

81.Ellipsus-mixdown

📅 Thu, Oct 09, 2025 2:48PM ⌚ 29:01

👤 00:21

Welcome to the hybrid pub Scout Podcast. I'm Emily Einolander, and I explore author resources and services to help authors get the information they need to be successful and safe as they pursue publishing.

👤 00:36

Thank you so much for tuning back in after such a long time. Or if you're new, welcome. I hope you find something here that helps you forge your writing and publishing path. The question, What program do you use to write prompts, different answers, but two of the most common are Microsoft Word and Google Docs, but both of those programs have added AI integrations within the last couple years that are nearly impossible to opt out of, if you're concerned about privacy for your projects, your rights to your own work, or if you're just annoyed by unsolicited suggestions that would make even Clippy cringe you'll be interested in today's interview. Ellipsis is a tool created by writers who wanted better systems to collaborate. It allows writers to have more control over who sees and who can interact with different versions of their drafts, avoiding the Panopticon effect. You know, the one where you're in Google Docs making suggestions then see an anonymous badger in there watching you when AI started to seem like an unavoidable force. Ellipsis found its audience within the population of writers who said, yeah, no, screw you very much. I first heard about ellipsis last summer when NaNoWriMo, or at least the nonprofit built around it, blew up in spectacular fashion,

👤 01:58

the match that set the explosive a post about how arguments against AI were classist and ableist,

 02:07

and for those of you screaming at me right now, yes, I know NaNoWriMo, aka National Novel Writing Month, was a grassroots movement before the nonprofit existed, and I know just because the nonprofit doesn't exist anymore. It doesn't mean people will stop doing it. In the next couple weeks, I'll post a deeper dive follow up on the death of the NaNoWriMo nonprofit and what authors are doing to keep the movement going this coming November. Anyway, that was the point at which I and many others learned about ellipsis. It's an alternative to Google Docs created to help writers collaborate with other writers and beta readers without anxieties about privacy or that they'll lose access to their own documents, as has happened in some cases with Google. Rex from ellipsis was nice enough to take the time to talk about ellipsis origins, its aims and principles, the community that has grown up around it, and what makes it unique, we cover a brief history of ellipsis. What ellipsis does for writers that other platforms don't ellipsis stance on AI who might benefit most from using ellipsis, and how ellipsis community helps with development. Rex, welcome to hybrid pub scout. Thanks for agreeing to talk to me. Thanks for having me. Yeah, I've really been enjoying working in ellipsis. It's fun to experiment with all of the stuff that you've got going on in there, and it's nice to have a new option for places to do my writing. But we'll get into that a little bit more

 03:39

later. First of all, tell me what ellipsis is and how long it's been around. So we started ellipsis about three years ago, which is kind of insane when you think about all we've been doing. It's gotten very kind of exciting in the last year and a half, though, when we kind of left the closed beta. So ellipsis was basically a way of my partner and I kind of realizing that collaborative writing is very difficult to do, especially when there was really only one tool to do it in, which was Google Docs. And so we decided there could be a better way. What would our dream, you know, collaborative, friendly writing tool look like? And so we kind of went through the motions of going through every different feature that we wanted to see in our perfect writing tool. Obviously, perfect is the enemy of good. So of course, we had to come out with this and, you know, promote it earlier than perfection would allow. But, but, yeah, we basically have a writing tool that allows for collaboration, that is online friendly, it has more permissioning, has kind of, I think, a better comment structure, just a lot of ways to hopefully improve on the Mega Corp, Google Docs, Google Docs experience. Yeah, so I think, I honestly think that it's good to get it out before it's perfect, because then you're never going to get, I mean, that's what they say about startups. It's a minimum viable product, all those things. Yeah.

 04:59

Um.

 05:00

Um, so you talked about the need that you needed to fulfill with better collaboration tools. Can you sort of elaborate on what you tried before you got to that point? So I mean our processes. I mean we all know that writing happens kind of alone before it happens collaboratively, right? So, you know, we, both of us. I mean myself. I'll speak for myself, I was mostly a word user, you know, since back in the day, I've always used word. I use Scrivener for a while as well, in college and after college, writing fiction and Google Docs, you know, as well to kind of get beta readers, to get editors into place and work with people that way. So yeah, just a lot of different tools. Also things like chat, you know, I would text people and kind of get the real time experience of, you know, editing and so forth, so many, many tools for many different reasons. And ellipsis was sort of a way of attempting to get all of those things in one place, nailed down, connective, etc.

 05:56

I do like that you have the ability to do separate drafts and invite different people to them. I know that one of my beta readers would get into a doc, and if they saw someone else in there, they'd get nervous, so just have a little privacy. Yeah, exactly. We always kind of called it the Panopticon effect and that, yeah, that when you bring in someone to collaborate with you, you want to be able to say, I'm setting this permission, I'm letting you into this document now, have the ability to say this is this collaboration is finished now, and I want to go back to kind of my one on one. So the idea of the draft system was probably our first big feature that we really wanted to solve for. Now, this was a pretty difficult technical problem, though, basically it's git style collaboration, but for text hadn't been done. So we spent, like, the first year, like, trying to really find our way into this problem. And what we have right now is the draft system where you can basically say, I have a main document I am creating now as many drafts as I want to iterate on this main document, invite people to them. They can comment on those drafts. I can edit those drafts, and then I merge them back into my main to really get the flow, I think, a little more correct in terms of how creative writers work, especially when they're collaborating, yeah, and have an easier time bringing everything together, rather than forgetting something in one document, which I've definitely done before.

 07:15

Yeah. So one of the biggest things that sets you apart is your stance on AI, I know that when all of everything happened with NaNoWriMo back in November, that was when I first became aware of you, and I think probably when a lot of people became aware of you. Can you elaborate a little bit more on what made you take such a strong stance? Yeah, I mean, so when we started the, you know, building the tool. It wasn't really a big thing yet, right? We had, you know, you had, kind of the nascent coming of of chat GPT, kind of in its, I think it was its second edition, right? Its second rollout at that time, three years ago. And, you know, at the time we were looking at it and saying, Oh, of course, it's, it's, it's ridiculous. It's, it's, it can't write fiction, etc. And then we realized around that time being in fandom circles as well, you know, as you know, we saw a lot of fandom writers realizing that, well, well, how does chat GPT know about fan work? You know, how does it know about kind of the deep, dark cuts of fan writing? And then, of course, we realized very quickly that it was scraping data across the internet, and then, of course, it became a little more legible over time with its chat GPT three. And yeah, it's so basically we've grown up at the same time. I think that AI for writing has become like a thing, yeah, so it wasn't really necessarily us taking a stance as much as it was us as writers in our bones, knowing that AI should not and could not replace human work. So across the board, we realized very early on that it was something that we didn't want to include in the tool, especially as we saw other tools, including it and other writing tools that were also all about AI kind of coming onto the market at the time, kind of seizing that that moment, right?

 09:01

So it's always basically been a non negotiable thing for us, just as creatives, as writers and as people in circles of creative circles and communities where we all kind of feel the same.

 09:12

But the National Novel Writing Month issue was, you know, that was our first kind of foray into a sponsorship, because we really did, you know, we've been participants in nano for basically two decades. At this point, both of us, myself on my co founder, you know, and seeing that, like on our first sponsorship day,

 09:32

they didn't even warn you. No, they did not. It was kind of, it came out of full left field as we actually, we had created a lot of content for the sponsorship. We were very excited to go forth with it. We loved nano as an institution for a very long time, and then kind of seeing that coming out of the blue and realizing that was something we didn't want to stand for. We had to, we had to leave, yeah, and you had to make it clear why you were doing it. Yeah, exactly, yeah. And it looks like a lot of people were on your side. I know it's kind of.

 10:00

A, I've I've, from what I've observed, there's like, factions of people who, like, are okay with certain use of AI at certain points. And it's, it's a, it's scary to have to stand up for either one, because you know, you're going to piss someone off either way. Yeah, I mean, I feel like we've been pretty lucky in that the stance that we've taken is just that we believe that generative AI cannot replace human work. It shouldn't be in Creative Writing Tools, and it also shouldn't be part of a, you know, creative writing endeavor that you know you write to improve. You don't cannot improve and become a great writer. You know, in terms of, how about that, if you allow a robot to do it for you? Yeah, pretty much it. I love that. Why would I bother to read anything that someone wasn't bothered to write? That's great. Yeah. I also, like, I was watching a different

 10:51

video where someone was, like, talking to their chat GPT, or they'd named it, and they were having that issue where, you know, the one, where they think it's a real person. They were like, they were like, tell me a secret that you haven't told anyone before. And the bot said I was trained on a bunch of fan fiction. I mean, boom, it's actually rage that was seething within me when I heard that. I mean, I know. But also, oh, you're just gonna admit it like that in front of all these people. Like, you know, what's interesting about that, too, is, if you kind of go into the weeds, this was the first kind of real understanding of how AI was trained. Like, this was not common knowledge until, basically, a bunch of fan writers were like, what's going on with this thing? It became, you know, pretty big at the time. I believe we wrote some blog posts on it, but it was mostly like the New York Times talked about, times talked about it. But obviously, because fan work is, you know, a gift economy, and it is not paid work, it is online and accessible for anyone to read, which I think is still its strongest point. You know, that's the most incredible thing about fan work. But of course, because of that, scraping is something that, of course, would occur.

 12:01

So other than that, which is, you know, very strong and maybe, let's kind of go back into the features a little bit. What? What differentiates you from other platforms, other than, like the anti IA, wow, anti

 12:19

anti AI, and also your collaboration features, like, what's different about you. We're also very privacy oriented. We We also seen, you know, kind of rumblings from the Google space, you know, the Google doc space, of people that are, you know, not very comfortable with, basically a company that has the ability to look at the work at any point in time and face issues. We're very adamant about not doing that. We were structured and, you know, as a company based in Germany as well as we are bunch of expatriates living out here, you know, we were very data, data privacy oriented. So that's something on the back end, I think is important for us as well. But in terms of features, yeah, we, we have the desire as well to not just be great for collaboration, or, you know, writing on your own, you know, in your own space, but to make that space feel as creatively stimulating, but also simple as possible. And in terms of, you know, the tools that we've all used, I think, not to name names for all the tools we've used, but, you know, there's a lot of complexity baked into these tools, and some of them are not really what we need at a given moment, especially for creative writers. So we wanted to make sure that the the UI felt very simple, easy to use, very elegant, very clean, but a lot of opportunities for customization. So we have a lot of great kind of visual themes that I think are mostly just our way of having a good time,

 13:40

things for us to play with, because we love, we love, we love kind of themes, but also for creative writers to feel more inspired when they're working. Yeah, you got to pepper a little bit of fun into all of the less fun work, the boring stuff. Yeah, I still, I This is embarrassing, but I am also kind of old, so I just use the default skin. I see you posting in the discord about all these cool new skins. And I'm like, I should try writing with one of those, and then I try it. And I'm like, I'm frightened. I mean, I was, I was worried for a long time. I always wanted that kind of word experience of that because I'm the worst ellipsis user. I am that user that has to be convinced. And I feel like that's a good position to be in, though, to basically running this company. No, that's great, yeah. But, you know, I personally, I came around to the themes in a big way. And it's really enjoyable to, kind of to feel very comfy in the space. And, you know, the feedback that we have as well. I mean, that's another thing that we do, is for any new feature, you know, it comes from the audience. It comes from the users. It comes from writers that really want to see something in the tool. And you know, that's what's great about kind of working with the community, and having the community that we have, we're really excited to iterate on basically everything possible that we can, you know, and so all of those interesting features that we develop, that are in development as well, and that we have developed are kind of things that people have suggested or talked about, and we always talk with them on kind of the best ways to make that work for, you know, creative writers, again.

 15:00

Like to case in point. We have pretty interesting permissioning system, right, where we have a can merge permission, which basically allows you to be a co owner of a document with somebody. But we also have an editor permissions right, which allows somebody to make changes on a draft level. And then we have, obviously, a view only role, but we also have a role coming out pretty soon for commenting only, which allows you to do the comments, but not kind of yet. So there's a lot of things I would love that that sounds great. Things are consistently rolling out, and we always take a lot of inspiration from the community and what they think would be worth, worthwhile for them. Yeah, and you just got that big influx of users recently because of some horror stories with Google Docs that came out. I

 15:41

yeah, I saw that on Tumblr, for that post on Tumblr where the person was just like, Where'd all my stuff go? Or, why can't I get back into my Docs? And, yeah, like, can you talk a little bit about what changed after that sort of scare came to light? Oh, you know, I think that what we're seeing is a combination of a lot of things that people are dissatisfied with, kind of the big techification, right? Of tools, especially in creative spaces, right? I mean, we hear the word bandied about a lot of and shitification. I think it's very, very clear that that's happened to a lot of tools. And it's not just the privacy fear, which I think is, you know, connected to a lot of the, you know, moving political things happening right now in many countries, privacy laws, etc. That's that's happening right now.

 16:27

But, you know, it's also the idea of AI kind of being inserted into every tool using the data to train, you know, AI specifically for Google. I mean, that's Gemini, right? Anything goes into its email system, right? Like is going to be used to train, etc. So it seems like it's more of a shift, not from one specific event as something, where people are realizing that maybe it's better to have something that is more aligned with my values, more something I feel more comfortable writing in, etc. I hope that we can, can be that for people. I think that I would never say, you know, we're, you know, we're perfect for everybody, but we want to be as good as we can be for creative writers. But yeah, that led to a very large shift. A lot of people joined the tool in the span of basically two weeks. We doubled our user base. We now, I think about over a million documents have been created in ellipses so far, which is really crazy to think about we had a lot of structuring on the back end. We wanted to make everything as stable as possible, and we were able to do that, which is really great. So having a good time. Community is growing. It's kind of incredible. Yeah, and you have that, that discord community, so everyone can come in, get the updates, find out what you're working on, make suggestions, yep. Yeah. Totally. We have a really active discord that I think it's now, God, think it's grown several 1000 in the past, like two weeks alone as well. So that's really exciting. Obviously, it's a lot to manage. You have two mods? Did you say, Yeah, we have two mods right now, but we're going to be growing, I think, soon, to have kind of more of a community guide system as well. Because, you know, our mods are incredible, but they're not octopus with eight legs, but they're amazing. And, yeah, we have a really incredible dynamic community of people. I think that we've we always wanted to make sure that, you know, the community was kind of at the forefront. I think that community strength for creatives right now is probably the most important thing we have online, especially in the political ecosystem that's developing. You know, everywhere I think we should be as as connected as possible. And yeah, it's, it's been amazing to see it grow. Yeah, yeah, there's something about having, like, a whole bunch of people who, you know, some of them are going to be awake at any given time and able to talk with you about your writing and your struggles with writing as that tends to happen. Yeah, we've seen a lot of, like, amazing connections being made as well. For people that want to find collaborators, that want to find a beta reader, it's somewhere, I think the one problem with, you know, the creative internet, which I think is, you know, we've been through all these different permutations of all these different permutations of all these different platforms and all these different tools, but it's difficult to find a place where you feel comfortable and you can have that connection and make those connections, and have somebody that you can actually work with on that level well. And this podcast is geared toward authors primarily. And so have you noticed

 19:20

adoption with the author community, and is there anything that they ask for that isn't that you're working on, that isn't necessarily there yet? Yeah. I mean, we, we do have a fair amount of self published authors, and also traditionally published authors that work in ellipses, which is great, also a fair amount of journalists, which is really cool to see as well. Yeah, we don't, we don't go deep into it. I mean, obviously we everyone is anonymous until proven otherwise, until they make the case, you know, like we're very okay with that. That's how we work. But, yeah, we've seen people kind of talking about us on socials now, which is really cool, but definitely some fast updates that will be coming in the next few months. Are definitely some features that I think that.

 20:00

You would like to keep in mind, if you are a self published author, a traditional published author, chapters is being our, one of our biggest issues to develop for the two years. Plus. What that means is it's kind of a different way of structuring what a document is. When we have things like drafts, obviously it's it's kind of a big, a big, big a question to solve, but we're working on that for the next few months. That should be out. And also offline mode is also going to be coming in the next few months as well. So, yeah, those are two things I think that we really wanted to get in pretty quickly. And now, obviously we get the fire under our feet, you know? Yeah, yeah. I'll be really excited to see see chapters coming in that'll you're like, easier navigation between chapters within one document. Is that kind of the idea? Yeah, okay, cool. Yeah, yeah, totally. So what you'll see, you know, you see on the sidebar where the drafts are, you'll see also chapters, and each chapter can have its own draft, etc. So we'll have more of a different structure, but still, kind of, I think, the same in terms of navigation. What people do now is a fair amount of people do use drafts as basically a chapters, kind of, you know, alternative. So people will will say, Well, I'm making a draft, but it basically becomes the chapter, and people can still be invited to in the same way they would with with any other document

 21:16

that's smart.

 21:18

Sorry, I was thinking about using it. I just went away for a second,

 21:25

great, because right now I've got, like, multiple chapters and multiple folders, but, you know, I'm not complaining, trust me, anything else we're bringing out. I mean, this, this also when you mentioned folders, I mean, that was a big game changer when we decided to implement folders, but we're going to have the ability to share full folders with collaborators is something we didn't have, but we will have in the future as well, to be interesting when it comes time to really kind of go into the granular nature of a project, right? You can share that full folder out

 21:53

right now, we're working on things like just organizing folders in terms of, you know, what is your role? Have you been invited to this document as, you know, a commenter, or as a full, you know, merge privilege, you know, Owner, basically. And you'll be able to see that kind of on the dashboard as well. So it's a lot of kind of small fixes and big fixes that we're doing. We're going to be improving share, you know, the sharing aspect as well. Because I know that, or we all know that, a lot of work kind of is shared from it, from ellipsis document at this point, and to kind of make that experience a little experience a little bit easier in terms of, can you comment on those documents when shared? So that's something we're looking at as well. Great.

 22:30

I can really see how this would be a good platform for journalists. I didn't, I don't know why that didn't occur to me immediately with the security and the fact that you're not looking at all their stuff all the time. Yeah. I mean, that's, we have a lot of personal friends that are journalists as well. And I think that we, we've sort of started thinking about it as, like an anti use case initially, because, you know, there's a lot of things that go into that. But in the, in the kind of future that we're thinking about, the farther future, I will not put a date on these things, right? But, yeah,

 23:00

we're looking at things like, you know, is encryption a possibility for ellipsis as well? That's something we think about a lot. Yeah. So a lot of things like that in the in the future. How do you figure out how to prioritize what to do next? Man, it's more like, how many people want to see this feature in the tool you know? We have, we have an ideas board that people can always upvote things down, you know, and make new comments and suggest new features. We always knew that chapters and offline, you know, only is something that people have wanted for very long time. So of course, that takes a lot of precedent, so we always will make sure to prioritize those features. But we're also developing, you know, here's another one, developing the full mobile app at some point that will and what we have now is basically called a progressive web app where you can use ellipses on your phone very easily. It feels like a mobile app, but it is not, you know, offline friendly. And we will be developing all these things together. You can obviously write offline, but you can't really navigate between folders and so on if you're offline on the phone. So there's a lot of things that we want to include. It is very chicken and egg, right? To know that to have chapters in that will rely that will basically dictate a lot of the things that we're going to be able to do in the future that we could not do previously. So yeah, it's, it's still, it's still audience choice, right? Yeah. And

 24:20

also things, themes always new. Themes always want to bring out fun stuff like that. Yeah, you got to keep some joy in it. I can sort of see, like, this might be a weird comparison, but I, during the day, I write a lot of, like, nonfiction related stuff, and there's always this difficulty in like, what concepts to introduce first, and like, if I get to a certain chapter and I haven't, like, set it up with a particular concept, it feels like it's not going to work, or it's funky or doesn't quite work. But that's sounds kind of similar when you're trying to develop this product. Yeah, I mean this, it does feel like, listen, it feels like an offshoot of writing.

 25:00

And like before I was, you know, working on ellipsis full time, I, you know, had the novel that I was working on which is still kind of, you know, in a drawer, right? But which is fine, but, yeah, it's feels like the same kind of process in a lot of ways, where you're worried about, kind of setting all those parameters and getting all those plot points in place, and what comes first, and you know, who's going to take that role, right? But, yeah, it is weirdly similar, you know, as a writer of fiction, and also I was an academic as well, so it's kind of like that structure working on this tool. Yeah, totally Yeah. Probably puts you in a good place to work on it then.

 25:38

So what's been like? The most surprising thing about developing ellipsis,

 25:44

honestly,

 25:46

seeing the love that we get from the users, which is, I'm kind of surprised by it. I assume there would be a lot more naysayers in the world, you know, like, I would assume that, oh, where's my Gemini? Like, that's right.

 26:01

I mean, it's incredible to see how much love we've gotten in the last especially in the last year since we kind of left the closed beta and across the board, just that feeling of community, like I feel like the people that use ellipsis and us were not different, you know? And it's the way that we've always felt, but it comes across really easily. We're very accessible for everybody that uses the tool and vice versa, right? And it is incredible to see like, how people have both entrusted us with their work, but also just how the community has kind of grown up together with the company, yeah, and the love is flowing. It's really exciting. We're having a great time, all of us, I think, in tandem with the users, and it's a lot of delight. That's what's surprising, that it's that it feels so delightful.

 26:51

What a lovely surprise. Exactly,

 26:55

well before we go, or is there anything that you would like to bring to people's attention,

 27:02

I guess just, you know, try it out. You know, it's, it's, it feels daunting, I think, to to start the process of importing your work, which, you know, we do make that pretty easy, but it's still, you know, it's still a process. When I see people saying that they're importing, like, years worth of documents into the tool, it's, it's shocking, but it's also exciting to see you know how much effort people will go to to work on something new, and I think that there's a lot of joy once you get into it, at just feeling comfortable in your space and feeling inspired by the tool. And I think I do, I think a lot of people do every day. So yeah, I definitely recommend just trying it out. If you're used to working at Google and you don't feel like it feels comfortable for you anymore. Just check it

 27:44

out. Is it, is it a manual switch over that people are doing right now, or is it we have an importer, basically, it's from markdown, so you'll have to basically get your work into markdown format, but then it's very quick import from markdown. Great. All right. Well, hopefully this will

 28:02

inspire some people to try it out, and I'll put whatever links are necessary for people to check you out in the show notes,

 28:12

Rex, thank you so much for coming on the show today. I appreciate it big thanks to Rex, and also a personal thank you for me for encouraging me to try writing in something other than dark mode. I'm currently using the red velvet skin, which is dark enough to stay easy on the eyes, no matter how much it makes me hungry for cupcakes. In addition to the podcast platform you're listening to, you can find both me and hybrid pub scout on LinkedIn. I'm no longer on Twitter or either meta platform, but you can also email me at emily@hybridpubscout.com

 28:47

thanks for listening, and I'll see you next time you.