

Kristin Gecan ([00:01](#)):

Welcome to *With Intent*, a podcast from IIT Institute of Design, about how design permeates our world, whether we call it design or not. I'm Kristin Gecan. This month I talk to Morgan Ames. Morgan is the author of *The Charisma Machine*, which dives into One Laptop Per Child, a hugely ambitious, or as she defines it, charismatic project, with good intentions; to bring a laptop to every child in the developing world.

The project was widely celebrated when it was announced in 2006, but in the end, although 3 million laptops were reportedly shipped, the project failed. I talk with Morgan about that failure. We also talk about how important the central tenets of design are when building internationally-driven, and, in some ways, utopic projects. Utopianism is a contentious concept at the heart of Morgan's research. To start things off, here's Morgan, on the tech centered ethos surrounding One Laptop per Child, and how she became interested in this project in the first place.

Morgan Ames ([01:13](#)):

People would tell these origin stories about themselves. They would say, "Oh, well, I got into coding when I was nine or I got into coding when I was six. And here's the platform I used, or the game I used or whatever." That origin story ends up being told surprisingly often in the tech world. I've heard stories from tech workers that it comes up in interviews.

My theory is that this story and particular forms of it, specifically, do a kind of cultural work in kind of signaling who belongs and maybe who doesn't belong so much. So people who have stories like my own story into computer science, where I took my first computer science class in college and had very little programming experience before that. I was a bit of a math geek, but I was a bit of a geek around a number of things. So I couldn't even claim that, particularly.

I found that people who have that kind of story, end up having to account for themselves in a way that people who started coding younger, don't always. Even if the coding that they did from whatever age they started, eight or nine or 12, up until college, was probably not very sophisticated in most cases at least. Sometimes they had to unlearn bad habits in fact in college, when they started really getting into efficient data structures and such. So I found the fact that so much weight was placed on this origin story really interesting.

And that's something I'm trying to follow up on and just see if that holds consistent, for example, across different generations of tech workers. So that's one piece of it. And then the other piece is looking at what kids today, especially kids who are maybe out of the spotlight of what the "typical kid," which of course is a very raced and classed and gendered assumption, around childhood, what these kids are doing with tech, and what it means for the tech industry, where those mismatches appear.

Kristin Gecan ([03:12](#)):

That's super interesting, and of course, very logical too, considering what you talk about in *The Charisma Machine*. And it also brings me to my next question, which actually is connected to childhood.

So there's a book that maybe you know, it's called *Locomotive* and it's by Brian Floca. It's the story of basically the transcontinental railroad. It really does drive home, I think, this idea of not just, "This thing happened at this time in history," but what maybe it felt like at that time in history, for this to actually be accomplished. That people could travel from one side of the country to the other, and what that meant for people at that moment of time.

And so one of the big things that you hit on in *The Charisma Machine* is how society interacts with and understands new and emerging technologies. And so you actually talk about the railroad in the book,

and you say that there are these feelings of sublime awe and transcendence that the locomotive evoked across the nation; that led the United States to pay an enormous price in resources and lives, in an attempt to realize the utopian promises of rail.

Do you see anything along these lines that is happening today, that we are sort of as a society, willing to kind of put our all behind, in terms of resources? Something that might make for a really good story, like the locomotive?

Morgan Ames ([04:39](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. And I think there are a number of them. I might augment this a little bit to say what I see now, as things that attract people's attention and their passions, these charismatic projects, and then what maybe should be a little more charismatic, but maybe isn't.

A lot of the discussion I see around self-driving cars, around the so-called privatized space race to Mars. These, I think are not nationalistic projects in so far, that they are funded wholly by the national government, by the US or another national government. Of course, they do get a lot of government contracts, but I think that they are enough part of the popular imagination in the US, and also beyond.

And I think they resonate in particular in the US, because we've had these narratives part of our national identity in the past. We've had the '60s space race, we've had Manifest Destiny. And so this race to Mars, and I would say also the promise of self-driving cars, really do attract so much attention, so much journalistic commentary. There's of course, both good and bad. A lot of people will say, "Oh, this isn't possible. What are the ethics of this?" But I think the amount of attention, whether it's good or bad, is already an indicator that this is really capturing the imaginations of a lot of people.

And I remember growing up in the 1980s, up until the Challenger disaster, I feel like NASA had a similar kind of cache of like, "Oh my Gosh. It captures the imaginations of adults, but also children by extension." I mean, I think there's a lot of children's culture that gets tied up in these kinds of large scale projects.

I think there are others too, and they're a little less tangible. So I think that there's a lot of discussion around artificial intelligence. I think that in reality, machine learning takes on so many different forms and does so many different things. It's a little hard to pin that on a particular technological system. It's a lot of technological systems, all across the world, and different mechanisms.

So that one, I would say is similar in a lot of ways, although much more, a little hard to grasp, I guess. I would say there are things that maybe should get a little bit more attention along these lines, but are not quite as flashy or charismatic. The infrastructure bills that are being touted in Congress right now, focus a lot more on maintenance and repair, and this is something that is generally just not as charismatic. We like new and exciting, brand new ways of moving or thinking or looking at the world, and maintaining what we have is not something that seems as attractive.

Similarly, I would say that funding public education adequately is something that I feel like should be way more charismatic than it is. And that's not to say that there aren't charismatic projects within tech, within education. I think that there's a lot that have to do with throwing technology at education. And it'll be interesting to see after, as the kind of remote distance learning from the pandemic starts to wind down, how the various ed tech companies that really were heavy use this last year, how they kind of pivot, if they pivot, what stories they tell about themselves going forward.

But I think this last year wasn't necessarily really charismatic in terms of the ed tech we all had to use every day, because we were living it. We knew all the ins and outs and the ups and downs. It was not something that was a kind of five or 10 year out horizon. It was something like, "Oh, nope, we have to just grapple with it." And I think a lot of people saw that it wasn't so much the technology, but the

people involved; the teacher on the other end, the parents in the room, trying to keep the kids' attention on the class, and not wandering off, all of that, that really sustained all of that effort.

Kristin Gecan ([08:54](#)):

It's hard to tell good stories about infrastructures. They're not the sexiest things in the world. And many times, especially in design, they're totally invisible. So it's really hard to get someone to understand what it is that you're driving at or talking about. And so, of course, many of the infrastructures that we're talking about today, are concrete and visible; rail, and roads, and that sort of thing.

But I just wonder, as you've worked on writing about these stories, how have you found good ways to translate their importance for people?

Morgan Ames ([09:31](#)):

Oh, gosh. I wish I had a really solid answer and I could say, "Here it is. Here's the way to make everybody believe in it." It's something I certainly work at. And a lot of it is, my own approach tends to lean on kind of inverting people's expectations about things. Where people expect maybe a technology, some, a laptop for children, for example, to transform the world. And I say, "Well, here's all of the ways that it made assumptions about the kids, that weren't true, and here's all the ways it fell down. And here's all the ways that it leaned on maybe infrastructure that wasn't there."

So it's kind of turning expectations on their head just a little bit. And I mean, I don't do that for no reason. I really follow the evidence as best I can. Another thing I've really tried to do for the One Laptop per Child project write up in particular, was write it as sympathetically as I could.

I mean, here was a project that by all accounts, really failed. But the people who believed in it, really wanted to make the world a better place. And I acknowledged that. I acknowledge that these aren't evil people out to make a buck off of the lives of children across the global south. They really wanted to transform the world.

It's very easy to say, "Oh, the whole tech world is out to ruin the rest of the world. Just out to make money." And I say, "Well, there are certainly people in the tech world like that, but there are a lot of people who really want to do good in the world, more broadly." So we need to sit with that complexity, I think.

Kristin Gecan ([11:08](#)):

Right. I wanted to ask you about that idea of charisma and what you mean by it, because we're kind of dancing around a lot of the ideas here that you set out in *The Charisma Machine*. But I think maybe one way, if folks haven't read the book, to kind of get at what we're talking about a little deeper, and to understand it better—if you could talk a little bit about what you mean by charisma.

Morgan Ames ([11:31](#)):

Yeah. I lean a lot on past sociological and STS work in this area. So of course Max Weber first theorized charisma as a sociological construct. He of course, connected it to people, to especially religious leaders and cult leaders, who didn't necessarily have institutional authority or kind of authority via tradition. Like a patriarch say, or a head of state, but still had an authority.

And he said, "How do we explain this authority? It's almost kind of magical." And so he dissected and says, "Charisma is what is bringing these people together around a particular leader. Here are some dimensions of charisma, and here's how charisma eventually subsumes into one of these other kinds of authority," because it's an unstable kind of authority.

In a kind of STS turn, as I was analyzing all of my interviews and field notes and everything, from my time in Paraguay, studying One Laptop per Child, I just kept having this kind of nagging feeling in the back of my mind like, "This laptop is kind of charismatic. What would it mean for a laptop to be charismatic?"

We understand charismatic people, but STS often says, obviously there are differences between people and machines, but there is something to be gained by analytically thinking about them in similar ways. And so I use that kind of STS move with charisma to say, "This laptop itself has a kind of authority."

I mean, of course the people who lead the project, also have, in a lot of cases, charisma, as well as various kinds of institutional authority, coming out of MIT. But the laptop itself also had charisma, based on the kinds of stories that got told about it, based on what this project promised to do in the world.

And one thing about charisma that is interesting, it certainly connects to the sublime, to some other ideas that STS and cultural scholars have teased apart within the history of technology. David Nye talks about the railroad, for example, as a sublime technology. And it goes beyond just charisma. It really evokes this feeling of awe, sometimes terror. Like that sublime feeling you get at the edge of the Grand Canyon, or maybe in a really grand cathedral, if you feel religiously connected, is the same kind of feeling people got with the locomotive.

And I thought, "Well, that's not quite the same as what they're getting with this laptop." I mean, it was specifically designed to be friendly and cute. It's not designed to evoke awe and terror, but there was something really attractive about it. So I thought, "Okay, charisma is related to the sublime, it's related to some of these other ideas, but it is somewhat distinct."

One other aspect of charisma that I focus in on in the book, and I think is kind of important for technological charisma, and possibly for people's charisma too, is that there is something a little bit ideologically conservative about it. It appeals to people's established sense of self, their established worldviews in some way. And that's how it resonates.

If it's really saying, "Oh, we're going to turn everything on its head. We're going to completely invert power structures." I think it would not appeal nearly so much as if it said, no, the power structures that people, at least within the project acknowledged of people in the technology industry, having special kinds of insights into people, and into learning that other people may not have.

The project really just reinforced those if anything, even though I had this veneer of, "This is totally new. This is a completely new approach to things," but it kind of preserves that idea of these technical people knowing best. To them, they can be at the top of this hierarchy that this project kind of establishes.

Kristin Gecan ([15:33](#)):

Great. So I think, as you're saying, charisma is sort of connected to this idea of something also being magical or transformative. And so transformative design is kind of a buzzword too, and you consider how we dispel the magic of that technological transformation, and what we need to do with technology, or alongside technology in order to actually accomplish real transformation. And that maybe it often has to happen at a slower pace than we want it to.

So are there other things that you see might allow an emerging technology to be successful or transformative, while maybe it can't be as charismatic, but it could actually be effective?

Morgan Ames ([16:18](#)):

Oh yeah. That's a great question. Certainly all of the discourse in Silicon Valley around disruption. It's very much akin, it's very much in the same vein as this sort of transformative. I can't say that there is a formula that guarantees that a technology will be transformative. I think that there are plenty of

projects that have great potential, that are doing all the right things, that just aren't maybe in the right place at the right time.

There's an element of luck. But the projects that I look to as doing a really good job with this, are ones that are deeply engaged with communities that they are hoping to transform.

Hopefully, even centering them in some way. Giving them leadership roles in the project, making sure that there are really strong deliberative processes that don't just bring in community members as kind of tokens, but really involves them in a very deep way, from the beginning. These are the ones that really have the potential or have in the past, actually, changed things in a really fundamental way.

When I think about certainly a lot of the infrastructural expansions across the US, in the 1950s and 60s, not to say that they were benefiting everybody equally, there were clearly problems with them, with institutionalizing, redlining within infrastructures, for example. But there was a process by which there was discussion with communities, some communities at least, and a lot of those have been baked into city planning practices now. So there's public commentary periods, et cetera.

And some people are frustrated by how slow these go, but that is a way to really make sure everybody's voice can be heard. And I think technology companies, and design firms can also have this kind of thing.

When I look back at the history of Scandinavian design, for example, or participatory design, its roots are really quite radical. They're really tied within workers' rights, they're tied in unions in some cases. It's something that really centers the worker and the workers' voice, and the solidarity that they might feel with people that they're trying to design for.

When I see participatory design kind of enacted within firms, it's often a lot more closer to kind of typical user experience, where it's like, "Well, we're going to design something, we'll get a little bit of feedback, but we're going to ultimately make the final decisions. And we may well just throw out some of the feedback that we get from the stakeholders, the user stakeholders."

So, yeah, I think that there's certainly a lot of different approaches to this, but I would say that kind of distinguishes the transformative potential of some projects, with projects that either don't take off or end up maybe steamrolling over people that they are meant to benefit.

Kristin Gecan ([19:17](#)):

It's interesting you bring up this idea of participatory design. We talk about this a lot at ID about this, designing with people, not just for them, and you're right. Certainly that happens more in certain realms than others.

I wonder about in terms of participatory design, like let's say, a project like One Laptop Per Child, that was able to inspire so many people, both in their hearts and in their pocketbooks, and part of the reason that they were able to do that, and part of what is really important when you're trying to put a project like this together, or even when you're trying to do a startup, or something like that, is being able to ignite that passion in people, so that they do reach for their pocketbooks and that sort of thing.

One Laptop Per Child was able to do that because it had this approach that looked like it could really scale, and really could make this huge impact. So I think kind of going back to a little bit about what we were talking about earlier, of whether or not that's realistic to say that things could happen at such a pace. And also, whether or not some of these concepts, can realistically scale. So if you look at something like this, where I think originally, One Laptop Per Child was supposed to focus in on areas in Africa, and it ended up being more in Latin America and that sort of thing.

But then is it realistic to think that one solution could work in this continent just as well as it would work in that continent? And especially if you're designing with, and for people, how much do you need to

localize your efforts? And then if you're having to localize that those efforts, how much are you really able to scale?

I mean, we want to be conscious designers that are designing appropriately with people, and for people, in a way that works for them. But how do you play that against the idea that, you have to sell an idea, right?

Morgan Ames ([21:18](#)):

Absolutely. It's a great question. I mean, I think one irony within One Laptop Per Child, is that they sold the idea to other tech workers. And I think in the American imagination more broadly, it certainly caught on. There was ton of press. But they did not sell it, so to speak, to the actual beneficiaries of the project; the children who would be using this across the global south, or their teachers, or their parents.

There were a lot of people I encountered in Paraguay, also in shorter visits in Peru and Uruguay, that really saw this as a little toy, and not something that was interesting, not something that was educational. Even though they have been told by the local NGO that this was educational.

So that charisma didn't translate to the people who were most important in the project in a way; the children across the global south. So, I mean, it's one thing to say, "Okay, how would they have made that charisma translate?" One would be, to acknowledge that computers today are media machines, that the internet is a media rich place. This was not a computer that was designed to support a media rich environment, but another would probably be to say, "Well, even in the 1980s or the 1990s, when some of the people who are really passionate about One Laptop Per Child came of age, not all kids who had computers grew up to be programmers."

There were a lot of kids who said, "I'm just not really all that interested in the computer," or, "I'm interested, but I want to play some games and maybe chat with my friends online and then go off and do some other stuff." So I think that recognizing no matter where you are in the world, not all kids are really going to be all that into computers, would have been a really big first step.

And certainly something that I saw in the field, something that I've seen across a lot of fieldwork with kids in a lot of different environments at this point, and something that throws a lot of the assumptions behind the project, really into question. So I think that that's, maybe one, if they had worked more closely with the actual beneficiaries of the project, they'd really have to reimagine the whole project.

In terms of localization, this is something I struggle with a lot myself and I lean on some of the excellent work by Anita Say Chan and others. She wrote a book that also did some work analyzing One Laptop Per Child, but the laptop project in Peru in particular, and she talks about how there is this myth of digital universalism.

The same system can be just scaled up, it can be rolled out everywhere and it's going to not just be adopted everywhere, it's actually going to create a transcendent culture. A hacker culture maybe, if you want to call it that. A cosmopolitan culture that children around the world in the case of One Laptop Per Child will join and want to be part of.

So she grapples with this in a really lovely way in her own work. It's something I really grapple with too, because I take people's cultural contexts of course, very seriously and the differences between different cultural contexts, but I also take their yearnings really seriously.

And I don't want to certainly be the person going in and saying, "Oh, well we need this something. Something that's really specific to your local context. You don't want that same thing that people in the U.S. have. You don't want that same thing that people elsewhere have." And the local folks might go, "Well, yeah, we do. Why wouldn't we? Why should we have something different?"

And this comes up in all sorts of interesting ways. So one thing that I found that had a lot of tension within my own field work for One Laptop Per Child was around language. Something like two thirds of the internet is in English. Kids were constantly encountering stuff in English.

For some of them, it was part of what turned them off from the machine. Some of them figured out where Google Translate was with the help of teachers and others, and would just put things in and get, not perfect, but okay translations to try to understand what was online, but a lot of them said, "I just wish there was more things that I could understand online."

So Spanish internet culture is fairly big. Guarani internet culture though, which the other official language of Paraguay, is non-existent practically. There's little Guarani content. So this is something that I found, it was a very clear line of exclusion for a lot of these kids and something that for some of them created disinterest, but for others really created a desire to be able to understand that content, to learn that.

So I would say it's uneven the kinds of reactions people have and the understandings they have on the ground. I do really love the idea, in anthropology, of bricolage. So this is not dominant culture steamrolling over everybody else and creating this universalism. It's everybody actively deciding what to appropriate and what to take up, what to transform, what to reject, and that really influenced the way that I looked at this project on the ground.

It's not just a case of everybody adopts it in the same way. Everyone makes up their own minds about how to adopt it. Of course, influenced by their social lives and social worlds in various ways but that individual choice is really important.

Kristin Gecan ([27:07](#)):

As I was reading the book, I noticed that it says One Laptop Per Child serves as a case study in the complicated consequences of technological utopianism. And the reason I really remarked upon that is that of course, many years ago now, ID founder, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy said we need "inspired utopians."

The Charisma Machine cautions against utopianism, or what can happen as a result of utopianism. Could you talk a little bit more about the role of utopianism, whether good or bad, the danger of it for design? As we work as designers to build responsible and intelligent futures, it seems as though there may be a role for utopianism, but it's something that we need to be conscious of and cautious of.

Morgan Ames ([27:55](#)):

Absolutely. Well, I would say there are some different kinds of utopianism. The kind that we are most familiar with by far is the, "Let's imagine a completely new world," utopianism. We don't imagine necessarily how it's connected to our current world, we might have a fairly simplistic story about how we might get from there to our, our utopian world but we don't have a really comprehensive understanding of, of what that process looks like. What are the pitfalls?

It's much more building that new magical world over there. And that disconnected kind of utopianism is incredibly powerful, certainly. It's alluring, it keeps me reading science fiction among other things. And there is a role for that, but I think that not enough attention is paid to the ways that it almost removes us from the here and now of our daily lived experience in the actual world.

It's not something that connects us to that. I would say that the fact that I'm even doing the research, I am, it might seem like I'm doing very critical research, but the reason I feel like it is hopefully valuable in the world in some way, is I hope it makes a difference.

I would say that I am, in some ways, an optimist about the potential for us to steer the world in a good direction. I don't know if I would call myself quite utopian, but I think that there is room for utopian visions that have a really strong grounding in present realities.

Gosh, there's even some science fiction that I feel like does this in a really wonderful way that tells you something about our present condition. Maybe the inequalities in it and how we might be able to overcome them. So I would say, clearly utopianism is something that is powerful and I would love to see more instances of utopian stories that are really grounded in the lived experiences of people today, with a clear, as clear as we can obviously, path from where we are today to that idealized future. And that's something that often is missing from utopian stories today.

Kristin Gecan ([30:18](#)):

Yeah. And that also kind of connects to the danger of nostalgia, which you also talk about, which is looking backwards at your own experience and, "Okay. This is what worked for me when I was playing around with computers when I was young and learning to hack and this and that," and it kind of gives you that warm, fuzzy feeling of like, "Oh, I know it worked for me, so maybe this will work for this whole next generation of children in the world."

And I think what you're saying about utopianism is also probably applicable to nostalgia in that if you're focusing on what worked for you or what worked for a certain generation and extrapolating it to today, that's also dangerous because the role of the computer is different today, et cetera.

So how do we make sure that we're really thinking about today and today's conditions and not transporting ourselves back and forth into our own experiences? I mean, I know it's very, sort of a central tenet of design to think about the people, as we talked about earlier, whom you're designing with or for, but people continue to drift into this, "This is what worked for me and so..." I don't know. Do you have any notes there for how to stay away from them?

Morgan Ames ([31:38](#)):

Well, and I'm so glad you bring up nostalgia in this moment too, because just as utopianism is often disconnected from the present in any way, I would say a lot of those nostalgic stories are also disconnected from the reality of even of the past.

So when I hear that story of, "Oh, I got my first computer when I was eight and it was love at first sight and I just taught myself everything," very rarely is part of that story who got them, the computer. Where they went for help. What kind of home environment enabled them to do that kind of exploration?

And of course, there's often a kind of privilege that gets unexamined in those nostalgic stories. So there's a disconnect between the way they tell those stories and the way they believe those stories and then what actually happened. It's a very hero narrative lens on it. It's all about them and the computer.

I mean, it's very powerful. People build their identities around it. Their sense of self is kind of built, especially their professional selves, for a lot of people in the tech world, gets built around these stories of, "Oh, well, I taught myself when I was eight and here's what I loved. And I think today's kids will also love it."

And this is a bit of a blind spot we have culturally generally. We love hero narratives. We love stories that are focused on the individual on the psychological level. We don't love sociological stories. We don't love infrastructural stories, as you said earlier. Those are hard stories to tell.

So I think part of what I do, even in interviews, when I interview tech workers and if they tell us some version of this story, not everybody does obviously, but if they do, I let them tell it and I talk a bit about, “Where does this come up? Can you remember the last time you told it to someone else?”

And I start unpacking it like, “Well, who got you that computer? Why did your family get that computer? Why did you have the access that you did to it? Why were you able to use it as much as you did, perhaps? Where did you go with questions?” I start unpacking and sometimes even in the interview they have this realization of like, “Well, yeah, I guess it was a lot more complicated. It wasn't just me and the computer.”

So that reconnect those stories to what actually happened. I feel that there have been a lot of similar paths in this, maybe this last year especially, but going back longer for some, in examining one's own privilege. I mean, this is something that I have definitely grappled with.

I don't want to claim any kind of superiority. I'm done, but as a white cisgendered woman, there's a lot of privilege I have in the world that has smoothed the way for me. And I think that similarly, these kinds of stories often embody a lot of privilege that gets unexamined.

So I feel like that's a great first step. It's a hard step for a lot of people to start thinking about the ways that their environment helped them along, but I think it's a great first step to really reconnecting to, “Okay. What are the lived experiences of people all around the world? Not necessarily who are all like me, and how can we better design things that really augment that multiplicity of lived experiences all around the world?”

Kristin Gecan ([35:12](#)):

Everyone's memory is always faulty to some extent. So the way I remember something and the way my brother remembers it, is probably pretty different. And so that's one thing in play. The other thing that I think that you're noting here is that there's something that we know, but again, I think it's part of this, what are the stories that we like to tell or that we key in on, or that we connect with and having an easy answer to something like parachuting a laptop into a region in need maybe is really exciting that, “Oh, that could make a difference.”

Whereas if we look at what we know in terms of education, as you mentioned in your book, that we know that that's a very social experience and that there's lots of people involved in that. And so designing, not just for one end outcome, but for this entire system that is at play in order to get to that outcome, I think is really important and it's something that we focus on at ID.

Just to bring the focus back to design for moment, we focused on human centered design, we focused on systems design, we focused on co-design. I wonder just how your work intersects with those different types of looking at design, different ways of designing in your work in science and technology studies if anything reveals itself to you as maybe coming next or being the next shift in design.

Morgan Ames ([36:42](#)):

Oh God, gosh. Yeah. This could easily be maybe a whole class. Multiple classes. And this is something I talk about in my own teaching, certainly, because I think that all of these methods can be done really well and really sensitively, and they can also be done very perfunctory without really good outcomes.

And so one thing I always caution students about when I talk about these, as well as, there's been this move towards audits of artificial intelligence systems, right? How do you do an audit? All of these tools are only as good as the thoughtfulness that you put into them.

Many of the methods across human-centered computing, I would say broadly, whether it's co-design, participatory design, have a lot of potential to really center the perspectives of those who, those who are meant to be the beneficiaries of the design.

There's been so much great work in theorizing design recently. I think about some of the design histories that Daniella Rosner has been working on a lot, some of the new possibilities around intersectional design that maybe Sasha Costanza-Chok and others have been really working on, and I think that these all have a wonderful potential to help people be less perfunctory about these methods.

If they really immerse themselves in them, if they really question a lot of the assumptions they maybe come in the door with about either the design process itself or particular beneficiaries they have targeted in for a particular project maybe, or what their role in the whole process is going to be.

And I think that that is the kind of depth that for any of these methods can lead to much more fair outcomes. Outcomes that are much more oriented towards social justice in the end.

Kristin Gecan ([38:51](#)):

How do you define design? It's a question we're always grappling with because it's something hard to pin down and so I wonder how you might, say you have a student in your class, how do you define design?

Morgan Ames ([39:05](#)):

Like many academics, I would probably say, "Well, here's how you look at it from this way and then there's this other way," and then it's going to be a very long answer. I think though, if I were to be pinned down to have a more concise answer, not just citing a whole bunch of different people's perspectives, I would say that any time we are shaping our environment to suit human needs, we are designing.

So there's little designs I do all the time around my house to just help things along. The house itself is obviously a lot of design hooked up to a whole city infrastructure that was also designed. We lived in such a designed environment, but I like this kind of definition and how it just decouples itself a little bit from technologies and the more formalized design process, because I think it helps students recognize that design isn't necessarily always a institutionalized or rarefied thing.

I think a lot about Lillia Ronnie's work and how design became an, entrepreneurial design in particular, became this particular state-making enterprise for the Indian State and I think for states all around the world. They're trying to look for a particular kind of entrepreneur to design your particular kind of thing, and they have a particular vision of what design is.

But I like thinking about design a bit more expansively about all the kinds of things we do in our everyday lives to make things a little easier for ourselves or for our loved ones, or maybe even for our pets. Maybe I'd expand that beyond humans. There's certainly things that are designed for animals and trees and other things in our lives.

One thing I also emphasize a lot in teaching is the ways that more institutionalized design intersects power, and the ways that we do draw boxes around design, often implicate institutional or national or other forms of power that some people exert over other people.

I always like foregrounding that in my, certainly my own research and also my teaching, just to sensitize students a little bit towards the institutions that they will probably be entering into; tech workers and tech companies that do have a lot of power within the broader ecosystem for political, economic, historical reasons, and to try to wield that power wisely, maybe try to distribute that power more

equitably. I do think that power is not often enough discussed in the realm of design. Sorry. I meant that to be a very short answer about design and it ended up being a long one.

Kristin Gecan ([41:59](#)):

That's the way it goes. No, that was an excellent answer. One final question, maybe no less difficult to answer, but when have you asked yourself, "Why am I making this?" and what was your answer?

Morgan Ames ([42:13](#)):

Yeah, gosh. So often these days, what I make is words, so it's a little bit different. When I do think about though my role within this broader ecosystem and what effects I hope to have, I mean, as I said earlier, one reason I'm making, even the words I am is because I hope to have a good impact on the world.

I hope to be able to leave the world a little bit of a better place than I entered it. And I feel like the same goes for, certainly some people's motivation with within technological design too. They really want to make a difference in the world. And this of course, implicates power again.

This is something that, here I am in an academic institution writing with legitimacy behind the presses and the journals and elsewhere that I publish and here are others working within big tech companies with a lot of power over people. And so when I think about, "Why am I making this?" the answer of, "To make the world a better place," of course needs a lot more pinning down to make sure that what I am doing ultimately is good.

Because that's the same story that One Laptop per Child people really fervently believed. They've all wanted to make the world a better place. And so their answer to that question may not be any different than my own answer. So how do I make sure that I don't get so caught up in a vision I become disconnected from reality?

And that's something that I constantly work on. I really try to meet a huge variety of people, look at things from a huge variety of perspectives, but even then it's partial and I have to accept that at the end of the day, I have my own perspective and it's partial and it will never be everybody's perspective everywhere. And so I hope that in aggregate, we can all work together and achieve this goal of design of making the world a better place.

Kristin Gecan ([44:26](#)):

A big thanks to Morgan for joining me today. Morgan is an assistant adjunct professor in the School of Information at the University of California, Berkeley, where she's focused on science and technology studies. She is also one of our 2021 Latham fellows at the Institute of Design. For more about our Latham fellows, visit our website and YouTube channel.

You can also find show notes and a full transcript of this conversation on the IIT Institute of Design website, id.iit.edu. Please subscribe, rate, and review with intent on your favorite service. This is a new show and we'd love your support. Our theme music comes from ID alum Adithya Ravi. Until next time.