

“Failure: The Foundation for Success” with Brad Nunnally

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Jeff Parks: (music) This is the I.A. Podcast. Today is Wednesday, November 04, 2009. Welcome to a show where I talk to Brad Nunnally as we talk about the importance of failure. That is learning from failure to become a better designer. (music)

Jeff Parks: Welcome back to the show everybody. As always my name is Jeff Parks and I am your host for the I.A.Podcast. Lots to talk about today. I am proud to announce my consulting firm. I.A.Consultants is the silver sponsor in the up coming Ted EX event coming up here in Ottawa. The event is happening December 6th, and registration is now open so I encourage you to go and do that, as quickly as possible. The 40 free tickets for the event sold out in less than 12 min. So many thanks to Alan

Isfan. and his entire team and their efforts in putting together their first ever for the Ted EX Conference in the nation's capital. I also have the pleasure of organizing the first UX Book Club for Ottawa here and the first meeting we are going to have is around Dan Roam's book called "The Back of the Napkin" and we're going to be meeting November 26th. Links to the wiki for signing up for the book club are in the show notes, so I encourage you to sign up there as the organizer of the event. It will just make it easier for me to send out invites to everyone, and to help keep track of who wants to come and who doesn't.

Conferences: The 10th annual interaction design conference is being put together by the IXDA and is being held February 4th-7th in Savannah Georgia. Editor and Chief at Boxes and Arrows, Chris Bond, actually just recently interviewed coach Bill DeRouchey about the event over on Boxes and Arrows. Links to the show notes page will be made available to that conversation. Alternately, point your browser to boxesandarrows.com and click on the podcast link on the left-hand knob and it will be as of today, the first show, that appears in the browser that you can listen to. Looks like I could be interviewing the other co-chair, Jennifer Beauvais, about the event in the next few weeks about speakers and other details that Chris and Bill did not cover off at that time. The 11th annual information architect summit is being held April 7-11th. Dan Roam, the author of "Back of the Napkin" actually will be the keynote and Whitney Hess is going to be the closing planetary. There's a lot more presentations and speakers they have lined up, so be sure to check out that great event as well.

In preparing this conversation with Brad, I actually set up a wiki. I thought it would be great to get other users experience professionals' insights around this concept of failure, because again I don't think we talk about this enough. Iterative designs are the way that sites, products and services are being developed today. You don't get it perfect out of the box, so I thought with the people that I have had the pleasure of talking to over the last few years, maybe we can get some of their insights. I was very lucky to get feed back on the wiki from the principal at FatDUX in Denmark, Eric Reiss, Boston's director of user experience at Walters Valeska O'Leary, Information architect and founder of IA TV in Berlin Jan Jursa, Daniel Szuc from Apogee in Hong Kong, all share their ideas with me. Thanks you so much you guys for sharing your insights. In addition, Yahoo's Christian Crumlish sent me an e-mail saying how much he loved this topic and we don't talk about it enough and sent me links mostly to Boxes and Arrows articles but I believe there are a few others as well, but again all of these things will be included on the show notes for everybody to check out. So today's show, I first brought up the Idea Conference in Toronto this year and Brad was actually there on behalf of johnnyholland.org and he wrote two blog posts covering the two day events, and he did an absolutely brilliant job. So make sure you go over to johnnyholland.org and check out his work. We talked about many things, including failure. Folks say mostly on failure, of course. It was the theme that was actually discussed throughout the idea conference and recently over the past year, I've been hearing more and more rumblings about this, but I

don't think we talk about it enough. Brad points out in our conversation we don't do enough as designers let alone talk about the mistakes that we have made along the way, and I couldn't agree more. So a huge thank you to Brad for talking to me the other night about this subject and more importantly than all of that is that I want to say a huge congratulations to Brad and his wife, their first child Tristan Danielle Nunnally who will actually find out in this discussion today that is actually teaching Brad a few important lessons. So looking forward to my next podcast with Mad Pow's Amy Cueva and I look forward to launching that in the next few weeks, so by the end of November, the start of December. I hope everyone enjoys the podcast. Cheers!

Jeff Parks: All right, so on today's show I have Brad Nunnally with me and thank you very much for taking the time in joining me today Brad.

Brad Nunnally: No problem.

Jeff Parks: We first met actually at the Idea Conference in Toronto and you wrote a couple of brilliant articles covering the two days that were the conference, so congratulations on that. I know that many people were happy with the overview and you got a lot of kudos for those two articles so congrats! And thanks for doing that.

Brad Nunnally: The payment was the enjoyment that everyone got out of it.

Jeff Parks: Ya, well you did a great job on it and the Idea Conference was a huge success so congratulations to Russ Unger and Mario Bourque and all the people that did a great job on putting that event together and it was being Canadian. It was nice to see one of these major conferences coming to Canada, coming out of Toronto. I appreciate everyone braving the northern elements as it were. We actually talked a little bit at the Idea Conference and most recently you wrote a great three-part article on this idea of failure. I was just wondering if you could share, what inspired you to write this post?

Brad Nunnally: My inspiration really comes from three different sources, one of which was a presentation that was given from Buttons to Business earlier this year on why designers fail and what to do about it. There's a lot of great content with them that just opened up and gave a lot of ideas for me to explore personally. Another avenue, which will also give away some of my geekiness background as well was playing the World of Warcraft for so long. The way you get through that game play is by failing a lot and figuring out what the proper secret events that would accomplish a goal, and another part was just a conversation between Will Evans and myself, was about a follow up article for Johnny Holland, because they were asking me what I was going to write about next and well I thought the topic of failure was interesting. What can we do about this? And what was expressed to me that a lot of people talk about failure but what they don't offer is how to use failure, or a framework

with dealing with failure. I thought will I can figure something out, something into regard to that, and here I am.

Jeff Parks: That's great! And I was joking with you before, this is the perfect show; you can totally relaxed as we are talking about failure so if you or I screw up during this conversation, we'll just be modeling what we're describing, so it's great. It will also save me a ton of editing after, which is fantastic! (Chuckles)

Brad Nunnally: Lead through example, that's my philosophy (Chuckles)

Jeff Parks: Oh, absolutely! I make at least 50 mistakes a day minimum, so it's good! We talked a little bit last week. You were sharing ideas with David Malouf from the Interactive Design Association about how designers need to be accountable. Can you expand on this idea and what David talked about?

Brad Nunnally: Sure, I set up a broad call about twitter and who's ultimately responsible for it, and his response was "Make sure you find out who exactly is to blame and make sure that person is always you" and I thought that was very interesting because as a designer, we're always juggling (a) a lot of hats. I mean we play many different roles over the course of a project and we have a variety of responsibilities that aren't just designing whatever the experience is. Since we also juggle a lot of communication lines between clients, business, or even technical side of things and even the users, if

one of those communication lines breaks down or gets screwed up, then it is ultimately our fault. Being accountable for that type of mistake, that failure is really important to (a) being a professional designer and (b) just growing as a professional yourself, and learning from that, "Ok, how did that go wrong and how can I avoid this in the future"?

Jeff Parks: It's gotten to the point to that a lot of larger organizations, it's almost to the point where everyone is responsible so no one is accountable, and by being accountable, you almost separate yourself from everybody else. The three words that I tell people to master in any field, I've worked in every sector private, public, non-profit, the three words I've told people to remember and say often is "I don't know". That's a big part of being accountable as well as stepping up and going "Well I don't know" but your job subscription says "You should know" and well for a lack of a better word, that's "crap!" At the end of the day, you can't know what you don't know and a big part about being accountable is being responsible to that fact that you can't know everything and you have an entire team around you that can help you move forward and when you do fail, offer support to help you move ahead.

Brad Nunnally: Right, so on a daily scrum, everyone is suppose to stand up and say what there working on and what's preventing them from accomplishing their tasks that they have been assigned if it's something that their personally responsible for, owning up to it. At least in my response, or my experience with agile environments,

that owning up to the responsibility doesn't happen as often as it probably should. Without that core sense of a single person being responsible and driving the responsibility over the overall group, the stuff gets lost very easily. It takes a really strong leader to push that responsibility and I think that an agile environment downplays the importance of that role of the leader.

Jeff Parks: Absolutely, I can't speak too much on the agile development side, because I don't have any experience in that. But I mean absolutely, it's about the entire team being accountable as well. Interesting that Jesse James Garrett noted at the closing planetary at the 2009 summit this year, as a discipline, you know he made a great point. He said, "You know, we're only ten years old" as an information architecture and interaction designs around the same age, and not a lot of time to perfect very much. Do we need to be fearful of failure in that context? Or do we need to look at this time as "fail fast", share experiences and to become better as designers and stop looking at it as "Oh, I failed, my career is over". This design is horrible.

Brad Nunnally: I think it's one of those things where we really need to use it and embrace it, but it's a balancing act, because at the end of the day, we are responsible to the clients that we serve or the employers that we serve, or whatever, and if we fail too often, then we're going to get canned! That's just the life of business. If you look at it from 100-200 years ago in the sense of blacksmithing, or barrel making, stuff like that and the role of an

apprenticeship. Apprenticeship lasted 5-6 years, and an apprentice wasn't aloud to create anything. They were told what to do, and they were very menial tasks. Until they perfected those tasks, they weren't able to go on to do more complicated things. It wasn't until someone was actually 10-15 years into their career, that they would create something that was their own. Here, we've got designers coming out of school with 2 maybe 4 years of education depending when you decided to get into the discipline of design and we're expected to rock the world. The real world is very different than academia. That's very obvious and without getting out and exploring, and I think that's what failure is, is exploring the possibilities and without doing the exploration, you're just misleading the people that you are trying to serve.

Jeff Parks: Yes, just recently I read Malcolm Gladwell's book "Outliers," and in it whether you need research. You know, whether you are a professional athlete, and doctor a nurse, a lawyer, professional musician, anything to become, to truly to be called an expert, you need to spend 10,000 hours of dedicated time to that. So like you were saying, spending a few years in university or college and then coming out into the real world, you have the theory. Everyone has the theory and in the information age, you can know about anything. Actually the experience, the big part in experience is, I don't know how other people learn, but I learn from screwing up. I learn from trying something, seeing what worked, accepting responsibility like we were talking before and you were describing about

David Malouf's work and being accountable, then looking back and to see what worked and what didn't and then moving forward accordingly. But if you need 10,000 hours, this is why I laugh at people when they call themselves social media experts. Brad Nunnally (chuckles) I mean there is no such thing and ultimately these tools...

Brad Nunnally: Well social media hasn't been around for 10,000 hours. (Laughing)

Jeff Parks: Well that's my point right? "I'm a social media expert". "No you're not". You know, Seth Godin said of TED 2005-2206, he was talking about this idea, being remarkable, right? It's no longer good enough to be very good, you have to be remarkable. In other words, you have to be worth making a remark about. There are over a quarter million podcasts in iTunes alone. There are millions of people on twitter. Facebook, the largest growing demographic are 55-65 year old women. So, if you think that it's only the kids that are involved in technology and using these things, well not so much, because the baby boomers are using it as much as we are now or it's growing in that demographic and 10-12 year olds have blogs. So there is nothing remarkable about that. It's about how you use these tools to engage other people in discussions and build relationships with those people so when you get into the real world just like you're describing the kids leaving college and university, how do you apply that theory to make more intelligent decisions moving forward? And you can't do that until you have

experience and you gain that experience by making mistakes.

Brad Nunnally: I think we're starting to see a rise of studio-based like graduate programs in schools and stuff like that. Where you are doing real work for real clients, say they contracted it out of the university and what not and to get the work, you have a mentorship of the professor guiding the project team through the process. I think that is a more appropriate environment for learning and failing at design than say being in a lecture hall hearing someone talk about design theory.

Jeff Parks: That's all it is, is theory and until you can apply it, it doesn't really matter. A couple things I wanted to talk to you about before we get to your article on failure, I was wondering what your thoughts were, do you think ego is a problem in the Interaction Design Community? That is, do you think we put too much emphasis on following the few and not learning from the many?

Brad Nunnally: Yes! But it's a very complicated answer because the fact that you tell someone that they are being egotistical or "well why you being a jerk to me" (laughing) I mean some people don't know that they're being egotistical. I mean that's just an honest assessment of the situation. There are people out there that say "it's my way or the highway" and that's another issue that I have when people call themselves experts. It's really easy to become an expert but it's really hard to stay an expert because you always have to constantly be on

top of things. And I think with how pervasive both social media is and also how to do stuff online like blogs, You Tube and all those other things, it is really easy to have someone's ego get inflated. So, if all of a sudden, they have a thousand readers on their blog, they're like "wow I have a thousand people interested in what I have to say, that must be meaningful. It's meaningful when sure... (Laughter) I look at my twitter file and see 600 people there and I think "Why in the hell do 600 people think that what I have to say is interesting" but if they want to hang around they can but people tell me I'm modest and I'm like "ok that's fine". But removing ego from the situation is a challenge, especially with things that are so impersonal, and I think that's really what blogs and twittering and even You Tube is, because it is one way. It's very impersonal so you can act as though you are talking from the mound as opposed to talking in a group.

Jeff Parks: Well, in contacts, it's impossible on twitter. It's almost 140 characters; I mean I couldn't possibly imagine why anyone would possibly be misinterpreted on a 140 characters. (Brad, laughing) I'm glad that you are laughing and picking up on my sarcasm. Now with the new list feature, "I'm on 40 lists, I'm on 60 lists". Well, ok great. All a list is a way to organize people that you already follow through to a specific group, basically. Even Daniel Zuck from Hong Kong sent me an e-mail around some of the ideas on failure. Just like you were describing before, how the work environment really should support failure, but many don't, unfortunately. In fact, failure is often seen in

negative terms, terms understandably he says, not to encourage the person to move into a new direction but perhaps to something better. And I think that's, if we could move the negative connotation around failure into something where you have the opportunity to succeed and actually raise the bar. Move the level of conversations and subsequently the ideas forward, I think that's the real benefit to learn from failure.

Brad Nunnally: Right! And I think that's one of the main things that I'm trying to get across with both blog posts that I am writing and some other activities that I'm performing with regards to failure, is to present methods of turning that mind set around. Failure is this world of negativity. It doesn't have to be. But in some cases it is, but it doesn't have to be.

Jeff Parks: Absolutely not! So speaking of your article, let's jump to it. You wrote a three-part article on your blog, and I'm sorry, what's the name of your blog again?

Brad Nunnally: Brad's Ramblings, which I thought was appropriate one since I like to talk a lot. (Laughter)

Jeff Parks: Well, welcome to the club! (Chuckling) So part one of your article focuses on two concepts: retrospective and the importance of documenting warning signs. So let's start with retrospective. Can you elaborate on this point for our listeners?

Brad Nunnally: Retrospective has become really popular thanks to rise of an agile development process. Some people are starting to look back at what was done and pinpoint the pain points that occurred and figuring out “Ok, how can we fix that for the next generation”? But I think from a designer's perspective, we all need the conversation because we all drive the development process sometimes. And if something went wrong, something wasn't developed correctly or something didn't get developed enough, it could be because of something that we did. Or if something did develop and completely failed, you go out and test it and say, “Why is that”? Looking at it from almost a design brain storming session both in and from an actual design but also you are designing from a methodology standpoint. It really helps us round out how we'd like to approach tackling a problem. I think that is what retrospective is all about. “Ok how do we approach the problem? Was it the right approach and if not, what do we need to do to change it?”

Jeff Parks: As part of this conversation, I actually set up a wiki so I'll provide everyone in the show notes, so even after we're done here, of course, commenting on your blog which I encourage people to do first and foremost. They can also come here and share ideas afterwards or add to the discussion points of Lusco Leary who is the director for user experience for Walters Cluers Health quoted Wickapedia from the retrospective from Latin and I don't speak Latin so I'm not going to try to pronounce that meaning. “Look back” generally means to look back at events that have already

taken place. So looking back, it's a time for reflection she says. Review rights and wrongs, so retrospect is like looking at the rear view mirror of a car, it's helpful because it gives us prospective, but we don't drive a car looking in the rear view mirror, or well some people do from where I've been driving! (Laughter) But typically, we drive looking at the wind shield, so looking forward gives you a wider facing view of the world around us and I think we need to look back to know where we've been and think they analogy that is trying to create here, we need to know where we've been but it's more important to focus on where we need to go to get to where we want to be.

Brad Nunnally: I think that analogy really ties into the second part of my first part, is documenting the warning signs which is, if you're looking in the rear view mirror, you can see the turns that you've missed or landmarks that would help you remember your way from wherever you are driving and going through the motion of retrospective will allow you to document those warning signs, and give you something "kind of study" going forward so that you know, "Hey, that big boulder is 20 miles ahead, I know what to do when I reach that boulder" and that's really the key stone to learning from whatever went wrong is knowing what were the signs, not exactly or specifically went wrong but what caused it to go wrong?

Jeff Parks: You ask several questions in each part of the blog and they're excellent questions and we're not going to talk about all of them today because it

will be a six hour discussion. So I'm just going to touch on a few of them and one of them that I found really interesting under the main concept of retrospective was Jan Jursa who runs a IA TV and he's an information architect in Berlin and the question he answered, "How did you answer a problem when the answer was identified that you were responsible for?" and he's basically saying never try to hide it. Problems occur. It's like gravity for example and in certain context you cannot escape from it. If problems didn't show up in your project, you simply didn't see them and this is worse than finding them and fixing them after the fact basically. Do you agree with that?

Brad Nunnally: Totally. I mean if you've done wrong, you've done wrong, and either assigning that blame to someone else or just trying to cover it up with petty excuses isn't going to fix the problem. I think that's the main thing, that whenever someone says "Hey, you didn't get this document in on time". Well, making excuses doesn't fix the problem. And the analogy that you didn't use your time well, that does fix the problem.

Jeff Parks: So in your experience then, how can retrospectives make you a better designer?

Brad Nunnally: It really puts the focus on you, and if you're in the room with 15 project members and something went wrong that was blatantly your doing, you've got 15 pairs of eyes looking at you for a reason, and that's a lot of pressure. (Chuckles) Being to handle that pressure (a) teaches you a lot of

things just from a personal development perspective, but it always makes sure that you're on your toes and always have an answer and I think those two things really help you to be a better designer. I always tell a story about one of the very first projects that I worked on where I had to present to a board room of executives and there was this one particular guy who was an older gentleman who was very stuck in his ways and he would have no qualms about calling someone out especially if he didn't understand it. He wasn't nice about it at all and he called me out and I got really kind of nervous all of a sudden. Then I said, "You know what? Here is why we made this decision. I understand why you don't understand it from your perspective but based on our research, this was the most optimal solution for the problem". I think that impressed him more than any excuses I could have thrown at him.

Jeff Parks: You know, it's like I said before, it's knowing what you don't know and it's about being clear and like you were talking about before, being accountable. I don't think there are enough people that are accountable to their own actions and I think also Jesse James Garrett, for example, gave a great presentation week in San Francisco and he was outlining four different elements around user experience design about cognition, emotion, but perception and emotion were the two main elements that I was focused on what he was talking about. Cognition and action were the other two, and cognition and action were focused on the quantitative end of things. We can know how people think and know specifically the actions to take whether were

looking at web analytics or whatever. But perception and emotion are two qualitative states that are getting harder and harder, just like you were saying, the gentleman the more senior person. They grew up in a world where it was almost like the industrial revolution. You knew the return on the investment was solid. It takes so much for a particular product, based on so many materials to let's say buy a car. You knew how many people could buy it and it was the same car; there weren't 30-40 different versions like we have today. I think a lot of design is focusing more and more on the emotional and those perceptual elements that make it really hard for someone who follows traditional business approaches, to buy into these different ideas and the fact that there is no one answer. $1+1=2$. Everyone knows that but when it comes to design and designing for other experiences in different people, there are really a lot of other elements that are really hard to balance off.

Brad Nunnally: I think one way to always have like a playbook in your back pocket if ever you do become under fire, is always have a clear and precise answer to the value of anything that you add to a design, whether it is from a navigation's perspective to a behavior's perspective, even a visual. Esthetics has finite value to it, if expressed correctly.

Jeff Parks: So documenting warning signs. One of the first questions you ask is, "How do you keep track of design failure?" So, let me pose that question to you? How do you go about doing that,

from your own experience or other people that you've learned from?

Brad Nunnally: I kind of like to keep a folder on my computer which I know is a bad thing, cause if your computer fries then it's gone, but it's a nice little folder of work that I've done and in that I kind of kept a mental catalogue about what went wrong with that project or what went right. I don't really have a formal process. It's more like Valesca said, she keeps it all in her head and so do I too. Just because it's really hard to make sure that stuff is documented in some manner, which I think is not a good thing. I think we should all make the time to find some ways to document it. One of the other questions that I pose is a book of failure to a portfolio and I think a book of failure is as equally important as your book of portfolio, because it shows people the problems that you've had in the past and if you communicate it correctly how you over came those problems. I think all of us need to do a better job at having a way of expressing that value in some sense.

Jeff Parks: I was even thinking about this too and I'll include this in the show notes but I was even thinking for the major conferences like this interaction design that's coming up in February in Georgia at the I A Summit in Phoenix which is happening in March. I was the first annual Visthink Conference with Dave Gray and others that put on and at the preconference, they actually had these giant white boards in this big grand room and with markers all over the place that people could just draw anything that they wanted, and I thought you

know, it would be pretty cool to have a rope to section off that would actually let people draw and sketch ideas on a white board or on a giant flip chart paper or something, where it's specifically around failures, like sketching out what failure means to people and being able to share experiences and ideas. I think that we need to involve more people in these conversations because we need to demystify the horrible nature of this. Part of what you're talking about with the respect to the portfolio that could be part of other people sharing their portfolio and their own experiences going ahead.

Brad Nunnally: When you talk about UX network as a whole, I don't think any of us do a good enough job in sharing our work and sharing it both from a failure perspective and a success failure, any effort in that realm is a good one!

Jeff Parks: If you talk to people who are leaders in any field, it doesn't matter if it's UX or other fields, the people that are most successful that you talk to them about it, they're the ones that failed more often than anyone else. Right? But they continue to learn from their mistakes and continue to evolve their designs or their concepts and they get better as a result of it. I really liked Eric Reiss from FatDUX in Denmark. He used the analogy from Titanic. He said, "Well you know, it sank because it hit an ice berg but the steel rivet's were brittle because of too much slag was on the metal mix, the lookouts in the crow's nest didn't have binoculars. They left them behind. The iceberg was much further south than icebergs normally were at that time. The sea was completely

calm so the iceberg left no tell-tale wake, which is the easiest way to spot them. If the hell- man hit the iceberg head on, the ship probably would have survived” and so on, so how do you track this chain in the design process? And ultimately what is the tipping point? I really like that analogy because he’s absolutely right. You know it’s almost like the field goal kicker that misses the 30-yard chip shot at the end of the game to win it because they’re down by two points. What about the wide receiver that dropped a pass, wide open that he could have run in for a touch down? So there are so many things that lead up to the failure that to pin it on one person or one particular element that’s uh, I don’t know, I think that’s pretty narrow-minded.

Brad Nunnally: Yes, what I saw about his quote was more about; I saw it as a story as lack of adaptation. Somewhere along that path those chain of events, someone didn’t adapt to the situation. Who that was, is open to debate and I think that’s what it really comes down too. As far as assigning the blame to someone that it’s all your fault, it’s who didn’t adapt correctly? And how do you properly mentor that person into doing a better job than the next time and figuring out “ok this is what’s happening” and how to change the course of events to be still beneficial.

Jeff Parks: Which fits beautifully into part 2 of your blog. The first element is actually around assigning blame, and that can be a tricky thing, of course.

Brad Nunnally: There is so much emotion tied up into this concept, because anytime you single someone out, it's kind of natural behavior to put up your defenses. Like "Why are you coming after me?" as to "What are you telling me? And how can I use it?" and those are very animalistic instincts. There is nothing wrong with that. It's our fight or flight instinct, but it's taking that rational or that high road and saying "Ok, they're not attacking me, they're attacking the idea or the situation", or something like that. It goes back to that whole concept of killing your darlings, only in this sense someone else is killing them for you. (laughter)

Jeff Parks: It is a hard thing to do right? One of the questions you ask is "Should highlighting a person's.....Well, you were talking about measuring someone's success but how do you do that? How do you do that in a sensitive way? And a lot of that comes down to the issue that we were talking about this earlier, talking about corporate culture. I think a lot of it depends on the culture, so do you have a team that is open to sharing experiences very much including failure to be able to learn from? Or do you have an environment where you know "Buddy over there really screwed up and I'm going to skip the afternoon meetings cause I don't want to be a part of what's going to happen next."

Brad Nunnally: So, I think it's a fine line of encouraging a culture of competition because, if you call someone out for making a mistake and calling someone out for whenever they succeed. Because if you call someone out for making a mistake you have

the ability to inspire everyone else to not make that mistake again. How do you do that in a positive way? I don't know (chuckles) I mean I don't think it's not possible or I don't think it's impossible, I think it's very possible, it takes a special kind of manager or a special kind of leader in order to do frame the conversation in that way. But, if you call out someone that is also very successful in a very public manner as well, you're challenging everyone around them to do better than them next time. So, how do you foster an environment of competition that's aggressive enough to push people to always do better but not aggressive enough that it's a hostile work environment?

Jeff Parks: I think what it really comes down to is part of our culture, people working with you or working for you, right? You have to know, there are some people that you can push and there are other people that you can't.

Brad Nunnally: Ya, and I think that ties into building the perfect team. That's a challenge all in itself because whenever you are interviewing for a placement on your team, you only get a few moments of interaction and until you start interacting with them on a daily basis, that's when you really learn who they are and figuring out what buttons you can push. I always like to say or whenever I start a new job or become on a new team, I'm pretty quiet for the first week or two because I'm gauging the people around me and who can I say what to, how can I approach a different person and that kind of stuff.

Jeff Parks: It's absolutely critical because at the end of the day, no one individual can do a project all by himself. It was interesting I gave a class at the University of Ottawa this afternoon about user experience design and one of the questions at the end of the presentation, she asks "A lot of your work must be a lot of moderating discussions between senior people and businesses that don't understand any of this, and the junior kids that come in and think that they know everything in the design world but don't understand enough about the business to make intelligent business decisions." It's not because they're stupid, it's just because they don't have the experience. So they just don't know. So, I said, "Yes 90% of my job really is doing that. Whether I've been given the title to go in as a project manager or an information architect, or interactive design. Whatever title they want to give me, a lot of my work involves doing that conflict resolution and getting people on the same page to make sure you don't have 50 objectives. You have 2 or 3 objectives and everyone is working towards those things. And I find that's one of the biggest problems because then when things don't work in my mind, a leader steps up and says I'm accountable for that. Just like your were saying before, and when things do work, when you're trying to put the praise on the leader, in my mind, the leader should be giving back and giving the praise to the team and say "Look, I'm the guy that steered the ship, but ultimately it was the crew that got us to where we want to go.

Brad Nunnally: Yes, and I think that ties directly into what we talked about earlier, especially about ego. So you have the person that's accountable and humble when something goes wrong but you have someone that is very modest and things go right and say " You know, it wasn't just me" and when ego starts getting built up and stuff like that both of those situations are less likely to occur.

Jeff Parks: So if you look on the flip side of that, we were talking about it here and there, even highlighting success. Saying you failed is one thing but the flipside of that is well, when something succeeds. I was saying on the wiki here, "If someone succeeds as an individual here, you should pull them aside and thank them for the work because then you're sort of singling somebody out by saying, "Well, you did a good job", depending on the corporate culture but others might think "Well hell ya, look at all the work that I did, I didn't get recognized". But Eric disagreed with that. Eric Reiss said "Yes and no. Highlighting a single person for a job well done, if the job was well done will also be a shared sediment for the rest of the well functioning team. So, no harm in praising this situation. But the key is there, if you have a well functioning team to begin with."

Brad Nunnally: Yes! And I think again from a corporate environment's perspective, game mechanics can play a lot of factors into it. So, there are a lot of concepts going on about how you can even corporate game mechanics into the corporate world to make people's jobs more enjoyable. I think

the chances of success and failures can tie directly into that because you have transient's leader boards going around for giving a project or faces of projects or what not. There's a leader board that resets up every week so you constantly have to try to one up someone else or stuff like that. I think that creates a healthy competition that I was talking about earlier, was that the highlighting of the success or even highlighting the failure is so temporary that it doesn't have that lasting negative effects, that it can if you see it over the course of 6 months and you just get like completely food bared! (Jeff: chuckles)

Jeff Parks: Yes! I remember sitting in a board room with ten executives one time and I have a back ground in traumatic brain injuries and I use to help them learn to walk, and speak again, I worked with kids with cancer and other things so your experience in life determines your perspective and that perspective shapes your reality So, having those experiences when I go into a design field, it sort of like my perspective is a little broader than the absolute critical nature, with a web site going up at a specific time, with this logo, and I remember telling these 10 executives that were all fighting about things. I said, "Ok, you need to calm down here a little bit because at the end of the day of the 11 people that are going to be really pumped about this when it goes up, 10 of them are sitting in this room" and one guy looked and me and said "Well who's the 11th?" and I said "With all do respect sir, probably your mother". I didn't mean that in a disrespectful way. I meant that in terms of, there are a trillion gigabytes of data online by the end of next year.

That's 3 million times the amount of content that was ever produced in all of human history. Do you really think that an updated website design is going to be this catastrophic thing or this unbelievable thing or if it doesn't work. But then again I think it's a generational thing. It's not a super bowl ad, you're not doing one iteration of it, pushing it out, spending a million bucks, and it's done. It's more about you're now not making one 1 million dollar sale. It's about making a million one dollar sales. That's a big shift in the adoption of understanding that. Ya, you're not going to get it perfect and it's ok that it's not perfect the first time out of the gate."

Brad Nunnally: I think one of the other economic downturn as well has really kind of highlighted some of these concepts too, because of all these older companies that were stuck in their ways and always had the old school way of doing things and were not willing to adapt to the new challenges that were being presented to them are falling around us. I mean huge staples that we thought were going to be here forever are now gone. Now these little bitty things are popping up to replace them. Personally, I think it's exciting because a) you've got people out there trying to chase their dream and trying something new in a very negative time is very inspirational but then it's getting those bad ideas out of the work place, and it's a harsh reality, it really is. But it happens in any kind of society or any kind of economy that it gets to a certain breaking point where the ways of the old have to go away and new ways have to come into play.

Jeff Parks: I totally agree, and I think that's going to be inevitable. I mean by the end of next year, the Gen Y's will outnumber the baby boomers and the baby boomers represent the largest generation in North American history. As a result, the most senior people in the federal government for example, some stats have shown that up to 60% of federal government employees in the public service will be retiring in the next five years! That's 6 in 10. That's massive when you think about it. So you're going to have 28-32 year olds taking on senior director positions because there is going to be no one else to fill the void. Fewer and fewer are aspiring to work in the public service. So in one way, that is great. That way we will have, I hope, I really, really, really hope! (Brad: laughing) less bureaucracy and fewer politicians and more leaders. But on the other hand, it's kind of scary because there is no attrition planning taking place, so you're going to have a whole lot of junior people coming into these roles who ultimately aren't going to have the wisdom of people who have worked in the field for 35 years and they are going to fail. They are inevitably going to make mistakes because they don't have those senior people there helping them out to get through the tougher times.

Brad Nunnally: More importantly, I think some of the situations where the junior person does fail, the senior person can't even really relate. So they can't offer that golden piece of advice that will help them over whatever that challenged them at that moment. I think that again, I'm trying to come up with and explore by offering methods of dealing with failure,

help with that because it gives up a particular mindset or something that we can step back from the current situation and kind of go through some mental steps and figure out the problems for ourselves. As to going to Grandpa, and asking grandpa "How did you do this?" I mean my Grandpa is 85. He was in WW 2. I can't go to my Grandpa and ask him about the challenges that I face because there is just no way to relate. I have to figure them out myself.

Jeff Parks: With Remembrance Day coming up, it's well worth noting, and thank you very much to your Grandfather, well there are no words, other than thank you. We'll get to part 3 next. I just wanted to say one more thing. It's interesting because I think we also forget about the senior people the most recognized names in the industries. I think they also need to remember that we are large fish in a very tiny pond from a global perspective. I think sometimes, not all times and I'm not equating this to everybody, but I think sometimes the senior people who have worked very hard, who have published books and are key note speakers at conferences, I think they tend to forget the amount of work that it took to get to that point, because when you got that success and you're being invited to conferences, you're sort of get swept up in it and it's exciting and you get to meet all these new people. I think it's important to remember all the grinding that they had to do and all the times that they failed and didn't succeed to get to where they are today.

Brad Nunnally: The other part is you're talking to an audience that already gets it. So whenever you reach that point, whoever you talk to about your ideas, at least someone will already understand it and can go with it. Whenever you start presenting those ideas to other people that are from a completely different context, it just completely breaks down and you're as junior as anyone else is. I think that was one of your great points: "We're just big fish in a small pond" is that there are lakes out there and people don't understand why we do what we do and creating that bridge between the two of them is a huge challenge.

Jeff Parks: So, the third part of your article is a couple of concepts, the first of which is embracing failure. This is like hugging the demon that you're most afraid of. It's important and you need to embrace failure and look at it as a positive perspective.

Brad Nunnally: Totally! If anyone ever comes up to you and says that they will do something for you and nothing will go wrong, that person is lying to you. If you ever do meet someone like that in the business environment, cut ties and find someone else because they won't have that type of personality or the demeanor to face the challenges that will come up because if they do come up, they'll put a blind eye to it and ignore it, or they will freak out and a small problem will become a huge problem.

Jeff Parks: So that leads to one of your questions, "How serious does failure need to be, before serious action needs to be taken"?

Brad Nunnally: Yes, and that ties directly into the concept of failure of critical mass. So how many times can you screw up before you get fired? Or how many times do you screw up before you get disciplined for whatever your contexts are and define a fine line for that. That way, people are encouraged to screw up and mess up. Then they know that "ok as long as I don't do this ten times, everything will be ok" and I think with that mentality, if you know you can mess up ten times, you're probably only going to make mistakes 5 or 6. By then, you'll start adapting, you'll start learning, and you'll see what you're doing wrong earlier and earlier on, and you can go forward and never reach that tipping point. Unfortunately, in a lot of environments, you're only allowed to mess up once, maybe twice. I think that's what really kills innovation, creativity, whatever, you want to call it.

Jeff Parks: It reminds me of Alcoholics Anonymous definition of insanity, doing the same thing and getting different results. You can't continually fail over and over again as you were saying. It also reminds me of a time that my Dad worked as the director of engineering at DuPont and he got to work with Steven Covey, who wrote the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. He remembers him coming up to him and saying, "Mike, do you think you're a good problem solver?" "Uh, I think I'm not bad" "Talk to me about what happens when something happens

at DuPont” “Well we shut down the plant and we’re at a certain operation level that we have to shut down, and then we try to get it going and getting it back up again as quickly as possible.” Steven said “Yes, but when you do that, you’re at the same operation level as you were before. What if you stayed down a little bit longer to think about what it is that you are doing in that particular process that could either improve the speed up the time that you’re down or to improve the overall process such that when you go back up again, you are operating on a higher level operational efficiency”. So you’re not going through the mundane routines that you do all the time but how in fact can you improve that process. Part of a shut down is necessary but technically you’re failing, you’re failing to produce product, you’re failing to push things out the door. So how can you improve those things? So I think you’re idea around embracing failure and to your next point, keeping an open mind about this as an opportunity, can help people move to that next level especially when it comes to design as well.

Brad Nunnally: I always like to go back to grade school when you’re first learning how to do things from a very basic level, and we’re encouraged to mess up. We get that graph paper on how to draw letters. At first you trace letters and then later on you’re doing it yourself and you’re encouraged to kind of mess up along the way. Somewhere in the educational system, that mentality shifts. You are no longer aloud to mess up. You have to be perfect. You’re A has to look like this A or that B has to look like that B. I think that the transition between those

two spectrums needs to be a little drawn out. Especially in an educational setting, there needs to a point where you have to get it "perfect" because you can't go from one extreme to the other, cause anxiety, stress, fear, all of those things...kind of cramp up. If during that transition is also the mentality of embracing failure and the mentality of keeping an open mind can be encouraged, explored and stuff.

Jeff Parks: Absolutely! It's like Picasso once said, "Every child is born an artist, and the difficulty is remaining as an artist as you grow into an adult." Because you're not allowed to fail, you're not allowed to make mistakes. That's what I loved about working with children back in the day before I got into this revenge of the Nerds stuff. (I'm just kidding. Chuckling) I loved working with children because they always looked at everyday and every experience of wonder. They were always amazed at every little thing and you know there is a great Louis C.K clip on You Tube about his child always asking "why?" over and over again to every single question they ask but I think we lose a lot of that, as we get older. We get locked down into our titles or into our job description or a specific ways of looking at things and we don't take that time to step back and go "Why am I not more amazed of what's going on around me"? A simple example right now, it's the Fall in Ottawa Canada, beautiful maple trees turning beautiful colors in old neighborhoods, and I was just walking around the other day and just taking in some fresh air on a beautiful fall day thinking, "This is an amazing experience, look at all the colors". I

remember the sense. I remember playing in the pile of leaves as a kid and we just lose that sense of play and wonder around us and I think if we went back to that like you were saying before, and we could innovate things in ways we never thought of before and we wouldn't be afraid to fail.

Brad Nunnally: I've got a 3-month-old little boy at home that when he was about to be born, I kept thinking, "What do I want to teach my son while growing up?" What are some kinds of concepts do I want to instill in him? So I went into this whole fatherhood thing as a way of expressing knowledge to my son. What I've learned very quickly in this past 3 months, I'm learning a ton from him. I can sit there and watch him figure something out and just being able to observe that behavior and the process, which is very simplistic because he's only 3 months old. It's already more profound than what I do. So now I've taken another step. "Ok, now what can I teach him and what can he teach me as he gets older"? So he can help me relearn some of things that I've forgotten. I think anyone that has any kind of connection with children needs to embrace that whenever you're around them, just take a step back and watch them. It's awesome.

Jeff Parks: That also speaks about an earlier point around the idea; I was talking about Malcolm Gladwell's idea about needing ten thousand hours to become an expert in anything. But, at the same time as you pointed out, there are so many opportunities to learn from people that don't have a lot of experiences. Adaptive Path wrote a book called

Subject To Change and in it, they talk about the design sessions where they'll bring in everybody from the company including secretaries and people that are involved in projects and they'll describe their projects to them and maybe it may be in a different light. That's why people outside our industry don't know anything about what we do can really help us. I've talked in past shows about leadership and teamwork. Well, why not go talk to a chief of a fire department? When they go out, if they don't work as a team, people can get hurt. I want to learn about stress management. Why not go to the head of a trauma word unit, like a nurse. These are the people that deal with real stress, like life and death situations. I think we can learn a lot more about that and that speaks to the last point of your part 3 article about open minds, open ears and hearts. I think that you've touched on this a little already but maybe you want to expand on this last part a little bit more?

Brad Nunnally: I like to focus on the final part, which is having an open heart, because many of us got into the world of user experience because we empathize with someone or we empathize with people. We see people painfully interacting with something and we know that we can make that better and I think that's something a lot of us might lose sight of which our industry, our profession and the one thing that we all love to do is rooted in failure. When we are brought in to redesign something or create something that is replacing a previous product, it's because something about that previous thing failed miserably, maybe not miserably

but in many cases it did or pieces of it did that needed to be refined. I think that we lose sight of that. If it wasn't for failure, we wouldn't have a job, and during the process of doing our work whenever you got into user testing, you validate something that you are creating to make sure it works, you're not looking for "is this going to work?" you're looking for "what's wrong with this?" and again right there we're looking for the failures and maybe we have been using failure a lot more than we thought we did, we just didn't recognize it. Open hearts ties directly to our sense of empathy as user experience designers, and I think we need to take it from being simply directed at the users that we are trying to make their lives better and direct it also to ourselves and our coworkers, and seeing where that gets us.

Jeff Parks: Brad, this has been absolutely fantastic! As I said before, we could probably talk about this for 6 hours. With a 3-month old at home, your priorities are probably elsewhere and should be other than talking to me, so I really appreciate you taking time away from your family to share your ideas with me tonight.

Brad Nunnally: No Problem! It's been a blast. I appreciate it.

Jeff Parks: Ya, you bet! I'll put links to the show notes for the wiki. Also, a special shout out to Christian Cromwell from Yahoo. He's sent me links to other things but he didn't have time to post things up on the wiki due to some other obligations so I'll make sure those links to the other articles get

posted as well, both at the Interaction and Design Conference, the IA Summit, and other events. I really hope that we're able to take some time and talk about this concept of failure more, because I don't think it gets talked about enough and I think we'd be doing it a better service and in the future.

Brad Nunnally: If you see me at any one of those venues, feel free to sit there and talk to me about it because I love chatting about this kind of stuff.

Jeff Parks: That's great! Well thanks again for your time and until next time, this has been your I.A. Podcast. I hope you can find everything you need, whenever you need it. Take care.