Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 71: Games

Guests: André J. Daughtry and Cherry Thompson

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode is about gaming, and in particular, disabled people who play games. I get to talk to two cool people about their love of gaming and the communities they're a part of: André J. Daughtry and Cherry Thompson. André is a lifelong avid gamer and disability advocate who streams on Twitch, a live-streaming platform for gamers and other activities. Cherry is a games accessibility specialist and developer with a keen focus on systems design and user experience. Please note during this episode, there will be discussions of suicide, harassment, bullying, and hate. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away. We. Go.

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: So, André, welcome to my podcast today!

Introduction to André's interview

ANDRÉ J. DAUGHTRY: Thank you for having me. I'm happy to be here.

ALICE: So, André, why don't you introduce yourself and just share a little bit about yourself if you don't mind?

ANDRÉ: OK. My name is Andre Daughtry. I am a disabled gamer and streamer on Twitch.TV/ my screen name there is Tripping Crutch and I play a variety of games. You know, I'm not a Fortnite streamer, you know. Twitch is much more than Fortnite. I specialize in variety, which means, you know, at any given time, you will find me playing something like Tomb Raider or an RPG like Mass Effect or a multiplayer game like Overwatch. So, it's just a variety of things that I play. And my schedule, I try to make it pretty consistent. But being born with spina bifida and chronic pain kind of makes sticking to a traditional schedule difficult. So, I play it by ears many weeks. There are some weeks where I have to take time off from the stream. And I do feel bad about it, but, you know, I have to do what's best for me.

[electronic, funky music break]

Streaming on Twitch and connecting to Black and disabled gaming communities

ALICE: For people who are unfamiliar with Twitch, do you mind if you describe what this platform is and what it's like to be somebody who's streaming it?

ANDRÉ: Well, Twitch is a streaming platform, which initially started out just for gamers to gather, to watch other gamers stream their gameplay. You know, you either set it up through whatever console you have, or you set it up through your computer like a bypass. And you have your streaming software set up and your camera and whatnot, and you can play games, and you can interact with people who view your channel in real time. But it has since evolved into all different categories. You know, you have people that stream music. You have people that do arts and crafts, people that do body paint, who do cosplay, who do game development and programing streams. So, it's really evolved from what it started out as.

ALICE: Great. Thank you for that. So, when did you start identifying as a gamer, and what does that mean to you? Because I think there may be some people listening who really don't know that much about gaming and about gamer culture. So, when did you first kind of start referring to yourself as a gamer?

ANDRÉ: Oh, I have been a lifelong gamer. I am, I guess you could say, I'm one of that group of people from, you know, that first or maybe second generation of gamers from the late '70s, early '80s, who grew up immersed in gaming and just never stopped. My earliest memories of playing games was actually going to the bowling alley with my father and my brother. Because my father and brother back then were very serious about their bowling. They would drag me along, and I was bored as hell. But, you know, I like shiny things, and I saw the arcade cabinets, you know, the flashing lights and the colors and these digital characters. And I found something that, as a disabled person, you know, I could have fun, I could interact, I can escape.

And to me, that's the essence of video gaming, is that I can escape, and I can enter all these fantastic worlds that I would never be able to realize in my day-to-day. It also means that, you know, my tastes have changed. For example, when I was younger, it was all about the escape. And as an adult, it's still about the escape and fun, but it's also about, how can I use this hobby of mine to reach other people that I might not ever get a chance to socialize with? How can I use gaming as a bridge to maybe educate people on social issues or issues that will affect me as not only a disabled person, but as a Black person?

ALICE: Yeah. Because clearly, Black disabled gamers exist, and I think with a lot of different communities, whether you're into like Star Trek, whether you're into any sort of hobby or interests, for a long time, it's very much dominated by white men. And I think it's been very interesting to see how people of color, disabled people of color, queer disabled people of color have been really on the forefront of saying how much representation matters, not only in games, but also as gamers. Can you talk a little bit about the diversity of folks that you're connected to in the gaming community?

ANDRÉ: I mean, it's not anywhere near what I would hope it eventually becomes, but it's a start. I am connected to CypherOfTyr on Twitter and Twitch. You know, she is a wonderful person who works in the gaming industry, and she is a very great champion for diversity. And she is a wonderful disability ally. Then there's also Cherry Rae, who works in the accessibility front of gaming to try and make games more accessible. There are communities like Black Girl Gamers. There's also TheCookout, which is a community centered around not just disabled gamer or not really disabled gamers, but they're centered around gamers of color. And, you know, it's really

nice to see all these communities all sprouted up. 'Cause as you said earlier, gaming has been gatekept in traditionally white spaces.

Like when I first started Twitch, I had gotten to a point where I was bored as a spectator because I started Twitch as a spectator. I wasn't a streamer at first. I just came on to watch people play games. But after a while, I got bored. I got bored with the streamers, not that they weren't competent in what they do. Not that they weren't entertaining, doing what they did. But I got bored with the whiteness of it all. And, you know, slowly but surely, through my own exploration and later on through joining Twitter and having conversations with people that look like me, I discovered this whole world of nonwhite gamers that I really didn't know existed. I just lament the fact that there isn't something for disabled gamers within that space. You know, it seems like we're always left out in the cold, or we have to choose one of our intersections to be included, but leave our disability behind when it comes to gaming.

[funky electronica music break]

Experiences online: harassment and escape from pain

ALICE: So, you know, I know that every fandom has a lot of issues, a lot of toxicity and just straight-up harassment. So, I was wondering, especially on Twitch or other online communities that you're a part of, have you ever experienced harassment online due to your disability or race?

ANDRÉ: Harassment due to race? Yes. Disability? No. You know, when I'm not using my mobility devices I can pass. And I've long since reconciled that I can pass, but I get annoyed when non-disabled folk point out the fact that I can pass. "Well, you know, if you didn't have your crutches with you, or if you weren't sitting in that chair, I would never know that you were disabled." I didn't ask you. That's rude. So, I think the other thing that plays into it could also be that a lot of people, again, because I can pass, don't think of me as disabled. So, for them, it's out of sight, out of mind. So, I kind of avoid that harassing. Even though there are any number of times when I'm streaming that you will hear me talk about disability. I will talk about my experiences. I will talk about accessibility. Or I will talk about accessibility within the very game I'm playing. You know, how the game feels, how the game looks to me, as a disabled person, what are the features that I'm toying around with that either are good or need a little work?

ALICE: Mmhmm. So, you mentioned earlier about, especially at the beginning when you started gaming, this idea of escape. And you mentioned how also, you deal with chronic pain. Do you ever feel like gaming, does it ever help you in terms of as a distraction to your pain? Does it ever make you feel better?

ANDRÉ: Oh, it definitely makes me feel better. I mean, you know, to get lost in a world where, like take, for instance, one of my favorite gaming franchises, Mass Effect. You're interacting with extraterrestrials. You're in space. You have you have all these fantastic abilities and powers and weapons and biotic suits and what not. You can go to all these exotic locales in space or Skyrim or the Dragon Age franchise, which is high fantasy. And you have dragons and magic and swords, and so it definitely helps to alleviate my pain or at least take away the thought of that pain for the time that I am playing. It's very, you know, it can be very therapeutic. And I don't, really don't know where I would be without gaming.

[funky electronica music break]

The future for disabled gamers

ALICE: What do you hope to see in the future of gaming, especially for disabled gamers? Like what do you want in the future for disabled gamers that’s gonna be better or just more inclusive?

ANDRÉ: What I hope to see is accessibility options being just that: options. You know, I want accessibility to be normalized. I don't want accessibility options to be hidden away in games under this menu that has this big red sign, you know, metaphorically, that says, "Accessibility." They're like this is the stuff for the people who game who aren't like everybody else. No, I want it to just be there incorporated. What I wanna see is more games that have inclusive casts and characters. I wanna see more nonwhite main characters. I want to see more disabled characters in games, you know. And I want that in front and behind the scenes. I want us to get to a point in gaming where you can have a disabled character onscreen authentically in a game being voiced and being acted out by a disabled voice actor. I want to see more, I wanna see more queer representation across the board. I need that. Other people need. The world needs to see more than just the gruff, angry, gravelly-voiced white dude, bro blowing shit up and saving the day. Because not everyone is a rough, gravelly-voiced white dude bro.

[electronic, funky music break]

Introduction to Cherry’s interview and gaming community

ALICE: OK! So, Cherry, I am so excited to have you on my podcast today. Welcome!

CHERRY THOMPSON: Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here. I've been a huge fan of Disability Visibility for so long.

ALICE: So, Cherry, why don’t you, I guess, if you don't mind, introduce yourself and just share a little bit about yourself?

CHERRY: Yeah. So, my name's Cherry Thompson, and I am a games accessibility consultant and developer. I work in game design and education to help make videogames more accessible to more people. And I've been disabled my whole life, but I didn't always identify as disabled due to all sorts of things we all face like stigma and misdiagnosis and things like that. And then I had some really big events happen to me about six years ago with a stroke and various other big medical events that really led me to reevaluate how I access the world. And that kind of led me to games accessibility. And I kind of love it. So, [chuckling] it's good.

ALICE: Well, I'm definitely somebody who's not a gamer. So, this is like a fascinating kinda community and culture for me. You know, I had Nintendo. I didn't really go deep into it. But for people who aren’t gamers, what is special, and what kind of pleasure does gaming provide for you?

CHERRY: Ooh, that's a really good question. So, this is something I educate on because what led me to really finding power in telling my own story with games, in helping people understand why accessibility is important, was being vulnerable about what that means. And so, games, for me, have always been a way of coping with the hardest things in my life. I'm autistic. I always found it really hard to socialize with people, and games taught me a lot about socialization, whether it was because I was playing multiplayer games back in the day of dialup or whether it was because games like Final Fantasy actually taught me about relationships and friendships that I didn't really have access to as a kid. And so, they've been a really important coping mechanism for me.

And then as my physical disabilities progressed, they also helped with things like pain management. They are a really important tool in what I call my pain management box, which is distraction. So, I have to be really careful and not overdo it, but they really help me not focus on the pain, not hyper-focus on the pain and do something creative or that engages my brain other than— I call it an active activity rather than a lot of the time when I've been at my sickest in and out of hospital, I wasn't able to play games. And so, all I could do was watch TV or movies, which is great in itself and is an enriching experience. But it's not, it's a passive experience, which is a very different way of engaging your brain. So, for me, it's all those things. And then also it's just fun. [chuckles]

ALICE: Yeah, and I think for a lot of us who are disabled or chronically ill, there's a lot of barriers to be outside in the world, and even with our hopes. And I'm guessing gaming also opens up people to a whole community of people that is incredibly vibrant, and you're just participating in this larger community.

CHERRY: Right. Exactly. And I really liken it to physical-world accessibility and things where when we're included in the same activities, whether it's 'cause we can go to the same cafe as non-disabled people or whether it's because we can say, play the same game as a non-disabled person, we're then able to be a part of the world. And I think video games are as much of that as that. And it's not about like ignoring the fact that we have disabilities, but it's about not reminding us that we're different and that we're, this idea that we're broken or that we don't fit in. It's more of a, it's more of a participation in the world.

[funky electronica music break]

Consulting on accessibility and speaking at industry conferences

ALICE: And can you tell me a little more about your consulting work? Because I see your tweets, and you're always at like various major game developer conferences. What are some of your experiences in terms of working professionally with developers and other people in the industry? What are some of the kinda things you've done?

CHERRY: Yeah. So, I do various different things. I do speak at conferences a lot. There is what we call a conference season. Every, I think, every industry has this. The wider tech industry has this. The transport industry has. Everyone has it. And games is no exception. And there's games industry conference season. And so, I do do a lot of speaking at conferences, which was something that started oh, about 18 months ago, a bit longer than that now, almost two years. And it wasn't something I realized was such a powerful thing to be able to have in my arsenal. I didn't think I'd be able to do it. Being autistic and not having a good memory, I didn't think I'd be very good at it. But then the games accessibility conference, which is the major conference specifically on this field, invited me to speak and give their closing talk. And it went really well. And people told me that I was a great speaker. So, I've been kind of doing it ever since. But that's kind of in addition to my other work.

And so, the rest of the time, what I do is I go into studios. And I will often do what I call is an audit, which is kind of like play testing, but much more in-depth, where I specifically look at a game in progress. Sometimes that's very raw. There's like literal, the cut scenes are not actually animations or cinematics yet. They're literally just hand-scribbled drawings of what they're going to be, things like that. But then there'll be mechanics in play where I can analyze the mechanics and the interfaces and the subtitles and everything, everything that a player interacts with, and I can pull up potential accessibility barriers. And then what we do from there is take the things that I've flagged, reported on, and I work collaboratively with teams. In games, teams are split

up between disciplines. And what we mean by disciplines is people that work on various small aspects of the game. So, whether it's the design of the controls or the design of the menus or the design of the subtitles or the camera controls, things like this. And it's all, it's very highly specialized. And so, I work with teams individually, and we problem solve, and we collaborate, and we come up with solutions and something that will work.

Because the amazing thing about games is, unlike other areas of accessibility, you can't really say, "This is what you should do. Here's how you fix it. Here's a list of things and how to put ramps in everywhere," 'cause that's not really how games work. Every game is so different that the solution to a barrier can be vastly different from one game to another. So, it's kind of a beautiful and fun experience to be able to do that. And I'm a designer at heart. That's my history is, I used to be an artist, and I used to work in the film industry and photography. And so, I have [laughing] those genes almost. It's really hard work, but it's really, really fun.

ALICE: Yeah, and I also notice that I think social media's had a real impact in the sense that disabled gamers are able to sound off and push back to say, like, I can't use this, or I can't play this as, my experience is not as good as other people's. They're tweeting about it, and they're tagging either the company or the developer.

CHERRY: Right. Exactly. Definitely. I think social media, like in all aspects of marginalization and the disability community, has given people a voice where we didn't have one before necessarily. I always go back to Pokémon Go because it was such a huge cultural phenomena. 'Cause it was on people's phones. They could go everywhere with it. Everyone was playing it. And then there were many of us that couldn't play it because of the way it was designed. I couldn't play it because I use a manual wheelchair. And it was really heartbreaking to not be able to be a part of that, to be out at a park, just taking a stroll, and see groups upon groups of people playing this game that you couldn't play. And it's very real and in your face, then you always feel it. But that made it hyper-real. And being able to share that experience and help people understand just how painful it is, is a really powerful thing. And I really commend all disabled players out there that are able to do it 'cause it's not an easy thing. I don't think people realize how hard it is to be so open and vulnerable and put yourself out there. But I'm so proud of everyone that does it because it's such a powerful thing to do.

[funky, melodic electronica music break]

Online harassment and disability visibility

ALICE: You know, I know that you have personally experienced trolling and harassment. And this is not unusual for every community, but I especially in the gaming community. It's been a real problem in terms of the way women are treated, the way people of color are treated, and obviously, disabled gamers are treated.

CHERRY: Mmhmm. Well, this is a big one. I could talk about this for a very long time. But harassment in games has been going on for so long, as long as I've been gaming and been connected to other people that game. I experienced at school when I was a little kid. I experienced it in my first forays into online gaming with Command and Conquer. I was always very open about, hey, I'm a girl! And I always had a girly name, and that always got me a lot of harassment. And I think it's true for everyone of every marginalization in games. And then with the advent of social media and the Internet, it's just intensified all harassment, I think. And it's kind of like a magnifying glass on society. Games is a particularly--I'm trying to think of the right word--but it's a particularly vicious aspect of society for some people. And I definitely was targeted through that. I've been targeted since. It was actually a big education to me on who the

alt right are. Like I already knew that they existed. I grew up in Britain. We've had Nazis in Britain my entire life. They're not new to me. So, it's not something that was shocking to me, but I did have an education on what certain profile pictures meant. I was kind of naive. I've always been naive. I think it's because I'm autistic, and I always get these things. Like I don't know what, even though I've been on Twitch for years now, I don't know what certain emotes mean. And people have to explain social things to me.

So, the things that you get targeted over are always just the silliest things. Like, for example, when Final Fantasy 15 came out, this was many years after the rise of 2014. I think it was like two or three years after. But Final Fantasy 15 came out. I'm a huge fan of fantasy play. I've been playing Final Fantasy my whole life. I love getting the guidebooks and just playing every nuance and aspect of those games 'cause they're so huge. And the guidebooks have been pride of place on my shelf. Final Fantasy 15 was the first one I got that had a whole page dedicated to accessibility, and I was so excited. So, I just took a picture of that, and I posted it to Twitter. And I was like, "How cool is this? An entire page in Final Fantasy 15 guidebook dedicated to accessibility. This proves that we're making a difference." And it was just like this triumphant moment. And then it ended up on some dark part of the Internet, and my Twitter just got so overly loaded with hate. And I wanna say death threats, but it wasn't death threats.

So, it's really different to what other marginalizations' experience is. As a visible disabled person, we don't get people threatening to kill us. We get people telling us we should kill ourselves. And that's a very different situation. And it's a very hard thing to experience, especially because so many disabled people have struggled with suicide and struggled with understanding the value of our own lives. And we've had to learn to be proud and come to terms with who we are and what we experience and living with pain every day and things like this, that when you're faced with that, just torrents of it, it taps into a part of yourself that you have tried to heal but never really heals. And I think it's an aspect of the harassment in the community that is unique to visibly disabled people, visible disability advocates in particular, is that it's a very particularly vicious kind of harassment.

And I don't usually like to focus on it. I usually avoid it in my interviews. But when you asked me if I was willing to talk about it, I do think there's a time and a place, and I admire what you do with Disability Visibility so much that I think this is the space to acknowledge this and acknowledge that other disabled people experience this. And that when we do, it isolates us more. And sometimes it's incredibly hurtful to people. And I'm very lucky I have a support network. I have a following. I have a platform. And so, when it happens to me, I have people that rally around me. And I like to be fully aware that there are people it happens to that don't have that and how damaging that can be to them. And so, I really want the community to come together and support everyone that has to go through that, because it happens when you're playing a game, if you have a voice that sound different or if someone can hear your ventilator or if you stutter or if you just can't use voice chat. I can't use voice chat when I'm gaming, and I get harassed for that. And so, it just happens everywhere. You don't even have to be talking about something controversial. It can literally just be trying to enjoy a game.

ALICE: And I think that's the thing that I wanna, in my work as well, is to dispel this idea that visibility is powerful, but it doesn't mean it's all rainbows and unicorns and summers, you know? Because there's a real cost. There's a real downside too that puts you definitely at risk. You're more vulnerable. I'm personally not saying that people have to be visible at all. You know, it's the fact that there is power in being out there, especially for people who don't feel comfortable yet or don't see themselves being reflected. And that, to me, is what drives my work. But I think we all have to be real about the huge toll it takes for all of us to be, not just alive, but just like in

order to be able to do what we want every day without having to defend our life and our existence. And I think that speaks to the ableism that's still so deeply embedded in our society where we still have to feel like we have to defend just our existence or our ability to be in the same space as other people. And it's exhausting.

CHERRY: Exactly. I mean, and we face it every time we leave the house. We face it even in hospitals. We face it just everywhere we exist. And so, sometimes, gaming is literally just an escape for people to get away from that. And I fully respect and love that about gaming. And this is why I am so visible and why I put myself in this space over and over, despite facing these things, because I know not everyone can do it. And I also strongly believe that not everyone should have to do it. Not everyone should have to tell their story. Not everyone should have to talk about their disabilities. And I think that, in fact, people shouldn't have to disclose their disabilities or talk about them or advocate or work on accessibility if they're disabled. They should be able to do anything else that they want. Like, I would love to be a full-time, just straight-up game designer rather than an accessibility game designer, because I think that's the ultimate goal for me with the work I do, is to create a space where it's so normalized and such a normal part of the landscape that when you're disabled, you are not, you don't have to do this. And so, I try to create that space to allow other disabled players to just exist and enjoy games and not ever have to say, "Yes, I'm disabled." That they can just enjoy the games and not think or talk about it. And I think that's so important. Just as important as being visible is providing and creating and nourishing that space for other players.

[electronic funky music break]

The future of accessible, inclusive gaming

ALICE: So, as we wrap up, I just wanted to ask you if there's any other kind of final thoughts on maybe the future of the gaming industry and the gaming community? What is your vision of a more accessible and inclusive gaming community?

CHERRY: Yeah, I would. One of the kind of side things that I'm working on right now that I'm kind of pouring myself into is I really want to see a more inclusive developer culture. I want to see more disabled people employed in the games industry. We already have a lot of disabled people, but they tend to be invisibly disabled, and they don't, they're not out about their disabilities. And that's really what my passion is in right now, is making sure more people can have jobs in the industry and can work on their passions. And part of that is about making the industry more accommodating. It's about breaking down stigma. And I think in the end, that will lead us to a truly inclusive and accessible space in the way we make our games. Because I do think that we only get accessibility right when we include people that experience inaccessibility and experience barriers.

And even though I'm a specialist and I have a broad experience, this is why I advocate and work towards making sure we have disabled players in testing. But beyond that, if we have disabled people able to be out about their disabilities when we're making games, we're more likely to have people come forward and say, "Hey, that screen that flashes at you constantly is a huge barrier for me. And if it's a barrier for me, it's gonna be a barrier for some of our players. And we should maybe provide an alternative for this, or we should maybe look at another design solution." And there isn't the safety to be able to do that right now. And I think it's a real hindrance to actually building accessible experiences within gaming. And I think it's, I think it's a resource that is just untapped right now.

ALICE: Yeah, absolutely! I just wanna wrap up and just say thank you so much for just sharing your story with me and just for everything you do and just for who you are.

CHERRY: Thank you, Alice, so much. I love what you do, and I believe in it so much.

Wrap-up

[hip hop]

♪ How far will they go (oh yeah, yeah)
How far will they go (oh yeah, yeah)…. ♪

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about André and Cherry on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is Geraldine Ah-Sue. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets! Byeee!!

♪ Rock it to the blast off
Stop, drop dance off ♪