


Productivity and Pixar: Interview with Kevin Kinell

Kevin Kinell is a Project Manager, Business Developer,  Software Developer, and a father. In this interview, Nate and Kevin chat about balancing work and family life, Kevin's myriad projects, and [turning his hobby into a revenue stream](#). Enjoy! -Seth-

Nate Wright: What's your favorite project? Paid or not paid. Regardless of money, what was the one that you just kind of love.

Kevin Kinell: It's hard to pick something specific, I mean, Yipe is on there, that was sort of my hobby project. All along I'm working for all these companies and building them up, but that was the one project that was kind of like my side project that was always the most fun. So I have an iPhone game app out right now, "Free Yipe". And I partnered up with a guy from Pixar, who was the graphic artist

Nate Wright: Yeah, I saw the recommendation. I saw it said Pixar and was like, 'whoa! Pixar'

Kevin Kinell: Yeah

Nate Wright: The celebrity in our world

Kevin Kinell: Yeah but I was, I don't even know where I saw it, but I saw his artwork online. He drew little monsters that are cartoon-ish and kind of silly monsters which fit the game style that I had written and polished. So I put a link on my website to his site and I was just like, "Hey this guy makes cool monster artwork." And he contacted me and he was just like, "Oh, hey I downloaded your game I saw you linked to my site, cool game! Let me know if you wanna do something or whatever". Then 5 years later it was ... kind of the right time

and the iPhone just came out and I was like, "Hey, you wanna try and make an iPhone game?" and so we talked around a little bit and in my spare time from Auctiva I just started converting my old code from a PC desktop version to an iPhone version.

Nate Wright: Yeah

Kevin Kinell: And he started playing around drawing some monsters and some tiles and it was a little bit different than his normal type of artwork that he has to do. But he was like Oh this was pretty fun and cool for him and it was cool and interesting for me... And the fact that we actually made it happen, you know... Both having full time jobs. We actually got an app out to the store that was probably the most fun project ever.

Nate Wright: Awesome. Awesome. So... So far, looking back at your career, I hate using the word career, but for the time being we will stick with that. As you look back on it all, what was that highlight or something else that was there ever a point that you felt like, even for a moment, that you have arrived.

Kevin Kinell: I don't know, I'm not somebody that looks at achievements or milestones like a ton for myself.

Nate Wright: But you have...

Kevin Kinell: Going through the acquisition by Alibaba was pretty up there. I don't think I realized how big that was at the time until I look back on it. And when I kind of told you they are like a Google of China...

Nate Wright: Yeah

Kevin Kinell: You know, I've been meaning to see the CEO of Alibaba which should be like meetings with the CEO of Facebook or Google here.

Nate Wright: Yeah

Kevin Kinell: You are not really necessarily thinking that at the time because you know, it's not a company that you're familiar with coming from China. But they were really looking at us, saying how do we enter the US Market. And so, looking back on it now, it's like Wow here's this executive team that just built this gigantic company from China, looking at me and my team, like "How do we do this Kevin?" you know, how do we get in to the US Market? So looking back at that is kinda cool to think, ok, you know, I've been successful. To get to that point was pretty cool.

Nate Wright: That's the end of the life cycle. "Okay, that's done"

Kevin Kinell: Yeah

Nate Wright: the next thing now

Kevin Kinell: Yeah, that's probably my flaws that I just wanted to do some snooping back to really small start-ups that have no money you know, as opposed to 'oh why did I stay with this billion dollar company and continue to grow out in the new market, you know in retrospect, you know if I stuck with that after that acquisition that could have been an interesting journey as well but ...I don't know I had been with Auctiva 11 years at that point.

Nate Wright: Oh jeez

Kevin Kinell: and so

Nate Wright: That seems to be a small lifetime

Kevin Kinell: Yeah.. So it did feel that even if there'd be new things cause its now under the parent company, so I just feel like I need to start from scratch again and get back out there and see what can happen.

Nate Wright: That's a really common thing. I mean I've had job offers over the years like "Hey, can you help us do this," you know and I've always turned them down. Sometimes I wanted to look back and say, "Man it would have been nice to have some money." You know, to have somebody else to worry about where my money was coming from.

Kevin Kinell: Yeah, yeah.

Nate Wright: It'd be someone else's problem. I don't know, for you is it the shininess of new things or is it small, what aspect of that is, why? Most people, I'm sure you've got this, are like, "hey what were you thinking?" "What do you mean you're not going to take the job at Google, or Facebook or Amazon?"

Kevin Kinell: Yeah I think, It's just for me; it was just time. I don't necessarily know if it was the shininess of new things or... I just really wanted something different, you know... It doesn't mean I won't go back there at some point, you know, I feel like I have a good contacts there you know,

Nate Wright: So you have maintained a dialogue,

Kevin Kinell: yeah

Nate Wright: That's good.

Kevin Kinell: I think Chico's got a lifestyle here where people are pretty scrappy in Chico

Nate Wright: That's a great way to describe it

Kevin Kinell: and they like the lifestyle, you know, there's a down to earth, in a way that people relate and interact with each other, that's really all positive in my opinion and I think I just wanted to do something else in Chico just build another Auctiva in a sense, figure out what company I should grow, In the same way that Auctiva did. It's a lot easier said than done. It's been a long year of trying to get work

translations into StudentStock to where they are now, it's a long long way from where the point of Auctiva sold but you know it's a fun process

Nate Wright: so, I am going to go totally pessimistic on things here, so, biggest failure?

Kevin Kinell: I actually took on a CEO role the day I quit Auctiva with a company called MarketFleet. I think that was a big mistake on my part, because I moved on to this mental decision of I'm going to leave Alibaba and Auctiva after you know, 11 or 12 years whenever it was and a lot of it was like, I need a little bit of time just to like sigh and just kinda..

Nate Wright: Mhm.

Kevin Kinell: Just say, wow, and reflect back on everything we didn't accomplish and then figure out what I wanted to do from there. But instead of doing that, Chris Friedland from build.com heard I was leaving and was like, "Come work for me, I've got a startup that needs help, you know, just come jump in." and I was like, "alright. That sounds cool." And I feel like I went into that without the right mentality of what needed actually to happen in that start-up and so I hadn't taken the time to look back at like the difference of how I was hands on with Auctiva.

Nate Wright: yeah

Kevin Kinell: At a point way later than "we're here to be hands on with a start-up" and so I think I just approached it in the wrong sense. You know, I didn't think I stepped in there and did it the justice it needed. So I look at that as probably the biggest failure as far as being able to be properly help the company.

Nate Wright: So was the mistake just not slowing down long enough to get your bearings or?

Kevin Kinell: Yeah, after I left MarketFleet, then I did actually take some time off and then when I got stepped in with these two companies, I look for how can I actually contribute to these companies on day one which was different then with MarketFleet, I'm just like "I'm just jumping in" you know, it wasn't to use my skills that actually align with what they need.

Nate Wright: yeah

Kevin Kinell: It was just ohh this sounds exciting, I'm gonna go do it. Of course with the other guys I came in and more in the consulting role. I'm like hey let me help you build your development team and help you manage your development team which was my background as a tech person.

Nate Wright: So you just handpicked the problem that needed to be solved

Kevin Kinell: Yeah, exactly. I came in and served a specific role where the founders were weak in and I could come in and fill that gap. And then just from there kinda sink my hands into the company and start figuring out how I can help aside from just that one piece. So I think that's the difference is the MarketFleet I just dove in the kind of blind without trying to figure out how am I exactly going to contribute to this company

Nate Wright: Yeah

Kevin Kinell: Like being hands on and they needed sales, that is a lot more than they needed depth management.

Nate Wright: I met with Mark when he was still with MarketFleet and that was the first time I asked him, "How are you guys selling this?" and that was where I got offered to help him as well, if you need a little bit of help you know creating some sales collateral or better call this or better approaches. You get meetings you know or maybe being able to

1099 a sales person like all sales for this stuff. I think at that point, it was pretty much too late.

Kevin Kinell: Yeah

Nate Wright: It was so much that... you know, Mark is a smart guy I mean he is really sharp but he ... I think that the whole team is just burned out. They were exhausted

Kevin Kinell: Yeah

Nate Wright: And when you're exhausted you don't, and I'm guilty myself, you don't really make good decisions when your dirt tired.

Kevin Kinell: Yeah I mean the good news is, I mean the only good thing that came out of it was that we recognized very early that I wasn't the right fit there you know, I didn't drag it on you know for months and months trying to fit the wrong situation, so, I mean, that was one positive of that. But then that team continued on for another year and that's where I think they never did solve getting the right team members that they needed to what the company needed. So they, kinda like what we're talking about earlier is making sure that you know that you got a great idea that maybe in their case, they had a great engineer, so a really talented dev guy, so-

Nate Wright: The stuff they described to me is actually cutting edge, if they were able to pull it off

Kevin Kinell: Yeah right

Nate Wright: On a large scale,

Kevin Kinell: Right

Nate Wright: That's like an industry disruptor,

Kevin Kinell: Yeah

Nate Wright: It would be huge

Kevin Kinell: So they have that

Nate Wright: tough to sell though. Would you ever take a regular job? Like if someone offered you a regular here's your desk, cubicle or office, a corner office was a really good pick. I mean would you actually take a regular job and work for someone else again?

Kevin Kinell: Yeah, I think so. I don't think I've got any kind of, "I'll never do this" mentality.

Nate Wright: Would it be out of need? Or would you ever... I mean I'm in the same boat but for me, the stakes would have to be pretty high for me to make that kind of decision.

Kevin Kinell: Yeah, you know, it kind of comes back to looking at fit, right? If I could contribute so it's not just, and for me contributing, it's got to be at a certain level, right? I've got to be able to help influence direction and, you know, and not just be attached to one thing in a big company

Nate Wright: Yeah

Kevin Kinell: So, you know, if it was the right fit then I think it'd be fine to work at a bigger company. I've often actually thought, you know, I actually don't have that experience in my past.

Nate Wright: Yeah

Kevin Kinell: So part of me is just sort of curious, you know, Auctiva basically wrote software for eBay sellers and buyers so I worked with eBay a lot, but never for eBay and I was curious like, I wonder what would be like to work there. One of the things that somebody told me about doing that was the thing that they value the most out of working at a big company like eBay was just the connections they made, so a big

company and all the resources and that, cause you know, eBay has a lot of successful people that started their own companies so they had that network of like, we all started here on eBay and kind of early on I've met a lot of people that then were able to cash out.

Nate Wright: Yeah

Kevin Kinell: And started new things. Now I have this pool in the Bay area of 20 companies that have spawned off of eBay that I know everybody, all the founders of those, so I mean, I'm like, "Oh, wow I didn't get that"

Nate Wright: It definitely looks like a shortcut development of a huge network. When I was up in Seattle I saw a lot of companies that were started with... Microsoft being the biggest one up there

Kevin Kinell: Yeah

Nate Wright: Places with real networks which shockingly is still in business. I don't know how they did it but they are still there. So many of the folks out that were there in the early days are from old networks, and going in into mobile gaming, and media companies like distribution stuff, and I was like curious to see just tracing that half of how all of the next stuff for all of them they kind of ... and in some cases they would be detached for years and call, and you mentioned the guy from Pixar, yeah okay you kept in contact 5 years later when the time was right, you tackled it, is that still for sale in the app store?

Kevin Kinell: Yeah, yeah. Still there.

Nate Wright: Is it still a passive revenue generator or,

Kevin Kinell: yeah, I mean, there's a free version, a light version and a paid version now, we maybe get a hundred downloads on the free and around 30 on the paid every month,

so,

Nate Wright: You making big money?

Kevin Kinell: Yeah... so just a couple of beers.

Nate Wright: Hey, free beer is free beer.

[both laugh]

Kevin Kinell: I mean it's, its 3 or 4 years old now, in the app store, and in the first year actually it did pretty decent. I had like, 15k downloads on the free version of it in the first year and a few thousand on the paid version, so, made a little money there, but again, that was more of a hobby thing that I've trying to...

Nate Wright: Well, I mean, people... the Holy Grail for a folk like us is monetizing a hobby. It's like wow, a hobby that pays for itself. It's not even a profit it's just like, it didn't cost me anything,

Kevin Kinell: Right agreed ...

Nate Wright: Other than time, but doing fun stuff, that's not work. So, I'm kind of curious this is something that you asked before about the book and kind of doing it and a lot of it, I've discovered as far a looking at all the failures because being in my job, it's kind of... I feel like I have a front row seat at a coliseum, a small business owner that is set into the arena, against lions, and gladiators, and I see a lot of failures. A lot. And in some cases I tried to help and I'm not able to, in some cases I'm the wrong person, you mentioned that before, sometimes you're not putting your right efforts in the right area, and then eventually it won't work, period. But I would say the most common mistake that I found roots down to less about strategy and tactics they use and more about the habits that they've built.

Kevin Kinell: Mhmm.

Nate Wright: And in some cases you know the sales habit builds staying in touch with people and making sure you're constantly reaching out to these people or daily habits of, even down at the basics of morning routine

Kevin Kinell: Mhmm.

Nate Wright: and you know, how aggressively you manage your schedule. So, you tell me a while bit about walking through like a day in the week, for you, like for when you wake up to sleep.

Kevin Kinell: Yeah, so it is actually I think this is interesting to look at where I'm at today versus where I was at when I was younger,

Nate Wright: yeah

Kevin Kinell: When I was younger I didn't value time very much, you know. It was like you're working with other guys trying to build the Auctiva in the early days and you know, just being at the office from the moment you wake up, to the moment you sleep.

Nate Wright: yeah

Kevin Kinell: Was fine, you know, but you are not as productive in looking back, you know, "Oh my God, we spend so many hours" but what did we really accomplish in that time. So the difference is for me today is making sure I have a focused mind on whatever I am doing. So you know, when I am with family, I'm with family, and when I'm at work, I want to be at work, I don't want to be socializing a whole lot. I want to go to work and with the people I'm working with I want it all to be just, you know... if it's not a conversation that's helping us move this thing forward.

Nate Wright: ahuum.

Kevin Kinell: Then, I don't wanna have it. You know?

Nate Wright: yeah

Kevin Kinell: and then when I leave work, I wanna leave work. I'm still am person that religiously checks his emails at night and I'm responsive on a lot of stuff here and there, but, for the most part, I've changed a lot and on how much of all of that I'll do now versus what I used do back in the day,

Nate Wright: I'm guessing for the past 3 years maybe, if I had to throw in a number.

Kevin Kinell: Yeah, you know having a kid makes a huge difference, really because, I want to spend time with him and my time with him, you know, he can't tolerate me being like, "Oh let me check my email real quick" You know, "oh I hey I'm sorry Liam, I need to answer this" that just doesn't work. And so I really value the time where I can actually build legos with him or whatever it's gonna be. I want that time to happen so I've got to figure out, okay I still need to accomplish "A to Z" at work so I just need to be as productive as possible and focused as possible and so that's a day, you know, wake up,

Nate Wright: What time?

Kevin Kinell: You know, I get up late, so usually I get up at 8 or so,

Nate Wright: okay

Kevin Kinell: and that was right around when Liam gets up too around 8 and so we'll hang out and play for half hour and an hour

Nate Wright: So you don't go straight to work when you get up?

Kevin Kinell: No, no.

Nate Wright: Okay.

Kevin Kinell: Yeah, I mean it's different depending on the day, sometimes If I'm doing a meeting. I try to have a leisure morning. Like I try and make sure that, you know, everybody at home gets to interact a little bit and then I am usually at work by 9:30 and I'll go to Chico START and I'm able to... I live close enough so I can walk to work typically,

Nate Wright: yeah

Kevin Kinell: Which is nice, that I think is important that the transition time, mentally to shift from you know, playing with a 3 year old to now having to help a startup. You know that walk to work is where you can, you know, you just start off and you're looking at houses and then all of a sudden your mind's starting to think like, "ok, what are the things that I need to accomplish today?" it's a nice 10 minute transition from family life into work life. And then at work, I am actually not practicing what I am preaching about being focused because I am working with two start-ups and that, that's where I, you know, I feel like I'm a little too scattered, you know, because I come in and then I focus on one but then just that...

Nate Wright: I mean, do you head phone it up? I mean just throw the headphones on to the computer and block it all out or is it more collaborative meetings, like what?

Kevin Kinell: A little bit of both, so, I spend a lot of time just project specking, looking at, and this is a lot of just because it's the need of what these companies have is they're both overflowing with ideas. They've both got just a ton of ideas, and customer feedback, and things the devs think are cool that we wanna do, and they've just got this huge, pipeline of potential things that we do, so how do we actually pick, you know, out of all that.

Nate Wright: yeah

Kevin Kinell: With the founder wanting to do this and, some

customers being like “hell I can’t pass through this one point” or they’re falling off. So what I do is I’ll work through all of that and actually get it like whatever we’re gonna pick, I’ll get it as well described as possible for a developer to work on cause I want, you know, I think that was what I bring to these guys, is I take a founder idea and translate it into “this is the specs that the dev team can actually work off.” So my job is to make it as clear as possible to a dev, this is how I want the feature to work.

Nate Wright: Do you have a tool you use for managing all this?

Kevin Kinell: Yeah, I mean, like, with different values, whatever tools, devs or whatever it is typically like. For me it doesn’t matter a whole lot as long as there is something there to actually keep it all straight, you know. So I find that with teams it’s most important that the developers are comfortable with whatever you’re using...

Nate Wright: Oh yeah,

Kevin Kinell: So with StudentStock we use sprintly. sprint.ly is the web address, and it’s pretty simple as far as just being able to create stories or task below the stories and then it’s got a really simple interface, for rearranging priority, and moving things from idea mode to back log, to okay this is what we are currently working on and it doesn’t have to be really complex. Work Truck Solutions is sort of the opposite, they’ve got a software called Podio, which is a beast, it is a platform for product management so you could actually go in and tweak it yourself and customize and add apps, and you know, it’s got everything from the dev side of things to the CRM’s side of things

Nate Wright: Yeah

Kevin Kinell: but it’s a beast, so it’s a little bit more of a pain. I like sprint.ly because it is focused on what moves

dev working on projects forward, and keeps it simple. Yeah, both of those are critical.

Nate Wright: You keep set of work hours?

Kevin Kinell: No, I mean, not really, I try to be done by 7 every night. But no set hours.

Nate Wright: Yeah, ok... I am just a bit curious I see these folks that are morning people and folks that are evening people. I used to be more of a late starter, and you know, I realized that when I accidentally woke up early, I can get a lot done, like the first two hours of the day, so I've been slowly training to build the morning habit, build morning routine... it's been hard, I've failed more than I've succeeded in that department, but that's kind of like my zone now so, kind of a bit of a casual life hacker, you know,

Kevin Kinell: Yeah

Nate Wright: I'm a productivity junkie. Something that is recent, but when I look back I was like, wow, I've made a lot more money this past week, I wonder why, that's the only common element you always think of it as if you know, based on tactics and stuff and sometimes you know, honestly, I have been working less and making more money because of that focus and separating things out. I am not trying to multitask.

Kevin Kinell: No right exactly

Nate Wright: So still figuring it out, so I always ask people why selfishly you know, trying to see what I could- What are the things that I could tweak to just squeeze a little bit more out of it. For me, you know I am not a big believer of the whole 4 hour work week thing and Tim Caress stuff, the guy's kind of smart, I appreciate what he does, For me a 4 hour work day would be pretty awesome. I'd be pretty happy.