SYPartners

Designing for Humanity
Episode 1: Time for tech to get inclusive, with Kat Holmes

Rie Nørregaard: [00:00:00] I think you might be a design activist. Are you a design activist?

Kat Holmes: [00:00:04] What's a design activist? (laughs)

Rie Nørregaard: [00:00:06] I think you just answered that.

[Music]

Introduction: [00:00:09] This is Designing for Humanity, a podcast by SYPartners about designing a future that's made for all of us, and the best in us. I'm Rie Nørregaard, and I'm talking with some of the most interesting people I know about how we, as designers, can tackle the most complex challenges our society faces right now. How can we use design to reimagine the ways we interact with each other, and with the world? I'm here to start the conversation about what new ways of thinking and methods are needed.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:00:44] Today I'm super happy to be joined by Kat Holmes, whose work I've been following as she's been pioneering new methods of inclusive design. Currently through her company Kata—did I get that right?

Kat Holmes: [00:00:55] Yes.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:00:56] —and previously as head of inclusive design at Microsoft, she's truly rethinking how we tackle exclusion and bias in the products and digital experiences we create. Kat's award winning inclusive design toolkit is widely known as a radical evolution of design thinking and practices, and she was recently recognized as one of Fast Company's Most Creative People in Business. Wow. Thank you again for being here.

Kat Holmes: [00:01:24] So glad to be here. Thanks for the invitation.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:01:28] Course. I'd love to start with asking you how you got into the work you do. What is your calling as a designer, and what I mean specifically, a calling to work on inclusion in design?

Kat Holmes: [00:01:41] Such a good question. For me when I look back, the work on inclusion really has been about human-led approach to design, and that started early in my career. I mean, I went to school originally to study orthopedic biomechanics. I was going to create prosthetic limbs — that's

what I wanted to do, that's what I wanted to design, and it was really about the fit between human beings and the objects around us. The tools that extend us, that assist us. This has always been an area of interest and focus, and I took the engineering path early because it really helped me understand how things are made.

[00:02:26] I studied the material science of that, and what goes into the very smallest kind of detail—making those products, those prosthetics, really feel like they belong with the human being, as opposed to very medicalized objects. But after school, as many of us do, I never pursued that as a career. It wasn't until I arrived at Microsoft after a series of companies that I'd worked at that I really started to focus on artificial intelligence. When I talk about inclusive design, often many people assume that you start with a basis in accessibility, and I had no background in that. It was never required training in school, it wasn't required as an employee at any of the companies I worked at, and so my entry point was really through thinking about the design of an AI at Microsoft called Cortana. Because there are no tools at the time—it was about five years ago—for doing voice conversational design, we really had to make it up as we went.

Kat Holmes: [00:03:29] One of the things that became a real resource for us was meeting with people who really are personal assistants or assistants to other human beings, and understanding how a human being creates a great experience for another human being. Through that, we realized there's so much expertise people have in how they work with each other that we could learn from as technologists. Another example that came up in that project is that there are people who have been talking to their computers for decades. It's primarily people who use a program called Dragon, because they have limited use and can't use a keyboard or a mouse and have limited use of their hands, or people who are blind who have been using speech recognition and speech based technology with screen readers for many years. So my path to inclusion really started with seeing the huge void in resources for designers and engineers in how to think about the topic, and then marrying that with some really interesting, gnarly problems I was trying to work on at the time, and realizing that human beings had more to teach us than the technology—and kind of even the traditional design thinking methods—that we've all come to know.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:04:44] Was that the time when you connected what you really cared about, and knew something about, to the potential impact you could have as a designer?

Kat Holmes: [00:04:56] Oh gosh, yeah. There was a moment. I remember because again, it wasn't known subject matter, there wasn't a book to read on this topic. There's a lot of academic work, but there wasn't something that was applied to digital experiences and how you would do this in a digital environment. There was a moment as I was going through this and kind of piecing it together, that I realized how much work there was to do, how many things had been missed, and that really this would be the work I would do for the rest of my life because there was just so much to do and

meaningful places—places like one small, simple, thoughtful design addition applied towards a problem—that could make a huge difference in someone's life. Sometimes it was taking technology that already existed, but had never been framed or applied towards a mismatch or disability that someone experiences. It became a whole playground of places to learn, and the outcomes really did make a difference in people's lives.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:06:08] In your experience, both at Microsoft and in the work that you're doing now, where does intention fit in? You're talking about lots of missed opportunity in places where we maybe have data or knowledge and we're not applying it toward solutions. Can you talk a little bit about where intention comes in for you?

Kat Holmes: [00:06:33] Yeah, I think the things that we make—this is a very well-known thing but I'm going to state it anyways—the things that we make carry a mark of the maker, right? There's a translation that happens, and biases are one of those things that translate into the things that we make. One of the most concrete types of biases that we don't always think about, but that we talk about in this space, is ability bias. Ability bias is one of the things where of course we're going to design something that we ourselves can see, or that we can hear to our own abilities. The things we make then end up working well for people who have similar circumstances or similar abilities, but it ends up excluding a much broader group of people.

[00:07:15] And that's not just by ability and disability, it's also by situation. You know, "I happen to be in a loud crowded environment and now I can't hear my phone ring." Well, that's because it was designed to work in a perfectly serene, quiet environment. These things that all of us have, these moments where you have these kind of mismatches with the biases, they're built into the things that we use. Bias isn't inherently good or bad, it is what it is. We can try to evolve them, but we really can't get rid of them. Ability bias is a good example of that.

[00:07:50] But what we can do is recognize, at least, what the bias is and then what's missing and recognizing what's missing is really then about matching up with people who have an ability bias that's different than my own, right? So how do I match up with someone whose ability biases are really for speech based interfaces to complement my text based bias? So I think about intention through the lens of, what's the problem you're trying to solve? And, which biases you bring to the table, and which ones are missing? And then actively seeking out and marrying those together by increasing the participation and inclusion of who's making that solution.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:08:35] So with awareness, we can have intention and then we can really practice and transform what it is that we bring into the solutions that we create for others. I wonder if you can think about a time, or a good example of, seeing and experiencing that in practice.

Kat Holmes: [00:08:55] Yeah, one of my favorite examples was when we were working on a text based interface, like basic texting. An important and critical element of inclusive design is that it's including people who are historically excluded from the design process. You bring them into the design process and make that a central part of how you solve problems.

[00:09:23] So with this text example, we'd met with a woman who was hard of hearing, and she was conveying a story about her relationship with her best friend. Her best friend had moved to the East coast and he had a deep voice, and she was losing her ability to hear the lower ranges of human voice and so it became harder and harder to stay connected. But what was interesting in that conversation was that she said it wasn't that she missed the functional element of the conversation, those are things you can get in text. What she missed was the inflection and the emotion that's conveyed that comes from the conversation and all that gets stripped away when things are typed in text.

[00:10:09] We started playing with how we could bring that into the expression of the text itself, how that could be something you could play with to convey different types of meaning in the design of the words, of the fonts, of the pacing of the words as they appear on the screen. We were thinking about the starting points, and what those emotional elements are, which often end up being the most important things to these experiences.

[00:10:38] If we had just set out to design a better text application, we would've asked different questions. We would have tried to solve different problems. Instead, starting with the story of the human-to-human interaction between this woman and her best friend gave us a starting point of what actually was most important—the meaningful emotions that come through in those conversations. So how do we design that? There are many, many examples of what kinds of mismatch and what kinds of exclusion happen; not just functionally, not just access, but emotionally and in our relationships with each other.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:11:15] Awesome. Kat, you're writing a book on inclusion and design. You're done with it, yeah?

Kat Holmes: [00:11:28] Yeah, I'm done.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:11:29] Congratulations. That must feel amazing. (laughs)

Kat Holmes: [00:11:31] Yeah, I'm still detoxing. (laughs)

Rie Nørregaard: [00:11:35] And it's going to be published soon?

Kat Holmes: [00:11:37] So the book that I'm writing is called Mismatch, and it's focused on how inclusion shapes design technology and society. It's being published by MIT Press in September of 2018.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:11:51] That's amazing. I'm very much looking forward to that. Can you describe what that process was like a little bit, and how the process allowed you to evolve your point of view while doing it? What did you learn, basically, is what I'm asking you.

Kat Holmes: [00:12:09] I had no idea what I was getting into. I thought I was going to write a book about inclusion and I ended up writing a book about exclusion, because exclusion in comparison is crystal clear. It's sharp. We've all experienced exclusion in our lives, and we know how it feels and we know what it looks like. It evolved into understanding the cycle that perpetuates exclusion; the cycle between who's making a solution, who we're assuming is using that solution, how we make it, what tools we're using, and then, why are we making this solution in the first place? In thinking about that cycle I was asking the question, if we can understand how exclusion is built in to these different parts of the cycle, can we start to shift it towards inclusion in different ways? Back to when we talked about ability biases being one example of what I'm calling an "exclusion habit", can we shift that exclusion habit to an inclusion habit by again recognizing the ability biases in others, and complementing them with our own?

[00:13:22] So that process was one of the greatest creative challenges of my life. I have two children both birthed in different ways, and I liken this to my third child, but birthed through my face. That's how I felt! (laughs) It was a very intense process, but wonderful, and I learned way more than I expected and I met an amazing community of people along the way.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:13:52] Is there anything else you want to talk about in relation to your book? Is there something that you want to say, or an aspect of that book that comes up for you in the context of this conversation?

Kat Holmes: [00:14:04] In the book, one of the things I had to contend with right in the beginning was that inclusion is often categorized as a nice thing to do. I think it ties to your conversation on designing for humanity because there is sometimes a distinction made between social good and business benefit; inclusion being a sharp example of that, sometimes to its own detriment. When we treat it as just the right thing to do, as just the right thing to do to be inclusive, it brings out our sympathies, which is sometimes a very dangerous place to design from. It brings out our own assumptions and biases and power dynamics in separating us from people that we design for.

[00:14:56] So one of the things I really wanted to underscore early was that inclusion is not nice, and it's hard work. It's battling for rights and it's working through tough problems, but when we can make

it a central way of working—when we can get the methods and the tools of putting it right at the heart of our engineering processes, of our design processes—then we can start to think differently about the business benefits and the economic case and the growth opportunities. There's a shift as we think about designing for humanity in all of these places of great scale that we really, as designers, also need to shape the language around that conversation so that it moves it away from the benefactor "I'm doing a nice thing" and to the central, "I'm doing a necessary thing" in a multitude of spaces that desperately need a humanized approach to some really tough problems.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:16:03] I love that you're mentioning language because it's so important and really powerful when imagining new ways of doing things and new frameworks. We also need new language for the most part, and that's perhaps where words like fairness and equity can really help us move from the sympathetic frame into a place where we're actually seeing and feeling the life that we want to have and therefore we want for everyone else, or what we want for others and also want for ourselves.

[00:16:38] Given that you've mapped out a cycle, and the relationships and the moments that make a difference in this cycle, is there a limit to what we can take responsibility for as designers when it comes to inclusion? What do we not have, and where do we need partnerships, and are they there for us now or do we need to make them?

Kat Holmes: [00:17:00] I did want to play in this book with an expanded definition of designers, and taking the approach of, anybody who's solving a problem on behalf of another human being or in service of other human beings. The key responsibility that underlies inclusive design really starts with the World Health Organization's definition of disability. It's the social model of disability that's defined as, a mismatch in interaction between the features of a person's body and the features and the environment in which they live, which squarely—for me as a designer—put responsibility on every choice that I make as either raising or lowering those barriers between people and the world around them.
 [00:17:47] And I think that whether you're planning a dinner party, or designing a complex software interface, all the choices that go into that really do produce an inclusive or an exclusionary result. That is squarely the responsibility.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:18:03] Yeah. So one of the things I'm thinking about, and one of the reasons for exploring that topic in this podcast is that with the kinds of problems that we're invited to solve or to help to think about here [at SYPartners], we're finding added dimensions in solving for very big problems that are systemic in ways that maybe even the term inclusion or exclusion doesn't cover.

[00:18:36] So let's say, migration on a worldwide level. We know more, we have lots of data, and so we can see and we can understand the effects of a suggested solution. We can test it and deploy it and we can we can know a lot about the world around us.

Kat Holmes: [00:18:54] Yes. That makes so much sense to me, especially since there's a lot of conversation around system design these days, and what that even means, what that is. I think I'm very fortunate to be in a position where I can work on a lot of these problems that have no guardrails and to-do lists. Thinking about the role of design in machine learning and the systems that dictate the behavior of self-driven, self-learning machines, where do we start as designers to even practice in that space?

[00:19:38] I absolutely agree that we are at a really interesting moment, and also it's a little terrifying at moments when you think about how there's so much we don't know, but how great is it to be in those conversations and that there's recognition across all disciplines that the role of design is important to the formation of these new territories, these new uncharted spaces. But what to do once we get there, that's the part that takes a lot of courageous, creative, adventurers to make sense of that space. And so thinking about, what are the skills that really drive learning? and asking meaningful questions, those are things that are really the new toolkit for designers.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:20:33] I love that. If you take inclusion or inclusive design as a platform, and it's pretty expansive, right? We're talking very expansively about designers and what we can do and what we can solve for lots and lots of people. What are the opportunities to connect with either political movements, or movements in science or in business on human rights to create an even bigger platform?

Kat Holmes: [00:21:05] What I love about inclusive design is I've been introduced to so many more dimensions of activism than I ever thought. I grew up in the Bay Area, I had a pretty good life introduction to civic and civil and diversity led fights for human rights, and something about this work on inclusive design has really unified—or found threads maybe is a better way to put it—finding threads across these communities and conversations.

Kat Holmes: [00:21:52] One thing that really has been a tension in working on inclusive design is identity. Identity is a strong place for creating impact and activist work especially in communities that have been excluded and underrepresented. And so the thing that I'm still trying to wrap my head around is the role of identity in designing for particular problems, or designing for inclusion. There are groups that I'll meet with who consider inclusive design entirely a gender-based conversation and there's groups that consider inclusive design entirely a disability identity conversation or accessibility conversation. I think that being in so many places at once, and having the discomfort of knowing that there are places where it stretches, and there are places where really there's distinctly

an identity based conversation that needs to happen and requires focus, and then there's times where we really do need to have the broad conversation and connect a lot of these ideas together. It's something that I'm navigating and learning about, what are the connections between Black Lives Matter and the disability rights movement? Where are the places where the collective work of those two movements is greater than the individual? It's necessary to have those conversations because that's how human beings really are, human beings are not one dimension of identity or any thing, but there are times we need to separate because we have to drive sharp focus, and there's times where we need to connect and blur the lines.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:23:47] Thank you for that. That was a really meaningful response, because we tend to have very binary conversations and I think it is difficult and threatening sometimes to even try to connect.

Kat Holmes: [00:24:06] Yeah, it can feel like taking away from something. Which I understand.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:24:11] Yes, as do I.

[00:24:13] So I think you might be a design activist. Are you a design activist?

Kat Holmes: [00:24:20] What's a design activist? (laughs)

Rie Nørregaard: [00:24:20] I think you just answered that. (laughs)

[00:24:25] You've described in several ways already how activism and design comes together for you. It's both in your upbringing, probably, as a way to problem solve and something that you know well, along with your deep knowledge and skill and training from school and your work, and what happens when you put the two together.

Kat Holmes: [00:24:58] You're like, unpacking me! It's interesting, I have always lacked a word to describe what I do for a living. But yeah, that's an interesting term. I hadn't really internalized that before, but I think you're onto something.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:25:23] Ha-ha! (laughs)

[00:25:23] That's what's so lovely about conversations like these because they wander and we're both allowed to make connections that we wouldn't otherwise and that is to me incredibly joyful.

[00:25:35] Having worked in tech and in the Bay area specifically for a long time, why is inclusion so important here, and now?

Kat Holmes: [00:25:46] The thing that I'm noticing is the word "inclusion" has risen to the top of a lot of companies. But, what to do next is still a huge disconnect for people. The traditional ways of diving into that conversation is to think about—and again this is from a historical perspective—demographic diversity and representation in a company which is certainly critical and important, but beyond that there's not a whole lot of tools and not a whole lot of guides on what to do next.

[00:26:21] Literally, in a meeting with the company yesterday they talked about how they have three areas of inclusion they're focused on, and I think this is very common across a lot of companies so I'll just share it here.

[00:26:31] They have workforce, workplace and their marketplace and the things that they make. And most of the efforts have started in workforce.

[00:26:41] You know, the makeup of their teams. They've been focused on their hiring practices and increasing the diversity of their teams. Workplace has gotten some attention in their company, we have some trainings, maybe some videos to watch, culture focused activities that are making a difference but sometimes also fall short of the ambition of inclusion. And then in marketplace, in the products and things that we make, often we don't know what to do there. We're not sure exactly how to get there. We know we're doing accessibility. But do we need to change the gender options on our drop down menus? What does inclusion mean there? And I find that very common. If we change this belief, the hypothesis that if we change our workforce it will lead to product. I have a challenge to that hypothesis, which is, if we start with the things that we make, and we start with the problems that we're trying to solve, the core of the industry in this region is problem solving technology engineering mindset, Design mindset. And so, if we start with that marketplace category and really get clear on what inclusive methods are going to make a difference there and what problems we can each contribute and solve, then we will have an impact and ask the question, who needs to be in the room to help us solve this problem? and we are missing a broad set of perspectives.

[00:28:08] Let's go seek those out, because it's framed by this problem that we need to go solve from an exclusion or inclusion standpoint and that that path—starting with product and then building out the teams that you need to solve that problem—can actually be a faster, more effective way to really produce inclusive outcomes. So I think of "why now" in the context of there's good triggers happening. Yay, it's good for business, it's good for human led design thinking. But what to do next is a place where design really needs to step up to say, we know how to go about thinking about human beings in the making process of solving a problem. Let's get explicit on what those activities should be. To recognize exclusion, to recognize who's missing from the conversation and bring people in, and solve one problem and the next problem, and address one type of exclusion, and then the next

one. And through that, we will create a shift in culture, and through that will create a shift in who is contributing as a maker.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:29:16] I love that. So rather than saying, inclusion is a culture or maybe even a human resources issue, let's—in this region right here, because we are activated as makers and tinkerers and engineers making products and services—let's use that energy to actually transform our organizations and ourselves.

Kat Holmes: [00:29:42] Yes.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:29:44] Thank you so much for coming and talking to me. I'm excited to read your book. I feel like I know a little more about it, but I'm clearly going to have to wait for the big insights.

Kat Holmes: [00:29:55] I'm excited to share it with you, and thank you so much for the opportunity to really dive into a lot of the topics that the book covers in depth.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:30:03] There's so much more, we'll have to keep talking.

Kat Holmes: [00:30:05] Looking forward to it. Thank you.

Rie Nørregaard: [00:30:07] Thank you.