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ABOUT THE SHOW

Community Signal is a podcast for experienced online community professionals, including those working in audience engagement, association management, developer relations, moderation, trust and safety, and more.

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Patrick O'Keefe (https://patrickokeefe.com) is an experienced strategist and designer of online community products and programs, who has been managing online communities for 20+ years. He is the author of _Managing Online Forums_ (http://www.managingonlineforums.com), a practical guide to managing online communities and social spaces.

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When private equity buys online community platforms, who wins? What about if those platforms were built on open source software? Does the company continue to be a good citizen of the open source community that helped build the product?

History has shown us that it is often the community managers and pros who lose. They might not just lose a good platform though, they might lose their job.

Lincoln Russell (https://lincolnwebs.com/) has an interesting perspective on this topic. He joined Vanilla Forums, an open source community software platform, as a senior developer in 2011, having already used it for a couple of years. He left the company in 2020, then the director of engineering. Lincoln has continued to use the software. Vanilla Forums was subsequently purchased by Higher Logic, a company lacking a meaningful history of open source contributions.

As a matter of disclosure, both Higher Logic and Vanilla Forums are past sponsors of the show.

Lincoln and I also discuss:

- How Vanilla Forums' open source ethos shifted over time
- The importance of data migration standards for community software
- Is community software best built by small businesses?

Big Quotes

> **Your community software provider must answer this (16:38):** "The first question you should ask a [community software] vendor is: How easy is it to leave you? It's not a fun question to ask, but the answer is crucial to me. It's a deal-breaker question." -Patrick O'Keefe

Some community platforms try to lock their customer data into the platform (18:07): "When [a client is] onboarding [to new community software during the] initial year or two, they don't care about their data export. It's at the end. That's a long-term reputational issue about how people talk about their experiences. We saw that with [community software] competitors. We had some trouble with a couple of competitors in trying to get the data from them and spent way more hours than particular customers were worth – just on principle, honestly – getting the data out for them because we were so personally offended. At least I was." -Lincoln Russell

When you aren't selling community software to the people who will actually use it (20:37): "In the [community software] sales process, you identify stakeholders – people that are decision makers. A lot of the time they weren't a community manager. A lot of the time it was a director of technology, it was a CEO, or other positions, and that warps your roadmap.

"When those are the people that [the] sales team [is] sitting in front of, day in and day out, and you're pitching an improved moderation queue, they want this button that does this thing. You're like, 'But that's stupid.' But it doesn't matter, if those are the people you're selling to, [with] their own idea of community that doesn't actually align with community management because they have internal business goals, and all they want to do are check those boxes." -Lincoln Russell

Why community professionals should drive community platform choice (22:10): "Although I'd like to believe, ego-wise, that I could make a community out of whatever piece of garbage application you throw in front of me, I know the software can either help me or hurt me, and it's tough when you're making dinner with someone else's ingredients." -Patrick O'Keefe

Great ideas need great communicators (23:44): "The biggest issue with charting a course is you need a really clear vision, and you also need someone who can articulate that vision a lot, and over and over again, to the right people in the right circumstances. You need an external marketer. All of us in engineering at Vanilla [were] all introverts. None of us were going to conferences and giving talks about our vision for community software. It just wasn't in us to do that. I think we were poorer off in that we had some really good ideas, and could have shifted the conversation a bit, but we didn't put our energy there because that was a lot of energy." -Lincoln Russell

Protecting your culture makes you unique from the big social media platforms (33:43): "I think this idea of being more private and being very selective about what you present to the world, and having an internal culture that is protected from the internet – not promoted to the internet – is the future of these independent community spaces because that's the space those [bigger] platforms cannot touch." -Lincoln Russell

Community drives great software projects (37:04): "To build great software, like the great software projects that are going to outlive me, you need a community of people committed to working on them for long periods of time. [You need] to replace those people when they leave, but you have to have a system to keep that going, not just like, [we] got great five minds in a room and they did a thing, and then they cash out at the end. That's not sustainable." -Lincoln Russell

About Lincoln Russell

Lincoln Russell (https://lincolnwebs.com/) is the vice president of engineering for uConnect (https://www.gouconnect.com/), which builds virtual career centers for colleges and universities to help students get better jobs. Earlier in his career, he spent 8 and a half years at Vanilla Forums, starting as a senior developer in 2011 and leaving in 2020 as the director of engineering.

Related Links

- Lincoln's website (https://lincolnwebs.com/)
- Higher Logic Vanilla (https://vanilla.higherlogic.com/), from Higher Logic (https://www.higherlogic.com/)
- uConnect (https://www.gouconnect.com/), where Lincoln is vice president of engineering
- Automattic (https://automattic.com/), the company behind WordPress.com (https://wordpress.com/)
- WordPress.org (https://wordpress.org/), the home of the WordPress open source community
- Arlington-Based Higher Logic Acquires Montreal's Vanilla (https://www.virginiabusiness.com/article/arlington-based-higher-logic-acquires-montreals-vanilla/) by Richard Foster for Virginia Business
- Nitro Porter (https://nitroporter.org/), Lincoln's community platform migration tool
- Lincoln's blog post announcing Nitro Porter (https://lincolnwebs.com/2021/10/03/nitro-porter/)
- Matt Mecham (https://www.linkedin.com/in/matt-mecham/) of Invision Community (https://invisioncommunity.com/)
- Matt Mecham on Community Signal (https://www.communitysignal.com/online-communities-in-the-post-facebook-era/)

Transcript

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[00:00] **Announcer:** You're listening to Community Signal, the podcast for online community professionals. Here's your host, Patrick O'Keefe.

[00:00:18] **Patrick O'Keefe:** Hello and thank you for making Community Signal a part of your day. Our guest is Lincoln Russell (https://lincolnwebs.com/), who spent more than eight years at Vanilla Forums (https://vanilla.higherlogic.com/), leaving as the director of engineering in 2020. Vanilla, a former sponsor of the show, was later acquired by Higher Logic (https://www.higherlogic.com/), another former sponsor of the show. Lincoln is uniquely suited to offer perspective on what happens when a commercial community product grows around an open source community software project and is then acquired by a company with its own goals. We'll also talk about the importance of community data portability.

On December 7th, we marked eight years of Community Signal. In honor of that, I'd like to take a moment to tell you a story. Once upon a time, there was a man who hosted a podcast for several years. The podcast was rewarding. It led to many meaningful conversations that created a greater level of inclusiveness and understanding within the discipline that the host had made a life's work out of. It brought many people together and created opportunities for others. It wasn't always fun being critical of the industry and some of the folks within it doesn't always make you friends like puff pieces do, but the experience was well worth it.

One day early in the podcast run, he interviewed a guest (https://www.communitysignal.com/your-community-teams-personal-brand/) who would introduce him to someone. They dated, moved across the country, and got married. More than six years after the podcast launched, they welcomed a son to the world. After the initial shock, the podcast chugged along like normal, but as parental leave came to an end and they settled into their new life, no matter how much the host tried, it became more of a struggle to continue to release episodes on a routine schedule.

Where the host had previously viewed it as a personal failure if he didn't get a show together in time for release, after becoming a dad, he learned to treat himself a bit kinder and to play the cards that a baby, now one-year-old, deals you on a daily basis. That brings us to now. I'm the host and I'll go back to speaking in the first person now. You may have noticed that our release schedule has slowed and has become quite random. I'm not ready to stop hosting Community Signal, but I realized recently that instead of pretending that I can get back to a once every two weeks release schedule, I think it's time to simply embrace it for what it is, an occasional podcast, at least for now.

This has led me to make some adjustments, including ending our Patreon in September and providing the max refund to all current supporters. I am as grateful as ever for the support that it provided. I'm not gone yet. I am just very aware of the moment that I'm in, in my life right now, and trying to navigate that in a way that I'll be proud of. It's funny that our last show was about retiring from this work because I've half-jokingly considered chasing my LinkedIn to say I'm retired, but like Michael Jordan in '93, for those who get that reference.

I'm not gone and I'm not done. I want to make time to do the show and write again, and I'm excited by that. It will just take me longer to create. I'd like to take a moment to thank all of our regular listeners, people who find value in the show and who share it with others. I see it and it means a lot. Thank you to Karn for his

work on the show over these past eight-plus years and for helping it to be the best that it can be and thank you. Let's introduce our guest. Lincoln Russell is the Director of Engineering for uConnect (https://www.gouconnect.com/), which builds virtual career centers for colleges and universities to help students get better jobs.

Earlier in his career, he spent eight and a half years at Vanilla Forums starting as a senior developer in 2011 and leaving in 2020 as the Director of Engineering. Lincoln, welcome to the show.

[00:03:24] Lincoln Russell: Thanks for having me.

[00:03:25] Patrick O'Keefe: Many of our listeners are familiar with Vanilla or Vanilla Forums as they were once a long-term sponsor of the show. Vanilla is a free to open source community software with a history going back to at least 2006, meaning that being open source, everyone could see the code, they could use it, and depending on what you do with it, you had to follow certain rules to comply with the license it was released under, so not an open source software introduction of any great documentation, but just to set the table, I've never used Vanilla, but I've been casually aware of it for many, many years long before they were a sponsor of the show.

First, I heard about it as an open source app because I've used a lot of open source software over the years and most of the software I've used to power my own websites has been open source over the last 25, 30 years. Then later as a brand and as a business that was able to pick up some high-profile clients. Being there from 2011 through 2020, you witnessed a lot of that. Can you talk about how Vanilla's business and operations shifted over time from when you joined to when you left?

[00:04:23] Lincoln Russell: Yes. Sure. I officially joined the company in 2011, but I'd actually been working with them for a couple of years prior even as part of their internal company chat as an open source contributor, discussing when I was going to come on full-time. It was a very interesting journey watching it go from a side project and a dog food forum, eating your own software to creating Vanilla 1 to watching it become Vanilla 2.

I would say in those early years, we were very still open source focused. That was how the software came about. We were really trying to see how many installations were out there in the wild. Even if it wasn't part of our company

dynamic, we were very keen to know what those numbers were and how it was working out there. A little over time, I'd say about maybe three, four years after I joined, it became much more enterprise driven and it was very much about moving upstream and getting bigger customers, which makes perfect sense for a business because we had to pay everyone. We got a lot of overhead, so those large sales did a lot more for us than a lot of tiny sales.

In the early days, we had price points at $50 a month or even less, I think, originally. As we went on, we just realized that it just didn't scale. Plus, for the type of business we wanted to do, price point moved up, our target audience changed over time, and we moved a lot more towards worrying about enterprise roadmap more so than the downstream or open source roadmap.

[00:05:47] Patrick O'Keefe: Vanilla adopted a model that a lot of open source applications adopt, which is they start as a tool out of a need. Usually a single developer, a small team of developers, a couple of people make something, it gets picked up, it gets used by a lot of people, bam. It's used by enough people where it's like, wow, this has really taken up a lot of time and a lot of people are relying on this software.

It's what we dedicate our full-time to, and so let's start hosting, essentially a hosting business for it. Here's the enterprise version you can pay us. You don't have to install it, you don't have to know what open source means. We'll maintain all of that for you. Automattic (https://automattic.com/), very similar. You have your WordPress.org (https://wordpress.org/), you have your WordPress.com (https://wordpress.com/).

[00:06:25] Lincoln Russell: When you're talking about mirroring what WordPress did, we were definitely using WordPress as a model in the early days for how we bifurcated the organization. The issue is you need a really strong open source project to do that. Great contributors, don't get me wrong. There was some great folks who were helping us out, but we never had external inertia to the company. It was always us having to guide and get these patches and minor things.

WordPress is able to do it because they have an open source lead developer and a team committed to it. Hats off to Matt (https://ma.tt/) and the team for getting that inertia going, that's self-sustaining, but that's a lot of work and it's very hard to get to that scale where you have enough– if you have 10,000 installs, how many of those have an admin that knows how to code PHP and how many of those have time? You're just talking about a scale problem, really.

We definitely not only were interested in that model, and I don't think we ever saw the path to success, and also because of the small amount of initial funding we took, we were very stretched thin. We didn't have a lot of runway as a company. We really needed to be concerned about where next month's income was coming from and it wasn't coming from open source. In a different world, I wish we'd had the resource dedicated to it because I think it could have gotten there but we weren't equipped to do it at the team size we had.

[00:07:48] Patrick O'Keefe: Then the money part of it brings us to the Higher Logic acquisition, but I don't want to get there yet. Before we talk about that, when you left, so that's before all that, that's before the Higher Logic acquisition, when you left in 2020, how did you feel about Vanilla's open source ethos and commitment?

[00:08:05] Lincoln Russell: I think a lot of people by then thought it was a nice idea, but there were no internals. I was I think the last internal stakeholder that cared about the open source project as a going concern, as a priority in any particular way. One of the last things I did actually was get someone who was still working internally to distribute one or two last patched releases and spend some personal capital on that because I knew it wasn't going to happen. Once that person left, it didn't happen again. I think I was dedicated to it long after that and I was not successful at reconvincing anyone that they should be a stakeholder to that.

[00:08:43] Patrick O'Keefe: In practical terms, what does that mean for someone who, say, is using the open source software, the package that's available on the web versus being an enterprise client? Is it you're not getting the latest code, you're not getting the full feature set? Is it two separate releases? How should we look at that in layman terms?

[00:08:58] Lincoln Russell: One of the issues always with Vanilla very early on was that we withheld a few of the features, a few too many features, I think, and that was probably part of our inertia problem. Today what that translates to is there's no one building releases, and so that means what we were doing was doing a WordPress-like thing where we say, here's a zip file, put this on your server, you're good to go.

[00:09:18] Patrick O'Keefe: Here's documentation, here's what's new, et cetera.

[00:09:22] Lincoln Russell: Exactly. The release notes. That just isn't happening right now. There's some raw source codes still being shipped to support enterprise docker containers and all that. If you know what you're doing well enough, you could theoretically get it to build. Someone was doing it as recently as six months ago on the open source forum. I think the writing's been on the wall for a couple of years that it's very difficult to get updated releases of the product. It involves a level of skill that most people do not have to update their forums.

[00:09:51] Patrick O'Keefe: Quite possibly myself, even with the amount of time I've been doing it.

[00:09:53] Lincoln Russell: Quite possibly myself. Honestly, it's a very complicated bill of trust.

[00:09:57] Patrick O'Keefe: I think I would need some documentation on the documentation. I want to be clear about your involvement at Vanilla because your title was Director of Engineering, but you oversaw two product teams and a professional services team. You had a pretty direct impact into the financial growth and the worth of the business, which was largely on the services side, right?

[00:10:15] Lincoln Russell: No, it was mostly product-based. It was primarily a product business. We viewed services as making for happy customers who wanted to stick with us for a long time. We categorized those into three different camps. One was themeing. We do make your site look good. Migration was part two, so you get your data to bring along. Then the third part was any other minor thing you needed. In the early days, we were pretty liberal about adding a small feature or two with an all this plugin system. It was very robust.

Later on, it was mostly we tried to limit it to single sign-on integrations. It was really about minimizing those services, honestly, and to maximize the recurring revenue because we didn't see ourselves as a services company, and that's not how any SaaS company can scale.

[00:10:57] Patrick O'Keefe: You weren't trying to take over the people side of running the software at the organizations that paid for it. It was really more about filling a gap. In other words, people aren't paying you to manage their

community. People aren't paying you to manage Vanilla for them. They're paying for the software, and their people internally tend to be the people responsible for it.

[00:11:15] Lincoln Russell: We only did hosted as a paid solution. We didn't want customers trying to get their own hosted environment and all that stuff. That's very support-intensive. It was not profitable. We weren't even allowing them to write their own plugin because, honestly, mostly what we got was plugins that were very unperformance, if that's a word. They had performance issues, they had bugs, they had security flaws, and then we'd have to fix them. We typically wanted to do it ourselves or stay within the box that we had.

[00:11:43] Patrick O'Keefe: After you left Vanilla, you mentioned how you stayed in contact with people and spent a little personal capital to get releases put out. That's because you were still using the software or had people who were?

[00:11:52] Lincoln Russell: Yes. I have two forums that run Vanilla software. Been working on some migrations for them, but to this day, they're still running Vanilla. I knew quite a few other people that are running it, too.

[00:12:02] Patrick O'Keefe: I want to talk about the Higher Logic acquisition, but understandably, it was after your time. You're an outside observer, like anyone else, like me, more or less. As a disclosure, Higher Logic is another long-term former sponsor of the show. They acquired Vanilla in May of 2021. Anecdotally, from your perspective, what has that meant to the open source Vanilla Forums software, if anything?

[00:12:25] Lincoln Russell: I'm not sure it changed much, honestly. I think that the executive level had already written it off at that point. I think that the biggest thing about the ownership change is that there's probably no internal knowledge about the open source community now. Because the last few people who understood that left. I think there's one engineer there who even knows how to do that release.

[00:12:46] Patrick O'Keefe: At the time when the news broke (https://www.virginiabusiness.com/article/arlington-based-higher-logic-acquires-montreals-vanilla/), I can remember thinking it was bad. I just speak for myself there. Because I know a fair amount about Higher Logic. Having been a sponsor,

talked to folks, looked at the software once upon a time, and just thought that they were not suited to deal with open source software. It's not in the wheelhouse. There's nothing wrong with that necessarily.

To me, it's okay to be a, whatever you would call it, a closed source or just a commercial software application that caters to associations and doesn't necessarily have a feature set that serves, let's say, a public-facing mainstream community. I haven't looked at Higher Logic in several years, so I don't know where they're at right now. When I looked at it as a favor and wrote up some notes years and years ago, I came away thinking that there was a narrow group that it could work for. That group was not the one that I worked in.

Long story short, when they picked up an open source app, having exposure to open source for so long as I have, I wasn't optimistic. At least from the outside, it's not gone well. I don't think it's done much for Vanilla's popularity. I think for someone like myself from the outside, it leads me to believe that it's an acquisition for the client list, and hopefully, they convert some folks to long-term Higher Logic customers.

[00:13:56] Lincoln Russell: There's a couple of points here. One is that they bought Vanilla, as I understand, to fill a market niche. They're still selling it alongside their original product. They've bifurcated their market and said, "These types of customers get this." It's being actively sold internally. It still is being actively produced. People are working on it. I think as open source is concerned, Vanilla, as the scrappy underdog, it's startup memory.

We at least, even after we stopped looking at open source as being a long-term bible, the inertia that could get going, we still saw it as covering our flank. Because if you are in that upper-tier space, that's how people enter the market. Is they go low market and they work their way upward. That's the playbook that so many people have used. We're using it against Lithium, but Lithium did that playbook to get there in the first place.

Having that open source, I think, was helpful to that because there wasn't a solution to at least get you to sample the product, to use it before you were ready to buy that sort of thing, deploy it in an internal environment, whatever. There's a lot of justifications you can have for it. I think that by the time they sold, I think that syncing had gone and I don't think Higher Logic's ever thought about it. I don't think that's even entered the conversation.

[00:15:10] Patrick O'Keefe: That makes a lot of sense.

[00:15:11] Lincoln Russell: That's fine. It's a playbook. You've seen it enough times.

[00:15:15] Patrick O'Keefe: I want to change gears a little bit because you've been working on something called Nitro Porter (https://nitroporter.org/) which I think is really interesting and it's a data migration tool or a tool set that helps community operators move and migrate community data between different applications. It's a great idea.

It's something we need more of. The project itself is derived from your time at Vanilla where you were working on a tool called Vanilla Porter. When you announced Nitro Porter in October of 2021 (https://lincolnwebs.com/2021/10/03/nitro-porter/), you wrote, "At its core, Vanilla Porter was about data portability for communities. "It's YOUR data" was a slogan I championed at Vanilla Forums from the day I started until the day I left. The greatest disservice we ever did the project was get a bit salty about other projects using it (ahem, Discourse (https://discourse.org/)) rather than embracing opportunities to decouple it from Vanilla specifically.

"As time went on, it was approached more as a defensive tool than a contribution. Several packages developed against what we deemed 'enterprise' competitors remain closed-source and were never included in the public project. As if that was helping us make sales. In retrospect, the logic was bananas. But it took me two years of reflection to realize a lot of things like that. Or rather, to let go of the worst ideas my head got filled with from working in a startup."

It makes a ton of sense to me because I've pitched more than one software vendor on the idea of maintaining strong paths in and out of their products. I'm usually met with resistance almost always. Especially on the out part.

[00:16:34] Lincoln Russell: Yes.

[00:16:35] Patrick O'Keefe: Less so on the in part. I tell everyone who will listen that I think the first question you should ask a vendor is how easy is it to leave you? It's not a fun question to ask, but the answer is crucial to me. It's a deal-breaker question. You don't have to sell me obviously on Nitro Porter or the idea, but as someone who has built community software used by a lot of people as you

have, can you talk a bit about the mentality through which some of these companies approach our data, the community data, and the positive and negative effects that can have on our communities?

[00:17:06] Lincoln Russell: Yes, for sure. I think one of the great things about Vanilla is, we did start out at least as very idealistic engineers mostly. Those data portability ideas, like we'd all been burned by that.

[00:17:17] Patrick O'Keefe: Only happens once generally.

[00:17:19] Lincoln Russell: Yes, exactly.

[00:17:20] Patrick O'Keefe: Yes. Once you burn a community and it goes away and everything disappears, you get hardened, I think.

[00:17:25] Lincoln Russell: Yes. Actually, my current company's currently launching a community forum, which I think they're doing a great job of it. One of the first things I contributed to the conversation was ask that vendor how they export data if you want to change. He is like, "That's absolutely table stakes for a conversation."

I think that the issue is internal power balance and just thinking, because if you have say sales or marketing teams that they're trying to maximize revenue. They've got KPIs and they got to figure out how to get that money. If you don't push back on them, they see that as an easy way to go about doing that. Not to say that this is the case of Vanilla at all, but you can push the money buttons in ways that they're not savvy to in the time that those teams care about.

When they're onboarding into this initial year or two, they don't care about their data export, it's at the end. That's a long-term reputational issue about how people talk about their experiences. We saw that with competitors. We had some trouble with a couple of competitors in trying to get the data from them and spent way more hours than particular customers were worth just on principle, honestly, getting the data out for them because we were so personally offended.

At least I was, I don't know, I'm not going to speak for the entire team, but about this, that ethos or needing to put it into your contract for next year that you can get it out for this amount of money. That sort of thing. I think that's the problem is a lot of those profit goals or revenue goals rather are quarterly.

You're looking for annual and so you're looking towards how do I make sure that I meet these goals and you're not thinking about what's the reputation of my software five years from now? That's what you have to be thinking about to be thinking about data portability and what my export policy is. To my knowledge, the only time at Vanilla we ever told someone we wouldn't give them their data was if they had unpaid bills of some significance. Otherwise it was an absolute given that they were going to get a full MySQL database stump of everything they had.

[00:19:19] Patrick O'Keefe: It's interesting you mentioned that five-year period because obviously a lot of people move on from jobs much quicker than that. They're not necessarily thinking about what the company or care what the company's reputation would be in five years.

It's interesting because I think there are certain community software companies that people who are on their second or third or fourth community gravitate towards as opposed to their first community. I'd be interested in that survey data, what software did you choose and was it your first community? Because I feel like some of these companies are ones that they won't go back to or they tell people not to go back to because you flag something that I've heard before too, which is, you're listening to this and you're negotiating a vendor contract right now, include the export in the contract, like the data portability, what you can do with it. Don't go on like good faith or like a promise from a salesperson that's like, "Oh, yes, of course." If it's not in the contract, then good luck.

[00:20:10] Lincoln Russell: 100%.

[00:20:11] Patrick O'Keefe: Which is an interesting point to flag there. Yes, I think unfortunately some community software companies I think do operate unknowingly or intentionally. I'm not casting dispersions here of bad faith, but on the notion that they can convince someone who's actually never had a community before, whether that's the executive making the call or someone who's on their first community.

[00:20:31] Lincoln Russell: Yes, I think that's a really good point because a lot of the time too, like our stakeholder– obviously in the sales process, you identify stakeholders. People that are decision-makers, and a lot of the time they weren't a community manager. A lot of the time it was a director of technology, it was a CEO or other positions, and that warps your roadmap. When those are the

people that your sales team are sitting in front of day in and day out, and you're pitching improved moderation queue, they want this button that does this thing. You're like, but that's stupid. [laughs]

It doesn't matter, if those are the people you're selling to have their own idea of community that doesn't actually align with community management because they have internal business goals and all they want to do are check those boxes. Analytics was a really big project for us to make a lot of data and charts and that sort of thing. How many of them actually helped community managers grow their community? I don't know, a lot of them were very executive report based because those were the things that were being requested and demanded of us.

[00:21:33] Patrick O'Keefe: Yes, and ironically that's something I've heard about Higher Logic before in the association space for more than one person, is just that as an association manager, you're not necessarily making the call. That's a conference at a dinner, at a meeting, somewhere it's happening ultimately organizationally at any department because community is not special. You have people making calls, other people will be responsible for them. They're picking the ingredients and telling you to make dinner. Right?

[00:21:59] Lincoln Russell: Right.

[00:21:59] Patrick O'Keefe: That happens in marketing, it happens in community, it happens in sales, it happens in everything. Ultimately, a community manager's job can be on the line based on the success of the community. Although I'd like to believe ego-wise that I could make a community out of whatever piece of garbage application you throw in front of me, I know the software can either help me or hurt me, and it's tough when you're making dinner with someone else's ingredients.

[00:22:22] Lincoln Russell: Yes, I totally agree. I think that one of the things that I really loved about my early time, especially with the experimentation, there's this kind of idea that we hadn't gone far enough in what we could be doing in the community space, coming up with reactions back when Facebook was not but a like, we shipped reactions in the first social product.

When a lot of other little experiments like that, that I think really paid off and they moved the state of the art a little bit. Did they sell particularly well? Not really. That's really the problem is that as the sales pressures increase as you need to

achieve this velocity, you need to to focus on those things and it really cuts down on any ability to go outside that space.

What you end up with is using established patterns, because it's the same market. Everyone already has Lithium (https://khoros.com/) or Jive (https://www.jivesoftware.com/#gsc.tab=0) or whatever out there, and so they have certain expectations that you have to meet. If you zag too hard, they don't know what they're looking at anymore. We even had that problem getting people out of vBulletin (https://www.vbulletin.com/) where they couldn't even let go of their table-based themes in the early days of Vanilla when we were trying to get people out because it's like this is their idea of what the product is and anything outside of that, that's just you guys playing around or something.

[00:23:33] Patrick O'Keefe: It's a tough moment because you either chart a course, or you give the client what they want because, again, going back to paying the bills, and sometimes you can do both. You can find a way to do both, but it's hard.

[00:23:44] Lincoln Russell: Yes. The biggest issue with charting a course is you need a really clear vision, and you also need someone who can articulate that vision a lot and over and over again to the right people in the right circumstances. You need an external marketer. All of us in engineering of Vanilla, we're all introverts. None of us were going to conferences and giving talks about our vision for community software, it just wasn't in us to do that. I think we were poorer off in that because I think we had some really good ideas, could have shifted the conversation a bit, but that we didn't put our energy there because that was a lot of energy. It would've been a lot of energy for us.

[00:24:20] Patrick O'Keefe: It's funny, a couple of things, this all ties into a conversation I was having recently. I guess it was a job interview. It was someone who, they were launching a paid community and they had some very aggressive goals, I think, that are unrealistic. They showed their screen and they're like, they spun up an instance of Circle (https://circle.so/) and I don't have anything against Circle. Not familiar with them, haven't done the deep dive, haven't tested the software, but it was just to hear the person talk about building a community. It was like, I've got this set up and they had a section for everything and look, we got people posting over here and it's like 100 people that are their most loyal people and no one's paying for anything. Even though it's a paid community, it's all people posting for free, it's got a few posts here or there.

It's got sections for geographical locations, it's got sections for topics, it's got sections for different groups to spit off. Everything is being thrown at it, right?

[00:25:03] Lincoln Russell: People love sections.

[00:25:04] Patrick O'Keefe: Everything was so easy. Everything is just so easy right now. I said, "Why do you even need me if you can just spin this up in the software?" There's no thought here about data portability. It looked like Facebook in a sense. I think Circle has a, call it Facebook, call it a social network, it has an appearance to it. I don't say that in a bad way. It just is what it is, so there's a familiarity there. Some people gravitate toward it.

Like I said, it could be great software, I've never used it, but just that it was that far along and the job post was essentially we're looking for a visionary. As I was talking to the guy, I was like, "Actually, you're looking for me to execute upon your vision." That's tough, and thankfully, I'm not at a point in my career where I have to do that, but it's the whole thing. It's like you're hiring for a high-level community role, but it seems like you've already made some determinations. That's a waste of my expertise. There's a lot of things that popped in mind on that one.

[00:25:59] Lincoln Russell: I've had some friends recently in that kind of experience where, I don't know, I think that transcends all industries. Wanting a visionary, what you mean is you want someone to execute my vision. You see that a lot out there. I think choosing the software and the implementation that is pretty baseline to having a vision about what direction you're going in and what your goals are because it doesn't leave you a lot of wiggle room. You're beholden to their roadmap once you're on there, that's not a fiddly type of thing which can be good or bad.

[00:26:29] Patrick O'Keefe: To call back to that post I quoted about Nitro Porter, the thought that a porter like that or a conversion tool could be a defensive tool more so than a contribution. What does that mean exactly?

[00:26:39] Lincoln Russell: Seeing it as a way to always make sure we can land the deal and making sure that whoever wants to come to our product and that's never going to be the deal breaker for us. I think that was really the mindset that it ended up evolving into. I think, ideally, the market is better served if it's a two-way street. If you can go in any direction from anywhere that gives you an

opportunity to experiment that in a way that you could not otherwise it puts pressure on people to add the feature that you want because you could leave and get an equally good product. You don't have that level of blocking anymore.

Companies go away. Companies change. Products like we've seen with Vanilla's open source is not what it used to be. What's the path forward for them? I'm not saying anyone needs to switch today. I think at some point there's going to be a time at which you say, "What are my options here?" I think a lot of people are going to put their heads up too late and be in a bit of a tough spot when that comes because if it's not a thing you're thinking about, then when it's time to start planning that. Migration can be a months-long process. If you're caught unawares by something and need to move quickly, that can be really expensive.

I think there's a lot of value. In being a purported of that, I think it's a good look for any company that espouses that and says "Yes, I am helping out with this idea of data probability because I think that is the ultimate expression of confidence in your product and your roadmap."

[00:28:04] Patrick O'Keefe: Yes, I totally agree. Migration should be at least a months-long process, especially of any mature community. The testing, planning. I have a 22-year-old community running a super outdated version of phpBB that I'm working on migrating where I want to save everything, makes no money and here I am, I'm throwing thousands of dollars at it to make sure that all that data is treated with proper respect, to make sure that people can log in if they know their password and they have the correct password and that we don't lose a single post or a single custom profile field.

Thankfully, we only have one. All those things that go into it. Yes, if you got to do it fast, the time, the money that you'll have to throw at it as opposed to just having a tool or some sort of ability to migrate, there is always a cost. I think unfortunately a lot of people are willing to pass that cost on to whoever's left.

[00:28:52] Lincoln Russell: Well, sure. There's two parts to migration. There's the social aspect part. The social part alone can be a months-long process of granting people, getting buy-in and talking things out, and making sure you don't have ruptures in your community, right? Then, of course, there's a technical part, which is so many tiers of– it's not just did you get your post content across? Is it formatted legibly? Did the links still work? Did you get set up all your redirects so that your internal links to a previous forum post don't go to nothingness?

Now the link structure has changed. There's so many bits that you can miss and as much work as I've put into Porter, it's still not a foolproof tool. You need to know what you're doing and there's some pre-work and there's some after-work. It's not a click it and it just does the thing and you're over. It's really complex even if you have most of it handled.

[00:29:45] Patrick O'Keefe: Before the show, you told me that, "We'll probably never see truly great community software from the VC-funded arena because those values conflict with the software needs." Can you talk about that or expand on that a little bit?

[00:30:00] Lincoln Russell: Yes, and I think we've talked about it a little already in just that when you expect a return on investment, that is a multiple of what you put in, and not some kind of organic growth situation. The way to do that is to go up-market, and I think that's just a universal truth. You can't get a multiple return on anything at $10 a month at $50 a month, unless– Not in the community space anyway because it's not B2C.

You don't have each individual person giving you $10 a month. It's per community, and there's only so many targetable communities in the entire world, and so if one of them's paying you $50 a month, what's that, 100 people?

[00:30:39] Patrick O'Keefe: Yes.

[00:30:39] Lincoln Russell: Combined, they're paying you $50 a month. That doesn't make any sense. It is just the economics still work out. There's this upward pressure to increase revenue to move in a particular direction that gets you to that revenue. Most community needs are about trust and safety. They're about moderation workflows, they're about enabling different types of discussion about drawing circles around this group versus that group and how are they going to interact in complex permission schemes and that sounds really hard and unprofitable.

Oh, man, I could read for half an hour about the permission scheme in Vanilla and all the heartache it gave us as time went on and how that affected our ability to scale and this and that, and it's like you spend so much time when you just want to change how DMs work as opposed to targeting this other feature that is going to drive these huge web companies in your door.

There's not a lot of overlap there, and it's really complex. The problem is you need that thought leadership on top of it too, to go in a different direction and service the underserved communities. Because there hasn't been a lot of that. There's people noodling on ideas, but there's no giant company doing that. At least I'm not aware of one that's trying to rethink how moderation works at a fundamental level.

They're really complicated. It requires a lot of experimentation. It's very expensive, and there's no clear stakeholder who wants to sign that check. I think there's a lot of challenges, and I think my trajectory of Vanilla really drove home that disparity for me. I make peace with it. I signed up for this journey and this is where that journey is going, and I have to commit to that, and we'll come back maybe another day to figure out how community could work differently.

[00:32:27] Patrick O'Keefe: I know that you're working on a "new community software focused on small communities and empowering volunteer community managers." When you say focused on small communities, what does that mean to you in the sense of a difference from other applications?

[00:32:43] Lincoln Russell: The high end of the market is gone. I'm from the technology and hardware and gaming space. That's what my first meeting's about, and so we all looked at Tom's Hardware (https://forums.tomshardware.com/) or, what was the other one, HardOCP (https://hardforum.com/), these big, open platforms, millions of posts, hundreds of thousands of users, and the idea was there's spiel. There was this idea of how many people can you get in here because we have the best advice.

That's gone. I'm not sure the sites are gone. I'm sure they still exist in some form, but that's Reddit now and Facebook. Someone did that better. They've done it as good as it gets. We've done the global platform scale. Facebook's got billions of users, and that's what the original forms were about, though. Everyone wanted to see how big they could get their forum.

It's always this idea like, "Well, if I can just do this, then I'll get more." I did that myself. We were convinced we were going to grow our community to thousands of people. I'm not sure that's a good goal. I think that this idea of being more private and being very selective about what you present to the world and having an internal culture that is protected from the internet, not promoted to the internet is the future of these independent community spaces because that's the space that those platforms cannot touch.

You cannot have 100 people in a particular culture that want to interact in this particular way about this particular thing and be protected from the broader internet. As these platforms break their trust and safety is breaking down on a lot of these larger platforms, Facebook, Twitter, X, whatever, and they don't seem to have any interest in fixing it. If you want to have safe conversations where everyone can participate, that's a part of your community, and not feel like they're being pushed out by harassment trolls and that sort of thing, I don't see any other way forward.

You need to do it at small scale and not try to scale. Every tech company in the world wants to know how they scale, and they all copy Facebook and Google to see how they can get to scale, which again, that's pushing in the opposite direction of what a tight-knit community is. A tight-knit community is 50, 100, 200, maybe 300 people.

I can't know more than 200 people in my community. My brain can't handle it, and so at a certain point it just becomes these distant degrees of separation. That's a different type of community, I guess I should say. That's not what I'm interested in, which is the smaller spaces and really getting to know people and making individuals more important than the platform.

[00:35:13] Patrick O'Keefe: Is there a business there?

[00:35:14] Lincoln Russell: Probably not.

[00:35:16] Patrick O'Keefe: I know I introduced you, I think, to Matt Mecham (https://www.communitysignal.com/online-communities-in-the-post-facebook-era/) at Invision (https://invisioncommunity.com/) a while back, because Matt has a lot of similar thoughts in my experience with him. Invision is purposefully not VC-funded. It's a small org. They make enough to pay their staff, and they're trying to get customers and clients, so there are some sacrifices I'm sure they're making, but it's essentially a small business.

I had him on the show, and if you talk to Matt, it's like, because he built something once and they bought it out, and he got stock that was worthless, and he hated that process. He has those scars, and so he set out to do it again. I think by Matt's own admission, is Invision will be only a certain size because it's built to be that way. Invision won't be a unicorn. Invision is not going to be a billion-dollar company. Invision is going to employ 5, 10, 15, 20 people, whatever it employs, make software that's reasonably priced, also offer this enterprise model. There's

nothing wrong with that. People would call them lifestyle businesses sometimes. I feel like that can be derogatory, but it's a small business. Is community software best run by a small business? I think that's a legitimate question.

[00:36:22] Lincoln Russell: Yes, I think so. I don't think it can scale, and I think that's exactly correct. I actually think of it more in terms of even the great open source projects of our time. Apache, Mozilla, that sort of thing. These are things that are going to outlive all and are building great software that is the backbone of a lot of what we're doing on the web as non-profits. I think that that's a great model, or at least part of a model to make these things work. Because there's something extractive about it if you're trying to scale your business. You need to make more money than you're putting into it.

That is the opposite of what a community is. Anyone's extracting to the community, you're getting booted. To build great software, like the great software projects that are going to outlive me, you need a community of people committed to working on them for long periods of time, and to replace those people when they leave, but you have to have a system to keep that going, not just like, got great five minds in a room and they did a thing, and then they cash out at the end. That's not sustainable. I think looking at the complexity of what it takes to let people interact well online, I think, is a lot more complicated than we currently understand.

We're still early. The web is only– younger than I am, and we're still learning stuff. The idea that a forum is the end all be all of how people are going to interact online, I don't think we're there yet, and I think that we have a lot left to learn, and I think we need time and patience to dive into that nuance. I think we need a lot of people putting their heads together and talking about it to get there. I think we're well past the point where like two people with some great ideas are going to sound a company together and become the face of community for the next 30 years. It's going to take a community to build that type of software.

[00:38:11] Patrick O'Keefe: Yes. I think there's a fair to question there, which is, do we even want that? One thing I've listed the question you're asking, but, also, I'll expand on it from my perspective, which is that I'm an optimist. Does an optimist say that and laugh, but I'm an optimist. I am. I'm an optimist. What that leads me to is that I believe the best that we can get to is a diversity of choice. Many different applications, many different forms of communication, many different options.

People love to champion a specific option or a specific thing and say, "This is the best or this is the way we have to go, or this is the future." I don't really believe in that. I believe that we are best when we have a lot of different options, and we can decide what's best for our particular space. I don't know that we could get to a singular, not a singular, but a few options. Apache is interesting. I don't know what else is out there and stuff that's beyond me. I think that having a diversity of choice is the best that I can see, but I'm unlimited by my own vision, so maybe there's something that could be a singular thing that can be forked out from and so on and so forth, but that's what I think about.

[00:39:19] Lincoln Russell: Yes. Obviously, when I work on Nitro Porter, I tend to agree that choice is best. I think that what I'm specifically interested in this is a depth of community that's going to last a long time. There are lots of uses of community, and that's not the only use case. I don't think there can be one tool of them all, but I think we're still scraping the surface in a way that I think is going to require more structure and thought to really dive into in a methodical way.

Even if it doesn't become the end-all be-all, I think there could be a lot of interesting things learned out of it about what things do and don't work, especially in the moderation space. It's a lot of vaporware in my head. We'll see what happens one day, but I think there's a lot of room left to grow that's not being mined by current solutions.

[00:40:05] Patrick O'Keefe: Well, Lincoln, thanks for sharing some of that vaporware with us. Thanks for making time. It's been a pleasure to have you on.

[00:40:11] Lincoln Russell: Cheers. Likewise. Thanks, Patrick.

[00:40:13] Patrick O'Keefe: We've been talking with Lincoln Russell, the director of engineering at uConnect. Visit gouconnect.com (https://www.gouconnect.com/) for more info. That's G-O the letter U connect.com. Lincoln is building Nitro Porter to help community owners more easily migrate between community software applications. You can find the project at nitroporter.org (https://nitroporter.org/). For the transcript from this episode, plus highlights and links that we mentioned, please visit communitysignal.com (https://www.communitysignal.com/). Community Signal is produced by Karn Broad. Thank you for listening.

Your Thoughts

If you have any thoughts on this episode that you'd like to share, please leave me a comment or send me an email (https://www.communitysignal.com/contact/). Thank you for listening.

June 24, 2024 (https://www.communitysignal.com/when-open-source-community-software-is-bought-by-private-equity/)

Patrick (https://www.communitysignal.com/author/patrick/)

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