

EPISODE 13

[0:00:00.5] SS: Hello everyone, this week's episode is brought to you by the Side Project Accelerator. The Side Project Accelerator is our very own program where we teach everything we learned while growing Hacking UI from a small unpaid side project to a full time gig that fully supports us. Side Project Accelerator includes eight weeks of lessons and assignments centered around our philosophy, which is audience driven product development.

But the program doesn't end there, you get to join private discussions with some of the world's most successful side project entrepreneurs. In the previous batch, we had Tobias van Schneider, Paul Jarvis, Rachel Andrew, Jeffrey Zeldman and more. You'll get access to all their recordings from the previous batch. You also become a member for life of a small but tight-knit and extremely active community of side project entrepreneurs. I'm talking about our private Slack group and members there constantly share tips and ideas with each other as well as hold each other accountable for staying on track and getting shit done.

The Side Project Accelerator is entirely online so you can sign up from anywhere in the world and live sessions are recorded so you can watch or listen on your schedule. The program is perfect for designers, developers and other tech related fields who want to attain both creative and financial freedom. You don't have to have an idea for a specific side project in order to join. If you already are working on a side project but haven't yet figured how to scale and monetize it, then the Side Project Accelerator is perfect for you.

You can learn more about the Side Project Accelerator at hackingui.com/sideprojects and since you're already listening to our podcast, we really appreciate your support and we are giving you \$100 off the price for the Side Project Accelerator by entering the discount code "podcast" at checkout. That's just the word "podcast". There's one small thing, registration is not open yet. The next batch of Side Project Accelerator will start in mid-October and you can join the waiting list to be notified when the registration does open. When it does, you'll be able to use that promo code to get \$100 off the next batch.

So again, that's hackingui.com/sideproject. Join the waiting list and you'll be able to use the code "podcast" to get \$100 off signing up when registration opens. All right, let's get into the episode.

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:02:08.5] SS: Hello hackers, thanks a lot for joining us for another episode of the Hacking UI Podcast where we hack our way through design, development and entrepreneurship. I'm Sagi Shrieber.

[0:02:19.5] DT: I'm David Tintner.

[0:02:21.5] SS: We're your hosts and today's show is a special show for a couple of reasons. First, this is a first episode of the series of scaling the side project. We're interviewing designers, developers and creatives that have built and scaled super successful side project that we admire. The second reason that today's show is special is because we recorded it in San Francisco and even more so, in our guests' podcast recording studio.

[0:02:44.3] DT: Yeah, our guest today is the owner of not one but a network of multiple podcasts that just hit the mark of five million downloads.

[0:02:51.0] SS: Talk about scaling side project.

[0:02:52.6] DT: Ladies and gents, it's our pleasure to bring you the one and only Bryn Jackson, cofounder of Spec.fm, which features the popular podcast, Design Details, Developer Tea and others.

[0:03:03.6] SS: Today, Bryn is also in charge of building the community over at Figma, a new design tool that seems to be massive popularity over the past few months. So D, are we ready?

[0:03:12.2] DT: Hell yeah. Let's get hacking.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:03:25.6] **SS:** Cool, so Bryn Jackson, how are you?

[0:03:29.3] **BJ:** I'm good.

[0:03:30.1] **SS:** Thanks for having us on your show, I mean, in our show or whatever. For those of you who are hearing, we are in Bryn Jackson's studio, it's an amazing studio, fully geared. I'm going to actually try to take pictures and, can I do that? Go post them up?

[0:03:46.4] **BJ:** That's fine,

[0:03:47.4] **SS:** All right.

[0:03:48.4] **DT:** I already told Sagi, as soon as we go back to Israel we're buying everything in here. This is an unbelievable studio, we have to show some pictures.

[0:03:52.8] **BJ:** Thanks, guys.

[0:03:54.7] **SS:** We're like, our podcast that you're hearing right now is the poor version of anything that has to come out of this studio. We are very happy to be able to talk to you and thanks so much for having us. So today we are doing this, I think like the first kind of episode of Hacking UI podcast that we are talking to someone, not about scaling a design team and design management.

[0:04:16.3] **BJ:** Perfect. I know almost nothing about that.

[0:04:19.3] **SS:** So we're going to talk to you about scaling side projects.

[0:04:22.6] **BJ:** Okay, I can talk about that.

[0:04:24.8] **SS:** How about before we begin just like if you can give a bit of background about where you come from like how you started out and up until now

[0:04:32.4] BJ: Cool. So I'm Bryn Jackson, I'm actually from Minnesota, which is in the mid-west in the US and it's just the worst place. It's super cold in the winter and it's super-hot in the summer. It has like the widest temperature variance in North America I think. It's like right in the center, it's ridiculous.

[0:04:51.3] SS: When I lived there for three years, that was just an experience of three years, I think it was amazing. But more than that, yeah.

[0:04:56.2] DT: You moved to San Francisco for the good weather, right?

[0:04:58.0] BJ: I did, it's like an air-conditioned city, it's perfect. Yeah, so I lived in Minneapolis before I moved out here, previous to that I lived in [inaudible], which is terrible, even more terrible. Then I got my start at a printing company, I went to school for audio engineering, I didn't really like to deal with design that much. I took a couple of design courses or art history or whatever but then I dropped out like three and a half years in or something like that. I was like a semester from finishing up.

[0:05:24.5] SS: All the geniuses do.

[0:05:26.7] BJ: I don't know about that, but I got to teach a few classes on recording my semester and I was like, "Well what's the point of me still being here?" So I dropped out, I took some courses from Berkley College of Music, which was a bit more advanced on the music side like Minnesota is not exactly known for music outside of like Prince. We had a studio that Nirvana recorded *In Utero* at.

That was like our entire claim to fame was Prince, *In Utero*, that's about it. Maybe Bob Dylan? So took courses from Berkley College of Music, which is in Boston, it's like the Harvard of music, which is funny because it's right down the street from Harvard and that was about it. So I just completely bailed on it, I worked in studios for a little while, putting together computers and fixing old equipment, fixing a lot of old Mac Pro's and then from there I went into IT.

So I ended up being a professional Mac fixer for a large print company and I kept getting this calls over and over about the same problems being broken in software. So I started trying to

design solutions for them and eventually someone at one of the sister companies or one of the subsidiaries hired me as a UX designer and that was like my first design gig.

[0:06:25.4] SS: Amazing.

[0:06:25.4] DT: Very cool. And that was in Boston still?

[0:06:27.0] BJ: That was in Minnesota. Sorry, I didn't actually go to Boston, I just took courses from the school, so a lot of it was online.

[0:06:32.8] SS: Amazing. So that's now like it tells a lot about what you do right now because we are here in your studio, fully geared up, you got the servers over there with an incredible setup. You've got the mics and everything for the sound, you've got like the sound and the IT going on and your podcasts and most of what you do is all about design. Recently you joined Figma.

[0:06:56.7] BJ: Yeah, when I got here I worked for a company called Shop Savvy and a guy named Jeff Broderick in particular, he was the person who hired me out here from that print company. The print company had decided they no longer wanted a designer, they couldn't quantify having designer when they were losing so much money because it's a print company in 2005, 2006.

So they sent me out here to Adobe to take analyst courses and I was like, "All right, fuck this." So I called up Jeff, I hit him up on Twitter I think and asked me if he'd be down to grab a beer and we went out to grab a beer and then hung out till like 2 AM watching Game of Thrones.

[0:07:31.0] DT: It does that to you.

[0:07:31.9] BJ: Yeah. It was ridiculous and he hired me out here a couple of months later after I did some freelance work for them, just kind of like see if it was a good fit. And then most recently I was at a political news startup called Sidewire where I got to hire another designer and lead some of the front end engineering stuff as well and then I left that to do Spec full-time and then Figma picked me up, which was a fortuitous coincidence.

[0:07:54.9] **SS:** A hell of a ride.

[0:07:55.6] **DT:** Very cool.

[0:07:56.8] **BJ:** It's been interesting.

[0:07:58.8] **SS:** Let's go back to the early days of Spec. How did you get started with Spec and what drove you to begin this project?

[0:08:06.6] **BJ:** Okay. So the early days of Spec frankly isn't that long ago. We actually started Spec last April, we started Design Details January 5th of last year.

[0:08:17.5] **SS:** It feels way like...

[0:08:18.7] **BJ:** We've done 160 episodes.

[0:08:20.3] **SS:** Wow.

[0:08:20.7] **BJ:** Yeah, 158 came out, maybe? I don't remember which number came out today or yesterday I guess.

[0:08:27.8] **DT:** Time flies when you're recording podcasts.

[0:08:29.6] **BJ:** So we're doing two a week which is just insane. I don't know if we'll keep doing that but we have been for a little over a year now. They really fly through them but it came together because I was using this blog called Design Details, by my now friend Brian Levin, for research and like using it to compare the patterns I was designing versus other people's my learning from people who had done this thing before, done the job better, done it previously, whatever it was, just wanted to see what other people were doing. He was breaking down every little piece of UI into single interactions and making videos out of them.

[0:09:05.1] **SS:** Yeah, I was following Design Details for a while.

[0:09:08.6] BJ: It was amazing, I didn't know it was him, though. I had already met him, I had no idea that he was the person who made this blog. So I met him at a GitHub party when I was trying to show off another side project to Mark Otto, do you guys know Mark Otto?

[0:09:22.0] SS: Yeah.

[0:09:21.8] DT: He's the one from Bootstrap right?

[0:09:23.1] BJ: Yeah, he and Jacob Thornton created Bootstrap together at Twitter, took that and made it this whole giant thing. My friend Michael Schultz and I, who I ended up hiring at Sidewire, built this tool for Twitter called Privatize and it would let you make a link — it would create a short link and then so you couldn't see the URL or anything and then you would tweet it out and whoever you mentioned in the tweet could open that link but no one else.

[0:09:49.4] DT: Very cool.

[0:09:49.6] BJ: So we wanted to show Mark this thing, it broke down completely when we showed it to him like he ended up being logged in as the engineer that was building it with us and just, it was terrible. But I did meet Brian and his now roommate Matt Leonard who I also hired at Sidewire at this event because we ended up in the same tour group somehow. So Mark gave us a tour of GitHub, this is shortly after he joined GitHub I think and we just ended up in the same tour group and...

[0:10:16.2] SS: The rest is history.

[0:10:17.8] BJ: Kind of, yeah. So I ended up running into Michael and Brian together at lunch one day and I was basically just like gushing about this blog I was reading and like how helpful it was and then Brian's like, "Oh yeah, that's me." And I'm like, "Interesting." So I DM'ed him later the same day asking if he ever thought about making a podcast and it just kind of went from there.

[0:10:37.8] DT: Very cool.

[0:10:38.3] SS: Cool, cool and that was before you ever had like a podcast right?

[0:10:42.2] BJ: Yeah, I had never done a podcast before. I wasn't really interested in it, I was particularly curious about the thinking behind these interfaces as opposed to the actual interfaces themselves. How do people process things, how do people feel about how their users interpreted their work? Things like that.

[0:10:58.8] SS: Okay, so you just wanted to basically open this podcast in order to get like a glimpse of the behind the scenes of design processes right?

[0:11:05.8] BJ: Yeah, more or less.

[0:11:06.6] SS: Okay, then because right now on Spec you have a few podcast going on, how did it evolve to being more podcasts?

[0:11:15.1] BJ: When I reached out to Brian, he had the statistic of if you make it past eight episodes, you're pretty much good. Most podcasts fail before eight-episode or something. I don't know where he came up with that stat but he did.

[0:11:27.8] DT: I think I heard Tim Ferriss say that too.

[0:11:29.7] BJ: That might make sense, that's a very Brian thing. So he was like, "Okay, we got to get eight episodes lined up beforehand." We ended up only getting five lined up beforehand but we had like 128 yes's before we shipped the first episode. So we were like, "Okay, we can make this happen."

[0:11:44.3] DT: 128 yes's?

[0:11:45.8] BJ: Yeah, people that responded, "Yes, they would talk to us on the show."

[0:11:50.9] DT: Essentially guests for the show.

[0:11:51.9] BJ: Yes. So we're like, "Okay, this shouldn't be a problem, we'll just do the things, we got five episodes recorded." Shipped it out January fifth, the same day, another podcast called Developer Tea launched. Now, Developer Tea was basically like, we were chasing each other up and down the charts for the next month or two before we even started talking to each other. We'd always just see each other like one or two below each other on iTunes or on Pocket Casts or whatever.

So we started talking to each other, someone from Mankato actually put us in contact with each other. Mankato is the town I grew up in Minnesota, he actually worked at the same printing company that I had worked at and he commented about the both of us at once like on twitter and so that's how Jonathan, the host of Developer Tea, I got in touch with each other and then he helped us switch over hosting for our podcast files and we helped him sell advertisements, and we just started working together a little bit.

Eventually, we just decided to make it a thing, we're like, "Okay, you're really good at this growth thing, we're not great at that but we're really selling sponsorships." So we just kind of joined forces and started shipping new podcasts.

[0:12:57.4] SS: Sounds amazing, so that was Developer Tea and you got another one in the network right?

[0:13:01.9] BJ: We have nine actually.

[0:13:03.7] SS: Nine?

[0:13:05.1] BJ: Yeah. So we have Design Details, Developer Tea, those are the two that started, and then Immutable is one that I host. We had one called Vicarious that we just shut down. We just added a new one called Layout, we've got one...

[0:13:16.3] SS: Oh I know that but that is Rafael Conde, no?

[0:13:18.3] BJ: Yeah, Rafael Conde and Kevin Clark.

[0:13:20.7] SS: I love this guy, I met him in Paris.

[0:13:23.5] BJ: They're fantastic people, stoked to have them on the network. So those are like the design side ones but then as far as developers, we have of course Developer Tea but then we have Runtime, which is for iOS developers, that's hosted by Sam Soffes and Caleb Davenport who are both incredible developers. Orthogonal, which is hosted by my accountant and his friend who is a freelancer and it's about the back end side of freelancing. So all that goes into it, the legal work, the accounting work, the marketing, whatever. Does Not Compute, which is for front end developer types and then Fragmented which is for Android developers.

[0:13:54.5] SS: Cool.

[0:13:54.9] BJ: Then on top of that we have three blogs, which are awesome.

[0:13:59.9] SS: Which are the blogs?

[0:14:00.7] BJ: Little Bite to Cocoa is one, that's by Jake Marsh who was my first developer here in the city, my first iOS developer and then the Design Details blog of course and I started one myself recently called Specifics, which is resource guides.

[0:14:12.3] SS: Amazing. So let's talk about maybe the strategic decision to grow like that.

[0:14:19.1] DT: Yeah, I'm actually pretty curious, what does it mean when a podcast is on your network? What are you actually doing for them? Are you producing the show or what are you providing?

[0:14:27.0] BJ: So until Layout, we have edited and produced every single show. Once the podcast joins the network, we do all the editing work, actually, our producer Sarah does all the editing work. She sells sponsorships for people, we kind of cross-promote, we just kind of help each other out.

[0:14:41.8] DT: This is amazing, it sounds like you're putting the people who have the content, the thought leaders in a place to deliver that content, you're taking care of kind of all the stuff

that, the obstacles that keep good people in the way of producing podcasts or producing content.

[0:14:54.2] BJ: Yup, so the whole goal was just to enable the smart people we're around all the time, to help other people. So it's always been about helping designers and developers level up. So we're like, "Well, what's the best way to do that?" Put talented developers and designers in front of them, just enabling that.

[0:15:10.3] SS: Amazing, and we'll be sure to put all the podcasts and blogs in the show notes.

[0:15:14.6] BJ: I appreciate that.

[0:15:15.7] SS: Anybody of you who hadn't kept track. We've been through the Spec story.

[0:15:20.5] DT: Well actually, Bryn, so one thing, we know we've only known each other just real quickly now but I've already gathered from you that you like working with your friends.

[0:15:26.0] BJ: Yeah.

[0:15:28.1] DT: You had mentioned you hiring, the accountant is now doing a podcast and you're hiring a friend at Sidewire and so can you talk about that a little bit?

[0:15:34.1] BJ: I find that when I work with someone who suits me particularly well when we are particularly efficient and effective together, there's no point in not working with them at any given point. So if they're open to working with me, I'm going to like scoop them up or partner with them in whatever way I can because what matters most to me is the outcome and if we're good at making a good outcome together, I'm just going to go after that as hard as I can.

[0:15:59.5] DT: Very cool, I can totally relate. Sagi and I became friends actually in two startups ago and then we wanted to stay together and do a side project together and I totally relate to that trying to work with your friends and especially when you find people that you click, like you said, it's not so common, you need to hold onto those people.

[0:16:15.3] BJ: I try and find people who are particularly suited to whatever the project is. I'm starting new video series on Spec called Constructive with Marshal Bach. He works at YouTube so he's particularly suited to video. We're doing some pretty cool interaction in editing with that stuff, it just made the most sense for us to work together on that stuff.

[0:16:32.4] DT: Very cool.

[0:16:35.6] SS: Very cool. So in terms of growing that network and working with the people on all these vertical, do you not find it hard to get them to work on those verticals? David and I also work with our friends and we have Hacking Revenue that we opened, which is a blog, which is kind of like Hacking UI. We just said, "Okay, here's our template, here is all the tools that we built." We are working with them, right? It's very fun to work with your friends. It's also time-consuming sometimes, right? How did you manage that?

[0:17:08.8] BJ: That's a good question. I just kind of keep moving. I can't say I've been bored in the past couple of years, I've always had something on my plate to do.

[0:17:18.7] DT: Can you give us a breakdown of your time like how much you're spending on each thing, in addition to having a full-time job basically?

[0:17:24.8] BJ: Yeah, that's interesting. Design Details takes about four hours out of my week. We record for about an hour and a half on a given night and we do that twice a week and it probably takes a little time beforehand, but that's like a half hour or so, and then a little time afterward as well.

Depending on the week, it could be six hours, it could be two hours, we could just like get right to business and get the thing done. Or it could be like they decide to stay here the whole night and we just hang out. It depends on the day. Immutable takes 20 minutes per episode, it's like 15 minute long episodes. So we record a bunch at once, all in a row and so that's once every three or four weeks.

[0:18:04.6] DT: Okay, cool.

[0:18:05.7] BJ: So pretty simple. The full-time job, a San Francisco full-time job is different than a lot of other full-time jobs especially a startup whether that is gearing up for launch. so I spend probably 60 or 70 hours a week on that and then Brian and Sarah and I work all weekend every weekend on building new tools for our websites or we're working on a community site together, we're building a bunch of other stuff. So that's like all the administrative stuff or the engineering side of building these products continuously.

[0:18:35.3] SS: Okay, cool. That brings me to the point which we talk about with the people that are on our Side Project Accelerator and that's the point of being technical and I see that you have that going on you are technical, also in hardware, also in software, also like everywhere.

[0:18:50.6] DT: A Jack of all trades, it sounds like.

[0:18:52.6] BJ: Master of none?

[0:18:55.2] SS: Like Tobias van Schneider says, "Master of some." But yeah. No, it's amazing because we preach about like being able to know the technical stuff and other people push back on that and say, "No, I can't possibly know how to develop that."

[0:19:08.3] BJ: It's "should designer's code", right?

[0:19:09.5] DT: Exactly.

[0:19:10.3] BJ: It's a conversation we constantly have in our industry, it's, "Okay, should designers code?" My favorite answer, I can't remember who says it. I can't attribute it right now but the answer that I was given was, "Only the good ones." The best ones know how to code. If you know your platform well, you can pretty much code, you can at least read the code, you know what's happening.

If you know your platform well, you understand the code anyway so you're just a hop skip and a jump from building the thing. I can't write Swift but I can read Swift. I can work in languages that are similar to Swift. I kind of pick up pieces of it, right? But JavaScript I can code in, HTML CSS

I can code in. I can put together components of say like a gulp streaming app. I guess it's not an app. Have you guys used gulp?

[0:20:02.7] DT: I was actually more of a grunt guy.

[0:20:05.5] BJ: So I moved from grunt to gulp, now I hear I have to use web pack for React but it's whatever. Gulp is like my best friend. I've released two open source projects and one of them was gulp based and the other I used gulp to build.

[0:20:19.5] DT: Very cool.

[0:20:20.8] SS: Okay, amazing.

[0:20:21.0] DT: You have like this kind of no fear attitude of just attacking some new technical challenge it seems like.

[0:20:26.2] BJ: If something needs to be done, it's easy to go learn how to do it. I first learned to code when I was back at this printing company, they wanted to launch a new corporate website, I was the designer in charge of it and I could not get the engineers to build what I wanted. So I went and learned HTML and CSS, I went and learned JavaScript and I just built it myself. It wasn't the best website in the world but it fucking worked, you know?

[0:20:46.4] DT: That's all that matters.

[0:20:47.3] BJ: Yeah.

[0:20:48.3] SS: Yeah, cool.

[0:20:49.0] DT: So I want to ask more about the side projects that you're doing because, again as Sigi mentioned, we're talking a lot about that lately. Any tips you have for someone who is starting out on a side project now?

[0:20:58.1] BJ: Have someone else that you're responsible to. If you're just responsible for yourself, you'll never finish anything.

[0:21:03.3] DT: You're saying commit and just make the commitment and...

[0:21:05.7] BJ: Yeah, if you commit to other people that's great, but if you have a partner in it, someone that's like really invested in you succeeding, if you don't do it, you're letting them down then. It's easy to let an audience down or like...

[0:21:17.4] DT: Like a mythical kind of figure, this audience.

[0:21:19.4] BJ: Yeah, when it's vague, it's not easy to bail out on it. When it's Brian showing up here to record the podcast or Brian's depending on me to book guests for a podcast, I better fucking do it. Otherwise, I'm letting him down too and that's a specific person, it's not vague, it's like, "Oh I'm screwing up something else, this person said they would do." I'm blocking them from doing their thing.

[0:21:41.3] DT: This is a great tip because I think so many people, one of the biggest obstacles preventing them from starting the side project is them saying they don't have enough time. But we all kind of, we do have time, it's just in these little nooks and crannies in our schedule that we have a hard time finding sometimes. So if you have someone that you're committing to, you don't have a choice, you're doing it.

[0:21:59.8] BJ: Frankly, I ran out of time all the time and I noticed myself doing stupid things that I have no reason to do. I am obsessed with comic books. I love comic books. Up until recently, I was spending something like \$60 a week on comic books. Love comic books. So I'd spend a lot of time catching up on comic book movies that are coming out, even just rumors and stuff, it was a complete waste of time. I hate it whenever I catch myself doing it because I have other things that I can do that are much more valuable to me even. That's not invaluable to me, it's just something that's kind of like an addiction I guess, I have to know the details of the story when it's coming out.

[0:22:36.5] DT: But at the same time it also seems like a passion.

[0:22:38.0] SS: Yeah.

[0:22:40.0] BJ: I'm definitely not as passionate about it as I am about building things. I'm not as passionate about that as I am about helping other people be better. So what the hell? It's very frustrating, it's just like a holdover from a previous life where I had time.

[0:22:55.0] DT: Have you built anything related to comic books or is that something that you may do that kind of intertwines this addiction with some sort of side project or some sort of more productive use of that time?

[0:23:05.6] BJ: I designed a comic book app maybe two years ago. I called it rat con, it never got built. I wanted to ship it but what are you going to do? I also built a Dungeons and Dragons app with Sam Soffes that never fully shipped either.

[0:23:20.2] SS: Nice. I want to take us back to your community that you're building. Let's talk about community for a second. So you grew, you just like passed five million downloads on your podcast am I right?

[0:23:34.3] BJ: We're almost at seven.

[0:23:34.6] SS: Almost seven?

[0:23:35.6] BJ: Yeah, we get about half a million downloads a month.

[0:23:39.0] SS: What are your tips for growing a podcast or like even...

[0:23:41.7] DT: For growing an audience.

[0:23:43.8] SS: I know you want to say "give value" and like that's probably the most...

[0:23:48.1] BJ: That's pretty vague, right? "Get value." Okay, that's easy.

[0:23:51.8] SS: A lot of people say that. We believe in that too but how do you really actually, what are your tips for building that audience and getting the right podcast? We have a podcast as well and we would love to learn.

[0:24:02.9] BJ: Well, how would you build up a product? How would you make a product better? How would you get an audience for it? Listen to feedback, right? Build it like a product. We know how to build a product, we know that there is a design phase where you determine what the thing is and how to solve the problem for a group of people then you go and build it.

So in, example, podcasting, that's pretty much the recording side of things, right? It's very technical, it's something where you have to have some level of technical mastery over that specific substrate if you will and then ship it, and then iterate as fast as you can. Get feedback, ask people for their opinion before you build the thing. Actually, the first episode of Design Details, we recorded twice because we showed the first episode to people and it wasn't good enough. So we went back and did it over again. Building things like a product, especially for designers, developers, we know how to do this thing, everything's a product in some way, build things that way.

[0:24:54.8] DT: This is interesting actually because it kind of clashes with another ideology about just like shipping, especially when it comes to side projects when you don't have a lot of time shipping, never looking back.

[0:25:02.5] BJ: MVP.

[0:25:03.7] DT: Yeah, but never looking back and just kind of like pushing forward, not being afraid, not being a perfectionist like getting things out there and moving forward.

[0:25:11.9] BJ: I would compare that to a horse with blinders on, right? It's only looking forward, it's not considering what else is happening and sometimes that works in specific types of races, right? If it's a marathon, if it's something that it isn't an ongoing project, you better know where other people are.

[0:25:27.6] DT: Great analogy.

[0:25:29.6] SS: How did you iterate basically on Spec and on your podcast. Did you send out surveys?

[0:25:35.2] BJ: We did. We sent out one survey and that was right after we launched our Slack team. We recently, actually someone else sent out a survey to our Slack team recently and they shared the results and they came back very similar. So we know that things are still moving in the right direction. It wasn't like, "What you hate?" Or anything like that.

We're trying to figure out how we could make it more manageable, more profitable than the first one. We wanted to make sure there was something that was sustainable for us as people because people on the network for example Sam Soffes, he's my favorite example because he charges a lot of money, he's published this very well.

He makes a certain amount of money per hour and if I'm not meeting that then he's more likely to go do something else instead. So sustainability comes down to, for us, making sure that people have the time to do it consistently because it's good for them, right? We have to make it worth their while to continue producing whatever it is that we think is right for them to produce.

[0:26:30.2] SS: Right, sounds right.

[0:26:32.8] BJ: Community wise, we didn't really iterate on that too much, we tried some channels out in our Slack team, we reduced channels, we've made new ones, we've reduced them. Nothing particular there. The community part kind of just happened frankly. A lot of people still see it as the Design Details Slack team, even though there are nine podcasts in there, it's super weird. That's something we're still figuring out but we're coming close to the Slack cap, there's a cap at 8,200 users and we're at about 6,000. So we have to build our own community site to get off of slack because we can't pay for it. If we paid for it, it would be over \$40,000 a month.

[0:27:05.1] SS: Wow.

[0:27:05.3] BJ: Which is not going to happen.

[0:27:07.9] SS: So you're going to build your own community site?

[0:27:09.2] BJ: Yes, we're actually building it with the community. We're using Figma to build it together because that has multiplayer functionality where people can actually be in the same file at the same time or at least all the files are together at once because multiplayer hasn't shipped yet. We're releasing that later. But it's amazing, it's super weird, it's just ridiculous. So it's Google docs style editing in a design file, it's really weird.

[0:27:32.5] SS: Crazy. So is that what I saw in Spec? In Twitch?

[0:27:37.2] BJ: We haven't done it on Twitch yet I don't think.

[0:27:39.6] SS: Okay. I was actually watching you use Figma, and by the way, let's talk about — I want to talk about that for a sec.

[0:27:46.9] BJ: Okay, so iterating on design details wise, to go back to your question quick before we jump to the next thing, we changed our format a lot, we started with prepared questions, we moved to off the cuff. Brian is really a naturally good asker of things, he started with job interview questions, though. He goes like the deepest first and then comes up to shallowness where I start with dumb jokes and just go from there.

[0:28:10.0] DT: Breaking the ice.

[0:28:12.0] BJ: Yeah. My job is kind of keeping the energy up and making sure that we're moving along at a pace because if Brian asks too deep of questions over and over, it slows down. So making sure it doesn't get too deep, although we do want deep content, making sure that the energy stays up and is positive, that's kind of my role and his role is getting the meat of the conversation.

[0:28:33.0] DT: So good cop-bad cop kind of thing?

[0:28:34.1] BJ: Yeah, totally. Brian's always the worst cop.

[0:28:38.5] SS: David, I think we have that going on as well, right? Usually.

[0:28:41.4] DT: Well wait, who is the bad cop? Hold on a second.

[0:28:45.1] BJ: We also took feedback on quality and bought nicer mics and continually improved what we were doing. We started at one episode a week, we moved to two episodes a week because people were asking for more, we just kind of grew the podcast quickly. We heard that we weren't having enough women or people of color on the podcast. So we started — we took a hard turn in that direction. We wanted to make sure that what we're doing is right for all people, not just us.

So when we created the podcast, it was more for people like us in the midwest, people in our situation where they didn't have design communities, we wanted to kind of share the conversations we feel lucky to have with them, and we kind of didn't consider other people. So we made a move to start considering everyone as hard as we could, be extremely considerate, make sure that we're encouraging everyone to be better.

[0:29:30.0] SS: Okay, sounds cool. In terms of selling, selling and making it profitable, how did you — when did you start accepting sponsorships and how did you do that?

[0:29:43.8] BJ: We had a sponsorship on our first episode because Brian and I went to a Dribbble meetup at a company called Weebly and I was half drunk and started talking to one of the co-founders and telling them that they should sponsor me because they're competitors do. Somehow they did it, which was incredible and we got to buy nice mics out of the gate without going out of pocket, which is very nice.

Then we launched it on Product Hunt, we got a huge amount of downloads the first day, which, well compared to what we were expecting. We were expecting 5,000 in the first month, we got six thousand the first day and then went on to have 10,000 the first week and just kind of — I was shocked. I did not believe that was going to happen. I was super proud of it and we had sponsors hit us up after we launched on Product Hunt, so we just kept selling it. So we had like

Hover hit us up then, Envision hit us up, we talked to Pixate the next week, it just kind of built from there.

[0:30:35.3] SS: What are your tips for someone now with a podcast that wants to, let's say, someone today opens his first podcast. Would you suggest he goes about and looking for sponsors or wait and build that momentum? I mean today you can't even launch a podcast on Product Hunt.

[0:30:51.1] DT: Well if I can clarify Sagi, I think really what you're getting into is when you add sponsorships or advertisements to any product that you have, you kind of feel like you're taking away something from the user, the listener a little bit. At what point do you feel like it's okay to put that in there?

[0:31:05.4] BJ: So that's a really interesting question, there is another way that we iterate it. Originally, all of our podcast sponsorships were mid roles. We'd heard that that was the most effective because people won't skip them. But you know what? The people who want to skip an ad are going to skip the ad, they're going to get around it, they're not going to convert. So we put them on the front and the end. We'll just let people miss that. If they had any decent podcast app, they can skip the first 30 seconds and they can shut it off when it starts being an ad again at the end. Easy, peasy.

So it didn't really make us question that but we always chose sponsors that we thought were the best for our audience. We always worked with people that we used ourselves, or people that we had talked to and felt like they had our audience's interests in mind, there were always taking care of the people that we cared about which was the audience. We didn't price things based on CPM or CPA. CPM is cost per mil which is per thousand listeners.

[0:31:56.3] SS: Yeah, it's nothing.

[0:31:57.0] BJ: Cost per acquisition is basically like you'll hear audible ones all the time like go to audible.com/whateverpodcast and that will tell you came from us and that's how they get paid. We tell people to go to a certain link but it's all value based, it's all based on what we think

we provide to them and what it costs us to manufacture a show and keep our hosts doing it over and over.

[0:31:57.0] DT: So flat fee, you're saying? Cool.

[0:32:24.6] SS: How is this going for you right now with all the different podcasts, your time management, your profitability, getting everyone on board with splitting of revenues and stuff?

[0:32:34.7] BJ: Interestingly, Design Details is the hardest one to sell right now. The others are pretty much sold out, which is really nice.

[0:32:40.9] DT: Is that because the others are more niche? Is there a more specific kind of product that would fit it?

[0:32:46.9] BJ: I think it's probably because Brian and I haven't spent as much time reaching out. Sarah sells most of the ads and there are certain shows where it's really effective to not have the host doing all the selling but we started selling them all personally. That matters a lot to sponsors if they can talk to the host, if they can get a feel for what our paying of the show is and what we want to do with it, then they can feel good about supporting it rather than handing them off to someone who is saying, "Here are our ad rates." It's just a slightly different thing.

[0:33:15.2] SS: Yeah, I guess chicken and egg in that case.

[0:33:18.0] BJ: Yeah.

[0:33:18.6] SS: We find ourselves also like dealing with should we talk to the sponsors of everything. Hacking UI related or should we have someone? Now we have two people in charge of selling but it was like all of us but we found out also that David had a lot of calls with sponsors and trying to fit some custom solution with tons of value and David, you want to talk about that?

[0:33:42.6] DT: Yeah, just one thing we found was that we would get on this long calls with sponsors and try to set something up and a lot of times the long calls and like these long presses just wouldn't close at the end and then some sponsor would come along that just

perfectly fits our audience, one email back and forth, boom. Close the deal and nothing like — and it worked. They were happy with it and they came back for more and I was shocked. They said, “Wait, what about, you know, the long phone call, I set up a 30 minute Skype, we had the whole thing,” and those were not the ones, that we’re closing less.

[0:34:10.2] BJ: Yeah, you’ll find that with pros, it takes very little conversation. People who have sponsored podcast before, they know the drill, they’re just going to ship the thing, they’re not worried about it. People who haven’t done that previously, there’s like three or four meetings or like a video call, there’s a whole process to get that thing sealed and I mean, I can’t fault them, it’s their money, they got to understand what they’re getting for it, which makes a lot of sense but there’s definitely a difference. There’s definitely an understanding in certain companies.

[0:34:39.9] SS: Yeah.

[0:34:41.0] DT: So I want to ask you a little bit, okay so we kind of got a layout of what you’re working with here, what’s underneath the Spec umbrella, where do you want to take it? What’s next? What’s on the roadmap?

[0:34:49.3] BJ: So right now, we’re launching our first video series. We just got our YouTube channel up and running, so we’re working on that. We got it past 100 subscribers so that we could actually get the custom name so it’s [YouTube.com/c/Specfm](https://www.youtube.com/c/Specfm) and then we’re also building our community site, that’s a really important thing to us because obviously, we have to move off of Slack. So we described it publicly, when Brian first posted about it, it was basically “designer news that isn’t toxic”.

So I think most people can understand why people would think it’s toxic and kind of what we’re saying we want to get away from. There was a post the same day that he announced it called menofdesignernews.tumblr.com, you should go check that out, you can have examples of why we think it’s toxic. I think most aggregators like that. Hacker News, even Product Hunt, they’re built around a specific link or a specific post that might not be — it’s not geared for people getting help. It’s geared for people showing off.

So we want to build a thing that is about people getting help, just like our Slack team is. Now Slack has an issue with channels or if you have too many, people get lost. But also if you have too few multiple conversations get put in at the same time. So we want to separate out the conversations while keeping the format that is still helpful. It has to be real-time chat, it can't be comments because I think comments are built around this kind of understanding that someone might not respond. You don't expect people to respond as quickly with comments. You do expect to respond quickly with chat. You feel like you can get help in a hurry. So chat is important.

We need to keep things separated by conversation so people don't get in the way, that's important. It needs to be built around everyone from juniors all the way up to seniors, just getting help with their thing. Whether that's like a research project, we have people post surveys in there all the time, we have people who are hiring, posting in job listings, that's super valuable to our audience. A lot of them are looking for new jobs. So it's not like free advertising so much or spamming as they're actually trying to help our audience, which is fantastic.

[0:37:02.8] DT: If I can ask you, how do you ask which of these things because I understand you're really trying to help people and you're really providing a good service for your audience and your community and it seems like you're building the community in this direction, to really help more and more people. So how do you decide which of these things to monetize? Like for instance, job listings, you can setup something and start taking and which of these things to let just be part of the community and just be for the audience.

[0:37:24.2] BJ: We're going to try not to monetize the community itself in any way. If there are people listening, what we're monetizing is the podcasting effort itself, right? Listeners are important but we don't base it on the number of listeners, so it does not matter how many people listen.

[0:37:42.9] DT: Very cool, this is a cool mentality so that way you can say you're always providing value.

[0:37:45.2] BJ: We're being paid for our service not for the people listening.

[0:37:49.9] DT: Not for bringing more and more people in.

[0:37:50.9] BJ: Yup, exactly.

[0:37:52.3] DT: That's nice, to not put your motivation in that direction.

[0:37:56.2] BJ: So we'll probably have to monetize the site in some way just to keep it up but we're going to try and do that pretty minimally. We actually did a job board before a lot of our sponsors are around hiring, but that's about it.

[0:38:08.1] SS: All right. So where do we want to take it? We can talk about live video because you are into live video now with your YouTube channel and it's something that's fairly new in the market as well. It's very interesting seeing the design kind of like a niche like in that realm of live video, how is it going for you?

[0:38:30.1] BJ: Well, we had like the laziest Twitch channel ever and it was completely unscheduled. But it was nice to have conversations while you're working and to work publicly and kind of — it makes you question everything you do, every decision you make because other people are watching you do it. But there are others who are doing it way better. Justin Mezzell from Code School has an amazing Twitch stream, Allison House has incredible Twitch stream. There's one called LetterShoppe, I think her name is Dina. Alexa Grafera from Primaries is her icon set and Parakeet is the studio that she works at with Louie Mantia. She has a channel where she designs emoji's, there are some amazing channels going on. Ours is like the worst of them.

It was just that we were working on projects that weren't for fun. In a lot of cases, the projects that people are working on were just like examples for the sake of streaming or just fun projects for themselves, which are cool but when it has to solve a problem, I think there are higher stakes, it's more meaningful. So I think Alison House did a bit of stuff that was like a bit more meaningful, Brian's even like coding on it. He's designing in code while he's working. So for us, it didn't do amazingly well, I think our channel overall had like 1,600 views or something like that, it wasn't anything significant and then we moved to YouTube, which already has something

like 800 views and it's only been a month. That's pretty small for most of our shows but video is something new to us so we have no idea. We're learning a lot there.

[0:39:59.0] SS: Yeah, cool, now you got also — you're doing a lot of video, I don't know if live video.

[0:40:04.9] BJ: Produced video, yeah. I'm doing a lot of video elsewhere that isn't live. Yeah, it's a learning experience.

[0:40:11.0] SS: Yeah, and so you seem to jump into that as well and we've seen your gear so it's nice to jump into that as well.

[0:40:21.7] BJ: It's not a far cry from audio like a lot of the principles overlap so if there's a problem to be solved then I think video is the best way to solve it, I'm just going to learn how to do that thing and it will be as minimally as possible at first to ship the right thing, I'll learn what I need to to make it a high-quality product but that's about it. Then if it's successful, I'll go from there. I'll listen to feedback, I'll make the improvements that are necessary.

[0:40:45.6] SS: All right, cool.

[0:40:46.9] DT: So we talked about your road map a little bit for everything you're doing on the side, but what about for you personally? You went back to working in a full-time job now and you have all these...

[0:40:54.4] BJ: I was only out of a full-time job for like a week, so that doesn't really count. I think I have three weeks off in between or something like that.

[0:41:00.5] DT: Okay, so like a long vacation.

[0:41:02.0] BJ: Yeah, it was nice.

[0:41:03.7] DT: But how do you go through this? It's a totally different mindset to be working for a company and working for someone else's company and then doing your own thing and your

own side projects. Is that where you see yourself always balancing these things or is there something a direction that you're going to take a career in the future that you know of?

[0:41:19.9] BJ: I have zero plans for my career, to be honest. Figma hired me because of the work I was doing on Spec, they trusted me to be good at designing things for designers and developers, that's exactly what I said I wanted to do when I left Sidewire, that's what I continue to do there. So I get to do a lot of the media stuff that I still wanted to do but also get to work on products. Small products, big products, whatever. Whatever people need help with, that's what I'm jumping in on.

I also work with the community a lot, I get to do a lot of design research and talk to the community, which is right up my alley and there's a lot of crossover. There's like zero contact switching. They're not the same thing but they're so close that it doesn't really matter.

[0:41:56.6] DT: Sounds like a perfect match.

[0:41:58.3] BJ: It was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. I'm a huge fan of Figma, I was using it like as my daily driver for something like three or four months before I joined the team and it's just a no-brainer for me.

[0:42:08.4] SS: What did you use before Figma?

[0:42:09.6] BJ: Sketch. I actually almost every day I was getting probably 15 or 20 tweets asking me for help on Sketch, I'd spend a lot of time learning it and talking about it publicly so people just came to me for help. I'd say I was probably more technical user and more process driven so people ask me how to do a certain process in Sketch and I talked a lot about that on Design Details so people knew. As soon as I switched to Figma, it was like obvious that it was the future and there was just no going back for me.

[0:42:37.1] SS: Really? It's amazing because I'm a heavy user of Sketch as well.

[0:42:41.1] DT: I just see that you just killed the next month of Sagi's life here.

[0:42:45.2] SS: Oh yeah.

[0:42:46.1] BJ: It doesn't take that long honestly, a lot of stuff maps to Sketch. The things I miss are plugins, so that is something I am working on aggressively. We actually just launched our first one today, which is integration with Framer. I really want data back in my designs. That's something we don't have built in yet and part of the problem with that is we're on the web, right? The web is amazing, we get a lot of stuff for free because of it and we still have the power of something on a desktop like Sketch.

We're using the same technologies they are, we're just doing it more accurately, which is incredible but there are security issues when we just start letting people write code against it. The Mac is very sandboxed, the web isn't. So making sure that people's information is secure, things like that is a lot of work, so that's what we're kind of working on to get the plugins ready. Other than that, I'm working on some things. I've been hanging out with Airbnb with their design team to figure out what kind of things they're doing because they're designing like the future of design systems, it's kind of incredible. Jon Gold just joined the team, Karri Saarinen, Ben Wilkins, they're doing incredible work.

[0:43:50.5] SS: Amazing. We had Katie Dill on the show.

[0:43:52.3] BJ: Yeah, Katie is amazing. Actually last time I was there I saw her. Yeah, they're just an incredible team and they're writing a lot about it too so you should go check out Airbnb Design because it's full of amazing like little nuggets of how design systems should work and where the feature's going.

[0:44:07.4] SS: Nice.

[0:44:09.0] BJ: Just trying to figure out what kind of data we should pull in and what kind of data we should put out because maybe visual assets aren't the expert of the future. Maybe they're not where we should be going because a picture only communicates in one way. What if it was a data set that is put out? What if it's adjacent document, the developers can use basically a shopping list of components and the variations on them? What if we're outputting better things

but I'm like, not like Macaw right? Macaw was writing front end code and people are opinionated about front end code. You can't ever win in that game, right?

I think that's what Webflow's doing too. It's just not a game you can win because people have opinions about it. If you just give them raw data, if you just give them a document that they can use to build their own system, that seems like a no-brainer, right? I think that's where things will be moving toward.

[0:44:55.4] DT: That's a very cool concept, I like that a lot. This is definitely the issue, even with Photoshop, if you can export code or something like that, what you said is so true that people are opinionated. Any developer is looking at the exported code the designer hands them and says, "Come on, I'm not using this, this is not professional."

[0:45:08.6] BJ: Exactly. If you had them a picture, they only can see what they think about you know? People don't see line height, people don't see padding all the time, there's a lot of details that go into it. They have to measure against something that might not speak the same languages their code does.

[0:45:25.7] DT: So this is what you guys are doing?

[0:45:27.6] BJ: Don't know yet but that's something I'm working on based on Airbnb stuff, I'm seeing if it's a feasible thing.

[0:45:32.4] DT: Very cool.

[0:45:33.8] SS: It's amazing that also you can be here in San Francisco where everything is happening to see that, learn from it and implement it.

[0:45:41.3] BJ: I don't think it would be possible anywhere else. We wouldn't be able to build the thing that people are moving toward if we weren't in the same place as them and watching them do it.

[0:45:50.5] DT: It's so true, every time I come to San Francisco, I forget, I go away for a little while and I forget how much is happening here and then you come back and you're just like slapped in the face with everybody. So many talented people in such a small area.

[0:46:02.4] BJ: The common phrase is "skate to where the puck is going". If we can't see the puck, if we're not around the puck, we have no idea where it's going. But the company's, here is the puck, their design teams are moving toward the goal so just watch them do it and be there for them.

[0:46:17.9] DT: Such a Minnesota analogy.

[0:46:23.2] BJ: I was a basketball player, I haven't worked in one of those yet.

[0:46:27.6] DT: Very cool, I think that's exciting stuff and we have to look forward to in the future.

[0:46:31.6] SS: We have like yeah, we have a lot of action items. David you're going to prepare the studio, I'm going to go learn Figma and yeah.

[0:46:38.7] BJ: Work in it publicly, it's pretty fun, give it a shot, yeah. It makes it really easy on you.

[0:46:43.0] SS: Cool.

[0:46:43.9] BJ: I design some show art in it, I did some illustration work in it for other purposes, it's been a learning experience.

[0:46:51.5] SS: I'll give it a go.

[0:46:53.6] BJ: It's super weird working in front of people, you'll get trolls, it's pretty entertaining.

[0:46:57.0] SS: Nice. So Bryn looks like you got the dream job going on, side projects.

[0:47:03.3] BJ: It is hard to be fair. I'm definitely like talking it up because I enjoy the hard work but it's super hard, it's not like a cush job by any means.

[0:47:12.9] SS: Yeah, of course. When you're working hard and like you know does it work, life, balance kind of thing. So you've got that, it seems that you got that figured out. It seems like you have a life and you have...

[0:47:26.5] BJ: Well my life is more work so it makes it easy to be work, work.

[0:47:30.7] SS: Yeah but you know, when you build stuff then that's your passion when you do that. You're having fun, right?

[0:47:37.6] BJ: Of course. I mean, I wouldn't be doing this if I wasn't.

[0:47:41.9] SS: Any last tips for people starting side projects? If you could go back to the day before Spec and give yourself one tip, what would it be?

[0:47:51.2] BJ: Ship more often.

[0:47:52.6] SS: Ship more often?

[0:47:53.6] BJ: Yeah. I think the only thing I'd shipped before Spec, or before Design Details I should say, was that one Twitter project and that got big for 30 seconds. I mean, we got featured on Life Hacker, we got featured on The Next Web and that was about the life cycle of that product. But we got to do some cool stuff with it and we learned a lot. If I would have just shipped more often I would have learned way more instead of, "Oh this thing is cool but I'm not quite done with it so I'm not going to release it." Get feedback from other people, don't keep it internally, just show other people what you're working on and you'll learn a lot about how to give it to more people and how to make it better for them.

[0:48:31.7] SS: Cool, amazing. Bryn, so thanks so much for having us here in your studio.

[0:48:36.5] BJ: Thanks for having me on your show.

[0:48:38.0] **SS:** Yeah, it was a pleasure. We've learned a lot.

[0:48:39.4] **BJ:** I've actually never been on anyone else's podcast before so this is...

[0:48:42.1] **SS:** Wow, nice.

[0:48:43.2] **DT:** We're honored. Thank you very much, this has been awesome and yeah, really excited for what you've said about the future of design system and everything that you're doing and producing and the awesome content.

[0:48:53.4] **BJ:** Thanks, man.

[0:48:54.1] **SS:** Yeah, you're doing an awesome job, we really love Design Details, Spec, everything that you guys are doing.

[0:48:59.8] **BJ:** I appreciate it.

[0:49:00.7] **SS:** So keep up the good work and I'm going to try to use Figma.

[0:49:05.6] **DT:** Thanks a lot, Bryn.

[0:49:06.3] **SS:** Thanks, see you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:49:18.7] **SS:** All right, that's a wrap. Thank you hackers for joining us today, we hope you enjoyed the show. You can find all the links and resources from this conversation on hackingui.com/podcast. Just before we go, we want to share with you something that you might find useful.

[0:49:34.4] **DT:** As you know, we are voracious readers and consume a ton of articles, books, podcast and videos about design, development and side projects. We curate the hell out of

everything and each week we send a short round up email of our favorites. If that sounds like an email you'd enjoy getting, then we'd love to have you join our awesome community, which already has more than 20,000 happy members from all over the world. You can sign up on hackingui.com.

[0:49:57.4] SS: By the way, on hackingui.com, you'll also find some other cool stuff like the Side Project Accelerator, our eight-week online program in which we teach everything that we learned in the three years working and scaling Hacking UI as a side project before we quit our day jobs.

[0:50:11.0] DT: And, you'll also find our resources page, which reached top of the week on Product Hunt Tech, and our events section, which is filled with conferences and meetups for designers and developers.

[0:50:19.7] SS: Hey D, don't forget the T's man, we also got some cool T-shirts for designers.

[0:50:24.2] DT: Sagi, again with the T-shirts?

[0:50:25.3] SS: Hey, I designed those. But really, last thing, if you enjoyed this, we would really love to hear from you. Either by tweeting us [@HackingUI](https://twitter.com/HackingUI) or by reviewing the podcast on iTunes. Those reviews really go a long way and help us and even make our day.

[0:50:39.6] DT: All right, we'll see you next week hackers, remember to keep hacking.

[END]