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02 - History

STEVE SAYLOR:

In this module, we're actually going to be talking about the history of accessibility in video games. Now, technically accessibility in video games goes all the way back into the ‘50s, but for this particular module, we're going to be focusing on the past 10 years from 2010 to 2020 in regard to gaming and accessibility. Now, this is actually a talk that myself and Ian Hamilton, who is a fellow accessibility advocate and consultant in the industry, we put this together for a Games UR conference that was in Montreal in May of 2021, so this is actually a talk that was directly taken from that, but it goes through pretty much the highlights and the best moments kind of, in a way, of the past 10 years with accessibility. So feel free to watch it and hope you enjoy. Hello! My name is Steve Saylor, and I want to thank the Games UR conference for allowing us to be able to present to you today. Today's talk is going to be the Climbing Mountains: 10 Years in Game Accessibility. This is a combo presentation between myself and Ian Hamilton. I'll be the one presenting today, and we're going to be talking about essentially the

10 years of gaming history. If you know a little bit about ourselves, Ian Hamilton and I are accessibility advocates and consultants. We've been working in the industry for quite awhile, and we've consulted with studios on how to build to make their games more accessible as possible, and we want to thank Games UR for allowing us to be able to present to you today. So let's get started. So this is, again, The History of Climbing Mountains: 10 Years in Game Accessibility. We've been very blessed to kind of see the fruits of a lot of labours over the past 10 years just in regards to game accessibility alone, so we'll be kind of touching on some of the highlights and just some of the milestones that have got us to this point of where we are within game accessibility. Since the first Games UR Summit in 2010, the field of accessibility has changed beyond all recognition. So in keeping with the themes of today's event, what we have for you is a little look back through history. Now, game accessibility actually goes all the way back to 1950 with Birdy the Brain, one of the earliest games, including configurable difficulty thanks to the designer who recognized the need for barriers to flex in line with human variants, a core principle that underprints pretty much of today's accessibility work. For this presentation though, we're going to be skipping ahead to 2010, but if you want more about what happened between 1950 and 2010, there'll be a link on that last slide. So what was the landscape like in 2010? It was

largely focused around three groups: Special Effect, which had been around for... since basically around 2007, Able Gamers which was founded in 2004, and a few handfuls of independent developer gamers and academic advocates, a group of which banded together as the IGDA's Accessibility SIG back in 2003. Hardware accessibility was mostly homebrew and hacks. There was very little accessibility awareness or implementation amongst devs, especially in the triple As. With no full-time accessibility roles anywhere in the industry, there was widespread negative attitudes from gamers. It was all very different to how things are today, so we're going to take you on a little stroll through a few key moments of that journey. We're going to start off actually with a feature. This is a setting actually added in the FIFA 2010 to reduce the complex controls down to just a stick and two buttons with a healthy dose of contextual guessing at player intent. It's a really nice feature that actually many games today could learn from. This was pretty typical of accessibility in 2010 actually. Occasionally, a single feature would kind of just pop up and usually that wasn't designed with disability in mind, but still actually had some accessibility benefits. I personally actually call it kind of accidental accessibility, so that's just... You'll find that several times that actually does come up in different games even within the past 10 years. There was some comprehensive efforts though, like Shoot One Up by solo indie DEV Nathan Fouts

with a range of features that are only just beginning to spread now like game speed, high contrast, auto fire, even an option to reduce the controls to a single button. We've kind of actually been seeing that in regard to... If you've heard of the term assist mode, some of these features actually have kind of been starting to spread back into games today. For a long time, it was indies like these who were at the forefront of innovation. Also in 2010, the Accessibility SIG's website launched, the first real collection of accessibility research, best practices, advice, etc., and the BBC launched their internal publisher level mandatory game accessibility standards, and also in Washington D.C., a law called the CVAA was signed in. Not many people in the industry were aware of it at that time, but it would come to have actually a great influence. 2011 saw a huge, big step by Film Victoria, an Australian government body that provides grant funding to the creative industries around Melbourne. They had accessibility... Sorry. They had accessibility requirements for film and TV funding that was conditional on subtitling your output, but nothing for games, so they actually decided to change that. They used a simple approach, asked devs how they were considering accessibility, and also a box on the form that says if you aren't considering considering it, tell us why. Nearly 10 years later, and not one developer has ever put anything in that second box. This carrot approach for prototype funding

meant devs considering it early and allowed the Melbourne dev scene to race ahead. Elsewhere, single features were trickling in influenced by disabled gamers. MLB The Show launched with a single button assist mode after input from Hans Smith. Dead Space gained remapping following a petition by Gareth Garrett. The DAGER accessibility review site was launched by Josh Straub, and in Florida, Tara Voelker, who some of you of course know, kicked off an accessibility challenge at a local global game jam site. This grew over the coming years. Now, every year global game jam has optional accessibility challenges across every site around the world taken up by tens of thousands of developers raising awareness, busting misconceptions, and giving hands-on experiences for those devs during the global game jam. Now, in 2012, two new resources launched, Includification by Able Gamers, and gameaccessibilityguidelines.com by collaboration of developers, academics, and specialists. These were not the first accessibility guidelines for games, but they were the first two resources to gain wide scale traction with developers. The Warfighter Engaged charity was founded aimed at using and adapting gaming technology and rehabilitation of service injured veterans. I'll be coming back to Warfighter Engaged again when we get to 2018. Deon Decker launched an award-winning Wii game designed for... Sorry, I think I probably mispronounced that. I apologize. I'm terrible at names. I'm sorry. Deon Decker.

Deon Decker, I am sorry, launched an award-winning we game designed for sighted and partially sighted children to play together. A lengthy Ubisoft forum thread went up asking for remapping in the upcoming Assassin's Creed 3. They never got to it and it wasn't actually added until Assassin's Creed Origins years later, but every single reply on that thread was a positive message of support for disabled gamers, and that was actually a real watershed moment because it saw as a sign of shifting understanding about accessibility and expectations from the wider gaming community, so gamers started to take notice and actually started to want to be able to petition studios in order to be able to have more accessibility in their games. Now, in 2013, Injustice became the first triple A game to include a consideration for blind gamers. Fighting games are actually generally pretty blind accessible through a combination of stereo sound and good sound design. You can usually tell exactly where each fighter is and exactly which move they're pulling off based on the sound effects within the game, but Injustice added interactive background objects like the tree here on the right that Bane is about to reach into the background, rip out, and bash Raven over the head with. They also added an option to turn on a simple audio ping when a player is standing in front of them. Moving forward, Australia continued their push with the establishment of a dedicated accessibility war category in their annual Australian

Game Development Awards. Something that actually will come back with a vengeance in 2020. We'll get into that in a bit. In response to an exchange.org petition by a deaf gamer, Steam added info to store pages to say whether each game had subtitles or not and also offered the option to filter the store to only show games that have them. A free-to-use game accessibility symbol was developed by Barrie Ellis of One Switch, and has since spread through games, documentation, and events, as a standardized way of specifying accessibility information. In 2014, several prominent triple A games... Sorry. In 2014, several prominent triple A games included colour blind support either at launch or through patches such as Borderlines 2 and Sim City. At the same time, sites like Kotaku and IGN published widely read articles on colour blindness. These two things together resulted in rapid increase in awareness and consideration over the following years. The first time that any accessibility consideration had approached being a common, let alone standard consideration. To the extent that just two years later it had gone from a rare novelty to a player expectation. In 2016, a journalist actually put out an apology piece for failing to mention in a review of The Witness that the game was not colour blind accessible. We've since seen this thing happen with big time event toggles, with subtitle presentation, features within a couple of years progressing from rare to expected, and that's

within the development cycle of a single game, so you need to stay ahead of the curve. If you can do that rather than fall victim to those changing expectations, you'll be one of the people setting them. Now, still on the topic of colour blindness, Unreal Engine implemented a colour blindness simulator. Now, this was the first time an engine made steps to help developers make their games more accessible. Expect to see more of that in the future with future engines and stuff that's going to be added in for accessibility, whether it’s plug-ins, or tools are going to be built into the engines themselves. So expect that to be able to become hopefully the standard within the development community. The quad stick launched, a sip/puff controller that builds upon Ken Yankelevitz's 30-year legacy of accessible controller development, and an article by Richard Moss went up on The Verge called Why Accessibility Matters involving a wide range of accessibility advocates, gamers, and developers. Articles like that are easily common today, but for its time this was a huge milestone. This article is where it really felt like accessibility was becoming a larger encompassing movement and we started to see things progressing from there. In 2015, we saw the first impact of the CVAA legislation in the form of the compliance waiver for consoles and networks coming to an end. This meant that any communication functionality in products like PlayStation services as well as Xbox Live, must by law be accessible

to all kinds of disabilities. This was a key driver for both the PS4 and Xbox One, gaining their initial suites of accessibility functionality in 2015, which continued to grow and evolve way beyond legal compliance over the course of their life cycles and now into the current generation of the PlayStation 5 and the Xbox series X and S of consoles. After lobbying for the accessibility community led by Barrie Ellis, Apple implemented platform level functionality to make one button games like Flappy Bird accessible using external accessibility switch inputs that send an on/off signal, like a button or two to blow into. Exactly the same tech that the Xbox adaptive controller is designed to be compatible with. So this made thousands of games accessible to hugely underserved audiences overnight. Then Evolve became the first triple A game to publish accessibility info on its website. Destiny became the first triple A game to include an accessibility menu. The menu only included two options, and separate accessibility menus aren't necessarily a good idea because all settings are accessibility, to be honest, but before its day, it was a big step. Now, jumping to 2016, it saw the launch of Uncharted 4, a triple A title with what by 2016 standards was a huge array of accessibility considerations and extensive publicity efforts around it by PlayStation. This had a really significant and direct impact on many other developers across the whole development spectrum, but particularly on triple A developers. One of the big

publishers even internally referred to an accessibility wave that spread through their company over the subsequent years, as the Uncharted Effect. Phil Spencer, head of Xbox, took to Twitter to praise PlayStation's efforts, a sign of things to come of how accessibility would become a source of people stepping across traditional barriers to collaborate both within companies and between competitors. Able Gamers was actually invited to speak at The White House, which was really cool. PlayStation hosted an accessibility panel at PSX, their most watched panel from the event. Shawn Laydon, former head of PlayStation, and Phil Spencer were making public commitments. Karen Stevens at EA was made full time accessibility lead. Bryce Johnson and Evelyn Thomas were full-time on platform accessibility things for Xbox, but this was the first-time in-house role working on accessibility of games. Others actually followed, and now there are actually 40 full-time roles within studios for accessibility of games, and there are actually three new game accessibility hires in the past month alone. As you can tell, the accessibility training is now picking up a lot of speed. Now, part of that momentum was an increasing number of people working on accessibility, and an increasing body of professional knowledge and experience. So with 2017 came the first edition of GA Conference, Gaming Accessibility Conference, is the direct equivalent to the Games UR event, a conference run by the IGDAs Accessibility

SIG. They quickly grew and expanded to a Europe edition as well. Previously, an accessibility talk getting on the lineup at a game dev conference meant a general awareness riser, but having this dedicated conference meant, as with Games UR, a forum for studying knowledge and experiences at a bit deeper level than just that while also having an essential hub for people working the field to come together, network, find collaborators and get some group therapy, because this conference... sometimes we kind of need that.

Elsewhere, Microsoft launched their inclusive tech lab, a place for developers and the community to come together and a home for all kinds of fun bits of technology to play with. The Nintendo Switch patched in their first accessibility features marking the first time in the history of the industry that every major gaming platform, Switch, Xbox, PS4, VITA, PC, Mac, iOS, and Android, had dedicated system level accessibility features. And to cap things off, as part of a fundraising event for Special Effect, even Kim Kardashian tweeted in support of disabled gamers to her, at the time, 56 million Twitter followers, so it was starting to gain a lot of traction. In 2018, 2018’s biggest splash was actually the arrival of the Xbox adaptive controller. Developed over several years initially in partnership with Warfighter Engaged, and later with a wide range of charities, specialists, and gamers. I'm sure everyone is at least partially familiar with this now, but at a high

level, it's actually a switch interface, a way to hook up accessibility switches, that range of on/off input devices as I mentioned earlier. So basically, it actually kind of uses a headphone jack that all it really needs is an on/off sort of signal and you can use a button, you can use a switch, you can use a pedal, and you can basically remap them to corresponding buttons that would normally be seen on an Xbox controller. You can see actually in this picture there are loads of ports along the back of it. Hooked up to that are a bunch of light touch-sensitive buttons on the table, and an additional large button mounted next to his cheek. It also had USB ports to hook up joysticks as he is doing here. Now, it wasn't the first device of its kind. There have actually been many before, but it was drastically cheaper, much higher bill quality, and looked like a natural part of the Xbox ecosystem. Also, the fact that it was Microsoft who built it sent a really powerful statement. Developing hardware is a pretty strong way of putting your money where your mouth is, and to be honest, I really do love the look of the Xbox adaptive controller. It really does look like an Xbox console that would be sitting beside it and it just kind of looks like it's part of that ecosystem, and it's still really cool and still one of the best controllers we have today. There was a ton of other stuff happening too. The Can I Play That review site was founded. EA implemented a dedicated accessibility feedback portal linked to their bug tracking system, soon

followed by similar efforts by Mixer, Ubisoft, Warner Brothers, and Blizzard. Celeste launched, and in reaction to the discourse around Cuphead and flexible design, included a bunch of accessibility assists. It was to go on to become as influential of a game as Uncharted with Celeste Assist Mode which became like a huge, huge wave, had a huge wave within the accessibility community. It shaped the accessibility mindset of many other devs outside just of the indie space. And then came the triple As. In 2016, a single game including a handful of features was huge news. In 2018, the impact of this was starting to be felt. Some of the triple As making comparable efforts to Uncharted 4, including Force of Horizon 4, The Crew 2, Marvel's Spider-Man, Black Ops 4, Starlink, Shadow of the Tomb Raider, State of Decay 2, Assassin's Creed Odyssey, Battlefield 5, Sea of Thieves, Madden 19, Monster Hunter World, FIFA 19, God of War, Red Dead Redemption 2. Now, a staggering turn-around in a space of just two years. Particularly important are Spider-Man and God of War. These were the two top grossing PS4 games of that year both with huge critical acclaim and conclusively putting together the myth that accessibility loses money and dilutes creative vision. The first day of 2019 saw the end of the CVAA's waiver for games, meaning all games for release in the USA are now legally obligated to ensure that both chat functionality and chat related info/UI is accessible to people with a wide range of disabilities. This

marked the first time that mainstream games have had explicit legal accessibility requirements. The impact has been profound, not just directly, but also spurring development of technologies like tech scaling and text to speech support that are being applied way beyond communication, paving the way for grassroot developers who previously founded and were struggling to be heard. Now accessibility was a topic that all of management knew about and providing an extra push for people who had been aware of accessibility but not quite taken the plunge. Now that accessibility was a requirement for a small aspect of their game, they were running with it, taking that as a cue to think about how to offer a good gameplay experience to as many people players as possible. Elsewhere, Microsoft put their money where their mouth is for a Super Bowl spot about the adaptive controller, which was huge. It was seen by over 100 million people and T-Pain tweeted about it. Cher even tweeted about it. Also, Able Gamers launched their new APX design patterns, Google included accessibility information and filters in the stadia store and Google Play app, accessibility mega threads became a thing, tweets about accessibility issues that received many thousands of likes and shares and many hundreds of replies, these are powerful, illustrating demand, shifting mindsets, raising awareness, and providing a goldmine of feedback. A huge uptake of accessibility events actually also happened as well. Covering companies

like Microsoft, EA, Oculus, Indie Mega Booth, Ubisoft, PlayStation, and Crystal Dynamics, and events like E3, Gamescom, Exo 19, and Paris Games Week, all had considerations like ASL, live captioning, and audio description, for talks, announcements and broadcasts. We also had quiet rooms, braille maps, low tables, and adaptive controllers available at booths. It was becoming increasingly hard to find a triple A game that didn't include accessibility considerations, with studios pushing the bar even higher with games like Division 2 and Gears 5. Though still being outstripped by indies with Secret Storm and Eagle Island sitting at the very top of the industry and both by solo indie devs. And then came the "I'm Spartacus" moment. In response to Securo-related gamer tweets claiming that accessibility compromises developer's vision for their games, Cory Barlog, the game director you probably know of of God of War, especially the 2018 God of War, he's at Sony Santa Monica, he tweeted out, and I quote, "Accessibility has never and will never be a compromise to my vision." Rommy Ismail of Lobbier copy and pasted that and many other developers across the industry followed suit, either saying the same or adding their own extra detail as to why. This outpouring of support, more than any other recent progress, was a clear sign that accessibility was now truly part of the fabric of the game's industry. Now, here's the big one. The big accessibility headline of 2020 was The Last of Us Part 2. Yes,

this is the thumbnail for my video. When (indiscernible) 4 came out, it followed the standard journey. Its feature set was the result of a few people pushing late in development and then, as they always do, thinking, "Oh man! If only we'd thought of this earlier. We could have done so much more and done so much better." So that's what they actually did at Naughty Dog. Their secret sauce for The Last of Us 2, was to consider accessibility early. The result combined with plenty of user research and working with a range of consultants, was a game that shot the bar extremely high, including being the first triple A game to be built from the ground up to be fully playable by people who are completely blind. But it was a busy year elsewhere too for mainstream hardware developers jumping with the Logitech's adaptive gaming kit and (indiscernible) equivalent to the Xbox adaptive controller but for the Nintendo switch. The launch of the new platforms including full controller backward compatibility for the Xbox series X and S, including expansive accessibility devices and a whole swath of new accessibility goodies for the PS5, a whole bunch of new resources for both developers and gamers, the arrival of audio descriptions for trailers which is a separate audio track narrating what is happening visually for people who have difficulty seeing it. Ubisoft actually was the first company in any industry to implement YouTube's beta audio description functionality. Technically, it uses the ability to be able to

add multiple audio tracks to a single video, and they decided to be able to take that and actually add the audio described track as one of those tracks, which is really cool, something that, again, had never been seen before in any industry. There was continued acceleration of breadth and depth of considerations in games, from Hyper God to Assassin's Creed Valhalla, from Moving Out to Miles Morales, which in some ways even exceeded some of the efforts of The Last of Us Part 2. This was all capped off at the end of the year by an explosion in accessibility awards, both dedicated accessibility specific ceremonies and mainstream gaming awards adding categories for accessibility including, of course, the Game Awards, which were watched by over 80 million people, and The Last of Us won that accessibility award at the Game Awards as well. Now, that brings us up to today. I hope what you've seen has given you a bit of sense of where we've come from and the trajectory where we are now and the trajectory we need to be on. There still hasn't even been a single triple A game that has managed to nail all the basics of text size, subtitle presentation, effect and camera intensity, remapping, and colour blind support, we are still a very long way from any gamer being able to pick up any game and have a reasonable expectation that they won't be needlessly locked out, but the momentum is there. People care. People are learning. People are collaborating to drive the field forward. So long as

we continue to do that, we will get even closer to gaming reaching its full potential. And just a couple links to finish on here, the first two are some nice insight both into pre-2010 and more detail on what has happened recently too. The third contains a handy bunch of links covering pretty much all you could ever want to know about accessibility. So I want to be able to... That is it for us. Thank you so much. I appreciate you paying attention as best as you can and watching this presentation. I hope you learned a little bit and kind of got to see a good perspective of what accessibility has been like and how much work has been done just within the past 10 years. Again, I want to thank Games UR for allowing me to speak to you today, and I hope you enjoy or have enjoyed the rest of your conference. Thank you so much for watching, as always. Bye bye. Have a great day.

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