

## Episode 34 | Alex Carey Pt. 1

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### **Graeme Wyman** 0:47

Hello and welcome to Discover Stories on Re-Imagine Radio. I'm your host, Graham Wyman, with the Disability Foundation. If this is your first time on Re-Imagine Radio, please like the video and subscribe to the channel, as it does help with our reach. Today on the show we have Alex Carey. Alex is a game designer and an accessibility consultant with Alex Carey Design. Alex, thank you so much for coming on the pod today. How's it going?

### **Alex Carey** 1:13

I'm doing well. Thanks for having me on.

### **Graeme Wyman** 1:14

That's great. We are also joined by the VAMS program coordinator, Bryden Veinot. Bryden, welcome.

### **Bryden Veinot** 1:22

Hey. Thanks for having me back.

### **Graeme Wyman** 1:23

Of course, of course. So just diving right in, Alex, do you remember your first experience playing video games?

### **Alex Carey** 1:32

Yeah, I was thinking about this the other day, and I had this moment where I was like, I can't remember the name of this game, it had something to do with Capture the Flag. So I Googled "old Capture the Flag game," and it turns out it was called Capture the Flag. So my first game I remember playing was called Capture the Flag, now, which I believe came out in like 1992 or 93 literally, before I was born for DOS, and it was like a turn-based Capture

the Flag simulator, where you move your people around, and they all have different stats, and there's like different properties on tiles on the board. So if you're moving through a forest, you move slower, or if you have to, like, cross a river or whatever. So that was the first game I remember playing,

**Graeme Wyman** 2:29

Okay, and Bryden, I'll ask you as well, both for our listeners, Bryden and I are gamers, and we were very excited to have Alex on today.

**Bryden Veinot** 2:39

Yeah. I mean, okay, so my first memory with video games, oh my gosh. Okay, definitely, it's got to be PlayStation 1, Crash Bandicoot. It's definitely like a very vivid one. I think a lot of people my age probably share the same thing. But there was also like, do you guys remember those demo kind of discs that had, like 20-ish, demos on them? I remember one time another early memory was like Duke Nukem, and my mom swiped that up so fast, like 30 seconds to playing it, "Nope, you're not old enough for that." So the real memory definitely like Crash Bandicoot or the Crash Team Racing. I was just infatuated with that game.

**Graeme Wyman** 3:22

Right? Didn't those come with, like, either at the back of magazines or in cereal boxes?

**Bryden Veinot** 3:28

I have no idea how I got my hands on that. And it was like, rated M games, and I was totally forbidden from those at that time. [Laughs]

**Alex Carey** 3:35

Yeah, I remember, when you talk about cereal boxes, I remember getting Roller Coaster Tycoon 2, and I was like, "This is really good." [Laughs] Right? Like, I was like, "Oh, these games will be terrible because I'm getting them with my breakfast." But turns out, some of those are really good.

**Graeme Wyman** 3:55

Yeah, I think that and The Sims as well, back in the day.

**Bryden Veinot** 4:00

I still play those games, like the new versions, like the new Sims and the new Planet Coaster, like it stands the test of time. What about you, Graeme, what was your first game?

**Graeme Wyman 4:10**

Um, I think it would have to be on the N64 and it was either between, I think Mario 64 or it was that, or Shadows of the Empire. And I definitely played way more Shadows of the Empire than Mario back in the day, yeah. But those were definitely my first experiences with games.

**Bryden Veinot 4:35**

Nice, yeah. So, yeah, I'll kind of pop into the next question then. So, yeah, Alex, I've, I personally found video games, and then Graeme, obviously, too, but also comics. I know, Graeme, you're super into comics. They're just like a great way to escape. Are video games and graphic design kind of like that for you? And maybe expand on kind of how that, how it makes you feel when you're getting that escape.

**Alex Carey 4:58**

Yeah, for sure. So. Yeah, I know at times like escapism in games can get kind of a bad rap from certain parts of community, but I think it can be really powerful and really wonderful. I like to reframe it just a little bit and think more about the idea of like video games as like an empathy engine, where you can create these experiences where, like, you're able to, quite literally, walk in someone else's shoes, right? So you're able to experience things you may not otherwise be able to. And when that ties into something like disability, I myself use a power wheelchair for mobility, and that's allowed me to experience lots of different types of things that I might not otherwise have been able to, right? So, yeah, I definitely think games are a wonderful tool for escapism and connecting and empathy and all those wonderful good things.

**Graeme Wyman 5:59**

I definitely like that empathetic connotation that you put towards that. That's very cool. I guess, yeah, just moving right along. Maybe you could tell our listeners a little bit about what work your company does at Alex Carey Design.

**Alex Carey 6:16**

For sure. So there's sort of two main things I do. So I do game design consulting, sort of on my own. I'm working with a very lovely Norwegian man to make a game about French musketeers called Sacre Bleu. So that's my day job, as it is, I help with the design and creation of that. And then I also have a company that I'm part of called playability consultancy, where we offer video game developers feedback on accessibility for the games that they make. So we're a team of people with disabilities with lived experience

that that offer that feedback to game developers. So those are sort of my two different hats, and then I have, like, Russian nesting doll hats inside, those hats that you have to take out and wear for all the things, because making software is hard, it turns out. But yeah.

**Bryden Veinot** 7:28

I want to tag on to this question a bit just, I think when the phrase game design gets brought up, people think that you have to have gone and done like, a bunch of program and like coding and like, learn all that kind of stuff. Where do you, your company, and where does playability kind of sit in that the realm of game design?

**Alex Carey** 7:49

Yeah. So game design is hard to explain sometimes. So what I what I like to do is I use a metaphor about the idea of baking a cake. So if you're baking a cake, what the game designer does is they write the recipe for the cake. So you're not necessarily having to decorate the cake with frosting and fondant or know how an oven works in intricate detail, but you should probably know a bit about how those things work. Otherwise, when you write a recipe, you're not going to know exactly how that's going to work. So that's sort of the really poor metaphor I used to try and explain it is the idea of, you're just writing the recipe for the construction of this. So it's like, do these two things go together? I don't know. Let's toss them in, blend it up, see if it play tests well. So you're sort of trying out different recipes and combinations of mechanics and storytelling and all this different stuff.

**Bryden Veinot** 8:52

Nice, yeah, obviously came a long way from Capture the Flag, that's for sure. [Laughs]

**Alex Carey** 9:00

Yeah.

**Bryden Veinot** 9:01

Yeah, probably not too many accessibility options in that one, hey?

**Alex Carey** 9:04

No. I think that game was limited in that regard. Yeah, in terms of accessibility, that's a whole rabbit hole I can talk about for a long time. Like, broadly speaking, there's like, this isn't entirely true, but it's helpful to sort of limit the scope when you try and talk about things that are complicated. So broadly speaking, there's like six categories where barriers

can exist to playing games. So there's strength and dexterity, low vision and blindness, hard of hearing and deafness, color blindness, cognitive and emotional, and each of those areas sort of has different barriers that a person can face in order to enjoy an experience within games, um, and yeah, it just sort of branches out from there within each of those areas, and it goes on and on.

**Graeme Wyman** 10:05

Yeah, right.

**Bryden Veinot** 10:08

So having talked with developers, just for your career, like, have you seen accessibility and gaming become more of, like, a priority or come to the forefront? Have you seen that?

**Alex Carey** 10:20

Yeah, yeah, absolutely, yeah. It's definitely on the uptick within the industry. I know the Game Awards, which is sort of like an oversimplification, but sort of like the Oscars of video games, has a specific category now for innovation and accessibility, and they've presented that the last couple of years, I know a number of Triple-A studios are pushing internally to have more players included, and that, you know, is a personally, a wonderful thing, because, you know, it allows more people to play and have these experiences, whatever. But there's also, you know, like, a capitalist angle from it where, like, although it turns out, lot of people are benefiting from these things, and if you put them in, more people can play the game, and then more people buy the game, so they end up making more money. So, like, there's this wonderful sort of, you know, empathy and inclusion or whatever, but also money, that is also a thing.

**Graeme Wyman** 11:27

Certainly a driving force, for sure.

**Alex Carey** 11:30

Yeah.

**Graeme Wyman** 11:30

I guess, yeah. And when you were mentioning those six different areas of of accessibility, would you say that developers are trying to find ways to accommodate across the board of all six, or is there particular ones that you've noticed them focusing on?

**Alex Carey** 11:53

Yeah, so they're definitely not evenly spread across all of those areas. I think things like cognitive accessibility and emotional accessibility can be harder to scope for and include sometimes. So an example of something for like cognitive accessibility is someone may have a barrier to like, not understand how a puzzle functions within the game and need additional weight prompts or waypoints in order to interface with it or something. I think, like epilepsy also falls within that where this is more common, because I believe there was an instance where a game did cause someone to have seizures. So I know, don't quote me on this, but I think Ubisoft now does mandatory epilepsy testing on all their games, which is really nice to see. So things like that fall under cognitive but more often than not, the major things that sort of get a majority of attention from a developer are things like subtitle sizes, what's the other one? Subtitle sizes, color blindness, rebindable inputs for controls, things like targetable options for aim assist, things like that tend to be some of the more frequent ones. I'm probably missing a couple in there, but it's off the top my head, so.

**Graeme Wyman** 13:26

Well, and just tagging on what you said about epilepsy. It's interesting. I was playing a game recently, and every time you log in, even though you've done a profile or everything, it still asks you to consent that seizures and things like that can be a result of it. And I found that interesting. And this was more of a younger game, but it was interesting again, every time you have to agree to that term, which is something different I hadn't seen before.

**Alex Carey** 13:50

Yeah, that's probably something that the old department brought up with them.

**Bryden Veinot** 13:56

Well, you never know who's coming over to play, and like, you might have a friend that has it. And then if it just only shows the one time at the beginning, then you might forget that the game even has that.

**Alex Carey** 14:08

Yeah, there's also something in terms of, again, this isn't within my lived experience, so I'm not talking with tons of authority about this. But, you know, there's also ways to design around just not having those elements. So it's like, "Well, why do we have something that could cause epilepsy in the first place? Oh, we have this big explosion that's trying to get across this high moment of tension." It's like, "Okay, well, could we just do that in a different way that doesn't make use of these elements?" Right? So rather than, you know,

putting the label on the front that's like, this may hurt people. You can also just do this if you plan far enough ahead. Now, that being said, that could be sometimes really challenging, because design sometimes takes a long time to get to the point where you're making the thing and actually doing the day-to-day work and things are planned out way in advance and schedules and all that. But yeah.

**Bryden Veinot** 15:04

Okay, yeah. So yeah, you were at Abilities Expo with ConneCTra this year. That was great. Kind of touched on some of the things that we're talking about here, but you spoke about the game, The Last of Us 2, which is, I know Graeme, big fan of that game. What are some of the advancements that Naughty Dog made because of this game?

**Alex Carey** 15:25

Yeah, so The Last of Us Part Two was kind of a big flagship for gaming accessibility. Some of the major things is, I know, for someone with sort of like zero vision, so total blindness can play the game from start to finish on their own third assistance, which is awesome. It also has some really amazing things, like high contrast modes. So if you have low vision—I'm just going to go off at a tangent for that—one of the things that's interesting is the term blindness is kind of interesting, where, if you're legally blind, you can there's sort of like a common misconception that that means you have zero vision, where that's not strictly true. Legally blind refers to having 20/200 vision or worse, I believe so. When someone says they have 20/20 vision, it means they can read 20 point font at 20 feet away. So if you have 20/200 vision, it means you can't read 200 point font at 20 feet away. So if you have vision worse than that, you're considered legally blind. So there are people who self identify with this is my understanding that they are blind, but have some amount of vision. So sometimes the internet can be real jerks about that, where there are content creators who go, "Oh, I'm a blind gamer. I do all this cool stuff," and they're like, "Well, how are you seeing the UI?" Which I'm like, "Okay, that's not what that means." So just going off on a tangent about that, but The Last of Us Part Two had a bunch of amazing stuff for low vision and blind gamers, yeah, so you can play it front to back. There's these wonderful high contrast options to be able to differentiate enemies and yourself with this, you know, really well thought out and implemented versions of that within my own lived experience. Things that I really benefited from was there's a mode that I think should just, more games should just do this, where, if you look down sights on your gun, the game goes into slow motion so you have these bigger timing windows in order to, like, you know, fight the zombie fungal mushroom people, and sort of go about doing combat. And that was so lovely. It was so lovely to be able to have that little bit of extra time. And it really helps sort of the wear and

tear on my hands, because I can get quite fatigued if I do too many hours of gaming in a row. So yeah.

**Graeme Wyman** 18:21

Yeah, no. And if I remember correctly from your presentation, didn't Naughty Dog kind of sweep the accessibility category at the Game Awards?

**Alex Carey** 18:30

Yeah, they won a ton of awards. And I believe they did win the innovation accessibility the year it came out. Yeah, they did some truly amazing work. And it's sort of, at least for right now, is still sort of stands as, like, the goal post for other games to, like, try and achieve, or at least measure up against when new games come out. Because one of the things is, like, for a more casual audience, you don't always want to have to like, you know, install a bunch of mods, or have a bunch of additional steps to be able to play you just want to take the game out, put it in and play it. And The Last of Us Part Two had this really amazing implementation that allowed people to sort of take out the box and play it, and everything was there for you to be able to meet the barriers. So, yeah.

**Bryden Veinot** 19:26

Well, I can only like, yeah, I can only imagine, because if you're not able to play the game, at least at, like, at a slower pace with something, you just resort to, like, watching a Let's Play on YouTube or something, right, just to try and get the experience of it. But if the game can be kind of slowed down, like you said, the aiming down the sights, slow motion, that's a huge one. It just seems so obvious too, right?

**Alex Carey** 19:50

Yeah, it's also really fun. So, yeah, it's a really cool system, and it's not like, it does make the game easier, but it's also, I genuinely think, just more fun because it becomes a little bit more, like The Last of Us is already so cinematic in its portrayal of a game like it feels like you're playing through an HBO mini series. And I believe they are making an HBO mini series of it. So that kind of makes sense. So like having these moments of, like slow motion, where it's like, you know, a bunch of zombies are coming at you, and everything just slows down. You sort of just pick your shots, opposed to this more frantic action thing, which can be fun in its own, but like it, you know, dying in the same place four times in your HBO mini series, where it just says, game over, do it again until you win, is like, not fun, right? Like, that's that doesn't, you know, having to watch the same, you know, zombie burst out of a wall and attack you four times because you've died three times before is not,



like, it was not fun, right? Like, I'm gonna put the game down, be like, "Cool, I'm gonna play something that doesn't hate me." [Laughs]

**Bryden Veinot** 21:00

Especially when the last checkpoint's, like, five minutes back, and you have to redo the entire thing over.

**Alex Carey** 21:05

Exactly, right? Yeah, oh, it's just, you know, having, having games meet you at your ability level, I think is important within my lived experience, right? Is sometimes difficulty can get a bad rap within games where people, sort of on occasion, can get maybe a little bit like over this or very passionate about difficulty options, or, you know, how a game is supposed to be played, which has always been very weird to me, because difficulty is a relation between a person and the game. So there's two variables there. So you can adjust the game, how hard it is, just, again, a bunch of things, but, but it's also in relation to a player's ability, and you want those two things to match up and be fun. So if one is, you know, if you're an amazing player, the game is really easy, that's boring, right? And if you're a less skilled player, the game is really hard, it's frustrating to want those two things to be in harmony. So you should be able to, you know, ideally, change them, which is, I'm not sure why that's a controversial take sometimes.

**Bryden Veinot** 22:20

Yeah, I even, like, just, Graeme, before you ask the next question here, I even play games on, like, normal or easy to start, just to see what the game is and judge the look of the game and how it plays, and the characters and the story, like all of that, before I even care about how fast can I dodge and roll and get out of the way? Like, that's a whole other game at that point to me, you know?

**Alex Carey** 22:47

Yeah, yeah absolutely. I think it's really beneficial to have sort of, what we call, like those training grounds right where, like a test level or whatever, right, where you're just sort of try the game out with a regular type setting without consequences of failing to see if the challenge is meeting your player skill, right? Um, I'm not the biggest fan of sort of that binary, I guess it's not binary, but like easy, medium and hard with no context or what that is changing the game is not terribly helpful for a player experience, right? Where you're like, "Okay, well, the game is too hard," and you put it to easy, they're like, "Okay, well, now the game's too easy. Now, what?" Right? Like, I feel like having more granular settings sometimes can be helpful, or at least an explanation of what that's actually doing, because

maybe you're failing at the platform, and the combat's fine, and if you switch it to easy, and the game doesn't tell you, "Oh, it's just making all the enemies easier." It's like, well, that's not what I wanted, right?

**Bryden Veinot** 23:53

Like, yeah, I'm realizing now that there's a big set of games that actually probably do have these great settings that, like individual sliders, is, like most sports games. I'm just thinking that now, like I remember going into, like the NHL settings just to make them as wild as I possibly could. But you can adapt them to any skill level too, right?

**Alex Carey** 24:17

Yeah, for sure. Yeah. The problem you run into, right, is the more granular you get in terms of adjustability for challenge, the more overwhelming.

**Bryden Veinot** 24:29

Yeah.

**Alex Carey** 24:29

You know? Where it's like, we have 15 pages with sliders, well, eventually, if you give me a weekend to figure out how to do all this, that might actually make the game fun. So that's sort of where there's a delicate balance between making something approachable and also allowing all of the things that can allow someone to be included in that experience, right? That is what people more talented than me get paid to do. [Laughs]

**Graeme Wyman** 25:01

I was gonna say maybe that's the real game. Is playing with all the different sliders. [Laughs]

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