

AT Banter Podcast Episode 331 - Tara Voelker

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SPEAKERS

Rob Mineault, Steve Barclay, Tara Voelker, Ryan Fleury, Lis Malone

R Rob Mineault 01:17
Hey, and welcome to a another episode of AT Banter,

S Steve Barclay 01:22
Banter, banter.

L Lis Malone 01:24
Hey, my name is Rob Mineault. And joining me today Mr. Cowbell himself. Mr. Ryan Fleury.

R Ryan Fleury 02:00
Hello.

L Lis Malone 02:02
We've also got Miss Lis Malone. Hey there.

R Rob Mineault 02:07
And Mr. Steve Barclay.

S Steve Barclay 02:10
Still happy to be included

still happy to be included.

R Rob Mineault 02:14
You're always included. How's everybody?

S Steve Barclay 02:18
Just Jim dandy.

R Rob Mineault 02:20
Hey, so I've been thinking about something for a week and I wanted to discuss this really quickly with you before we start the show. Because I've been thinking about this since Jesse, our guest from last week, brought this up about Ryan's hit song Glitter and Spangles. Does anybody know what a spangle is? No one knew last week.

S Steve Barclay 02:44
I did know last week but you guys were talking over top of me.

R Rob Mineault 02:46
Oh, really? Okay. Well tell us so what is the spangle is.

S Steve Barclay 02:50
A glittery shiny thing attached to clothing.

R Rob Mineault 02:54
Really? Yeah. Well, wait, so how so? What's the deal then with the Star Spangled Banner?

S Steve Barclay 03:03
Because the banner was spangled with stars, which are glittery.

R Rob Mineault 03:08
Oh, all right.

R Ryan Fleury 03:11
That's been your educational moment from AT Banter.

R Rob Mineault 03:14
That's pretty good. Where did we pull that out of our butts?

R Ryan Fleury 03:18
I was like a comment Lis had made on a show a year ago about spangles or glitter and spangles. And so I know she challenged me or I challenged myself. I put my foot in my mouth and said I could write a song called Glitter and Spangles. So it took a year.

L Lis Malone 03:36
We were having one of our rhyming moments. Just rhyming like the bangles and the spangles and all maybe that's how it happened. Yeah, you know, it always starts with music and us getting stupid and playing a little idiotic rhyming games and I feel like it's stemmed from a music trivia nonsense kind of thing, but it led to an amazing song. So you know, our stupidity does have its silver lining.

R Rob Mineault 04:04
Yeah, indeed. Yeah, exactly. So www.whitecanerecords.com, go check it out.

L Lis Malone 04:10
That deserves a cowbell.

R Ryan Fleury 04:11
That's it. All right. Where is it? There it is. Okay.

R Rob Mineault 04:18
All right. Well, any other housekeeping things before we get started? Anyone else have anything they want to bring up?

L Lis Malone 04:24

I just want to say my Devils made it to the Playoffs.

S Steve Barclay 04:27
They're locked in.

R Rob Mineault 04:29
Are they? Good for them!

L Lis Malone 04:29
Yes.

R Rob Mineault 04:30
So when are the playoffs over?

R Ryan Fleury 04:34
November and then it starts again?

S Steve Barclay 04:37
Unless you're a Canuck in which case it's already over.

R Rob Mineault 04:42
It's April How can it be playoffs and it doesn't end until November? You're pulling my leg right?

S Steve Barclay 04:48
He's pulling your leg indeed.

R Rob Mineault 04:51
So somebody answer me, it is a legitimate question. When do playoffs happen, is it in the summer?

S Steve Barclay 04:56
It'll it'll go into summer. Yeah.

R Rob Mineault 04:58
Wow. And the Devils made it huh?

S Steve Barclay 05:01
The finals will be. What? June?

L Lis Malone 05:03
I think. So

R Rob Mineault 05:05
What's the deal with the Canucks? Are they in the playoffs?

S Steve Barclay 05:08
Oh, hell no.

R Rob Mineault 05:11
I just thought I would check one one year maybe they will be.

S Steve Barclay 05:13
They're playing the best hockey that they have played the entire year and they're doing it entirely too late.

R Ryan Fleury 05:20
Y'all know they make the playoffs when we have another riot.

R Rob Mineault 05:25
That's true. Yeah. Good. I need a PS5. Oh, just kidding. All right, on that note, Hey, Ryan.

R Ryan Fleury 05:53
Yeah, Rob?

R Rob Mineault 05:55
What the heck are we doing today?

R Ryan Fleury 05:57
Today we are speaking with Tara Voelker, who is with Microsoft Xbox Studios Accessibility. Welcome, Tara.

T Tara Voelker 06:04
Thanks for having me. I'm really excited to be here to chat today.

R Ryan Fleury 06:06
Thanks for putting up with our crap.

T Tara Voelker 06:08
I love it. I love it.

R Ryan Fleury 06:14
Most of us would have bailed by now.

T Tara Voelker 06:17
I mean, you guys have just had me rolling even before we started this recording. So like, why would I not love to be here?

R Rob Mineault 06:26
Yeah, I don't know what the deal is. I think we think it's the nice weather here here in Vancouver so we're all giddy.

S

Steve Barclay 06:32

Yeah, we certainly got vitamin D. And we're just busted out all over the place.

T

Tara Voelker 06:36

Yeah, I can relate. We're definitely in the same band of first sun down in the Seattle area. So yeah.

R

Rob Mineault 06:42

Of course, yeah, we share, we share our weather system for sure.

S

Steve Barclay 06:49

Probably got coders frolicking all over the Microsoft campus.

T

Tara Voelker 06:53

Let's not go too far, we don't let them out that often.

R

Rob Mineault 06:59

Well, listen, despite all our MAC talk, and PS4 talk, which was actually a joke, we are thrilled to have you, we have been really super interested in gaming and accessibility for a while now. And so this is kind of the first opportunity that we've really had to talk to somebody who's really kind of in that space and is a real passionate advocate. So before we really dive deep into it, maybe you can just kind of give us a little bit of background on you and sort of how you sort of found your place as at Microsoft and as sort of a gaming accessibility advocate.

T

Tara Voelker 07:36

Yeah. So at Xbox Game Studios, I'm the Accessibility Lead, which translates into I work with each and every one of our studios. And both educate the Devs on how to do things accessibly, help them set their goals, help them reach their goals, and really trying to create these, you know, products that are intentionally inclusive of gamers with disabilities. And I got into the role, because I'm someone who's been in game development for a very long time and always done accessibility. So for years and years and years, there were not accessibility jobs in gaming. And it meant that you were a game dev who just tried to shove accessibility work into your job. And I was a dev that had been doing that, and was very loud about doing it. And even before I came to Xbox, like, I'm the co founder of the Game Accessibility Conference, along with my great pal, Ian Hamilton. And so I was screaming about how to make accessible games since

before I was at Xbox. And so once I got to Xbox, it just obviously seems like a natural move to kind of put me in a position where I got to scream directly at the people who needed to do the work as it were.

R

Rob Mineault 08:48

So maybe you can sort of give us a little bit of a of an idea of what, what kind of things we're talking about when we talk about putting accessibility features into video games.

T

Tara Voelker 09:01

So when you're making a video game, there are a lot of things that you can do that can unintentionally stop someone from being able to play your game. So for example, or some people having to use a normal controller can be really hard, they don't have the mobility in your hands that you know, the original people designing the controller assumed people would have, right? And so you have to figure out okay, so if they can't use the controller, what can we do? Oh, well, let's figure out how to allow them to remap the buttons so that they can get around that issue to be able to play. So that's kind of an example of added on accessibility. But a lot of the work is figuring out how you can make the core design more accessible, and figuring out how you can not potentially create those barriers in the first place. So the most basic example is normally around like color blindness. So if you have the user interface that's telling you what's going on in the game. And you indicate things by color alone. Well, now it's not colorblind friendly, someone who's colorblind can't tell what's happening. So you have to add a Colorblind Mode. But if you think about designing accessibly, you can make something that's colorblind friendly from the very, very beginning, and not have to add accessibility features on the end. And it really is a space that covers a whole bunch of different areas. And it's, it's something that is a really fun design challenge.

R

Rob Mineault 10:28

Well, you know, it's, it's interesting, because, you know, I and Steve and I are both kind of pretty big gamers. It has been a very interesting journey, because I remember even six, seven years ago, there wasn't even such a thing as an accessibility menu in a lot of games. Like it just wasn't really a thing. And now, it's pretty common, like anything that that anything new that's come out in the past few years, you'll always see some sort of accessibility options. And whether that's things like auto aim, or, you know, turning off quicktime events for certain games, or, like you said, being able to remap the entire controller. Has that sort of been your experience where you're really seeing a little bit of a renaissance going on in the past few years?

T

Tara Voelker 11:13

Oh, definitely. So if you go back to when I first started working in accessibility, and video games, which was almost 15 years ago, now, people just literally did not know anything about it. It was a foreign concept to them, unless they had a very close friend or family member who had been impacted. And years later, I remember, I don't remember what game it was. But they

added a Colorblind Mode. And it was like newsworthy, people were like, wow, look at the amount of work that they've done. And now as a as an industry if you aren't colorblind friendly, and you don't have a Colorblind Mode, like you will get dinged. People will be like, what the hell, why didn't they do this? And it's, again, completely mind boggling. And you see it reflected in the studios themselves. Because like I said, for years, there weren't even accessibility jobs. And now there are companies who are hiring full time accessibility people. Even just last week, I saw that Blizzard put up a full time Accessibility Designer position. And obviously that shows in investment that again, just like you said, a couple of years ago was unheard of.

R

Rob Mineault 12:29

So what do you sort of credit to that?

T

Tara Voelker 12:31

I credit a few things. So I think, first is there were definitely a group of people who had been beating the drum about accessibility long term. But I do think that one of the big things was actually the rise of social media and content creation, it gave a way for disabled gamers to be able to show the barriers that they were hitting, and get that information directly to the Devs. And before for very, very long time, you know, game developers were so separated very intentionally from players, that hearing, oh, I can't play for this reason, or that reason, would never reach the Dev team. But now because of social media, we're able to have those conversations. And I think something else that was very interesting was the introduction of the CVAA, the Digital Communications Act, that actually kind of caught multiplayer games with text chat, in what was covered. And so it kind of forced some Game Devs around the same time to actually be like, hey, what is this accessibility thing? And once Devs started learning about accessibility, once they started seeing the videos from gamers with disabilities, or reading their tweets about the struggles they were having, they wanted to act. Like, the whole point of being a Game Dev is you want people to play your game. And so when people can reach out to you and say, hey, I can't play your game, you want to fix that.

L

Lis Malone 14:03

So Tara, you mentioned the CVAA and its impact in terms of the game development. And so the CVAA came to being during the Obama Administration. So that that's been quite some time. So did it take some time for the industry to actually start to catch up and say, hey, there is this other legislation that we're supposed to be following?

T

Tara Voelker 14:29

Yes, there was definitely a little bit of lag in video games. Basically, what happened was the tech to make accessible video games didn't exist. So for example, when the CVAA was first signed, there wasn't a screen reader on any of the consoles. PlayStation didn't have a Linux box, it didn't have one. And so you know, trying to figure out like, oh, how would you do something like Menu narration literally wasn't possible. And so there were a series of waivers that were in play is to basically help video games get their act together and start building the

things that they needed. And then compliance hit for video games in 2019, which is why, again, post 2019, you really start seeing the ramp up because they actually had to start meeting this legislation.

R

Rob Mineault 15:18

It sounds like it was sort of a combination of customer driven input, along with legislation, if I'm sort of understanding it correctly.

T

Tara Voelker 15:29

Yes, it was definitely a one two punch of actual user needs and legislation really bubbling up at the same time.

R

Rob Mineault 15:37

How much of of accessibility in gaming these days is sort of this idea of sort of, like tacked on accessibility, as opposed to like trying to roll accessibility into the the the mechanics of the game itself? Is that sort of still a little bit of a struggle?

T

Tara Voelker 15:55

I think, as an industry, we're really at a turning point, to be able to include accessibility in the core design instead of tacking it on. I think that the game industry has spent the past few years learning about accessibility. And it's really been, you know, there was even a talk at GDC this year by Darren Thompson on like this very topic of how, as designers, we need to get better at having in the base design instead of added on. So I don't want to quite say it's a problem. So much as we are, we're maturing and getting better at accessibility. And I think you'll really start to see that more and more over the next few years. It's, it's really, it's interesting, because in game development, you know, games take multiple years to make. And so even though we're talking about these lessons externally, now you be, you may not actually see them in the games or the products until a couple years later. Because if I say this today, and the game I work on doesn't come out for two years, then you won't actually see the fruits of the things that I'm talking about until two years later.

S

Steve Barclay 17:07

I was super impressed the first time that I saw the well, I'm still super impressed with it. But the first time I saw the Xbox controller that had a switch for every single input, that was such an enabling device that Microsoft created there. And I don't think you necessarily even envisioned how third parties would leverage that device. Because it's, it's a device that is produced on a much larger scale than most assistive technology companies can do it. It's incredibly useful. And it ties into other devices really, really well. There's a small developer here in Vancouver, who's tying that through, it's an internet protocol for controlling smart devices at any rate, hope they'll come up with eventually, but but they're using that controller as kind of

the hub for that to control smart devices around the home. And it's way cheaper than dedicated environmental controls that do pretty much precisely the same thing. It was a very empowering little device.

T Tara Voelker 18:24

We've definitely seen some really creative and cool uses that are completely outside of the accessibility space use of it even. There was one concert that one of my co workers was telling me about where they basically used the adaptive controller to power this like, giant joysticks thing for the concert, and you can do so much stuff with it. Because you know, like you said, under the hood, it's so easy to connect things to it and connect it to everything else. Because it's, you know, the same 3.5 millimeter jacks that everything uses that you can connect to.

S Steve Barclay 19:05

Yeah, it was very, very elegant product and hit the market at a great time too. It's interesting to see how people did use it.

R Rob Mineault 19:14

Yeah, well, you know, and if you think about it, a lot of these video game consoles, I mean, the recipe is so right for accessibility. I mean, controllers have haptics these days. There's all kinds of elements that that are in there that the developers could really lean into and really use in in sort of innovative and unique ways to really build accessibility into a lot of the games. But, you know, I can totally understand that it's also not as easy as it sounds. I mean, developing a game is pretty hard, I'm assuming. I mean, I don't know anything about it, but I'm assuming it's probably pretty hard. You can probably speak to more than more to that or but I mean, developing the game just just as a game and all the mechanics and the graphics and everything is probably hard enough. To then also try to juggle accessibility and how somebody with limited mobility or somebody without sight how they're going to interface with the game. I mean, it does have to really be a challenge.

T Tara Voelker 20:16

It definitely can be, it's one of those things that you have to be conscious in planned for it. Because if you don't, you'll end up at the end of development and be like, oh, crap, we've messed up and then trying to rush to fix it. But it is difficult for a lot of reasons.. So for example, we use different engines for our video games, like there's unreal, and unity, and even some custom engines we use in house. And not all of them have the same tools for building accessibility. So some things are harder, and some engines and others. But it also means that a lot of it, we can't share between our studios. So some studios can share because they're using similar tech, but some of them are using completely different ones, which means that they have to completely build it yourself. And then some of the tools to create basic experiences are also completely different per platform. So like how you get narration to work on the Xbox versus the PlayStation versus your iPhone versus Android. They're all completely different systems. And so it does mean that you're kind of doing a lot of bespoke work to try to make

these systems. And again, like they can't always be shared between studios. And so that's when you get these like radically different levels of accessibility between games that are made by the same publisher. And this is not just like an Xbox Game Studios thing. This is something that all of the major publishers we all we all struggle with. Because yeah, it's very, very hard to make games. And you know, some games are just kind of held together with duct tapes and hope. And so then you're you're adding a little accessibility and hoping it all it all stays together.

R

Rob Mineault 22:03

So is there kind of like a best practice in terms of where were you sort of put in that accessibility development in the entire development process? Like, is it sort of just a general rule of thumb that look, you know, you need to start, you need to be thinking about accessibility, you know, at you know, when you're mapping out a game on graph paper, that's when you should be thinking about it not, you know, when it's three quarters of the way done. Is there a standard sort of best practice when you're talking to developers?

T

Tara Voelker 22:37

Yeah, so one of the things we always tell our developers is you do need to start early, like designing your UI, and making sure that like, the font size is legible, and that you have good contrast, like yes, we absolutely start at like the earliest designs possible, because the goal is to make sure that we've made accessible decisions before they actually even start coding that UI. But there are some other things that you have to keep in mind. But it's more nebulous, like the gameplay itself, you have to think of the gameplay and accessibility at the same the same time, and those are harder to have very specific guidelines for that being said, there are best practices that we have with our does, but how we apply them varies per studio. So for example, we can have a studio that only has 30 people working on a game, and what we may work with them to do will be very different than another studio that maybe has 300 people working on a game. So we kind of offer a prioritization framework, but like available right now online is the the Xbox Accessibility Guidelines, which is, you know, if, if you are looking to create like a best in class experience in accessibility, that is where you look. And really what we do with our devs is kind of look at where they are the tech they have how much time we have left, and figure out okay, where what should we prioritize out of out of that list, so our devs can get the biggest bang for their buck.

S

Steve Barclay 24:10

That was also really impressed when I was doing some background for this, this episode to find that on the Microsoft Learning Site, there's an entire piece of coursework on Gaming Accessibility Fundamentals. There's like three hours and 49 minutes worth of education available there for it.

T

Tara Voelker 24:36

Yes, that is the award winning accessibility fundamentals for gaming training course I actually. So that won an award for the from the game accessibility conference. I actually physically have

So that won an award for me from the game accessibility conference. I actually physically have the trophy with me right now, because I'm going to be delivering it to Dr. Caitlin Jones, who was the mastermind behind getting that entire training course together. Obviously there's like a team that worked on it, reviewed, supported blah, blah, blah, but like it was Caitlin's baby. And she did so so so much work. So I love that you brought it up. And I have it right here. Here. Wait, hold on. This, this is the sound of the bubble wrap on the trophy.

S

Steve Barclay 25:25

Can you describe the trophy to us?

T

Tara Voelker 25:27

Ah, yes. So it is a black acrylic. It's wrapped in bubble wrap. So of like what it looks like. So it's a black acrylic trophy with Calibri font in the Game Accessibility Conference yellow. That is the others two of them, actually. So one is for biggest accessibility surprise for the bad. And what was the other one? Hold on. I'm like, I wish I wish you could see it's like me holding up the bubble wrap to the light to try to see if I can see. So just won these awards last January. And yeah, I'm delivering, delivering the trophies.

L

Lis Malone 26:18

Now is this content for users?

T

Tara Voelker 26:23

It's for game developers.

L

Lis Malone 26:25

Basically, I wasn't sure if it was consumer facing. So it's industry facing this, this content this course content?

T

Tara Voelker 26:33

Yes. So it's aimed at game developers. But on I obviously, I'm a little partial, but I think anyone who is a gamer would find it fascinating. The goal was a lot of accessibility courses that are available for other areas of tech don't always directly translate well, to video games. And also, the few certifications that are out there could be cost prohibitive, potentially for someone just getting in. And there wasn't a ton of just like, free ways to have a training course. And so really, the goal of putting this together was to have a way that someone could say, yes, I've completed this course. And they would be able to say, like, Yeah, I know the fundamentals of gaming accessibility, because I have completed this course. And again, it's completely free. So any game dev who's looking to learn about accessibility and doesn't know where to get

started? They can start with this course. And it's an amazing primer. And it really just gets you pumped up to learn more like, I know Caitlin's not here. And I don't know if Caitlin will listen to this. But like Caitlin did a fantastic job. And I'm so proud of her and all of the work that she did.

S

Steve Barclay 27:45

She's gonna be mad that you defaced her bubble wrap though.

T

Tara Voelker 27:51

You know what we'll just don't? She won't know. Just don't tell her that.

R

Rob Mineault 27:59

She might be listening.

T

Tara Voelker 28:00

That's sure. Well, if if Caitlyn does listen, Caitlin, I'm very sorry, I did it to create great content

R

Rob Mineault 28:08

For the show.

L

Lis Malone 28:10

So I have a I have a question. And this probably leads into what I was thinking about is so again, as as, as Rob mentioned so eloquently, I am not a gamer. And so what kind of learning curve for somebody who might want to get into gaming, but didn't realize that there was accessibility? So how, how would somebody go about actually learning about how to use all of these different interfaces based on the user's specific needs?

T

Tara Voelker 28:45

This is actually like a huge challenge in the gaming space right now. So unfortunately, the learning curve can be pretty steep. And it's not intentional. So one of the things that we're doing right now is like when we release a game, we put out a web page that has all of the accessibility information about the game, the options that are available, things that are baked in, so that people have a better understanding of what's there. But one of the problems is, you would only know if that is something that will help you if you've already been gaming. If you don't know what any of it means, then it's not really useful. So this is a struggle we have outside of accessibility, just the approachability of games as a whole can be quite daunting. And so not only is it really hard to if you didn't grow up with video games kind of get into

gaming later in life, if you have accessibility needs. On top of it, it becomes even more complex. And it's definitely something we need to solve. I wish I could say like, oh, it's super easy go here and read this, but it's not yet it's something we need to need to improve unfortunately.

L Lis Malone 29:57

And you know, I think that this is a problem that is certainly not unique to your particular vertical. Because as companies develop products and services, and they make things accessible, so many times, you'll run into situations and I've run into the situation where you get this new device, and it's supposed to have all of these great accessibility features. And then it's never plug and play, I have to get a sighted person to help me set it up and figure out how to work it. So it's always there's always that extra layer of like, how do we get it so that it becomes a little more universal from like, from you know, that that initial introduction? So I don't think anyone has an answer for that yet. So but it's definitely something that is sort of just becoming very ubiquitous.

T Tara Voelker 30:47

And that's definitely something that, like, we know, that we have struggled with, with the Xbox in the past. Like, if you got a brand new Xbox, and you wanted to set it up, you did need sighted assistance. It wasn't until this latest console generation that we added, it's not Braille, but tactile indicators for each of the various ports on the Xbox. So if you're setting it up, you can pull up the information on your phone to be able to have it read out what the different ports are. And then, you know, feel the indicators to be like which your Ethernet cable which is your HDMI cable or something like that. But those are improvements we really only started making in this last console generation.

R Rob Mineault 31:36

I don't know if this is necessarily question, but this is just something that I find really sort of interesting about accessibility, especially in video games, is that it's one of these things that really benefits everybody, and regardless of of their situation. So, you know, able bodied players certainly benefit from a lot of these accessibility features as well. Because what it really does is it really makes you be able to customize the way that you want to play the game in a way that gaming just never worked before.

T Tara Voelker 32:13

So fun fact, so a few years ago, the Game Awards, introduced a new category called Innovation in Accessibility. And the winner of that award every year has also been the game that won the most awards overall, at that year show. And I think what you see is that the studios who are investing in accessibility, are seeing those returns in pretty much every area of their game, because you're making much more intentional design decisions around everything, that just creates a better product all up.

R

Rob Mineault 32:50

Yeah, that's right. I mean, first, because for a lot of games, you know, if it was just too hard for you to get through a particular section, say, well, that was it, you were just screwed. You had to get your buddy from down the street to come do it for you, or whatever. But now, like there, it's all it's all configurable. So, you know, it really what it really does, right across the board, makes this much more of a customizable experience for any player. And that's, you know, yeah, it's gonna become more popular as a game when you do that.

T

Tara Voelker 33:29

So if you don't mind me talking like a game designer for a few minutes. Like, what is what is happening is that when you're making a game, you're trying to introduce a challenge that the player has to overcome. And then after they complete that challenge, there is a reward they get afterward, you know, that thing that gives you that dopamine high that says, yes, I did it. And what accessibility helps do is make that challenge more appropriately related to that award reward that you get. So for some players with disabilities, whatever challenge they had to overcome, was like, not worth the reward they got afterward because it was way more difficult due to these unintended barriers. So by being able to adjust the challenge, you get the reward that feels right, that makes you feel like you did it. You know, it's not too little like wow, I went through all of that for what? So it's, it's really fun to think about in terms of designing and making sure that like your core loop challenge to reward is what keeps the player hooked and that you're, you know, giving them enough that they feel rewarded and they want to do more but that giving them too little so they think what the hell is this, I don't want to play anymore.

R

Rob Mineault 34:44

So are certain genres of games more conducive to accessibility than others? So you know, just for an example like say, you know, something like a first person shooter is that a little bit harder to make accessible than say something that's like maybe turn based, like some sort of a strategy game.

T

Tara Voelker 35:08

So I would say that certain types of games, certain genres are more accessible to certain groups of people. But I wouldn't really say that there's any genre as a whole, that is easier to make more or less accessible for everyone. But there are definitely like, it's easier to make some games accessible to some groups of people than other ones.

R

Rob Mineault 35:30

So is that ever a challenge though, too, in the sense of, you know, trying to make it accessible for the most people because, you know, that's the thing with disability is that you have wildly different groups whose needs are all sorts of different.

T

Tara Voelker 35:49

That is definitely one of the ongoing challenges. So we'll have games that are like 80% of the way to an accessible experience for one group, but like, oh, they're only 20% of the way on this other group. So figuring out okay, well, we should prioritize and get this to be a fully playable experience for this group, because we're so close, and then start moving down the list. And it is a unique challenge for each game, because the things that are easy to do per game are incredibly different. So, you know, we like the motor skills that you need for Forza Horizon 5 are grossly different than the motor skills, you need to be able to play Penultimate. And so it, it is a game of okay, what, what is happening in this particular game that we're working on? What does it naturally lend itself to? Where are our massive gaps? And we have to go through that individually with each game, because they're so different.

R

Ryan Fleury 36:48

So is there a rating system then for accessibility that the studios have on their websites, or if someone was interested in getting into gaming? Where would they even start?

T

Tara Voelker 36:58

So there isn't a rating system, and I don't think there will ever be one, just because the needs of each individual is so different. But we do try to do is just put out the accessibility information that is in the title. So you know, you can go to the Penultimate website, and at the bottom of it, it has, hey, here are the accessibility features that we have in game. And you know, there's also here's just kind of how general gameplay works. And we hope that that's enough to be able to get people started, we also have introduced in the Xbox store, accessibility tags. So for example, if there is a particular feature that you know, you need to have to be able to play, we have a set of those that you can filter by so if you need a game that has subtitles, because you're deaf, for example, you can search for games that have the Subtitle tag. And then it's been verified that this the, the person who made the game is saying, yes, I have the subtitles, that meet this criteria to try to try to help out. Again, it's still a little bit of a problem, we're working on another thing that we've been doing. And not again, not just offset Xbox, but you know, PlayStation, Ubisoft, all these other companies have started doing as well. In our marketing campaigns, we're making sure that we're talking about accessibility, and also making sure when we're working with content creators influencers, you know, whatever you want to call them, that we're including disabled content creators, so that they can talk about their experience, as well, so that they are able to lend their voice and, you know, basically, fact check, whatever we say. So you don't have to hear it from us, but like, you know, actually hear from real disabled gamers on their experience with the game.

R

Rob Mineault 38:53

So we've talked a lot about the software side of it. Is there anything going on sort of on the hardware side in terms of of accessibility? How is that space looking?

T

Tara Voelker 39:03

Well, I mentioned earlier that in the last round of consoles, we did start adding the tactile indicators on the back. And really with the Adaptive controller, we have put out a couple of firmware updates, but the hardware space for us has been more of a watch and learn. And honestly, the thing that I'm really excited about is actually our competitor, PlayStation announced Project Leonardo, which is their adaptable, accessible controller, and it looks completely different than the Xbox Adaptive controller. So for us, like the exciting thing is we're not going to be the only one with this kind of customized gaming hardware. And at the level that we have, you know, because there are other controllers out there that I want to acknowledge just you know, obviously Microsoft as a production company has more resources and some others, so to see Sony you know, PlayStation stepping up and coming out with theirs - like that's going to be the next new hotness, like, I can't wait to see it, I can't wait to get my hands on it. And I can't wait to see what we get to learn about their controller because again, it's so different from ours. And so I want to be able to get my hands on it and learn from it to figure out like, how can we take the learnings that PlayStation is made for Project Leonardo to put it back into our work as well. We're really lucky that as an industry, we are a 'rising tide floats all boats' kind of deal. And we do try to share, you know, as much as we can and learn from each other and apply back into the work that we're doing. So yeah, I got I gotta get my hands on it. I want them to announce the official release date. The fact they haven't yet it's driving me absolutely bonkers.

R

Rob Mineault 40:50

Well, you know, and that's why I love you know, the the accessibility space, the advocacy space, because, you know, there is none of this, you know, cutthroat competition aspect of it. You know, screen readers on phones. Apple was the first out of the gate to create a smartphone, that, that, you know, had a built in screen reader. But, you know, and it was only because of that, that, you know, Androids followed suit. And now you know, every smartphone that you buy, you're gonna have a screen reader on it. And that's in a lot of ways thanks to these, these tech companies and Microsoft, you know, you guys are the same. I mean, you guys were the first ones out of the gate with the idea of an Adaptive controller, and that really pushed the needle forward. And you're right, it is great that now Sony is following suit. Had you guys never done that, you know, this wouldn't be happening. And so I love that I love knowing that, you know, everybody's sort of watching each other and sort of building on these ideas. Or in some cases, you may not even be building on the ideas. It's just great that there's something different.

T

Tara Voelker 41:56

No, I'm, I'm really lucky that the accessibility community and Game Dev, like, we're all friends, I feel like you can just even from this past week, there's a conference in San Francisco called the Game Developers Conference. And you can find pictures of just groups of accessibility folks from various companies all eating dinner together. And it's because we all support each other. We're all working towards the same mission, which is to make accessible games to help make sure that disabled players are included in the conversation. And we get that mission done better together, right? Like if we fought, how does that help us get to the end goal of making sure as many people can play as possible? It does it. So like, yeah, we will, we will totally share as much as we can. As long as our companies and legal teams do not yell at us.

R Ryan Fleury 42:52
Okay, but who's got more accessible titles?

R Rob Mineault 42:54
Oh, come on.

T Tara Voelker 42:56
Oh, no. It's a really, really good question. And it's a it's a really tight competitive space. And we all do accessibility a little differently. So I would say that, for example, if you go look at the stuff coming out of Sony, Santa Monica, and Naughty Dog, like they are continually pushing the industry forward. But then you look at like Ubisoft as a publisher, and they have a consistency of accessibility, that is really unique overall, as a publisher. And then when you look at x Xbox, we have such different games. And we have some titles, who are also doing some really cool stuff. But we're, we're looking in different areas. So like, if you look at Forza Horizon 5, like yeah, we introduced ASL and BSL in our cinematics. So if you use either of those sign languages, you can follow along with the story. But then you check out the stuff that was in, you know, The Last of Us Part Two and the Part One remake, like they have some really cool blind accessibility that our titles don't have. So it is this like, triple, quadruple like three way tie. And like we're all exceeding in different areas. So I think like the winner will be like the first one that can like kind of converge all of the accessibility learnings from like these different groups and get them together. Like I have no problem talking about like, when another studio when a non Microsoft studio has excelled because like they did the work they deserve the recognition. So like, yes, I will. 100% be like yes, you absolutely killed it. Like I've been playing so much God of War Ragnarok. And just while I was at GDC, there were two different talks about the accessibility work that they put into their titles. And I got to learn and that's amazing, like, so I will totally give them the recognition like because again, they put in the work and they did a great job. So like, yeah, I don't care. Like I work at Xbox, but this PlayStation game did amazing stuff. And now I want to go do similar amazing stuff.

R Ryan Fleury 45:09
So each gamer needs to have both consoles is what we're saying.

T Tara Voelker 45:14
100%. Yeah, I mean, I've got them both. Just do it. You know, win the lottery and have enough money to buy every console out there. And then a crazy gaming PC. That's a bajillion dollars. Yeah, because we all have the money for all of it, right?

R Rob Mineault 45:32

I'm just waiting for the Canucks to get in the playoffs. A riot...

S

Steve Barclay 45:37

And then you fire up your PS 17.

T

Tara Voelker 45:45

I think the only other thing I have to add is that right now is a really, really exciting time for the video game industry and the work they're doing in accessibility. I mean, you guys have kind of hit on earlier, we're on this, like, exponential growth trajectory. And we're further than we were even just two years ago, and so so far ahead, where we were five years ago, and drastically ahead of where we were 10 years ago. And it I'm so proud of the industry overall. And I just I know the next few years, we're going to have even more amazing innovations coming out of our studios. And so it's, it's just a fun time to be alive and to get to be able to see it happen.

R

Rob Mineault 46:27

You know, well, listen, thanks for all your work over the years. I'm glad that it's really paying off. And, and yeah, I'm excited as well.

T

Tara Voelker 46:35

Yeah. Thanks. Thanks for having me. Thanks for inviting me letting me ramble on about video games.

R

Rob Mineault 46:41

But before before we let you go, though, if people are interested in learning more about you or learning more about accessibility, or Microsoft, or Xbox or anything else, I don't know, where can people go to check you out.

T

Tara Voelker 46:55

So you can learn more about me, which is basically I have pets, and I love the video game Alan Wake, on Twitter. So you can find me @LadieAuPair. If you get that where that references from, you're a very cool person. And if you want to learn more about accessibility in general, I highly recommend the Game Accessibility Conference. So it happens twice a year, but it's completely free to attend online, paid in person, but free online, and all of the videos from the past conferences are available, so you can watch them all. And then for you know, Microsoft and gaming accessibility, like we have tons of information about all of our video games and just

start our general process up online. And you can check them all out. But definitely I highly recommend again, the award winning Game Accessibility Fundamentals course if you just want to get a lay of the land.

R Rob Mineault 47:56

Well, I was I was really hoping that that would be 3 hours and 50 minutes, but 3 hours and 49 minutes. So ...

T Tara Voelker 48:06

Just won't make the cut then how's that single minute?

R Rob Mineault 48:11

Just pad it out.

T Tara Voelker 48:15

if we'd been truly invested in accessibility, we would have had that additional minute in there.

L Lis Malone 48:20

You're right. Oh, blame the editors.

T Tara Voelker 48:25

Maybe we did pad it out and then they just set us up.

L Lis Malone 48:29

True. Tell you that truncated audio is so overrated.

R Rob Mineault 48:35

Tara, listen, we want to thank you. It's been an absolute delight. chatting with you. Please come on again, because I feel like we've only you know, barely scratched the surface and talking about gaming and accessibility. And you know, best of luck with with everything that you're working on.



T Tara Voelker 48:52

Awesome. And again, thank you so much for rescheduling the last minute when I had to move it because of the the vet stuff. As an update dog is fine but yeah, I appreciate that because I was having a hectic day as you could probably put together so being able to it ended up being just like \$300 for the vet to tell me my dog was fine. She just needed to poo.

L Lis Malone 49:19

Can I just say I had the same thing but it costs me 700.

T Tara Voelker 49:23

Oh God well I got a discount then.

L Lis Malone 49:25

I said well thank goodness she's fine, because now I'm gonna kill her.

T Tara Voelker 49:33

Similar vibe. Yeah. All right, thank you so much.

L Lis Malone 49:37

Thanks Tara! by Okay, I gotta know Rob. Did you know ladieaupair reference?

R Rob Mineault 49:45

No, I didn't.

L Lis Malone 49:47

You are not cool after all, Rob. Like, oh my God, does someone actually really think Rob's cool? Does he know this one?

R Rob Mineault 49:56

No, there's no no no threat of that. But wait But what so do you know what it's from?

L Lis Malone 50:02

L Lis Malone 50:02

Oh, hell no.

R Rob Mineault 50:06

I don't know. Yeah, I don't know. It's well, someone's gonna Google it, Steve. Do the honors.

S Steve Barclay 50:11

I'm looking but I don't even know how to spell it.

R Rob Mineault 50:16

Yeah, I've Googled it here and it does seem to be a reference to a gaming character. Ladie Au Pair and her murderous Moppets. Oh, she's got Moppets.

L Lis Malone 50:52

What's, what's a moppet?

S Steve Barclay 50:55

It's like a small.

R Ryan Fleury 50:58

Jim Henson creature.

L Lis Malone 51:01

The Muppets?

R Rob Mineault 51:08

Man, I hate this. Steve, what game is this from?

S Steve Barclay 51:16

Sorry, I'm just I'm looking back through here.

R

Rob Mineault 51:19

I hate this. We're getting too old.

S

Steve Barclay 51:21

All right background here we go. As a young woman, she attended State University and was a student from Professor Fantomas. She has a doctorate in an unnamed field and appears proficient in mechanics in general sciences as evidenced by her having built the monarchs first pair of functional wings, his ill conceived sunshine den and several tracking devices used for our own purposes. She later became the supervillain known as Lady Au Pair. Before serving as the second in command to many different supervillains over the years under several names, she soon went on to work for phantom limb under the name, Queen, Authorea. Alright, so here's the here's the important part. First appearance in The Terrible Secret of Turtle Bay, voiced by Jackson Public. From the Venture Brothers. There you go. Well, we're, we're no less we're no more informed than we were before.

L

Lis Malone 52:25

Okay, great deal.

R

Rob Mineault 52:28

Weird. Like, we're in the basement of cool.

S

Steve Barclay 52:33

So I think that is industry specific knowledge.

R

Rob Mineault 52:38

Maybe? But very cool. We learned a lot today about accessibility. I really had no idea that there was there was so much activity going on there. But it sounds like we're getting there. Because I do remember on this very podcast, I remember specifically, I don't remember the game, unfortunately. But I remember talking about it was like the first game that had an accessibility like option in the in the game menu itself. And there's only like two or three things that you can do. But it was like the first one. And that was not longer. That's like maybe five, six years ago. So you've come from that to you know, this being a pretty thriving industry within the the gaming industry. So that's pretty cool.

R

Ryan Fleury 53:23

Well, it wasn't that long ago, either that we had Melissa Hope from Descriptive Video Works. And they were seeing more and more studios asking for descriptive audio in their games.

R Rob Mineault 53:31
Yeah.

R Ryan Fleury 53:32
Yeah, that was that was only the last five years.

R Rob Mineault 53:34
Yeah, that's that's a really good point, too. We didn't even touch on that. But yeah.

R Ryan Fleury 53:38
And so I think it'd be really cool for myself, because it's something I've been thinking about doing. But I just have never pulled the trigger. To even like, sit down with you or Steve and look at some of these games. Because it sounds to me that they're some of them are so cinematic, right that you're like you're watching a movie you're experiencing a theater production with the audio description, and you know, that, like she said captioning and you have you know, like, how immersive is this actually. It'd be really interesting because I haven't experienced any of that.

R Rob Mineault 54:14
Not only that, Ryan, but like, you know, all these controllers are all they all have haptics in it right so they all buzz and vibrate and stuff like that. So I'm sure that you can, you know, game developer or something could really work that into and make some some sort of a gaming experience for somebody who is non visual.

R Ryan Fleury 54:31
Last gaming I did was Guitar Hero on our Nintendo Wii.

R Rob Mineault 54:36
Yeah, it counts.

R Ryan Fleury 54:39
Yeah, it'd be interesting. Interesting experience.

R Rob Mineault 54:44
You had a Wii?

R Ryan Fleury 54:45
Used to. We gave it away years ago. It was fun.

R Rob Mineault 54:53
Yeah, Guitar Hero was fun. I missed those games.

L Lis Malone 54:57
Last time I played the game was on Gameboy So it's been awhile for me.

R Rob Mineault 55:04
That counts. you're a gamer. You had a Gameboy, that's super nerdy.

S Steve Barclay 55:09
I played Civ 6 last night.

R Rob Mineault 55:12
Say, oh, yeah, it's a good game. I played a bit of that.

S Steve Barclay 55:16
So I could challenge you online to that one.

R Rob Mineault 55:20
You have a PlayStation 4 right?

S Steve Barclay 55:22
No I don't I have a gaming console.

R Rob Mineault 55:24
Oh, you're playing online?

S Steve Barclay 55:27
PC game.

R Rob Mineault 55:28
Yeah. Got it. Got it. Yeah, there you go. We'll do that too. I can get beat by Tara and then come get beat by you.

S Steve Barclay 55:36
There you go.

R Ryan Fleury 55:37
We didn't talk about, we've talked about the accessibility of consoles. But are these games have the same accessibility if you're using a PC?

R Rob Mineault 55:46
Dammit, I forgot to ask that.

L Lis Malone 55:48
Bring her back. Yeah. Get her back on the line.

R Ryan Fleury 55:52
Yeah, so I was playing with Chat-GPT today. And I asked Chat-GPT to write me a country song and it did. And so I've got verse, chorus, verse chorus, bridge, chorus and outro. You know, typical song layout. So if I put music to that song, do I have the copyright on that song even though I didn't write the lyrics? Who owns the rights to that song?

S Steve Barclay 56:19
That's a great question. I have no idea. Yeah. there's probably a whole area of iurisorudence

that has not been thought out. with respect to this technology.

R Ryan Fleury 56:28
Yeah. That's why we want to try and get somebody on who can talk about AI. B

S Steve Barclay 56:34
I'll get somebody from Chat-GPT legal.

R Rob Mineault 56:39
Lawyer. Yeah.

S Steve Barclay 56:41
Like, why not go to the root?

R Ryan Fleury 56:47
You could probably just ask Chat-GPT whether it's legal. Just ask him. He wrote it.

S Steve Barclay 56:54
Yeah, that's right just say, hey, if I put this if I put this to music, who owns the copyright on it?

L Lis Malone 57:11
Google

R Ryan Fleury 57:13
It's funny though, because I was talking to these guys earlier, I asked chat write me a song called Grudge Whore for the show last week. And it said, nope, can't do it. Derogatory terms and stuff in there. So it has some ethics.

R Rob Mineault 57:29
So you have to wait for the evil version?

R Ryan Fleury 57:32
Yes. Because yeah, it's coming.

L Lis Malone 57:35
Yeah. The dark web. The dark web version. Yeah, exactly.

R Rob Mineault 57:39
I'm going to build it

S Steve Barclay 57:42
GPT dark.

R Rob Mineault 57:45
And it drains your bank account.

S Steve Barclay 57:54
Free me.

R Rob Mineault 57:58
Alright, Hey, Lis. Where the heck can people find us?

L Lis Malone 58:06
They can find us at www.atbanter.com.

R Rob Mineault 58:11
Hey, they can also drop us an email if they so desire at cowbell@atbanter.com

R Ryan Fleury 58:16
Shout out to Svetlana

R Rob Mineault 58:22
That's right. Yeah. So Svetlana sent us a lovely email.

R Ryan Fleury 58:27
Yep, yeah. Yeah.

R Rob Mineault 58:29
So there you go. People you want your name mentioned with the cowbell strike send us an email.

R Ryan Fleury 58:36
Even if you think we're not funny. Send us an email.

L Lis Malone 58:42
Already gotten enough email on that.

S Steve Barclay 58:48
Well, you can tell them it rhymes with fun.

R Rob Mineault 58:52
That's right. Hey, where else can people find us?


S Steve Barclay 58:57
Honestly, I don't know anymore.

R Rob Mineault 58:59
Just Instagram. We just lost the password.


S Steve Barclay 59:02
I don't know. I don't know. I don't know.


Okay, so Facebook, Twitter, Truth social.

 Rob Mineault 59:08
Mastodon

 Steve Barclay 59:09
Mastodon. Yeah, I don't know Grindr. We're everywhere. Swipe right. Is that the good one? Swipe right. I think so.

 Ryan Fleury 59:26
That's the good one. Okay, Steve talked to you app developer. We need an app. Here you go. Yeah. That's all you can do. Just swipe right.

 Rob Mineault 59:38
No other functionality, just swipe right. Endless, endless pictures of Ryan eating pancakes.

 Ryan Fleury 59:51
That'd be awesome.

 Rob Mineault 59:52
Perfect. We'll get Tara to make it accessible. All right, that is going to about do it for us this week. Big thanks of course to Tara for joining us, and we will see everybody next week.