AT Banter Podcast Episode 278 - Darren DeFrain and Vizling

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SPEAKERS

Rob Mineault, Lis Malone, Ryan Fleury, Darren DeFrain

R   **Rob Mineault**   01:11

  Hey, and welcome to another episode of At Banter.

R   **Ryan Fleury**   01:21

  This silence is deafening.

R   **Rob Mineault**   01:22

  The silenceis deafening. Well, our normal banter banter-ite is actually not here today. But I'm jumping ahead of ourselves. Because, of course, this is the podcast where we talk with advocates and members of the disability community to educate and inspire better conversations about disability. Hey, my name is Rob Mineault. And joining me today is The cowbell. The cowbell has arrived in the room. Well, listen, just derail my entire intro. I had an entire intro written up. Forget it. I'm ripping that up. Hey, it's Ryan Fleury, and the cowbell.

R   **Ryan Fleury**   02:09

  Hello, everyone

R   **Rob Mineault**   02:15

  And not joining us today? Of course, which is why we had that big pause at the front of the show. Steve Barclay is away today. So that leaves us with hey, it's Lis Malone.

Lis Malone 02:30
Hey, it's Lis Malone.

Ryan Fleury 02:32
That's deserves a cowbell.

Lis Malone 02:35
Thank you. Thank you, Ryan.

Rob Mineault 02:37
You get a cowbell today.

Lis Malone 02:39
I was told I needed a cowbell

Rob Mineault 02:45
Exactly. So hey, I'm not gonna waste any more time with the intro because I am actually excited about today's show. I know I say that every week. But today I'm honestly very excited about this, because it's talking about one of my favorite topics, which is comic books. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Ryan, can you tell the fine folks at home what the heck we're doing today?

Ryan Fleury 03:08
Sure. Today we are speaking with Darren DeFrain who is an Associate Professor of English and the Writing program at Wichita State University who has developed an accessible comic book app. And I do have to say go Shockers.

Rob Mineault 03:26
Shockers? Okay. I will get you to explain that after. Yes. So, welcome to the show, Darren.

Darren DeFrain 03:36
Thank you.

Rob Mineault 03:38

Okay, what's what's a shocker?

Darren DeFrain 03:41

It's very strange mascot.

Rob Mineault 03:43

Oh, is that right?

Ryan Fleury 03:44

Yeah, it's the Wichita State University teams, I guess are called Shockers and the mascot I think I read is called Woo Shock isn't it?

Darren DeFrain 03:53

That is correct. Yes. He looks like sort of a deranged, or it seems okay, just a stupid it's an it's a anthropomorphic shock of wheat.

Rob Mineault 04:09

Oh, a shock of wheat. Oh my gosh. Okay, I get it. I get it. Okay, just basically just based on that originality, I would be a Shocker fan too. I don't blame you.

Lis Malone 04:18

At risk of getting edited out, there's another shocker. It's kind of a not PG friendly shocker. That's why when I heard that I think I'm gonna just be quiet.

Darren DeFrain 04:34

Our cheerleaders actually adopted that hand gesture.

Ryan Fleury 04:40

Oh. I'm coming to Wichita.

Lis Malone 04:43
Darren I am high fiving you right now.

Darren DeFrain 04:51
They leaned in on that one.

Lis Malone 04:55
Shocker cheerleaders.

Rob Mineault 04:57
You're gonna have to explain all of this to me after the show later.

Lis Malone 05:00
Okay, I will draw you a picture.

Rob Mineault 05:01
Okay, thank you.

Lis Malone 05:02
And then Darren's software can explain it.

Darren DeFrain 05:08
We'll need some more testing for that.

Rob Mineault 05:12
Well, I don't know. Maybe the haptics will come in handy in that sense.

Ryan Fleury 05:15
Oh, geez, are off the rails? Here we go.

R Rob Mineault 05:20

Okay, well as yeah, we're getting way ahead of ourselves and into the weeds already. So why don't we take a step back. And if you could just maybe just give us a little background on yourself. And then maybe we can just start talking a little bit about the app. So just give us a bit of background on the app?

05:37

Yeah, so I've been in Wichita State for a long time. And about 10 years ago, I started teaching graphic novels, classes. And I started to teach a graduate course for the first time in that, and I had this terrific student named Aaron Rodriguez. And it just so happened, his office was right across the hall from my office. And so after classes, we'd often continue the conversation. And one of the things we were looking at was Disability Studies in the class. I, I put this question to the class, and it was really serious about it. So what do we do if you can't see comics? How do we create a situation where you can take part in a full discussion of comics and this combination of text and image that's so important to comics without having someone just tell you what they're seeing? Because that's pretty much what you get if you get anything at all, with with comics and graphic novels, and Aaron and I kept talking about this, and it came around to this idea of haptics, and if we utilized haptics on tablets and cell phones, we thought, well, maybe we could come up with something where you could use that contact with the screen to get a sense of where things are laid out on the page, and the order in which things are meant to be read.

R Rob Mineault 07:04

Well, that's why it was it was really interesting when when Ryan pitched the show, and I was really intrigued by it, because, you know, I'm sure that that this is the case, you know, for for many, many, many years. Nobody's ever even tried to adapt comics in terms of making them accessible, because it just feels like it's such a visual medium. And, you know, right from just the way that because you're right, every single panel of a comic book, there's a there's a strategy, I'm sure, behind that in terms of the the writer and the artist working together to sort of portray things like motion, and or emotion or like there's, there's so many elements, that must make it incredibly challenging to take even just a single, a single page of a comic book and really sort of make that an equitable experience for somebody who say can't see it. So I mean, right off the get go I have to say that this is this is a really exciting idea. But it must also at the same time feel very, like almost overwhelming, I would I would think, that

08:14

Yeah, well, one of the things overwhelmed me when we started talking about this is I have almost no coding experience. And so I was going to kind of talk myself out of being able to do anything in this regard. And we fortunately, we got a little bit of help from Wichita State University, and they put us in contact with some coders and give us a little bit of seed money to try this out and see if like, the basic premise was going to be workable, and it was in that encouraged us to apply for some bigger grants to pay the coders to do the kind of work that -

Aaron's a little more with coding than I am, but this is beyond the skill set of either of us. And so we've had to really rely on a good coding company here in in Wichita to get us to the point that we're at, we're hoping to have this thing done or close to done by this summer.

R Rob Mineault 09:06

Growing up, I was a huge, huge comic book fan. You know, through college, I worked at a comic bookstore, I've always really appreciated the, the medium, you know, and I've always thought that it's a really incredible medium for storytelling, there's there's many different ways that you can you can tell stories, and as important of a story as a literature. But I feel like that's also something that's only happened say in the past, maybe, what 10/15 years where it's actuallyas a medium, it's actually starting to be taken seriously and graphic novels are seen as forms of literature. Is that kind of the case?

09:50

Yeah, you know, it's Maus was the first work that won the Pulitzer Prize for work of fiction and that's a it's a comic. It's graphic novel. And it's also been in some hot water in the state of Tennessee lately, which really boosted sales. So there have been conversations around this for, you know, 25 years, probably, but even like 10 years ago, when I was starting to really pitch this hard to my department that this is something that really is, is worth the attention and that it's not just kind of a, you know, like, just a fun thing to do. But there's there's a lot going on in comics that I was met with a little little resistance there. I remember our University President, in fact, kind of scoffed at me. What is it you're doing? And he kept asking me, you're going to go teach comics to adults? And eventually, I was able to, like, push some some things into his hands that showed him that this is a really serious literary endeavor. I mean, are there terrible comics out there? Sure. But there's, there's tons of terrible fiction that gets published over time as well. So you know, it's, it's, it's a, it's its own genre, and it's got a rich tradition, and it's just, it's really fascinating. area to be studying.

R Rob Mineault 11:15

Well, and that's partly why also, that it's never really been that much of a priority to to be adapted. There's been this idea that well, comics are for kids, or they're not, it's not something that really needs to be adapted for, for the disability community. Because, you know, it's it's frivolous.

D Darren DeFrain 11:37

Sure, yeah. And I think that that was really one of the reasons that there was somewhat of a lag with the technology, the urgency with getting technology that's actually providing something for the visually impaired, because I think what happens is, there's this attitude about comics just being all about plot, you know, Batman's gonna come driving in the Batmobile and punch Joker, and that, you know, that's really the whole story there. And so, I think there was

the sort of satisfaction with like, well, if we just tell what's happening, we'll call it good. But that, that certainly does not do justice to the work. And it does not give agency to the readers if they can't see.

R Ryan Fleury 12:18

It's the whole audio description and captioning argument all over again.

D Darren DeFrain 12:24

And that's not to say that that is, you know, and certainly depending on how much attention and how much skill someone has, providing something like that. It's not like that's without merit, but it's not the same thing. You're not interacting with the text, it's a really passive endeavor to just sit there and have some someone tell you something, right?

R Rob Mineault 12:42

You're very right, like, listening to an audio book, or listening to a talking book is a very passive experience. But I think that what you're talking about here is, is it's more of an interactive engagement with with the text, that's really exciting. And comic books are like that, because comic books feel more vivid and more engaging than say, you know, blocks of paragraphs. And I want you to talk a little bit about this idea of, of multimodal texts, because I think that that plays into it. There's, when you're looking at a comic book panel, there's, there's a bunch of different things that are going on. So maybe you could we could start to and you could just sort of speak to that a little bit and what you mean by the multimodal text?

D Darren DeFrain 13:32

Well, a multimodal text is really just something that's that's bringing in a couple of different modes. And in the case of comics, it's typically the image and the text together. And so there's not you approach one first always, I mean, you read the text, or you you look at the image and then read the text, but it's kind of a recursive act. Typically like you go back and forth between that with most multimodal works. And this is not just for comics and graphic novels, one of the things that we're, we're interested in, in this whole thing is like how, like textbooks often. Aaron had this great example that he found from a biology textbook, and it was a cell dividing, and they give an audio track to explain what you know, the multimodal parts of this textbook. All it said was, here's the cell. And then in the next image of the cell dividing, there's all these complex things going on all these labels of the different parts of the cells, the cells is pulling apart. It just says 'the cell divides'. And that was that was the audio version of that. So clearly, that is not giving the person reading that textbook, the kind of information they need to really understand what is on the page in a way that someone who can see those images can understand it. And I felt like all along comics were running into that same problem that there was just not this engagement with the text and the ability to go kind of navigate the modes a little bit. To navigate between the text and the image as a reader that I think is really important to it.

R Rob Mineault 15:14

Okay, so let's talk about, about the technology and about the app itself. And just a little bit about how it actually works.

D Darren DeFrain 15:23

Sure, so we've got some different modes that we're, we're working with there. We do have a mode where if you just want to hear the comic, you can just press the button and you'll get what we call the global narrative. It will, it will give you the audible version of the comic. But we're using haptic so that when you put your finger to the screen, and you start to drag your finger across the screen, if you're going in the proper order, from panel to panel, you'll get some haptic feedback that lets you know that you're going in the in the preferred order of panel, the panel. If you go out of order, you get a negative feedback, and it does not read the next part to you. So you have to kind of back up and then what that will do for the reader. It, it's the kind of thing that I think you'll have to learn a little bit to use it. But once once you use it, if you're reading in that mode, you'll get a sense of how the comic is laid out how one panel moves to the next and speaks to the next. You can also then just touch different parts of the screen that will tell you what it is that you're seeing. We're coding the comic so that it's searchable. So that you can you could just say to the to the app, hey, how many instances of Batman riding a motorcycle? And it would find those instances for you in the text. And then we're also looking at a translation version as well.

L Lis Malone 16:49

Are these are these comics pre loaded into the app or available through the app? And is it a certain selection that's available? I guess, how does the selection actually become is determined?

D Darren DeFrain 17:04

Well, one of the things that we want to do is make this like a drop and load kind of thing with the app so that anyone can take this app and, and make a comic accessible in this way. But we will have like a library within the app, and one of the things we'll be looking at is trying to get, we've talked to a bunch of the comic publishers, and we've got nothing but positive feedback. The only concerns they have, which I totally understand are like the safety of their product, right that, that if we if we have access to that, that we don't just make it free for everyone to come through visiting and, and access the comics. So we'll work out that side of it. But we also are going to have comics on the app and the library of those to start with and then hopefully that will grow in the near future. We're working with a visually impaired comic artist named Doug Knight out of Canada, he's written a really interesting comic called Chiasm. And that's one of the first ones that we're adapting through this technology.

R Ryan Fleury 18:10

One of the things I was talking to Rob about earlier today, was we have accessible library

sources around the world for blind and partially sighted users. Have you thought about having the ability to connect to, let's say, a public domain library, if one exists for public domain comics?

D Darren DeFrain 18:29

Yeah, there are a lot of public domain comics out there. And that's why I think it's important with what we're putting together that this is something that if you have if there's a digital version of a comic out there, and it's something that we don't have the rights to that someone has the ability to adapt this comic pretty readily. And I won't say totally easily, but I mean, they can adapt it using the tools on the app, so that it's, it's usable in the app format.

R Ryan Fleury 18:58

So then the author of that comic wouldn't need to, they could use the tools built into your app to make their comic accessible.

D Darren DeFrain 19:07

Yeah, as long as there's no rights issues there. And we have a little bit of latitude with that actually. From my understanding that if it's if it's if it's going to assist someone in this way that that that frees us up a little bit. We have some concerns that we'll have to get to down the road. But we're very excited about this. We really feel like this is something that that is going to provide a platform for reading and enjoying and engaging with comics that hasn't been there before.

R Ryan Fleury 19:47

But when you think about it, you know, I don't know how many of us why I can tell you probably all four of us here on the call pay for subscriptions to Netflix, Disney Plus, Hulu, Amazon, you name it You could have tiers of subscriptions where, you know, if you're having to pay for licensing, you've got to recoup that cost at some point. So, you know, you get access to the public domain stuff for free. And then maybe if you did get Marvel on there, you know, there's a, whatever, $9 a month subscription fee, you know, there's people that would pay that.

D Darren DeFrain 20:22

Yeah. So that's our hope that most of these, these places that, you know, have the deep pockets that they'll work with us on this, and they won't see this as any kind of threat to their, to their enterprise, which is something we, you know, we want to respect the comic artists, for sure, as well in all of this and make sure that if they're getting paid through Marvel, or they're getting paid through DC, or whatever. They would continue to, to get the same pay from using Vizling. Like it would not preclude that. But, again, that that's, it's a little bit down the road for us, but it's certainly on our horizon. Sure.

Lis Malone 20:59

Do you guys have a partnership with the various comic creators that you do include in your app in terms of the way their comics are being described?

Darren DeFrain 21:10

Not yet. We're in the testing phase right now. And so that's, that's really, that question kind of speaks to where we're going to be at probably in May of this this year.

Ryan Fleury 21:24

So it probably worked in a similar fashion to audio description for TV or movies, you'd probably have a script writer who writes the script for the comic and then a narrator come in, or is your voicing in the app just going to be text to speech?

Darren DeFrain 21:40

Yeah. That is actually the one area of this that I think is going to be a little more time intensive. To write the global narrative, you need to really take a step back, and you can't just can't just go text to speech because otherwise you're you're missing out on so much of the action was taking place there. And so that has to be written in by someone. But we're creating some protocols for that as we go as well.

Lis Malone 22:06

And then I'm assuming you might be working with some sort of focus group type of format to make sure that the order ensure that the description sort of meets the needs of the artistic license that, you know, the creator has sort of put out there and probably would want conveyed against, you know, the way your your I guess copywriters are sort of interpreting it.

Darren DeFrain 22:34

Absolutely. Working with Envision here in town. Envision is a really big, indie, we were fortunate to have them in Wichita, they're helping us with the testing side of this.

Rob Mineault 22:47

Well, it's it is a really, I think, a good time to be doing something like this, because, you know, we talked about Marvel and DC, but really, the days where they're the only game in town is really not not necessarily anymore. I mean, there, there are so many other independent comic publishers out there. There's a huge, you know, digital online, independent, comic industry.

There's tons of different people doing different things out there. So that even if you don't necessarily capture the big players, at least initially, there's still lots of other really, really valuable publishers out there that certainly would be interested in coming on board.

D **Darren DeFrain** 23:35

We reached out that was one of the things that really struck me, we reached out to so many comic publishers, when we were starting this initially and a lot of the mid tier and smaller tier places were very like, oh, we would love to have something like this because we we are on such a tight threshold with our publication budget that we just honestly can't afford to devote the resources to this. And so if we had something like this, read someone doing something like this, we'd be all in. So we're excited about that.

R **Rob Mineault** 24:06

Well, and honestly, like, I really do think that any publisher would be really foolish to turn their nose up at this because because you're absolutely right, the margins for producing a comic book are very thin. You know, a comic book publisher may seem like they had they have a ton of money. But really, the reality of it is they don't. Nobody's getting super, super rich writing or illustrating a comic book. And certainly the publishers aren't necessarily either. I mean, they make a lot of their money off things like they're lucky enough to get movie rights or, you know, other other types of ways to make money. They don't they don't necessarily make a ton of money based on that $5 comic book.

D **Darren DeFrain** 24:52

And what do you speak to there's also another part of this, I think is really important. Just how big of cultural drivers comics are at the moment. I mean, they have been for a while. But one of the grad students we have working with us, their name is Peach and Peach was blind for awhile. And Peach has told us that they'll go blind again at some point because of a degenerative eye problem that they have that they've got a correction for right now, but it's not permanent. And Peach tells us such a compelling story about loving comics and loving Marvel movies, and Peach would go to these Marvel movies with their partner and their partner would lean over and tell them what was going on in the films because they were they just felt like they wanted to be a part of this, this Marvel boom, has been going on for about 20 years. And so Peach has been such a great addition to the team for that reason with it, that kind of experience and that kind of interesting comics.

R **Ryan Fleury** 25:59

Well, we've talked about it on the show many, many, many times over the years, how the disability market, have dollars to spend, and it's a missed market for these companies not to have their services accessible. So, you know, I applaud your efforts. And hopefully, we'll we'll see some movement on this media because there hasn't been any access to it.

D Darren DeFrain 26:23

You know, we're, we're thrilled to this. I just personally mean, my, I had a situation where I was like temporarily blinded that glaucoma situation. Now, I can't really read things on my cell phone. And so one of the things that I'm looking forward to with this as being able to I can follow like the images and things on my cell phone, but you know, it's there's there's spectrums, right, and one of the things that I'm looking forward to is being able to just press the little speech balloon, and have that particular aspect read to me when I can't see it. So I think there's, there's so many people that are touched by this, in the country levels of this that they're, you know, I think you're 100%, right, that, that there just has not been the kind of I mean, that the ADA was 1990. Yeah, that's a long time ago. And it's certainly done some good things, but I'm, I'm shocked when I see the lack of lack of services in some areas that have manifested.

R Rob Mineault 27:28

Quite often, it's like this with any sort of accessible technology, in that there are also implications for just the mainstream, you know, everything from, you know, text messages that were originally developed for people who are deaf, to closed captioning that I've gotten into the habit, I watch everything now with closed captioning, because I feel like, it just adds, it adds a layer. I can, I can keep up with a show or I gain a lot more details when I have the closed captioning on. But even things like audio description, we've heard of people who are sighted turning on audio description, so they can go cook in the kitchen and still watch their show. And I feel like this also has some of those implications. Because I know even for me, I'm excited. I would love like the idea of a audio described comic book that I could interact with in a different way other than reading it. And I feel like that's even just exciting. And nobody's really tried this before. I feel like this is a really untapped market, like Ryan was saying, because for for comic book publishers, this could be a golden opportunity for them if if this technology works out, and they can implement it in a way and produce that, that content that would make these comics accessible, that could really give them a bump in sales.

D Darren DeFrain 29:01

There were I mean, our technology is working. The thing that we're we're really focused on right now is making sure that we're not making decisions that people are without their vision, you know, don't like with the app. And that's very important to us that this is not something that we're being prescriptive with this, but we're getting, we're trying to get as much feedback as we can and working with some things like with VoiceOver and stuff like that to make sure that this runs seamlessly and just runs well. For the for all the people that that are going to be using it.

R Ryan Fleury 29:38

So you do have some visually impaired or totally blind beta testers as part of your focus groups.

Darren DeFrain 29:43

Yes. That's where Envision comes in. The Kansas School for the Blind had reached out to us about a month ago, and we're looking forward to working with them too.

Rob Mineault 29:54

I know it always seems like a silly question to me, but it's funny you talk to their app developers that not only do they not have any beta, you know, beta testers that are that are in the community, they didn't even consult people to actually see if it was something that they, the community actually needs or wants.

Darren DeFrain 30:15

Yeah, there's, there's sometimes kind of just a sense of like, Oh, I got a big idea. That's right, this has got to get out in the world right now. And we're, we're being as cautious as we can, we obviously want to get this app out there. But we want to make sure it's something that that that people want, and people can use with as little effort as possible.

Ryan Fleury 30:36

Do you guys have support for braille displays, you know that we have some multi line displays, and that may come in handy where you have a dialog or you have a bubble with text in it. I'm not sure how that would work.

Darren DeFrain 30:51

Right now, we're kind of, we've pushed to the side a little bit. This is definitely something that we're gonna come back to and take another closer look at and see if it's something that we can integrate. We don't we don't expect to have this done by the summer and then just share, like, you know, yeah.

Ryan Fleury 31:08

I want it now.

Darren DeFrain 31:11

Now, what's the next big idea? So we'll continue to get feedback on it, and look for ways that we can continue to improve it.

Rob Mineault 31:21

So is the app essentially, a reader only? Or is there are there tools so that somebody could say

taking an existing comic and, and produce an this accessible track for the app? Like, is it going to be community driven?

D Darren DeFrain 31:42

We're working to do this both things simultaneously, so that when it's when it's ready, and again, our goal is this summer, that you will have the ability to, there's a host of free digital comics out there, a lot of things like from, say, the 40s 50s and 60s that copyrights have lapsed on. If somebody wanted to take some -- I mean there are tons and tons and tons online, more than we could, we could hope to render ourselves in any short amount of time. So one of the things we want people to have the opportunity to do is just take those as one example. And if they want to make one of those accessible for classroom use, or for for someone else's use to to be able to like, take the software and just use it and, and upload those works into there and work with a little bit and have an accessible version of it.

R Rob Mineault 32:34

Amazing.

R Ryan Fleury 32:35

Are the tools to make the comic book accessible to blind and partially sighted? So I'm totally blind myself. And if I found a public domain comic that was free, would I be able to use those tools to convert that to an accessible format to work in the app?

D Darren DeFrain 32:53

Honestly, probably not immediately. But one of the things that I really I really this is, this is big on my heart, I want to make sure that we we try to get there and I think there's enough other technologies surrounding this that we can find a way to to make that kind of thing happen.

R Ryan Fleury 33:13

Okay, that's exciting.

D Darren DeFrain 33:14

Now we're not we're not we're not there yet. But I'm sure that's definitely, that's definitely something that's been kind of, you know, we started with this simple question about what can we do to make this accessible, and it spurred so many other questions. And that's definitely one of them.

Ryan Fleury 33:29

You can definitely tell we're curious, because we have all these questions and wish and pipe dreams, right? So it's exciting to have something like this, that's coming to fruition.

Darren DeFrain 33:39

So yeah, we've been really, really impressed with the feedback that we've gotten the enthusiasm, we we've gotten a lot of encouragement from all the people we hope to be encouraged by in this endeavor.

Rob Mineault 33:53

Oh, yeah, absolutely. Because I mean, really, you're talking about a medium that's been completely locked away for for a lot of people for many, many, many years. So yeah, I can, I can totally understand why people would be really excited about it.

Ryan Fleury 34:08

Well, there's those of us that, you know, like I had sight until I was 23. And then boom, it was gone. So you know, I remember looking at comic books, reading comic books laying on the front lawn. So you know, being able to still be I can still visualize colors and characters. So being able to have an interactive comic book, such as this sounds like it could be, would be very exciting.

Darren DeFrain 34:33

That's what we hope.

Rob Mineault 34:34

Well, and I also, I also really think that there, I was really intrigued by you talking about the idea of textbooks and diagrams and stuff like that, because really, there's there's actually a lot of implications there as well, of being able to make a lot of these materials in an educational setting, suddenly a lot more accessible or at least a lot more engaging, to study.

Darren DeFrain 35:02

Yeah, we one of the other areas that we're going to pivot to as we finish off some things with, with where we're at right now is looking at maps we have on our larger board leaderboard is a blind historian. And one of the things that we really want to do is to get digitized versions of maps and ways that that users can explore those maps and get a better understanding of like, okay, this river, this is how this river moves through this territory. And, and this is where the mountain ranges relative to the planes and that sort of thing. So we're excited for the other applications for this as well.

Rob Mineault 35:44

And just started curiosity, how big is the actual team that's working, working on Vizling?

Darren DeFrain 35:51

You know, really, the core of us is just myself and Aaron. But then we've got a group called T3, which is doing are all the tech side of it. And there's several people involved there several programmers that we have working on it right now, we've got a couple of grad students on board. And then we've got a larger board that that is very varied. And they've been giving feedback as we've gone along.

Ryan Fleury 36:17

And I haven't asked because it hasn't been asked yet. But where did the name come from?

Darren DeFrain 36:23

One of the things that, that I had worked into my syllabus, my graduate course was - Neil Kohn is a theorist. He's in the Netherlands. Now. He's a linguist, and he's got this book called The Visual Language of Comics. In that book, he talks about comics, and sequential art having, like, a kind of grammar to them. And he, he really does a nice job of backing that up in that book. And so one of the things I was introducing the students to was this idea of, of visual linguistics, and so when it came time to come up with a name -- Viz and Ling

Ryan Fleury 37:02

There you go,

Darren DeFrain 37:04

That's kind of at the core of our approach.

Ryan Fleury 37:07

Makes sense to me now.

Darren DeFrain 37:10

The nice ring to it, too,

Rob Mineault 37:13

Which also actually brings up a really interesting idea to be because I could see that there could, there could be a real a real art to developing the accessible version of any given comic book, given those visual linguistics, like you were talking about, you know, that's just above and beyond then just describing the action, and, you know, doing, you know, doing basically a read through of the dialog or whatever, there. There's all kinds of implications there on just how you how you interpret that, that visual experience, and translate that into into that accessible version. Really fascinating stuff.

Darren DeFrain 38:03

Yeah, it's, it's, it's opening up a lot of really interesting research questions for us as we go along with it, for sure. And that's, that's right there, at the heart of it.

Rob Mineault 38:12

Well, sure, because I you know, I feel like even from person to person, how that person engages with that comic, you know, interpreting the visuals, in in line with the the text is probably very different, just depending on because we all process information very differently. And so that experience is going to vary from person to person.

Darren DeFrain 38:36

You know, somebody's looking at a whole page of a comic is, you know, someone is going to zero right in on the 'POW', you know, that may be like a little bit further down the page, someone else may be really interested in color, and may go to a panel based on that other people are like very text based, and they will start there. And all these things are part of what we want to bring into the experience.

Rob Mineault 38:59

Yeah. Which is really fascinating, because I almost feel like as if somebody is a writer, or illustrator of a comic, that's almost really exciting because it gives you it gives them another way to translate whatever they're trying to do with any given panel, or any given page of a comic.

Darren DeFrain 39:21

There's some really interesting stuff that has been written about Alan Moore who wrote Watchmen and yeah, V for Vendetta. I think it kind of started with like fanboys getting really really under the floorboards of what he's done, but they there's several several books out just on like Watchmen now that goes panel by panel by panel and really breaks everything down and talks about all the things that he worked in each panel so that, you know, they were like

callbacks to other comics were foreshadowing things that are gonna come up later in the narrative and it's really tightly structured in a really interesting way. That kind of parallel to literature, but also its own critter.

Ryan Fleury 40:06
So what is the status of the app currently?

Darren DeFrain 40:10
Right now, we are just very close. We're on spring break here, which does stay. Um, so all the shockers are all over the place. Next week when I get back, we should be getting to the point where we're meeting with our tech team and getting ready for the some of the specific testing that we're going to be doing. So between now and really this summer, it's going to be lots of testing.

Lis Malone 40:34
Darren, this might actually be the most important question of this whole interview. Who will you dress up as when you go to Comic Con?

Darren DeFrain 40:44
I wish I could say that we hadn't joked about that.

Lis Malone 40:51
This is a real question. I want to know.

Darren DeFrain 40:53
Yeah, I don't it's gonna have to be something without spandex. Because the first time people are like running out of Comic Con.

Lis Malone 41:04
Have you guys gone to Comic Con yet? Have you been?

Darren DeFrain 41:09
No, but, you know, this is one of the things that we are, we're really, we really want to do. I mean, for lots of reasons. But certainly for the fun side of that as well.

Lis Malone 41:19

Well, listen, if you if you guys ever do decide to go, please reach out to me, because if I can make it to New York, I would absolutely love to hang out in your booth with you. Absolutely. I just want to wear a costume.

Darren DeFrain 41:32

I'm just gonna get one that fits, though.

Lis Malone 41:38

Start early with diet now. Right?

Ryan Fleury 41:42

Is there a place that people can follow the progress of the app?

Darren DeFrain 41:46

Our website is still in progress. But that should be we completely tore down and we were having the same team that's doing our coding, building it back up for us. But that that's going to be ready here. Soon. If you get on just visling.org, you can find a little bit of information. But the rest of that should be available within about a month or so. And we're on Twitter, we're on LinkedIn and other places as well.

Rob Mineault 42:14

And they can find you just by searching, Vizling?

Darren DeFrain 42:18

Yep, they you get a few kind of strange, other Vizling things that come up. But we're feeling better about the name all the time, because we're, we're pretty much what comes up in Google.

Rob Mineault 42:30

Awesome.

Ryan Fleury 42:31
We will definitely link to everything in the show notes as well.

Darren DeFrain 42:35
That's awesome.

Rob Mineault 42:36
Absolutely. Well, listen, sir. Thank you so much for taking some time out of your evening to talk to us. I'm excited. I think this is incredible. And you please come back a little bit closer when you guys are ready to release and let's talk again.

Darren DeFrain 42:54
I'd love to bring bring Aaron with you next time. He's He's someone you want to meet.

Rob Mineault 42:59
Yeah, that'd be great.

Darren DeFrain 43:00
But this is great. And I just love the interest in this. I really appreciate you guys taking the time and talking with me about it.

Rob Mineault 43:07
All right. Well, thank you, sir.

Darren DeFrain 43:10
We'll see you at Comic Con.

Rob Mineault 43:11
Yeah. Go shockers! Take care. Okay, I'm serious. I do want you to explain this to me later. Because I don't know what you guys are talking about. We've I'm the kid in the room.

Lis Malone 43:31
He doesn't know the shocker.

Ryan Fleury 43:34
I'm thinking I do. But go ahead and clarify.

Lis Malone 43:36
No. After the podcasts.

Ryan Fleury 43:39
Okay.

Rob Mineault 43:42
We're recording that we can use for blackmail purposes like she ever decides to run for Congress. No, but seriously, that is that is a really exciting app. I like I want to see it in action, I still feel like I'm still a little fuzzy on exactly how it's gonna work. And how how somebody with with a visual impairment is going to navigate it and how the haptics sort of play into that. But I'm, yeah, I'm totally down I'm, I really hope that they, they hit that launch window for the summer. And we can start to play with it. Because there's, there's a lot of really big implications.

Ryan Fleury 44:18
Well, and even, you'll be able to, you know, turn your screen off, turn VoiceOver on, or talkback, whatever phone you're using, and drag your finger along the screen. And the haptics will tell you and it'll start speaking, right. If you go off of that panel or frame or page or whatever, then you're not going to get a response back. So it sounds like the the they've done their investigations. They've talked to the right people. They're approaching this the right way. Yeah, it is exciting, and it'll be intriguing to take a look at it.

Rob Mineault 44:50
It's it's a medium that's been locked away for so long that it's exciting that you know, there's this whole new, whole new demographic that can be enjoying these things on a on a like, honestly, like on a different level even? Because I think that there's potential that you can actually engage more with an accessible version of a comic book than just reading it.

Ryan Fleury 45:13

Ryan Fleury 45:13

Yeah, it'll be interesting. You know, I'm picturing or hearing, in my mind. The same sort of thing as listening to like, a Marvel movie audio described on Netflix. Yeah. But you know, because I don't have any other. I have nothing to relate that to. Right. So that's the closest I can come but it will be different. Because you'll have that tactile sensation of the haptics you'll have the different elements, I guess, of the panel being described to you. It's gonna be very interesting. I'm really curious to see how this is gonna work.

R **Rob Mineault** 45:50

Well, it's a lot I think I equated to a lot like I've heard Braille described, like, it's a different experience when you read a braille book, as opposed to if you just listen to an audiobook, right, because you're engaging with it, you're following you, your, your fingers are feeling the words, you know, you're engaging with it a different set in a different way. Yeah, a different part of your brain is engaged. And so what you know, so in terms of reading an accessible comic book, where you're following the panels, I mean, you're driving you it feels, it feels like you're driving the narrative, because you're going at your the pace that you want to, and you're taking your time and engaging with every individual panel on your own terms. And I think that, that, that can't be understated on how important that can be.

R **Ryan Fleury** 46:40

Well, they could get as detailed as they wanted to as well. You know, let's say on the first panel, it says, whatever, you know, Batman jumps into the Batmobile and takes off, but perhaps down the road, you could maybe double tap and it would describe to you the colors in that panel. It could describe you the color of the Batmobile, not just the description that's going along with that comic or that that panel, but actually what's in that panel? Yeah, Batmobile black car, winged tail, you know, blue sky yellow, you don't I mean, like, yeah, they could, you could really double tap, triple tap, use some of those voiceover elements to gain even a deeper detail of what's in that panel.

L **Lis Malone** 47:25

And they use like a cool voices too. It would be strange if it just says, you know, text, POW. You know, instead of like, you know, you need a little 'oomf'. So, you know, we'll see. It could be really fun.

R **Ryan Fleury** 47:48

It could absolutely yeah.

L **Lis Malone** 47:51

Would you guys dress up as if you went to Comic Con?

Rob Mineault 47:59

Hmm, who would I want to go as?

Ryan Fleury 48:03

I haven't been into comics and I lost my sight so I tried to think it was probably Spider man. But Spider Man from the 80s Because I've no idea like I haven't seen Spider Man since 1995.

Rob Mineault 48:16

Spider man, that's a pretty that's pretty tight fitting costume you can't. There's no hiding in a Spider Man costume.

Ryan Fleury 48:25

I've got nothing to hide.

Rob Mineault 48:28

Mommy why does Spider Man have a big belly?

Ryan Fleury 48:35

He's retired honey.

Rob Mineault 48:49

I'm I'm I'm with I'm with Darren. I'm not wearing spandex. There's too many Superheroes wearing really uncomfortable clothing.

Ryan Fleury 48:57

So what would you go as? You can't go as Thor is that's like very wearing barely nothing.

Rob Mineault 49:02

Yeah, no, Thor would be no good. I mean, maybe Iron Man. But that would require a lot of work, that's a pretty elaborate costume. And then plus I look stupid when my glasses overtop of the mask. See, that's the trouble with wearing glasses. Like there's no cool superheroes that wear glasses again, and then you just look stupid.

Ryan Fleury 49:33

Well, there's a whole nother conversation about disability representation. Yeah, right. Why is there no disabled superheroes?

Rob Mineault 49:40

Yeah. Well, I mean, there is Professor X.

Lis Malone 49:48

We're like, we see he's the he's the he's always the Oh God, the Daredevil.

Rob Mineault 49:53

I know. It's always the only people always go to Daredevil. No Yeah, it would. That'd be actually a cool costume Daredevil. Oh, yeah.

Lis Malone 50:08

You guys, you guys can come to Comic Con too.

Rob Mineault 50:11

How about you Lis?

Lis Malone 50:13

Oh, that's easy Catwoman it's a very black is very slimming. So I'm all in on them.

Rob Mineault 50:18

That's a good point. Yeah. Hmm.

Lis Malone 50:21

I'm just gonna squeeze on some Spanx and put on my cat ears.

Ryan Fleury 50:26

Put on your shocker.

Lis Malone 50:27

Hope for the best. I got two shockers right here. No, now, Rob's really confused.

Rob Mineault 50:38

Yeah, yeah, for sure.

Ryan Fleury 50:41

It's the best show we've done in seven years. I love it. So glad to be on board Lis. You make the show so great.

Lis Malone 50:50

Bringing the shocker. Okay. Thank you, Darren.

Rob Mineault 50:56

Alright, enough of that. Hey, Lis.

Lis Malone 51:00

Hey, Rob.

Rob Mineault 51:02

Where can people find us?

Lis Malone 51:05

They can find us online atbanter.com

Rob Mineault 51:13

One sec. Is it called the shocker? I don't know... I don't see anything here. Wait, shocker, dirty. Here we go. Okay,

Ryan Fleury 51:26

He's on PornHub now

Rob Mineault 51:30

Urban Dictionary. Hold on ways. Oh, my. Oh. Wow. See? Wow, okay. Yeah. All right. Okay, that makes things make so much more sense.

Lis Malone 51:47

There you go. Yeah. All right.

Ryan Fleury 51:50

Shockers are the names of the team at the Wichita State University.

Rob Mineault 51:54

Yeah, um, all right. Oh, man. I'm still recovering from that. Okay, so

Ryan Fleury 51:59

We know what Rob's doing this evening.

Rob Mineault 52:03

Shocker. oh my god okay, so anyway where am i? What are we doing now? What's what's happening?

Ryan Fleury 52:25

Okay we can

Rob Mineault 52:27

People can also email us they so desire at at banter No. Wow

R Ryan Fleury 52:37
You are gone.

R Rob Mineault 52:38
My mind is in different places.

R Ryan Fleury 52:44
Obviously.

R Rob Mineault 52:45
Good thing I didn't look it up earlier.

L Lis Malone 52:47
That's why they call it that's why they call it the shocker.

R Rob Mineault 52:53
Anyways. They can also drop us an email if they so desire at cowbell@atbanter.com

R Ryan Fleury 53:02
And they can find us on Facebook and on Twitter and soon to be LinkedIn.

R Rob Mineault 53:09
Ah, yeah, that's right. You can find us on LinkedIn and we're going to do some more more work you work on our LinkedIn account that's exciting. Yeah, it's not shocker level exciting but still exciting.

L Lis Malone 53:27
It's like one shock not two shockers. Not a double shocker.

R Rob Mineault 53:32
Oh, don't make me Google the double shocker. Make my heart can take it. Stroke out. Right.

That is gonna about do it for us this week because we've done enough damage. Thanks, everybody for listening. And of course big thanks for our guests for joining us and we will see everybody next week.