they can graduate to expert beginner by assuming that they've graduated to expert,"
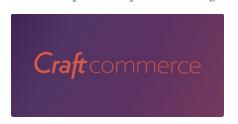
and I feel like no one is doing step one, grasping the big picture, and then they just graduate into this perpetual cycle of still being a beginner, but thinking they're an expert, and then that becomes like, "Okay, learn more code, learn more code." Then you're not actually an expert because you're constantly at beginner level.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, now, I would agree with that definitely. I'm mentoring someone and it's been a really interesting experience. It's the first time I've ever done this in my career, and she's fantastic, but she definitely has that tendency to forget about some of the foundational stuff to go after the cool stuff.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: So a lot of what I focus on is like just basics and foundation because I feel like that's so easy to do is to, like you said, the squirrel, this "I want to learn more about Sass" when you don't really understand CSS doesn't really work to me, you know?

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: And I know there are things I understand about CSS that don't apply as much anymore like the box model and how F'ed-up it was and IE6 and things like that, but it's still that foundational knowledge is what, like she'll ask me a question and then I'll just be able to say like, "Well, try this," and it works and I'm not even in the code.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And that foundational knowledge is where that comes from, and so I definitely feel like people don't want to become move into competent where they can move from competent up the ladder into a true expert because it takes a lot of time.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: And then going back to job postings, this year they might be looking for Angular.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: And a year and a half from now, they might be looking for whatever the new thing is, so why become an expert in Angular if I'm just going to have to move on.

Lea Alcantara: Right. That's a good point.

Susan Robertson: Yeah. But that actually makes it harder too, you know?

Lea Alcantara: To like decide to even what to begin because it's like, "Well, is this going to be even relevant?"

Susan Robertson: Yeah, that's the hardest part, in my opinion.

Emily Lewis: Yeah. Those postings I wish more people realize that they're written by HR people who got a list of keywords from a few people on a team. It's more often than not someone who is very distant from the actual technology or you won't even work with that person. It's just someone who puts the job listing up.

Lea Alcantara: Right, right, right, right.

Emily Lewis: I feel like that's also, to sort of a slight detour, but you see the same kind of thing like an RFP, they want absolutely everything, but they have zero knowledge with half of the things they've listed are or what they cost or what's involved to get them. It's kind of like people who don't know tech asking for tech.

Susan Robertson: Yeah. I feel like the longer you go in your career, the skills that are important, and it's something I kind of write about a lot, is not like actually how to solve a problem with actual code, but to know how to start solving the problem.

Lea Alcantara: Yes.

Susan Robertson: I'm more interested a lot in just that kind of the soft skills that I think make a great developer because a lot of people can sit in a corner and something really, really cool in CodePen, but if they can't interact with a non-technical person to talk about how to get what that person is

looking for, if they can't figure out how to take a problem that maybe thrown into their lap and solve it, be it a bug or be it an actual like the designer wants something and you don't know how to do it, if they can't do that kind of stuff, I guess they're not a great programmer to me, and so that's why I kind of talk a lot about those kinds of things and foundations because I think those are what make you really good at your job much more so than being able to write like the coolest algorithm ever.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, absolutely. I think that echoes a lot of… we talked to Dan Mall last year about professionalism in our industry and what that really means, and in our discussion, it was really about having those really great soft skills that make you stand out, they make you be someone who's great to work with.
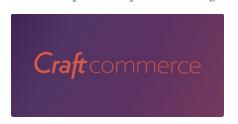
Susan Robertson: Yeah, I would agree.

Emily Lewis: So we talked about sort of this concept of an expert beginner, what about a real expert? What do you consider an expert? How do you define an expert coder? I mean, is there even such a thing?

Susan Robertson: Well, I don't know how I would totally define it, but like I said, I would define it as someone who is better at figuring out how to solve the problems and isn't afraid to ask questions, then I would define it as, like I said, being able to do really crazy cool stuff in code, and so my team right now, most of them have been coding for ten to fifteen years and working in the web a lot of the older team, like those kinds of solid inner sanctuary team members before they started hiring. This last year, there are nine partners, and a lot of them have been doing web stuff for a really long time, and so they don't always necessarily know how to fix a problem or exactly what code to write, but they know where to go to get help and who to talk to in that kind of stuff when they're working on

something that's kind of a little more gnarly, and I think that that is a sign of both maturity and being okay with where you're at, like you're confident that you're not a moron so you can ask questions.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: And also just having gone through the process where you try to figure out in your own for a couple of days and you waste a couple of days and then you go and you ask someone and they point you in a direction, and by the end of that day, it's finished, it's fixed or whatever.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: That another thing I've been working a lot with the person I'm mentoring on is questions aren't bad.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: We don't expect you to know everything. No one knows everything. So to me the person who gets comfortable with being able to ask questions on stuff is the person who's going to do better, and that's really hard in our industry. There are a lot of IRC channels where that can be very intimidating and very hard to do, and if you're at home trying to learn something new, that might be one avenue for you to ask, and I'll admit, I've never even done that. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: But there are places where you can go to do that kind of stuff, and if you can get over your fear of looking stupid to be able to learn, then it goes much better, and I work with some

super smart guys right now, and like yesterday, I was just like, "I'm trying to do this thing in JavaScript and it's not working. Can somebody help me?"

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And the quicker I ask that question, the better it is for everyone.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Timestamp: *00:29:51*

Susan Robertson: I get done with my project faster, these guys are helping me learn, and everything goes better, so that's kind of one of the things that I think kind of delineates between expert beginner and actual folks that are moving from competent onto expert.

Emily Lewis: Yeah. I feel like that maturity factor is a big part of it, and just that example you gave about asking a question, I'm still getting better at that.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: Which is to say I have a lot of room to grow still to ask the questions so I'm not wasting so much time.
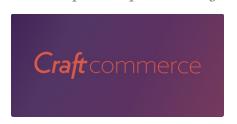
Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: But the better I get at that, I actually feel more competent and it has nothing to do with my skill set. It has everything to do with my ego and putting it aside.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah, that's true. I try to these days give myself like a 30-minute limit, like I actually put a timer. It's like if I can't figure this out in 30 minutes, I'm opening the Slack channel.

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Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: And then sometimes then somebody gives me a 5-minute response, like solution, which you're like, "Okay, well, as long as it gets done." I think part of the issue is people need to realize that the code isn't the end game.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: The code is contributing to whatever the app you're trying to do and that app's or website's function is fulfilling a greater goal. The code is just a tiny, tiny, tiny essential, but tiny piece of the puzzle.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, and you're client is probably trying to solve something or advertise something or whatever it is, and the code is helping them meet that goal.

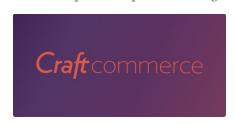**Emily Lewis**: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Susan Robertson: So yeah, for sure.

Emily Lewis: So we've talked a lot about kind of, and I feel like what I hear from all three of us is that we've reached a place where we know where to, as individuals, to pursue something or not, but I have to admit, there are times like I'm reading articles, and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, I am so far behind everybody else," like it still creeps in this feeling of anxiety that I'm somehow missing out or I'm behind the curve. When those feelings kind of enter in, what are your suggestions for putting them in check?

Susan Robertson: Honestly, usually, I walk away from my machine. [Laughs]

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Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: I know it sounds really bad, but I'm a big believer in like just maybe taking a break.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: And taking a walk or getting up and making yourself a cup of tea or whatever it is that you like to do for mini-breaks during the day, and I think the other thing is having some supportive community that you really know well.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: So I'm in a private Slack channel, that's only a handful of people, they're good friends. They're all somehow involved in the web industry, and so a lot of times I vent it in there, and I'm just like, "I can't handle this. Everybody can do these things, but me," and a lot of times somebody pipes up and is like, "No, I don't know how to do that," you know?
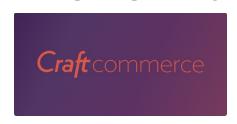
Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: Or something related to that.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: And so that's kind of the big thing for me is having some community that you're a part of. I run our local Refresh, so once a month I'm with other web folks in and around Portland, and that's also helpful because you get a wide spectrum of people and it's really nice to be able to meet

people who may be are just starting out or have been in the industry the longer than you. When you bring up something you're working on, maybe they don't even know what it is.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And you realize that there are just all these different facets and little niches in our industry that, you know, and vice versa, somebody else will be working on something and will have no idea what the thing is they're doing or know very little about it.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And I think that's helpful to realize that because I think it's pretty easy to like set with your RSS reader and feel like you're a loser.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Susan Robertson: But you're probably not. You're probably doing great and you just need to have some community that helps you realize that.

Emily Lewis: Put it in context, yeah.

Lea Alcantara: I think sometimes we just get into our work day to day and forget what we are already doing is interesting. For example, like Emily and I have been talking about some of the things Bright Umbrella does with our starter files and the way we've been designing and moving away from traditional wireframes into wireframes in the browser, and sometimes when we speak about it, Emily and I like, "Well, don't people already know what we're saying?" [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: [Laughs]

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Lea Alcantara: And then when I go and then we get invited to talk about it anyway, and we're like, "All right, sure, let's do some show and tell," and then when I do and then when Emily does, there were so many people who were like, "I've never done this before, or I've only done it this way." I remember when we went to the CSS Dev Conf. I think it was in New Orleans.

Emily Lewis: New Orleans.

Lea Alcantara: And then there was one of the lead developers of the CBC website showing how they did their front-end stuff, and it was essentially the same concept that Emily and I did. It felt so validating. We're like, "Well, I guess if the CBC does it…" [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Yeah. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: I think that's the other thing too, like I get asked this a lot by people like, "Well, I don't have anything to say." That's what a lot of people say or, "Everybody already knows what I'm going to talk about."
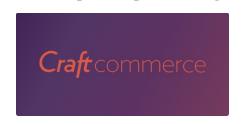
Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: And I can say without a doubt, almost every blog posts or smaller piece I've written for A List Apart, I felt exactly the same way. Even with my bigger articles, like when I wrote about style guides, I was like, "Well, Anna Debenham has already written a book. What do I have to say?" You know?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

http://ctrlclickcast.com/episodes/overwhelmed-by-code

Susan Robertson: So I pretty much always throw a draft at by A List Apart editors and say, "I don't know, you know, whatever." [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: And they're always like, "No, this is really good. Let's work on this." You know? [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: And then you get some response and it's surprising, and so the one thing I tell people is, "Your voice is pretty unique, and even if the topic has been written about a million times before, what you say about is probably going to be different because you have different experiences, you work in a different way, and maybe you work in a different industry or whatever it may be, and your voice is unique and your voice is worth hearing so you should just do it."

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: My website is kind of my playground for that. I'll post almost anything on there. Well, not almost anything. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: My husband is a very offline person so there's not a lot about my personal life on there, but at least as far as it pertains with the things with him, I'll do anything on there and play

around with stuff and just have fun with is, and I actually don't even track stats anymore because I feel that it was helpful for me to just put it out there and let it go and see what happens.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And so I think everybody has something to say in uniquely their way, and worrying about if it's being right a lot or all these other things are what stop you and so when you take that kind of out of the mix, for me it's been a lot better.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: I just post and if you read it, you read it. If you don't, you don't.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: Yeah, I feel like a theme I'm picking up on is that one of the things that can help kind of alleviate the anxiety of either you're not learning enough or you're not good enough is to stop comparing yourself to what everyone else is doing.

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Because you're making a lot of assumptions about the person who wrote a given thing, that they're somehow an expert or they're somehow better. They're just sharing and just putting it in that perspective.
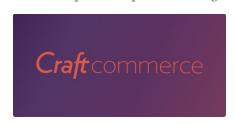
Lea Alcantara: Right, right.

Emily Lewis: I love the idea of not paying attention to stats.

Lea Alcantara: But that's hard. [Laughs]

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Susan Robertson: It is.

Emily Lewis: It's hard because Lea always wants to check them. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Well, I'm a stats geek, like I just want to see like which one is getting clicked.

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Well, to some extent, you do need to figure out certain numbers depending on what the goal of your writing is, right?

Susan Robertson: Right.

Lea Alcantara: Like if you're doing a marketing campaign, then you probably should take a look whether that made sense or not, but if you're, let's say, just sharing like a workflow process article or whether it's something about culture in tech or something, does it really matter how many clicks you're getting?
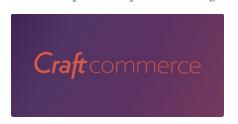
Susan Robertson: Yeah. I mean, I was that person. I had Google Analytics on my personal site and I would tweet about a post and then I'd open up to see the real-time bubbles coming up from people clicking, you know?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: And I would just get really excited, and then I just stopped. I just thought about it and I was like, "But this isn't really why I'm writing, like this isn't the purpose of what I'm doing it."

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: So it isn't helpful for me to worry about or think about that stuff, and I mean, we all do it.

Lea Alcantara: Sure.

Susan Robertson: You look at how many times you're faved on Twitter or how many Likes on Instagram or whatever it is that your social media of choice is, and I still do it with those things, but with my site, I decided to just kind of let it all go. It's freeing, but I will admit, sometimes I'm curious, but I took the Analytics code off so I can't. It's not there so I won't be able to look.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Oh, interesting.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, so you know, and when I get retweeted by people who have a gazillion followers, I'm always like, "Well, I hope it holds up." You know? [Laughs]
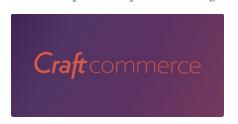
Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: But I have no idea.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, I feel like taking a step back is also important. Not comparing yourself to everyone else, but whether it's taking a step back from your computer or taking the Analytics off your

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site or myself, I haven't done any writing for over a year, which is unusual because that's kind of what I do.

Lea Alcantara: Your thing. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: But it got to the point where it was completely overwhelming to me, and not because I can't write or that it was hard to write, that's not the problem, but it's that the emotional experience tied to the writing was getting stressful and anxiety ridden. It's one thing to deal with comments. It's another thing to deal with people being like, "When are you going to do this? When are you going to do that?" It's like, "Why are you expecting things of me? I'm not here for you."

I mean, technically when you're writing a piece for something like A List Apart or something like that, you're writing for other people, but I was always writing for myself and it's just kind of nice that other people benefitted from it or that I could make a little money by putting it on a publication, but it stopped being all that. It started being like, "When is the next whatever? When are you going to do something new on this?" I was just like, "I don't want to do this anymore because I'm not going to."

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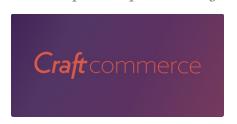**Susan Robertson**: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: And I just stepped away.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, I mean, I just published a piece yesterday at my site because I took the full two weeks off for the holiday.

Lea Alcantara: Nice.

Susan Robertson: Because Fictive shuts down, a couple of people kind of monitors some client stuff, and we were asked to kind of check our email on what would be a traditional business day, but other than that, I really wasn't on my machine much, and when I went into that at those two weeks, I was like, "Well, am I going to keep writing for A List Apart? I don't have any ideas, and I don't know. I don't know what I'm going to do." The first week I drew and I baked and I ate. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: And the things you do when you're having Christmas, and then the second week, I was asked to contribute a little blurb, it's not even very long like less than a hundred words probably, and I got the email and I was like, "Oh, I don't have any ideas." But it kind of sat in the back of my mind.
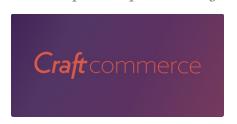
Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: But because I had taken a week and a half completely away from the web and wasn't really on Twitter too much, I wasn't checking RSS feeds and things like that, I started having ideas.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And I think that part of it too is that when you're feeling overwhelmed, if you can take a break from things like social media, like RSS, like all the things that are hurling the stuff that you need to learn at you, I think that's helpful.

Emily Lewis: Right. [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: I think it's helpful to remember that it's an industry and things change, but it's not the end all be all of the world and if you can just step back for a few minutes, it can be really helpful. I mean, I've stepped back from social media in a huge way just because it got overwhelming for me.

Emily Lewis: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Sure.

Emily Lewis: So the opposite of stepping back would be moving towards, so let's talk about when some new trend comes out that is worth looking into, how do you evaluate that?

Susan Robertson: Well, like I alluded to already, I kind of look for, is it still around? And if like I might hear about it and then I want to see if four or five months down the road, are people still talking about it? Am I still hearing about it?
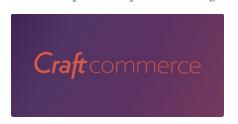
Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And if that's the case and it actually looks like it could be useful for my day to day, then I might start reading about it and playing around with it, maybe at CodePen or maybe just some flat files on my own computer, or I might just introduce things into a project and see how it goes. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right, right.

Susan Robertson: We do some little one off like smaller projects often at Fictive where we have since I've been on board, and so I've been able to kind of take some risks or try some new things in those, which has been really nice.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: So that's kind of usually the way I approach it, and I'll be honest, like CSS Tricks is kind of one my big places. He's talked about it a couple of times on there that I'm like, "Oh, there might be something here."

Emily Lewis: The Chris Coyier factor. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Yeah, it's having a little bit of him. Especially for new CSS stuff, there is definitely a Chris Coyier factor.

Lea Alcantara: That's an interesting point though, because I also do a similar thing, not necessarily Chris Coyier's specifically, but if there are certain types of people that I respect and they start saying it over and over and over again, then it's like, "Okay, maybe. Maybe I should spend some time."

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Is there anybody else besides Chris Coyier that you think, "Okay, if this person has been mentioning it for the past few weeks…"

Susan Robertson: Yeah, yeah, Stephen Hay is another person I kind of follow quite a bit because he does client work, so he's pretty level headed in what he's going to be able to use and not use.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

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Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And he's used to deadlines and things like that.

Lea Alcantara: That's a good point.

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Lea Alcantara: Client work people, huh? [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Yeah. I mean, he just came out today with a really interesting article about it. It's really nice to think you can have the same process all the time, but in client work, sometimes you can't. I do follow Jeremy Keith, but Jeremy is like a leading edge person to me.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: He's actually going to implement something on his website really far out advanced of me necessarily ever using it in my day to day, but I like to see what he's implementing because he does typically not implement until it's useful or he thinks it's useful.
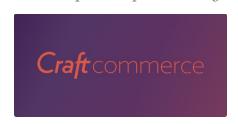
Emily Lewis: Yeah, I think he's also really pragmatic. Whenever he does something, he points out flaws, where it could go, where he thinks, you know. It's just a really well reasoned. Anything he puts out there is well reasoned I feel like I agree.

Susan Robertson: I totally would agree with that. So I look at what he's doing quite a bit, and Nicole hasn't been writing as much lately, but Nicole Sullivan is someone that I look to as well, and so it just kind of depends on the technology and the thing that a new thing is.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: I keep my eye much more on CSS than almost anything else. So it's kind of your standard bearers in the CSS world that I probably look at.

Emily Lewis: One of the things I do is when there's some new thing that I read about that sounds interesting, I just put it on a list and it's a list I don't look at often. I probably revisit the list once a month. I always revisit the list before a project starts just to see if there's anything on that list that I think might make sense for that project and the project has the time and budget to allow for the learning curve involved with it, but I just put it on the list and then I stop thinking about it. [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: You know, I think that's a super good idea. I've got like a huge list of things I want to try on my website, and who knows when I'll get to them?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: But that's a way for me to learn some of those things too.

Emily Lewis: So one of the other articles that you wrote for A List Apart last year that also connected with me, but also I think is related to *Overwhelmed By Code* is your *Building To Learn* article. You noted at the end, and I'm just going to quote a bit from your piece, "But when you slow down and focus on something you find useful or something you need to know how to do, you flip the equation. Instead of trying to get through to a tutorial or lesson, you're making something you want." And I think this perfectly illustrates another thing about not feeling overwhelmed by all the new stuff out there, but you're focusing on building something as opposed to trying out some new thing.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, that came into play because I have a really hard time with JavaScript.

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Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: I have a very, very hard time with JavaScript, and I have spent years trying to learn JavaScript and get better at JavaScript and move beyond a jQuery on click action kind of thing.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And it's just there is something that just doesn't click with me, and so it's very hard, and I've had people mentor me at jobs where it's like, "Just make this little project that you want, but you don't really have to make it. There's no deadline. It's just the side thing that you're going to make to learn JavaScript." And that went okay, but last summer, I needed to do a password meter for a login form or for a signup form, and I had no idea what to do and one of the guys I work with, he and I peer programmed—via IRC no less—for about a day or more where I would try something and he would look at it and we had a couple tools where we could share code and...
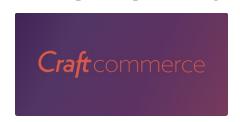
I didn't really want to sit on Hangouts with him because then he's like over your shoulder watching you type, and that's too much, but since we're remote, we kind of made it work with a tool to be able to paste code and share a quick link of that and then just me being able to try to describe as well as I could what was happening or what wasn't happening, and by the end of it, I had a password meter that was functioning as the designer desired it function, and that was super gratifying. It took a long time. I mean, most of the guys on my team would have written that password meter probably in half a day and it took me over a day, but I learned, and I learned quite a bit.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

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Susan Robertson: And I'm not saying I'm great at JavaScript now, but that was much more useful to me because we had a thing and it needed to be built.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: And I had to kind of get it working, and sure, I could have asked other people to step in and do it, and we weren't in client projects, this was for our own thing because we do our own things plus client work. When we're on client projects, there isn't always a time for that, so yeah, somebody steps in and does it for me.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: But when we're on our own products, there is more time and so that's kind of one of the goals and one of the reasons I started working with Fictive was I wanted to get that kind of mentoring relationship to try to learn more about JavaScript, and so it's happened and yeah, I mean, that's pretty much the only way I learn now.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: I can't motivate myself to do the tutorials.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: They're really hard for me. [Laughs]

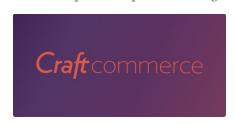**Lea Alcantara**: Well, I feel like because there's nothing at stake. When there's nothing at stake, you just don't feel as interested.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

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Lea Alcantara: And I know that when I first started learning Craft, for example, I just dove right in because I needed to get abrightumbrella.com out. You know? [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Yeah, yeah.

Lea Alcantara: And I needed to learn, but I actually downloaded Craft months in advance, and I hadn't even cracked open anything until Emily was like, "We need to get this out now!" [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Yeah, yeah, I know. I think it's pretty true. I mean, I also got myself into situations freelancing where I'll be like, "Sure, I can do that." [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: And I'll be like, "Holy crap, I don't know what I'm doing," and I'd learn how to do it.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: Or I had other freelancing situations where I was pretty honest, "I'm not really good at this," and they're like, "Well, can you bump a little bit off your rate and we'll work with you and you can learn."

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: I mean, those are really rare freelancing situations, I'll be honest, but that's happened too, and I think that's actually helpful than stuff like that. So yeah, I think the motivation to have to get something done is helpful.

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Emily Lewis: I think for me it also helps along if it's motivation, not just an urgency sort of thing, but getting paid for it.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: Like I absolutely am very open to trying new things when we've got a project that we're just getting started on, just sort of identifying where something might fit in and knowing we're going to get paid for it, that makes it a whole lot easier than, "Oh, I've got to spend Saturday messing around with this to figure it out and all that I'm going to walk away from is maybe some knowledge," which I should be more appreciative of, but honestly, your priorities shift when you own your own business and you've got to do client services work, and I feel like this past year is a really good example of that. Lea and I, prior to 2015, hadn't done a lot in terms of performance, in terms of performance monitoring and audits and making recommendations for our clients.

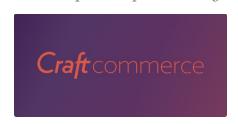*Timestamp: 00:50:23*

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: And we had situation where a client needed it and then that just sort of not only triggered Lea learning some new stuff with New Relic in ExpressionEngine, but me learning some new stuff with front-end performance tracking, which then trickled into building performance as you're building as opposed to after the fact auditing.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: And now we're doing quite a bit of that kind of work, and I feel like we learned new things and brought new things into our processes, but it wasn't strategic like, "We're going to learn this new thing," but it was, "We have a problem to solve." There was an actual reason for it that we

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were getting paid for. There was a lot of value for the client and it also turned out to be a lot of value for us because now we can sell it to other clients.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, yeah, I would agree. That's definitely a better way to learn.

Emily Lewis: Yeah. It's what makes the most sense to me. I mean, everything I do these days is from a business owner's perspective, so I'm always thinking about how much money are we going to make, you know?

Lea Alcantara: Right, right.

Emily Lewis: But that's the way you have to think. If you don't, you're going to drive your business into the ground. But I think that's another thing to do not only to motivate to learn something new, but also to sort of check yourself when I'm feeling like maybe we should be doing something new. Well, if it's not going to make us money, then I can't even worry about it. I can't even think about that right now.
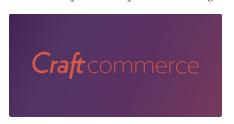
Lea Alcantara: So what I think is kind of funny a little bit as we've gone through this entire discussion is that employees don't get it. [Laughs] But if you're a freelancer or if you are working in an agency, you're a lot more careful over what the new thing you're working on because if you work for a giant mega corp and you don't have an ongoing project and you're not going to get fired just because that project doesn't move forward, you might have more time to jump into something brand new.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: But I feel like as we've been discussing this throughout, and including even the people that we admire who are a lot more reasoned, they tend to deal with that in a lot more reasons because there is money at stake.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Like if they make a mistake, they don't get food on the table.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, for sure.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: It's a huge motivating factor.

Emily Lewis: One of the things I wanted to kind of to just close up this discussion with, and this is basically because this is something I care a lot about is let's not talk about the new and shiny, let's talk about the old and rusty. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Like you said in the beginning.

Lea Alcantara: You mean classic…

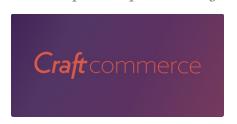**Emily Lewis**: Yeah, the classics. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Because for me, I still love HTML. Just writing HTML is probably one of the most satisfying things that I do in a project, even though it's probably one of the smallest components of what I do, and it's because I love the thought process of deciding what elements to use and doing the accessibility testing and the validation and just sort of knowing that the bones of what I built are solid.

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It's incredibly satisfying. So what are some things that are along those lines sort of foundational, tried and true, that you think people need too? If they don't know it well, learn it. And if they do know it, continue to revisit and master it.

Susan Robertson: So definitely HTML. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Like use a button when it's appropriate.

Emily Lewis: Right. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: If it's not actually a link, use a button. You can't nest <div>s inside of a <ul>. You can't.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: Like these are some of the things that I've encountered, and like just knowing those things and knowing how to, you know, and a lot of modern design with things we do, we do tend to have more <div>s with HTML5. We can get away with sections and things like that to help us out, but I found recently in code reviewing some things that the <div> is like the go-to thing for a lot of people, and they don't think about document outline, which is actually a pretty big issue, and they don't think about using the proper tag for the proper element for the proper thing.

Emily Lewis: Right.

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Susan Robertson: If you have a list of stuff, it's a list.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And if it has a 1-2-3, it's an ordered list, and it may not look that way and it may be a big section with all kinds of stuff in it, but you can still use a list, and that goes to accessibility, which if you're using the right stuff at the right time, it's going to be better for most of your users.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Susan Robertson: So my two big things recently have been just proper HTML markup and accessibility.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And I'm not even talking like heavy duty stuff, but just knowing some of the ARIA roles you should be putting in, still doing a skip-to-content link because screen readers vary so much, making sure that you have everything marked with the right tagging, and just stuff like that, that isn't hard, but most people don't do because they don't know HTML really well.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: They don't know the tags that are available to them, and sometimes it's hard because the styling and the tags like, man, I love the definition list, but sometimes it's really hard to use definition list stuff for some list because you can't style borders evenly and things like that over the term and the definition.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: So sometimes you kind of can't always use exactly what you love to use. I went to bat for a definition list like a month ago, and one of my coworkers was like, "Stop it. It never works. You can't use it. Just use a list." [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: I was like, "But it's a definition list. There's a term." And he's like, "I know, but it's not going to work." So it's stuff like that that I don't think developers learn that they should learn.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And I found that one of the things that have been really helpful for me is using style guides to kind of say, "This is the markup for this thing." So that if people need to grab it and use it in a new template page they're doing, say, in a product or whatever, they have the right things from the get-go and I don't have to do as much clean up.
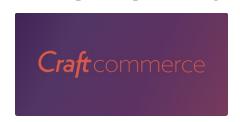
Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: I wish we as an industry really embrace how truly important something as fundamental as good solid accessible semantic HTML is.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

http://ctrlclickcast.com/episodes/overwhelmed-by-code

Emily Lewis: Because as cool as whatever new thing might be out there and how it might save time in a given workflow and speed up a process, if your underlying HTML is problematic, it's going to cost money down the road to mitigate the problems it built.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: My boyfriend Jason, he works for a government contractor and they work on a lot of government apps and sites. I mean, they still have to support like IE6 and 5, like that's just how it is.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, yeah.

Emily Lewis: And one of his tasks he was given at the end of last year was to make a certain app accessible, and he was like, "Well, we're going to have to rewrite all of the HTML."

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Because it's simply not, like you know it just isn't, and he just couldn't get anyone to grasp that. They were like, "Well, can't we plug something into this that's going to make it accessible?" And there just isn't. I mean, sure, you could do that, but you'd spend a ton of money on something that probably isn't going to give you the solution you want when you could just spend – well, you could have just done it right in the first place with HTML.

Lea Alcantara: Right, right.

Emily Lewis: And as much as we hear all of the new things that are out, I wish that mantra just could stay steady from everyone, from the innovators down to the new, enthusiastic learners who are just getting into the industry and just having that appreciation for the fundamentals. I can't think of the last time I saw a conference lineup that had a topic that had anything to do about basics.

Susan Robertson: Right.

Emily Lewis: But yet, I can tell you how many sites I see all the time that don't reflect basics, good basics.

Lea Alcantara: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: So I find that really frustrating and I really hope that someday we can appreciate HTML and CSS as, you know, they're sexy. [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: I love them.

Emily Lewis: They're totally sexy.

Lea Alcantara: Right. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: They save money. Done right, they save money. They're accessible. They're fun. You don't need a whole lot of other stuff if you have those two things.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: It's very sad to me that it takes lawsuits and actually losing money.

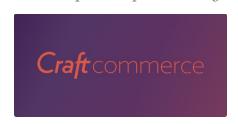**Emily Lewis**: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Susan Robertson: Like what happened with Target and some other major companies and actually now they have a really crack accessibility team at Target. [Laughs] But that's because the lawsuit that they lost, that's what it took.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

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Susan Robertson: And that's actually kind of sad.

Emily Lewis: Well, you know, I think it's an ongoing battle I think. I think that's always going to have to be. When you're dealing with anything related to technology, there's always going to have to some kind of reminder of that might be cool, but don't forget about the fundamentals, and that's something that I've always talked about. I think I will always talk about in the future, and it's kind of where I focused my energy on the past year. Even with almost twenty years in this industry writing HTML, I've been writing HTML for twenty years and I'm still finding ways to be better at it.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, and I still have the moments where I'm like, "Oh, should that be this or this?"

Emily Lewis: Right, yes. [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: And I agonize.

Lea Alcantara: Right.

Emily Lewis: I love those moments though. [Laughs] I love those moments. I feel like it's a puzzle.

Susan Robertson: Yeah, I agree.

Lea Alcantara: And I know we've been talking a lot about HTML, but like even basic CSS, basic CSS, like know your CSS before you start messing around with Sass because I've noticed sometimes is now, like Sass is quite powerful, but then you can inception Sass. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: Right. [Laughs]

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Lea Alcantara: And then something becomes, you know, it seems usable and then it becomes this monster, right?

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Lea Alcantara: And even basic vanilla CSS would have been better.

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

Emily Lewis: Right.

Lea Alcantara: Know your basics, people.

Emily Lewis: Yeah, I think that's the kind of situation where maturity and experience is going to serve you. If you want to try something new, if you have that maturity and that fundamental knowledge, you will know. Like what you were describing in the beginning, Susan, you use Sass, but you don't use it to the Nth degree. You use the parts that work for you and then where they don't, you use your basic CSS, and having that sort of ability to distinguish is I think critical to someone who's moving up that competence ladder.

Susan Robertson: Yeah.

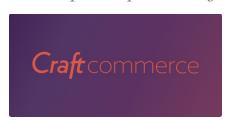**Lea Alcantara**: Oh man, we can talk and rant about this all day.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: But I think we need to wrap up, but before we do wrap up, we have our Rapid Fire Ten Questions so our listeners can get to know you a bit better.

Emily Lewis: And these are our new questions fresh for 2016. [Laughs]

http://ctrlclickcast.com/episodes/overwhelmed-by-code

Lea Alcantara: Are you ready?

Susan Robertson: I'm ready.

Lea Alcantara: Okay, first question, morning person or night owl?

Susan Robertson: I have turned into a morning person.

Emily Lewis: What's one of your guilty pleasures?

Susan Robertson: I watch crappy Netflix TV shows and just let them spin until Netflix asks if I'm still available sometimes.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Sometimes while I'm working and sometimes while I'm drawing.

Lea Alcantara: I love it. What software could you not live without?

Susan Robertson: The browser.

Emily Lewis: What profession other than your own would you like to try?

Susan Robertson: Wow! I think actually being an artist.

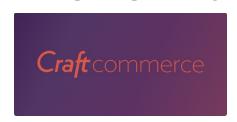**Lea Alcantara**: What profession would you not like to try?

Susan Robertson: I have pretty much zero interest in finance.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Says the girl reading an economics book.

Susan Robertson: I know, but there's a different thing going on there. [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: If you could take us to one restaurant in your town, where would we go?

Susan Robertson: We would go a half block from my house to Cibo [restaurant] which is our favorite place and the bartenders know us.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: Very cool. If you can meet someone famous, living or dead, who would it be?

Susan Robertson: I would probably choose to meet Mark Rothko, my favorite artist.

Emily Lewis: If you could have a super power, what would it be?

Susan Robertson: Oh, totally, invisibility.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Because you could like with all those things, you wonder what's going on, but you can't see it or be there, you could do it.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: That's terrible, I know, but… [Laughs]

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: Total privacy violation, but that would be cool.

Lea Alcantara: What is your favorite band or musician?

Susan Robertson: I am not a huge music person, so I'm just going to say that my favorite music in general is 1950's bebop jazz.

Emily Lewis: [Agrees]

Susan Robertson: And so I listen to a lot of Miles Davis and those types of artists.

Lea Alcantara: Cool.

Emily Lewis: All right, last question, pancakes or waffles?

Susan Robertson: Pancakes all the way with berry syrup.

Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

Susan Robertson: I'm not a maple syrup person. Sorry, Vermont people.

Emily Lewis: Oh.

Lea Alcantara: Sorry, Canada.

Susan Robertson: Sorry, Canada and Vermont people. [Laughs]
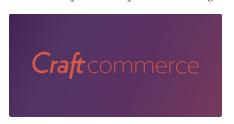
Emily Lewis: [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: That's all the time we have for today. Thanks for being our first guest of 2016.

Susan Robertson: Thank you guys so much. Happy New Year.

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

Susan Robertson: I'm at Twitter, @susanjrobertson, and my website is susanjeanrobertson.com as Jean is my middle name.

Emily Lewis: Thanks, Susan, this was a great discussion and for me at least, a great way to set the tone for the new year.

Susan Robertson: Thanks.

 [Music starts]

Lea Alcantara: CTRL+CLICK is produced by Bright Umbrella, a web services agency obsessed with happy clients. Today's podcast would not be possible without the support of this episode's sponsor! Thank you, Craft Commerce.

Emily Lewis: We'd also like to thank our partners: Arcustech and Devot:ee.

Lea Alcantara: And thanks to our listeners for tuning in! If you want to know more about CTRL+CLICK, make sure you follow us on Twitter @ctrlclickcast or visit our website, ctrlclickcast.com. And if you liked this episode, please give us a review on iTunes, Stitcher or both!

Emily Lewis: Don't forget to tune in to our next episode when Brad Weaver will join us to talk about practical pricing, and I have to say this will be a do-not-miss episode if you work for yourself in any capacity.

Lea Alcantara: [Agrees]

Emily Lewis: Brad helped Bright Umbrella this past year and it immediately paid off, pun intended. [Laughs]

Lea Alcantara: [Laughs]

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Emily Lewis: Be sure to check out our schedule on our site, ctrlclickcast.com/schedule for other upcoming topics in 2016.

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!

[Music stops]

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