Transcript: A Conversation on Inclusive Gaming with Bryce Johnson and SightlessKombat

Webinar recorded on September 17th, 2024.

Note: This transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Sinéad:

Good afternoon, good morning, good evening, depending on where you are in the world.

Welcome. I'd like to begin with a visual description. My name is Sinéad Burke. I'm a white cisgender woman. I use the pronouns she/her. I identify as queer and physically Disabled. I have brown shoulder-length hair and a kind of mauve pink cardigan on today. I'm here in my home office in County Meath. I have a bookshelf behind me that is filled with books and precious things that mean a lot to me.

While I shared a visual description, I didn't give you an introduction to myself and why I am the person here hosting this conversation today. I am the CEO and founder of Tilting the Lens. Tilting the Lens is a strategic consultancy. We are a majority Disabled team that is across Europe, but we have global and local clients. Our job is to build pathways to design with Disabled people to ensure that they thrive in every room, in every environment. Part of our strategic plan at Tilting the Lens is about investing back into the Disabled community, and about open-sourcing our learning and to create opportunities like this where we can introduce you to people that we know, people that are new to us too, and to give an understanding of how they do what they do.

I won't lie, on the topic of inclusive gaming, I am not an expert. Though prior to this conversation, I did get some time with both Bryce and SightlessKombat. They told me if I played the Sims, or even Snake or Solitaire or Sudoku, I'm a gamer. I'm taking that with great pride!

But I feel like that is very much enough from me. As I shared, it is about introducing you to people who we know and don't yet know. This time last year, I had the great privilege to be in Seattle to be in conversation with Jenny Lay-Flurrie, the Chief Accessibility Officer at Microsoft. While there, I got to meet the wonderful Bryce Johnson. I will tell you that I spent more than a lunch time picking his brain, asking him all sorts of questions. I have admired SightlessKombat for such a long time, both in terms of his work as a gamer, in terms of ensuring that as many people as possible can see gaming as an opportunity for them to have joy and look at gaming as an

opportunity for accessible innovation. But I think it is important they introduce themselves rather than a version from me. We often do this at Tilting the Lens alphabetically by first name. Bryce, can you give us a visual description of yourself and a brief introduction of who you are and why you are here today.

Bryce:

Sure, my name is Bryce Johnson. I am a middle-aged heavy-set white man with a big grey bushy beard. I am coming to you from the Microsoft Inclusive Tech Lab which is just outside of Seattle in Redmond, Washington. I will give the folks a quick sort of spin of the room. We are a facility on the Microsoft campus where we host the Disability community. This is a space for the Disability community. We bring in folks to engage with us to develop our products. I work on primarily Windows in our hardware devices here at Microsoft. I focus full-time on basically making assistive technology.

Sinéad:

Bryce, before I go to SightlessKombat for an introduction, I'm mindful you gave us this wonderful pan of the room. Can you tell us a little bit about what is in that room particularly for those who are blind and low vision and don't have access to it?

Bryce:

Yes, we are a facility that has designed this room to be not just as accommodating as possible, but as welcoming as possible. So, while we have an ADA (The Americans with Disabilities Act) exterior door width, and the expected wheelchair door openers, we also have things like this double door which is more welcoming and it has – if you are running in a power chair going through an ADA door – can be a bit like threading the needle. This is a lot more welcoming.

Our floors are sectioned off into these sections where tile separates each part of the room and the floor, it has a unique texture so that if you are someone who is blind or with low vision, using a cane or feet, you can feel when you transition from one side of the room to the other. It has a tactile border on the room. I have a big glass wall over there, pretty far from the camera. I'm not too echoey, that's because we have a tonne of soundproofing in here to make sure that the room is as clear as possible and the people speaking here are as clear as possible. We do have an amplification system if someone needs it. We also can control all of the lighting aspects of the room. I have got quite a collection of assistive technology in my cupboards.

Sinéad:

That was so helpful, Bryce. I love that comparison and the contrast between accommodation and welcome. You know, we often talk about accessibility as creating the environment for people to thrive and acknowledging that it is not the fault, of course, of Disabled people but the fact that

design, whether it is in technology or the built environment, is what often creates the barrier, and actually there is so much that we can do within that space.

For me, when I came to the lab, one of the first great symbols of welcome was even what is typically a foot plate or a hand plate to be able to enter into the door, so often if you are going into an ADA door, there is a push plate you push with your hand, there was a plate almost as tall as I am, which is 105 centimetres, which means it doesn't matter at what height or what mobility device you use, it doesn't determine how you can or can't enter the building. I wasn't expecting a tour of the lab this afternoon! Thank you so much.

SightlessKombat, I want to come to you. I would love for you to introduce yourself and to tell the audience a little bit about you and gaming and, you know, why you're here today.

SightlessKombat:

Hello everybody.

SightlessKombat:

I'm SightlessKombat, or at least the handle I have gone by for many years as part of my work as an award-winning multi-credited accessibility consultant. I'm also a gamer without sight, having absolutely no sight whatsoever. I'm also the Accessible Gaming Officer for RNIB, that is the Royal National Institute of Blind People, the UK-based sight-loss charity. I have been their Accessibility Gaming Officer for a couple of years now. The thing about the way I game is, you know, people say to me, oh, you know, you're a blind gamer. Then I say, well, technically yes, but I use the term "gamer without sight". If you didn't know before that, that's why I use that term, and that is the clarification. I use that to try and just clear things up.

For those of you that can't see me, I'm a white man in my early 30s. I have light elements of facial hair. I'm wearing a cap. In this instance, it is an RNIB one with "Design for every gamer" on it, which is the initiative I helped co-launch last year, alongside a bunch of wonderful colleagues and external sighted influencers from outside of RNIB's circle, I guess you could say. I'm surrounded – by memorabilia, but behind me I have what we, as part of my streaming because I do lots of different things, I write accessibility reviews, I stream on Twitch and on YouTube, and I put videos together for YouTube as well. I disseminate content to social media, et cetera, et cetera. I have done presentations all around the world, including at Microsoft, as part of various events there and the gaming accessibility conference.

Behind me, I have what we call the "wall of stuff" on my streams. It was kind of a community joke that then has just stuck! But that includes the "pop waffle", also a community-related term which is a series of squares with various Funko Pops in, from the numerous franchises I have played or, you know, I've beaten or even worked on in certain cases. I have worked on titles like Horizon Forbidden West, Killer Instinct, Sea of Thieves. Recently accredited in Star Wars Outlaws, which

was amazing to be accredited as part of a Star Wars game. That's me. I'm sure we will elaborate on elements of that later.

Sinéad:

Thank you so much, for also the nuance there around language, you know. I think those of us who are immersed or part of the Disabled community, we have an understanding of the nuances of language, but I think for many people it can mean that they don't actually have the conversation. I even remember a brilliant engagement that I had with Jordyn Zimmerman last year, around the difference between non-verbal and non-talking. It was such an education to me.

To your point, how do we think of the spectrum of vision and try to be as accurate as possible and include everyone and know that everyone is learning? You mentioned a whole list of qualifications along with a wall of stuff, which I think is officially what I'm going to be calling my backdrop from now on! But when I think about changes in accessibility, I think there's an ease for somebody who is day-to-day not a gamer to say "Gosh, gaming is an industry that has been radically transformed, as has technology, with accessibility being a baseline or an undercurrent of those changes". I guess what I'd love to know from you is, is that true? What changes have you witnessed in the gaming industry, as regards to being both somebody who is an adviser and somebody who is a gamer and a streamer, themselves?

SightlessKombat:

It is a very good question., I feel like gaming has, I wouldn't say radically transformed, but it is beginning to transform and that's been a process many, many years in the making. Partly started when games like Uncharted 4 came along from Naughty Dog, which didn't add accessibility for gamers without sight, but it added very high-profile motor accessibility features thanks to Josh Straub who worked at DAGERSystem, but that's now changed to Ability Points, I think they have re-branded relatively recently.

The point being that, accessibility started as a major talking point in the industry probably about eight or so years ago. It was a thing before that through, you know, physical disabilities and various initiatives through a few games like Injustice: Gods Among Us and Mortal Kombat X adding the audio interaction cues that are for stage interactions. Those were added thanks to discussions that were able to be had with consultants – not myself – but other consultants in the community which is interesting to know.

Even over the past four years, we have seen arguably the biggest evolutions, maybe 4 to 6 years, with Xbox's games allowing menus to be narrated, so menus that just speak as you go through, rather than having to use Optical Character Recognition (OCR). If you are unfamiliar, it takes a picture of the screen and attempts to extrapolate text from that picture, so a screen reader which renders on-screen controls text and other elements has synthesised speech and/or Braille. When they're labelled correctly, OCR renders text to a screen reader which, you know, you can then try

and read and understand what is going on there. But that happens even when there is no text in there sometimes which can be hmm... frustrating to say the least!

Sinéad:

Thank you so much, because I'm even trying to think about, to your point, you know, in those eight years and four years what that tangible change looks like. Your example of the menus but also in terms of, you know, character, engagement and responsibility and how that engages with the screen reader and, you know, in Tilting the Lens we have this phrase of "We don't know what we don't know", I'm discovering all that I don't know as regards to gaming. You talked about the last four years, is there anything specific or any functionality that you could speak to that has transformed or changed or is becoming more mainstream, to your point?

SightlessKombat:

I would be remiss, given you said the last four years, I should mention The Last of Us: Part 1 and Part 2 and the work that was undertaken on that, I was not involved in that but the team of consultants that were, including Brandon Cole, who is unfortunately no longer with us. The Last of Us, as a franchise, has now set the standard for a lot of people. It has a few innovations of its own, but what it does as a key thing is that it puts together a lot of cohesive features from other titles, so things like the navigation assist elements that were present in things like the original Dead Space all of the way back in 2008, and, you know, Gears of War had implementation of it back in 2006. It also takes things like the learn game sound concept from audio-only games, which have been arguably their own genre for decades at this point. You know, just to name a couple of elements, as well as the fact of the matter is it is taking those elements and putting it into one giant package for the industry to then see, ah, this is how all of these things work together. Having that as a reference point, even to say that this is the bar that the industry shouldn't just be reaching for but surpassing, that was a big step.

Sinéad:

It is creating that benchmark, and having something for people to aspire to and be able to measure engagement and impact. It is so interesting. I think, you know, it's my birthday in a couple of days, so I think I'm going to be ordering for myself The Last of Us and I will let you know how I get on, but I might need your help or some sort of cheats.

SightlessKombat:

If you would like an assistant, let me know.

Sinéad:

I will call you.

SightlessKombat:

Partly because there are other games as well that have come along since. This is the bar that the industry is reaching for, the benchmark and there are other games that have done that and exceeded it in different ways. So things like God of War might not be fully-accessible, but thanks in part to a guide that I've been helping co-write, with a fellow gamer, who worked on accessibility for that game as well. In addition to the accessibility that is in games for things like combat or navigation as well, that game is an example of how to make an accessible combat experience. The game does need assistance to be played fully, but it is a better example than what has come before.

Sinéad:

It is about progress. I love that idea of the guide you spoke to because I think so often, I'm going to come to Bryce in a second, when we think about accessibility, particularly in a corporate environment, there can often be the mentality "this is ours", rather than something that is open sourced or is about creating legacy for community and sharing that knowledge. So, I can't wait to ask for your help as I move to the scenes, is that what it was called? I think the last game I played like that was Tomb Raider.

I will come to Bryce now because we have been talking about functionality and the changes in the last few years and seeing this transformation. Bryce, I remember when I met you for the first time and one of the big pivots for me, as I think about just the consumer and corporate and company sentiment around accessibility, was the Xbox Adaptive Controller. It acted as a real turning point for so many communities, and thinking that this was something that could and did exist. And it wasn't merely an announcement, but something that people could engage with in order to make gaming, but also multiple devices, more accessible. Bryce, I remember when I met you the first question I asked you was, "How did you get it made?" What I meant by that was less about the materiality of the plastics and the various different items, but in terms of getting those over the line, getting buy-in, et cetera. I'm jumping far into the narrative for those who are new to the conversation of the Xbox Adaptive Controller, I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about that process, your involvement, and then also, being mindful that the adaptive joystick has just come out.

Bryce:

It hasn't come out yet. The adaptive joystick has been announced but it hasn't come out yet. It is interesting, right, I know SightlessKombat has been with us on this journey for a long time. I was at Xbox and I was in gaming when the gaming community actively ignored accessibility, right. Basically, just said that it wasn't important. And that journey to get people to change has been a story of broader inclusion in gaming. You know, I mean, we can all look back to a recent time when gaming was very insular, right, and, I think there's still elements of that within the gaming community, but hopefully they are dying and we are embracing a larger world. Gaming is the

most popular form of entertainment on the planet so it is one of those things where we need to be completely inclusive.

Our journey with the adaptive controller was challenging. I would say the adaptive controller wouldn't have happened if the team that built it, didn't stick with it. What I mean by that is, you have probably heard Satya, our CEO, say things like, "Be the change you want to see in the world", quoting Gandhi. Another thing he says is, "Use the power of – use Microsoft to be the change you want to see in the world." That can be really tricky because we were creating a controller, we had our customers that we started with, who were disabled veterans, people who had grown up playing video games, lost the ability to play video games when they were injured and so they had a real need to get back to it.

As we developed the adaptive controller over many years we had to bring the entire community along. When I say "insular", it is a close-knit community. People didn't recognise that game controllers were the challenge. I will say that that is not even for people within the community, it is for people outside of the community. There's a lot of power in the idea of forms and how they are interpreted. If I held up an adaptive controller to you, you wouldn't immediately recognise it as a game controller. If I held up an Xbox adaptive controller, you would. That's a powerful thing, even for those who can't use the typical controller. It still mentally is a game controller for them.

For us, as we developed it we had to really push along this line of changing attitudes, about what people expected from a product. One of the things early on in the process was that we had engineers, and programme and product managers so used to going, "what is the primary purpose of this product?" We could not articulate the primary purpose of it in a way that was satisfying to them. Until we basically said, the primary game controller is the traditional controller, it is the one that most people will use. Our product is for all of the people who can't use that one. We are the alternative.

When we talk about the social model of disability and you talk about, the built environment, we do not believe in one-size-fits-all. The inclusive lab here does not try for one-size-fits-all. Often I have to push against industrial designers and other people who think they've cracked the code: "I can do it, I can make this one thing that works for everybody". It doesn't take long to really push on that.

Now, that doesn't mean that we don't think things can be made flexible. We talk about flexibility a lot. The reason why the adaptive controller is called the adaptive controller, isn't because you adapt to it, it is that it adapts to you. How do we make things that grow and stretch when we make products? I use this example all of the time – Sinéad, I don't know how it will land with you – when you buy a car, you don't buy a small, medium or large car, the seats adjust, things go up or down, maybe not enough for you, but that's something to strive to, this idea of "no, let's make something that is so adjustable we can adjust it to meet the needs of human diversity."

I think one of the things I do like to say and hear quite often in the lab, in our inclusive design practice – we think about accessibility as the outcome of inclusive design. All accessibility really

is, is personalisation that takes into account human diversity. If we just thought about it like that, it would be a lot easier for people to put their heads around. I think the problem is that, when you get engineers who try to learn to be doctors or try to learn the ins and outs of every condition, it can be really tricky.

I remember when SightlessKombat used to hang out in Redmond, we used to have these vision simulation goggles. I still have them, they're in a box somewhere but we don't really use those in our practice any more. We don't role play disability, because we would get engineers that would put on a pair of goggles and be, like, "oh, I get it", in a minute. Oh, no, you don't! You're heading in the wrong direction if you think you can get it in 30 seconds. I think that's part of the practice that's really hard, you know. In tech, we have this ideal of "Move fast and break things" and that stunt sometimes jives well with the communities we participate in. We have to figure out how to be mindful, get people to really truly understand what people are asking about. I often tell people here that I'm into the striving to build empathy, I'm striving to build compassion and altruism. Empathy is a strange thing, it can be a strange thing, you know. Sorry, I went off on a tangent there. I hope that answers that question.

Sinéad:

It was a wonderful tangent. A couple of things that really resonated with me, one that accessibility is the outcome of inclusive design, and how we need to bring everybody on that journey, particularly those with expertise and good intention. I often think about how many conversations I have where, often, the belief is that the outcome of accessibility is compliance. The people who are most in need of access, because things are not designed for them, become erased when it comes down it, a framework or a minimum, or a set of cons, or the negative outcome is being defined. All of those things exist historically for those purposes, but to your point, they don't necessarily create compassion.

I think also about how, to your point, in terms of dressing up disability, in many ways that still exists in different forms. I think about how often there is, an annual festival of a CEO sitting in a wheelchair for the day and going through a local town or a local city in a wheelchair for the day, with the ambition that they emerge from that experience with empathy. But, I actually believe that they emerge from it with gratitude that that is not their lived experience.

Bryce:

Right.

Sinéad:

I think they come out of that chair thinking "I'm so grateful that's not me, because that's awful." I think it does the inverse of what we're trying to do, is that disability is part of the life cycle, of the human experience, but also that everybody requires flexibility. To your point in a car, Bryce, I make the contrasting example around clothes, that, you know, buttons are tricky for everybody. A

zip at the back of a dress is difficult for everybody. How do we think about flexibility, dignity and ease, comfort, but also design in terms of, particularly around garments or products, the aesthetic of it?

I want to ask you one more question about the adaptive controller because I'm mindful that our audience today are both those who are experts in gaming and inclusive design and there are some here who don't know who either of you are, have never heard of inclusive gaming and have never heard of the adaptive controller. Bryce, would you mind telling us a little bit about the functionality of the adaptive controller and to your point, how it creates flexibility for different types of use?

Bryce:

Yeah, let me just go and grab one. Maybe, Ben, if SightlessKombat wants to add?

Sinéad:

I will come to you with a question while Bryce finds a corner of the lab where it is going to be. SightlessKombat, what I wanted to talk to you about, you have mentioned a couple of times today quite brilliantly the importance of consulting and whether that is projects you have consulted on, whether it is projects that others in the community and experts have consulted on. Sometimes when we think about inclusive design and innovation, Disabled people are, as I mentioned earlier, only considered the end users. I wondered, without necessarily naming any company perhaps, but what has been a good best practice or better practice that you have experienced in terms of meaningful engagement of disabled people as experts in inclusive gaming?

SightlessKombat:

Great question, Sinéad. I think a good practice to look at is the idea of worldwide collaboration. What I mean by that is not just saying this opportunity is only available to people in this region who can come into this place and play. What you do instead is, you reach out as a company or a studio to people and say, right, "We're looking for people who have this set of needs, so we're looking for gamers without sight or we're looking for people who have physical difficulties or whatever it is." Then you say, "We will offer you the ability to remote test whatever it is, whether that's with the hub or we sent a piece of software out for you to have a look at". Being able to test stuff like that, and then give your feedback in an environment that is familiar to you, and also in a way that you can participate whilst being all of the way across the world.

So I worked with The Coalition a few years ago on Gears 5, a great feature that came out of that was "navigation ping escape mode", as it's officially called in gaming. We call it "escape ping" for short! Escape ping, I got to remote test that and give feedback. There's actually a big blog article that The Coalition published afterwards. Admittedly, the system was flawed. It was admitted as such. The fact of the matter was that the system opened up a massive part of a game mode that was previously only accessible if you had a sighted player running in front of you, swinging

whatever attack they could around, for you to then follow just by the audio. So being able to do that remotely rather than having to necessarily travel all of the way to a studio, and get all of the logistics organised for that is fantastic! I'd love to see more studios adopting that.

By all means, have physical consultancy as well, because I don't deny there's a massive amount of in-person engagement that can happen in a room, but don't dispute or discourage the idea of being able to just chat with people, much like on a call like this, let's say, on a webinar like this, and, you know, there is knowledge to be imparted, there are fun moments to be had where you might find bugs. There are great moments where, you know, things you might not have thought possible are possible.

For instance I have beaten optional bosses in video games. I have played the hardest possible difficulties in a game all done without any assistance. I have played Spider-Man on high difficulty, that's all because accessibility is there. Even when I'm testing stuff for accessibility, it is sometimes a thing of "oh, I didn't know that was a feature" and then a developer might see that and say, "oh, that's really cool, we saw this game had this feature, could you tell us more about it?" It is all worldwide, it should be about collaboration and uniting under a common cause.

Sinéad:

Yes. I think those are just some really great kind of baseline standards that people and companies should adhere to. To your point, it should be global and, it should be in an accessible format and it should be both hybrid in terms of things that often happen in person. And to your point, there's huge value with engaging with people online and going to a place where they themselves have their set-up and have value in that. I would nudge and also say they should also be paid. But as a Disabled CEO and Entrepreneur, that is a very particular principle of mine that I think Disabled people should be paid. I heard a phrase once which is "lived experience is intellectual property". I think people's lived experience and expertise, which adds value to so many projects and innovations.

SightlessKombat if I could ask you, we have talked there about the positives and what best practice looks like, without naming any organisation, what is it that a company should not do in terms of thinking about meaningful engagement with Disabled experts?

SightlessKombat:

I think that's a very sticky question arguably.

Sinéad:

Sure.

SightlessKombat:

What I will say is that a key thing to remember, a couple of key things to remember, is what I'll say instead is that sight loss is a spectrum, so if you think "oh, you know, this works for blind people", going back to terminology thing again, "this game is blind accessible", what does that mean? Because blind-accessible could mean, you know, a person's got usable vision or they've got residual vision or enough to see the screen for instance they've got enough to determine what is going on on the screen. If you add in a high-contrast mode or colourblind features, that's fine, they can play the game.

If you take it to mean, to apply it to a situation like my own, then you are adding in audio cues, you're adding in navigational assist, you're adding in menu narration and all of those fun things, audio cues that can then help you play without the need to see at all. Because of course video games are inherently seen as – pun intended – seen as a visual medium which is inherently not true, because, you know, people have been blindfolded speed running for decades even if they can see, which, sort of is a good way to hammer the point home. Sight loss is one part of it.

Also remember to get the feedback. Constructive feedback, be constructive in your feedback when you're providing it to studios and companies. Don't just say, "This sucks, this is bad". Say, "You know, I have had issues with this because of these things, here's a potential solution". But also as well, I have played video games for decades, for many, many years now. I'm not the only type of person you want to be looking at. You want to be looking at the casual users, so people who have never played a video game in their lives or this might be their first video game since losing their sight or having their vision changed or, however, you want to look at it, so embrace your widest possible audience as you get consultancy to happen. Consult with a gamer without sight who has been playing for years and consult with a gamer who has recently lost their sight. I have done music streams, I'm a certified audio describer, it can apply across the board and not just to gaming, any of this.

Sinéad:

I love the multiple services from both of you, I'm in and signing up! To your point, we often talk about this, I have dwarfism, you meet me today, you have met one person with dwarfism. Somebody else with a different or the exact same kind of dwarfism has a different experience and potentially different accessibility accommodations and different innovations. It is one part of our identity. How do we capture the broadest possible audience as part of that? I also think about another headline that we are probably going to attach to this content afterwards which is, people must misunderstand gaming as a visual medium. For me, that's a real takeaway from today. Thank you so much.

Bryce, I will come to you specifically around the adaptive controller so you can give us some sense of what it is and how it works.

Bryce:

Yes, to sort of start off, I will go through a regular control and the unintentional exclusions that happened.

If you are old like me and you remember the Atari 2600, it is a generation 1 Nintendo. Then it was Gen 2, this is Gen 9. PlayStation 5, genomics series X Gen 9.

These things have been optimised around a primary use case. They made a lot of assumptions that unintentionally excluded people. They assume that people have hands to hold them. They assume that people have two thumbs, that they've a fluid range of motion with thumbs. And that they have the strength and the endurance to hold this while they're playing.

What we had to recognise when we created the adaptive controller was that when people couldn't use our beloved Xbox controller, that we unintentionally created the barrier. So, the social model of disability, we created the problem. I will say we primarily started with people who are limb different, and Cerebral Palsy. You do not have the fine motor finger stuff that typical controllers needed. The people who needed the most radical set-up were in that group, those limb difference folks.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnLlbeVRe7Q

The way it works on the back of the controller, we have a switch port for every function on the controller. So, switches are very common in the Disabled community, very simple, they're typically just three and a half millimetre plug, you plug it into here, you take the button, this one is by our partners at Logitech G. This button is the X button. I will plug it into the X port for consistency. So, now it's actually the X buttons here. If I wanted to, I put this button where I have movement. But the way that we designed this controller and the reason why there's so many ports, what we saw out there in the disabled community is that assistive technology gets sold on feature sets and not necessarily on ease of use. And that there were a lot of people buying full-functioning pieces of kit that they never read the manual or took out a default mode. Like, they basically started to adapt themselves to that new form that they were using instead of customising it. It was really important to us, back then, to make the customisation of this as simple as just plug, plug back in, this is how you can reconfigure it, no software, just things like that. You can do this for every function of the controller. So, that's buttons.

I will say that, we have more than buttons. We worked with a lot of other partners on things like the joystick. You mentioned the adaptive joystick. This is the precursor of that, actually, there's a precursor before this, if there are any Nintendo fans out there, this looks like a Wii joy con. We worked with our partner PDP, doing this basically moulding and tooling to create Wii joy cons. They changed the board and the cable so that it could plug into the adaptive controller. It uses a standard USB port. It is not proprietary, you plug it in there, this is a joystick. But a little over a year ago, the tooling for these devices expires. What it means in a manufacturing sense is, basically the moulds broke. They were no good any more. It is very expensive to recreate these

things. PDP decided not to do that. We thank them for basically coming with us on this journey so far. But we had to go and fulfil this need and that's what led to us basically deciding that we needed to create our own version of this and that's what led to the adaptive joystick.

There's lots of things we have learned in the many years since the adaptive controller has been out. We are really excited about how the adaptive joystick will come out into the world. I didn't work on it a lot. I worked on it a little bit. We have a wonderful colleague Kaitlyn Jones who worked on it. And Kaitlyn, you know, knows her stuff. You're all in good hands!

Sinéad:

And I believe it's coming early 2025, as you said.

Bryce:

Yes. Dates for me, since I'm not working on it, I know it's early 2025, that's all I know too.

Sinéad:

Amazing. I want to ask you one question before we go to the many brilliant questions in the Q&A box, because, I asked SightlessKombat around creating an environment and settings for conversations with Disabled gamers and about accessibility as an outcome. From your perspective in the lab, what are the principles that you put in place or the ways of working to really cultivate that or to ensure that, to your point that you made earlier, that well-intentioned engineers or designers, you know, keep in mind the things that are most important or thinking about widest possible audience and challenges or barriers that they may experience.

Bryce:

One of the things I have learned, it is a hard lesson to learn, is that you're always doing basically introductory work, right? And, while I have been in tech a long time, and I've been focusing on disability exclusively for a decade, my colleagues aren't like that, right? So, I could fix something in a product, the next version of that product comes out, there's a whole new team that has entered the product and then I have to go reteach them all of the things that happened, it is kind of constant.

I will say in here we go through these kinds of ebbs and flows. The one thing we have the space for, and we are clear and we can't achieve the goal we want to achieve, is to make sure that the Disability community is engaging with us as much as possible to build our products. We hire people with disabilities. My boss has cerebral palsy. All of my colleagues have, like, different types of disabilities. It's still never enough, right?

So, one of the things that I recently did, to kind of get back to, I think a little bit of that grounding, was to think about the many, many ways that we engage the Disabled community. While we do

practise inclusive design, we bring people in, but that is for specific projects. I have a discussion in our lab with colleagues, we call it “Nothing about us without us”, and we call it a conversation. It is to make sure that my colleagues have a constant set of opportunities to go and talk to folks from the Disabled community.

I know I said at the beginning that gaming used to actively ignore accessibility, but no-one does that here anymore, right? No-one would ever say accessibility is not important, but that doesn’t mean they have the tools or the knowledge, or even the tools to get started to engage the Disability communities, and it is a two-way street.

I know we’re big tech and we deserve all of the punches that get thrown at us sometimes. But, one of the challenges that I have is, as someone who works on both sides of the fence, is making sure that the Disabled community’s voices are heard and their needs are met. And not extinguishing the ideas that my engineers have. So, engineers can have some wild ideas. I’m staring at two interpreters and we all know the story of the Sign Language gloves, right? So, part of my job is to direct folks to not extinguish that idea or that fire, but to redirect it into the best way possible, right? Because yeah, I will tell you as someone who has worked in here, I have gone through those journeys too. I have told engineers, no, this idea is offensive, don’t do it. That’s also not helpful. The enthusiasm around accessibility and engaging with the Disability community is precious and you don’t want to waste it. You do want to redirect it.

Sinéad:

I can’t stop thinking about what you said earlier, we’re always doing the introductory work. I think about it in the sense we have a maturity model internally at Tilting the Lens for how we do our work, which is – this is me going to remember it – it is awareness, advocacy, policy, culture, system. It is ebbs and flows in thinking about how change happens and how people are on a journey but also organisations and projects too. You’re always doing the introductory work. Even when you think progress has happened, and it has, there are still more people who need to be told the origin story.

Bryce:

There’s always new people.

Sinéad:

And who forget, or don’t remember, or who need a re-engagement with the lesson. So, I’m going to be taking that with me. I can see that the Q&A box is incredibly full. The first question we’ve received, which is very interesting because it takes us to a particular Disability. “Are there innovations that improve accessibility for gamers with sensory sensitivities? I often find parts over-stimulating.”

SightlessKombat:

I mean, it depends on your specific situation. I think that's the main thing, that a lot of sensory stuff – I'm not going to try to speak to it myself. But I think what I would say generally is that, it depends on what you find over-stimulating, as to whether you can adjust it. Because, you know, if it is certain types of sounds, some games allow you to have frequency cut offs and things like that. If it is visual overstimulation, you might need to use other options to look at that. I don't know if you agree with that, Bryce.

Bryce:

I think it is what you're saying. There's a gaming disability consultant named Shell Little. Look up Shell, this is basically her wheelhouse. But I will say that it is about tuning. What I find interesting about stimulation and, one thing that happens a lot in accessibility is that we think about barriers and facilitators. The problem is that in gaming, the barrier is the reason why you're there. Like, you're playing the game to engage the barrier. So, it is about right-sizing the barrier, for yourself, Something that could be overstimulating for you can be, like, understimulating for others. I find this really interesting because I have worked with King Games, if anyone is familiar with Candy Crush, that is made by King Games. And we have talked to people who find the aspects of a "sugar crush" just overstimulating. And it is, it can be, but they still want the celebration. They don't want to skip the celebration. I think a lot of times in gaming there's this idea of, like, if something is bad, skip it. But I think it is like what SightlessKombat said about sound, but, like, on a visual and animation kind of level. Turn down the celebration, right? Maybe not full fire but maybe like a sparkler, I don't know!

Sinéad:

It is about customisation. The hope is that that customisation is built into the game to give users and players that flexibility. If not, how can you customise it within the limits that exist? Look at me, pretending to know gaming. An hour with you both! Someone has asked a brilliant question – with so many remasters of classic games for modern consoles, isn't that an opportunity to make these titles more accessible. Are there any classic series you would like to be remastered with better accessibility?

For those who are not sighted, Ben's arms went up in the air!

SightlessKombat:

I was raising both fists in anticipation of just being able to go, yes!

There is a massive opportunity here. I think a lot of people have a go at remasters and remakes and things because, you know, it's a matter of "oh, we don't need this".

The Last of Us Part 1, “we don’t need a remake this soon”, The Last of Us Part 1 for those who don’t know, the original game launched in 2013, – the PS4 remaster of the PS3 game launched in 2014 and Part 1 as it is now known launched nine years later. People were, like, “Oh, you know, why is this a thing?” It is, a thing because there are people who wouldn’t have been able to play the original game. Tech has moved on. The key thing is that what they decided to do, we’re remaking our beloved game and we’ve got all of these features from Part 2, why don’t we just grab all of these features from Part 2 and shove them into the original, in terms of accessibility included. I was then able to go through, sit down on my own terms, and play through a game that I had been waiting for over a decade to complete, nearly a decade to complete at that point, I was never able to play it without assistance. And when you can’t play a thing, when you can’t play a game on your own without having somebody to be constantly there with you… and yes, there is something to be said in terms of it, you know, bonding and collaboration and friendship and whatever else, the fact of the matter is you sometimes want to play a video game at midnight or 1.00 AM! You then don’t want to have to enlist other people’s help to play that video game at 1 AM. You want to sit down and enjoy it yourself. Remakes can help with that. It can make those experiences, it can open up those experiences that were previously off-limits.

As for classic series, anything Warhammer 40K, I have been playing Space Marine 2, I had to do both with sighted assistance, I’m pleased to see that Focus Entertainment have put out a statement about accessibility. By the same token, the original game didn’t have much in the way of accessibility. I would love to just go through and play that without assistance. Doom, basically if you take any popular franchise of the past 20-odd years, you know, I could list off names. You mentioned Tomb Raider, Final Fantasy, Call of Duty, Fortnite, even stuff like FIFA, a cricket game, any number of things, Dark Souls, God of War.

Sinéad:

I like it. I think we’re manifesting.

I’m mindful of time and that we have asked an hour of everybody. What I would love to ask as a final question to you both and in just sixty seconds, are there any books, streamers, blogs, podcasts, advocates or individuals and industries or organisations that you would recommend about inclusive gaming? Who are the people or the platforms that the audience should be engaging in after today?

SightlessKombat:

Bryce, I will let you take this one first.

Bryce:

Seeing the locale and the company I’m keeping, I would say my friend SightlessKombat is one that you should follow! As far as organisations go, I’m fond of the work of SpecialEffect in the

UK. Mick, Bill, Tom, you know, all of those guys have done some truly amazing work over the years.

We learn so much and we have learned so much from their practice. We continue to learn, they're really a great organisation. I would encourage everyone to look into SpecialEffect.

Sinéad:

Thank you. Besides yourself, SightlessKombat?

SightlessKombat:

I appreciate the endorsement from my learned friends! I would say, I mean if you want to find out – as a plug – if you want to find what RNIB is doing in the gaming space, go to rnib.org.uk, design for every gamer. That's the home page of the DFEG, the "design for every gamer" initiative.

Looking up, there are communities on social media as well. There is an inclusive, I think it is inclusive design, there's a list that I've seen pop up on X/Twitter, however you want to refer to, I've seen that list pop up. There are various places on Reddit to go and look as well. I know there are various places with their pros and cons of course in terms of what type of advice you might get. In terms of streamers, I know Twitch are looking at inducting disabled creatives into some kind of guild. There is an application form online. I believe it has now expired though.

Family gaming database as well, to look at accessibility. That's got a very varied sort of discourse on that. "Can I play that?" is a site that you could look up for information. Though of course, remember accessibility reviews are all subjective and different perspectives.

Sinéad:

And deeply personal. SightlessKombat, thank you very much. I can't thank you both enough for spending the past hour with me and it has been such a privilege. I have really taken so much away. I think the two things for me from both of you is that "accessibility is an outcome of inclusive design". I think also the piece that "gaming is not a visual medium, it's actually far more than that" and "how do we meaningfully include disabled people as experts in the process?"

Thank you so much for joining us. Thank you for spending your time with us. Bryce, your lights have just gone off which is a true sign that we are done! Thank you everybody for joining us! We will see you again soon.

You can follow SightlessKombat on Twitch, YouTube, et cetera. You can find my website at www.SightlessKombat.com