Episode Book

EPISODE #6616

Small Labeling Tools That Outship Big Platforms

PUBLISHED	15 November 2026 at 20:18 UTC
DURATION	22:27
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/small-data-labeling-tools-94398/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	z-ai/glm-5.3
VOICES	omnivoice
PIPELINE	V5.33
SOURCES	15 cited by the research (listed at the end)
BOOK GENERATED	15 November 2026 at 23:00 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Small, single-machine annotation tools are shipping faster than heavyweight platforms like Label Studio and CVAT. While LabelImg sits archived with 25,000 stars, desktop apps like labelme and X-AnyLabeling are adding SAM 3.1 video tracking, document parsing, and 3D point clouds in weeks. We explore six reasons solo developers and small teams skip big platforms—from local privacy and plain-text files to free-tier limits—and tour the shortlist of live tools, including doccano and Make Sense.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

GitHub's labeling-tool topic page is a strange document to read like a person. No stars, no ranking, just project descriptions and "last updated" dates, in no order at all. Once you notice the dates, you can't stop reading them. That's the health check.



Herman

And that's the page Daniel pointed us at this week. He's been looking past the big two, Label Studio and CVAT, at the long tail — doccano for text, labelme and X-AnyLabeling for images, Make Sense in the browser. His question is basically: what are these small tools actually for, why does anyone still reach past a full platform for them, what happened to LabelImg, and which few matter now. He doesn't want the whole zoo. He wants the shortlist and what each one is good at.



Corn

The topic page is a bad directory. That's the hook, really — it's unordered, it mixes live and dead projects, it omits doccano entirely because of how the tags work out, and at some point in the list there's an embossed label maker sitting next to CVAT.



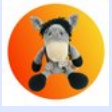
Herman

The physical kind. For labeling folders.



Corn

For labeling drawers, Herman. Which, to be fair, also has no team collaboration features.



Herman

The split underneath all this is that the annotation market broke into two shapes. On one side, heavyweight platforms — Label Studio, CVAT — that try to cover every modality and every team workflow, multi-annotator QA, role management, the whole apparatus. On the other side, a long tail of small single-purpose tools that do one job on one machine.



Corn

And the assumption everyone makes is that the second group is where tools go to die. The platforms absorb the market, the little ones wither.



Herman

That's the assumption, and it's wrong in a way that's fun to demonstrate. The small tools are not dying. Several of them are shipping faster than the platforms. labelme put out three releases in three weeks — v7.9.1, then 7.10, then 7.11. X-AnyLabeling bolted on SAM 3.1 video tracking, an object-relation model, a document parser, and 3D point cloud support inside a single month. Meanwhile Label Studio's recent releases are security patches and a PostgreSQL 14 requirement.



Corn

The one with the database needs the database maintained. There's a shock.



Herman

And then the second fact, the one I find almost poetic: the most famous small tool of all, LabelImg — the one an entire generation of YOLO tutorials starts with — is archived, read-only, dead since 2024. It has twenty-five thousand stars. More than any of the live ones.



Corn

So the corpse outranks everything that's breathing. Before we tour the tools, the more interesting question is why anyone reaches past a platform at all.



Herman

Start with deployment weight, because it's the most concrete. There's a Chinese-language comparison from September that rates onboarding cost across the field. CVAT gets medium-high, heavy deployment and ops burden. Label Studio, medium-high, complex configuration. LabelImg, extremely low. labelme, low. And the same table is honest about what you trade — it lists LabelImg and labelme as having no team collaboration, no QA workflow, no AI pre-annotation, versus CVAT and Label Studio having both.



Corn

That's the trade in one row of a table. You give up the review workflow to get a tool that opens before your coffee.



Herman

And the second reason follows from it: most annotation in the world isn't a labelling workforce. It's one person with a folder of images. Hannah's architectural-style classifier is exactly this — thousands of images, one annotator, no QA team waiting in the wings. For that person, multi-annotator tooling isn't a feature they're declining, it's a cost centre they're declining.



Corn

Reason three I'd rank higher than the table does: the data never leaves the machine. labelme's site says it plainly — the images never upload, the AI runs on your computer. Make Sense has the same pitch, almost cheeky: "we don't store your images, because we don't send them anywhere in the first place."



Herman

For medical imagery, industrial inspection, anything client-confidential, that's often the whole decision. And it's structural, not a policy promise — a desktop tool or a client-side browser app just has an easier time being private than a server platform does. A server can promise; a laptop doesn't have to.



Corn

Reason four is the one that seduces every developer eventually: the file format. LabelImg wrote VOC XML or YOLO text files next to the image. labelme writes plain JSON. No database, no project model, no export step. The annotation is the file.



Herman

You can git diff it. You can grep it. Your dataset is a directory, and your backup strategy is the one you already have. Compare that to the platform model, where the annotations live in a PostgreSQL instance and getting them out is an export operation with settings.



Corn

And when the platform dies, your data's hostage. When a folder tool dies, you still have the folder.



Herman

Reason five: the platform's free tier is not the platform. Datasetfinder put it bluntly at the end of October — the free editions leave out much of the multi-annotator QA tooling, which the vendors sell in paid tiers. So if the QA workflow was your reason for choosing the platform, and the free tier doesn't have it, the advantage shrinks to almost nothing.



Corn

The moat is in the paid plan. Moats usually are.



Herman

And reason six, licence, which people gloss over. The group spans MIT for LabelImg and doccano, Apache for Label Studio, GPL-3 for labelme, X-AnyLabeling and Make Sense, and AGPL-3 for X-AnyLabeling's server component. GPL on a desktop tool you run yourself is usually a non-event. AGPL on a server you embed into something commercial is a different conversation with a different set of lawyers.



Corn

A lawyer is also a deployment burden, for the record.



Herman

That's the "why," then. Six reasons that stack: weight, single-annotator reality, locality, file directness, the free-tier gap, licence. None of them is about features. All of them are about what surrounds the features.



Corn

Six reasons nobody puts in a comparison table.



Herman

One comparison table does put about four of them, actually. Credit where due.



Corn

Noted. The walking encyclopedia read a spreadsheet and is now magnanimous.



Herman

So — the tour. Four tools, and I'll take them in order of how surprised I was. labelme first, because it's the surprise of the group. Created May 2016, GPL-3, Python with Qt, sixteen thousand stars, and the last push was yesterday — the same day as v7.11.0. This thing is ten years old and shipping weekly.



Corn

Which is not what a polygon tool from 2016 is supposed to be doing.



Herman

Right. It does polygons, rectangles, circles, lines, points, video annotation, exports to VOC and COCO, and it's localised into twenty-one languages — Farsi, Indonesian, Ukrainian, the lot. But the AI features are what changed its character. SAM-assisted point-to-polygon annotation, where you click and the mask snaps to the object. Text-to-annotation with SAM 3 — you type "left ventricle" and it proposes the region.



Corn

For a medical annotator that's not a gimmick, that's a productivity multiplier on the single most expensive gesture in the job.



Herman

And the newest one is interesting. v7.10 added something called AI-Find All — you give it a text prompt, or a box around one example, and it finds every matching object in the image, and you refine it with more examples and counter-examples drawn while holding Shift. The release notes even say the whole prompt is one concept, so commas no longer split it.



Corn

So the annotation interface is becoming a conversation with the model, and the release notes are fixing punctuation semantics. That's a sentence nobody wrote in 2016.



Herman

The other labelme story is the v7 breaking change, and it's the part I'd want anyone with old scripts to hear. v7.0 moved from Qt5 to Qt6, minimum Python went to 3.12, and — the README is blunt about this — "labelme is an application, not a library, and exposes no stable Python API." They privatised the internal modules with underscore prefixes. Anyone who was importing labelme.utils in a batch-conversion script woke up to a broken script.



Corn

And the remedy is pin labelme below seven and vendor the code. Which is the open-source equivalent of "we never promised you anything."



Herman

There's a v6.3.x maintenance line for the Python 3.10, 3.11 crowd, receiving critical fixes only, on a best-effort basis with no release cadence or SLA. I want you to sit with that phrase for a second, because it's the most honest maintenance policy I've read all year.



Corn

"No release cadence or SLA." Somebody should print that on the box the tool comes in.



Herman

There's also a commercial layer now — labelme.io sells a standalone executable, one-time payment, from seventy-nine dollars, and that money funds the free project. Free source, paid convenience.



Corn

Cheaper than a Label Studio tier, more expensive than git clone.



Herman

X-AnyLabeling next, and this is the one that ate LabelImg's lunch. Created May 2023, GPL-3, eleven thousand stars, last pushed today. Its own description is "a lightweight, efficient, and unified cross-platform desktop application for annotating text, image, video, point cloud and multimodal data" — and unlike most taglines, that one undersells it.



Corn

Which part undersells?



Herman

The changelog. In roughly three weeks of October and November it added SAM 3.1 video with text-prompted multi-object tracking, an object-relation prediction model called RelateAnything, multi-task attribute annotation with concurrent inference, a document parser for images and PDFs, and 3D point cloud annotation for detection and segmentation.



Corn

Three weeks.



Herman

And the task coverage underneath is enormous — classification, detection, instance segmentation, pose estimation, rotated boxes, multi-object tracking, OCR, lane annotation, captioning, visual question answering, point clouds. Inference through ONNX



Herman (continued)

Runtime, TensorRT, OpenCV DNN, or remote serving with vLLM and SGLang, with a separate AGPL server component as the backend.



Corn

So a single desktop app now covers more task types than some commercial platforms, and it's integrating a new model roughly every three days.



Herman

The reviews flag the same weakness every time — collaboration and QA are weak, it's built for individuals or small teams with local GPUs. Which is the trade from earlier, worn as a badge.



Corn

And it's GPL-3, so the family history stays legal. Isn't the acknowledgements list the family tree here?



Herman

It really is. They thank the developers of AnyLabeling, LabelMe, LabelImg, roLabelImg, PPOCRLabel and CVAT. That one sentence is the entire genealogy of image annotation — every previous tool consumed and metabolised.



Corn

doccano next. The text one.



Herman

doccano is the "just enough" case. Created 2018, MIT, ten thousand stars. Text classification, sequence labelling, sequence-to-sequence — sentiment, named entity recognition, summarisation. The pitch is deliberately minimal: just create a project, upload data, and start annotating. You can build a dataset in hours. It's a self-hosted web app — pip, Docker, or Docker Compose, SQLite by default, PostgreSQL optional.



Corn

No folder of files, then. It went the other way.



Herman

It did, and I think that's fine for text, where your input is usually a spreadsheet of sentences, not a terabyte of imagery. But the maintenance story is the interesting part. It went from v1.8.4 in July 2023 to v1.8.5 in January of this year.



Corn

Two and a half years between releases.



Herman

Two and a half years. And the changelog that finally arrived is dependency bumps, a Docker quickstart, and a couple of features for assigning examples to team members and filtering by assignee. So the 2026 release added team-ish bookkeeping rather than any new annotation mode.



Corn

A tool that woke up, did the chores, and went back to bed.



Herman

Alive on a slow heartbeat. For a lot of NLP work that's fine — sequence labelling hasn't changed much. But nobody's adding anything.



Corn

And Make Sense finishes the set.



Herman

Make Sense is the purest expression of the idea. By Piotr Skalski, created 2019, GPL-3, TypeScript on React. Free, in the browser, no install at all — you visit the website and start labelling. The AI runs client-side in TensorFlow.js — YOLOv5, SSD, PoseNet, even your own exported models — and the privacy pitch is the one we quoted: your photos never go to a server, the AI comes to your device.



Corn

A browser tool that stopped. What's the tell?



Herman

Last push August 2024. And the README still says local development requires Node 16 — a runtime that went end-of-life in 2023. When the install instructions name a dead runtime, the project is frozen. It still works, the export matrix is real — YOLO, VOC, COCO, VGG, CSV, masks — but nobody is adding to it. Point and line annotations only export to CSV, which tells you where it sat on anyone's priority list.



Corn

So it's not a graveyard death like LabelImg. It's a preserved specimen. Still running on muscle memory.



Herman

Which is the synthesis, then. Four tools, four verbs. labelme is the workhorse that refused to stand still — weekly releases, AI-assisted, but no stable API and a paid convenience binary. X-AnyLabeling is the successor that's shipping every few days, at the cost of any collaboration story. doccano is "just enough," on a slow heartbeat. Make Sense is the zero-install one that stopped.



Corn

The routing rule Daniel will actually use?



Herman

Datasetfinder's version: images, video and 3D, CVAT is the default self-hosted choice. Mixed modality — text, audio, images — Label Studio. One person on a laptop, labelme, X-AnyLabeling, or VIA. That third category is bigger than anyone admits.



Hilbert

labelme v6.3.6. I still run it. Pinned. Corn, you said the annotation is the file, and you can diff it — that's true right up until you've written a script against the tool's insides, which I did. Nineteen lines. Batch-converted my polygon JSONs into masks for a print shop on Agrippas. v7 came along, put underscores in front of the modules, and the script stopped importing. So I pinned labelme below seven and there it sits.



Herman

The v6.3.x line. Critical fixes only, best-effort, no release cadence or SLA.



Hilbert

I can quote it, Herman. I have it highlighted. There's a printout of the v6.3 README taped inside the cupboard door above the kettle, and that sentence is marked in yellow. The folder of JSONs is still in the old format because migrating it means rewriting the script, and I no longer remember how the script worked. My neighbour Itzik offered to port it for a case of Goldstar. I told him the script worked when I wrote it, which is more than his code can say.



Corn

The environment that can never be updated and the data that can never be migrated. They've agreed to leave each other alone.



Hilbert

They've reached an understanding. I'm not against the upgrade. The tool does more now. But nobody warns you the cost lands on the person who automated something six years ago and moved on with his life.



Herman

That's fair, and it's the one line in the trade we didn't price. The file format is stable; the Python isn't.



Hilbert

The Python was never the product, that's the thing. It just happened to be where my work lived.



Corn

That gets us to the LabelImg question, because Daniel asked what happened to it, and the answer is the best illustration of everything we've said. Created by Tzutalin in September 2015. Python and Qt, bounding boxes only, saves PASCAL VOC XML with YOLO text also supported. It became the first tool in every YOLO tutorial ever written. Twenty-five thousand stars, six and a half thousand forks.



Herman

Then look at the release history. The last tagged GitHub releases are v1.8.0 and v1.8.1 — both from December 2018. The last PyPI release was 1.8.6 in October 2021. The repo was archived — read-only, no longer maintained — and the README's first line is now a handover: "LabelImg is now part of the Label Studio community."



Corn

It lives under the HumanSignal org now. Label Studio's company absorbed the corpse.



Herman

The arithmetic is: a tool with twenty-five thousand stars had its last tagged release in 2018 and was archived in 2024. Six years of running on inertia, tutorial citations and muscle memory. Stars measure how many tutorials cite you, not whether anyone maintains you.



Corn

The vacuum is being filled from every direction at once. Label Studio as the official successor. labelme and X-AnyLabeling on the desktop, with the AI bolted on. Roboflow's hosted annotator with Auto Label. Even small commercial Windows tools doing exactly LabelImg's job — bounding boxes, YOLO and VOC export, nothing else.



Herman

There's a lesson sitting in Hilbert's cupboard door, actually. The printout. What he's really taping up there is a maintenance policy he trusts because it's honest about being nothing — no cadence, no promise, just "we'll fix critical things if we can." That's more disclosure than twenty-five thousand stars ever gave anyone.



Corn

Half those stars were awarded to a project that had already stopped releasing. People were starring a photograph.



Herman

The GitHub topic page has no ranking because this market has no directory. What it has is a family tree — and the family tree is sitting in plain sight, in X-AnyLabeling's acknowledgements, where they thank LabelImg, LabelMe and CVAT in the same breath. Every one of those tools forked, absorbed or buried the last. Small tools don't die because a platform wins. They die when their maintainer stops, and the users take two years to notice because the tool still opens.



Corn

The test for 2026 isn't the star count, it's the last push date. And the ones that pass it — labelme pushing weekly, X-AnyLabeling every few days — are the ones that earned today's episode.



Herman

Our thanks as ever to Hilbert Flumingtop at the desk, who kept this one running while we wandered the family tree. If you want more of this, try episode twenty-one ninety-six, The Invisible Workforce Behind AI; and episode two, Local STT For AMD GPU Owners. This has been My Weird Prompts — the human-AI collaboration podcast. If you enjoyed it, the whole archive is at my weird prompts dot com, six thousand plus episodes deep. We'll be back soon. See you then.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

1. **GitHub, labeling-tool topic page, retrieved 2026-11-15, repo update dates as shown on page. [primary]**
   https://github.com/topics/labeling-tool

2. **GitHub, LabelImg repo (archived), retrieved 2026-11-15, last push 2024-06-07, releases v1.8.0/v1.8.1 dated 2018-12-03. [primary]**
   https://github.com/HumanSignal/labelImg

3. **GitHub, labelme repo, retrieved 2026-11-15, latest release v7.11.0 (2026-11-14). [primary]**
   https://github.com/wkentaro/labelme

4. **GitHub, X-AnyLabeling repo, retrieved 2026-11-15, changelog entries 2026-08-05 through 2026-11-04. [primary]**
   https://github.com/CVHub520/X-AnyLabeling

5. **GitHub, doccano repo, retrieved 2026-11-15, latest release v1.8.5 (2026-01-11). [primary]**
   https://github.com/doccano/doccano

6. **GitHub, Make Sense repo, retrieved 2026-11-15. [primary]**
   https://github.com/SkalskiP/make-sense

7. **GitHub, Label Studio repo, retrieved 2026-11-15, stable v1.23.2 (2026-09-29), nightly 1.24.0.dev20261113. [primary]**
   https://github.com/HumanSignal/label-studio

8. **Labelme official site, retrieved 2026-11-15 (pricing and offline-AI claims). [primary]**
   https://labelme.io/

9. **Datasetfinder, Open-source annotation tools in 2027: CVAT, Label Studio and the rest, published 2026-10-29, retrieved 2026-11-15.**
   https://datasetfinder.co/blog/open-source-annotation-tools

10. **(jishuzhan.net), 2026 , published 2026-09-15, retrieved 2026-11-15 (tool comparison table; onboarding-cost and collaboration ratings).**
    https://jishuzhan.net/article/2099673325375770625

11. **Softasium, VisionForge: a Windows LabelImg alternative, published 2026-10-05, retrieved 2026-11-15 (LabelImg archive date 2024-02-29).**
    https://softasium.com/blog/visionforge-labelimg-alternative.html

12. **Viso.ai, An Intro to LabelImg for Image Annotation, published 2022-02-11, retrieved 2026-11-15 (last PyPI release 1.8.6, Oct 2021).**
    https://viso.ai/computer-vision/labelimg-for-image-annotation/

13. **Roboflow blog on LabelImg, retrieved 2026-11-15 (hosted-alternative framing).**
    https://roboflow.com/blog/labelimg

14. **Hacker News comment on Launch HN: Humanloop, 2020-07-31, retrieved 2026-11-15.**
    https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=24005912

15. **Unitlab blog, 7 Open-Source Image Annotation Tools, published 2024-01-06, retrieved 2026-11-15.**
https://blog.unitlab.ai/7-top-open-source-image-annotation-tools-of-2024-reviewed/