

[Music] [Narelle] Hi and welcome to the next episode of The Digital Access Show. Today, we are talking with the wonderful Shannon Towell. Shannon is an experienced designer. Shannon, thanks. [Shannon] Thank you for having me on and good afternoon to everyone or whatever time it is yours Shannon, tell me about yourself. [Shannon] Yeah, so as Narelle said, I'm an experience designer and have been in the design industry for this would be my ninth year now and freelancing for the last year. So, I have two key areas of my business, so working with websites to ensure a bit usable, accessible and interactive one possible. And then what is slightly more of a niche area is I do a lot of work in the museum space, so interactive installations. So, think that you walk into a museum or art gallery, do anything fun and interactive. Someone has to design noise and put in like how it will work and operate and look. And yeah, I do a lot of work in that area as well. [Narelle] Actually, that's quite an interesting area because I've never really thought about that. So, when you say experience and designing an experience for in an art gallery or museum, what did that encompass? What, what are you thinking about there? [Shannon] So, it really depends because like, the work that I've been on varies so much and not one of these installations is completely the same, but one really good case study of mine is called a Day at the Races. And it's an installation in the Australian Sports Museum, which is here in Melbourne at the MCG. And it's about horse racing. So, the brief was to do an experience about horse racing, that didn't mention gambling at all. And so through doing that, we've wanted to be fun for people to be able to colour in a horse template. They'd be able to scan it into a booth, name it and then it would race against other visitor's horses. And so, It's quite an engaging experience. It does have some accessibility hiccups. Like it's very visual focused and that is something that would be lovely to improve later on that. I'm aware of it that's a ongoing issue within that industry. But when it came to that experience, so, one of their concerns was bottlenecking because their target market was school groups and so they'd come through, a lot of people all at once, needing to get through quite quickly. And so, I was thinking about all areas of that experience. So, through to the colour in template, it was originally a four, but reducing it to a five men. It was a lot less time to colour in and then would be able to change some hardware decisions. And it was also more economical for the museum to print themselves. So, we could have two to achieve rather than one and also less paper waste. We worked on testing different markers and so working out what would be fastest to colour in, but still get the best result on like the screen when it was digitally like crossed over. So, we tested with pencils, markers, crayons. [Narelle] It would be fun [Shannon] It was, we worked in one of the developers, young children to do like that as well, which was really great. And crayons were the winner by far because it had a really good colour result and faster colour in, but also it cleaned off the tables quite well. because like, yeah, that was something in to think about as well and then getting more into like timing nitty gritty. So, I also did animation direction on that project. And so, I know, with those big school groups, okay, so, there's a balance of like making it worth waiting, but like not too long that people leave. And so being like, okay, if we're taking into account this time, we need to the hardware to do it, it needs to do. Like how much time are we giving them to name the horse. For naming the horse, it was also like, oh, it can be decision fatigue. They have to like just think of something from scratch and there's also a hiccup of. Oh, they could write a swear word or a slur. [Narelle] Oh my god, yeah [Shannon] Yeah. So we ended up having like two large lists and fabulous like copywriter and like content strategist, like went from HR, but there was no iffy combinations. And so, there'd be

two dials and like the list need to do different combinations. One of my favorite personal favorites was inexpensive pancake. Yeah, and so, yeah, what would be a good amount of time to give them and like make sure that people are not getting bored. The final like outcome were a race every three minutes, which is quite good. And then we did have some moderation. It was inbuilt as well. So, people did the funniest thing to a primary school person is to draw a penis. And so, if that did happen, we didn't want people to think that the machinery was broken, but we also didn't encourage that. And so the horse would scan in, but it would be completely white and all the colour wouldn't show. And that was the same for a few other things. So, any content strategist right is full list of swear words. [Narelle] Oh my gosh. [Shannon] But even through testing, it those two are some things that slip through the cracks. We were not expecting a primary school groups. Draw swastickas or like 'N' slurs And so, we did have to make some refinements to moderation as well, because you can have a moderated or an unmoderated experience. And so, moderated means there's a staff member in the room at all times whereas unmoderated, there isn't. So, it was unmoderated. And so, there were like multiple levels of backups. So, yeah, that first level of if they're doing the wrong thing, we can detect it and solve it from there. We also had a back end moderation system. So, if something slipped through and someone had saw it, they'd be able to remove it from a computer in the office and get again that would strip the colouring, not remove the horse. But worst case scenario, it slips through and no one one catches it. It's only everyone's frame for most three minutes. So, that was how we got around that. [Narelle] Must have been a lot of fun. [Shannon] It was. And that's just one. Like I've been able to work on so many great like wonderful projects. Last year, I was working on a piece for the Melbourne Holocaust Museum. I've worked on pieces for the Melbourne Zoo before, like the State Library. Not so much outside of Victoria, but a couple of experiences in Western Australia, ACT and hopefully internationally soon. [Narelle] Wonderful. What about the web experience that you have? What type of work do you do there with website? [Shannon] Yeah, so with websites, their user experience aspect of the museum work landed really well. So, I technically started in like digital design first. And so, I was kind of came back to it a little bit after spending some time purely dedicated museum stuff. And so, it works really well. So, just a touch back a little bit, a lot of the museums in Australia have government support. And so just like a website has accessibility requirements for government websites. It is the same for museums. So, there's already aware of some of the accessibility concerns going into that because it's not only the Web Content accessibility guidelines for digital part of the experience that we're also relying on the Smithsonian accessible. I've got it here Smithsonian guidelines for accessible exhibition design. That also includes like if you're in a wheelchair making sure there's adequate space to go through, like reach heights, also like lighting, captioning, all of that as well. So, that lended itself really well to websites because with those Museum things should thinking about so many things. And so in some cases slightly less for digital, but it can still have some really interesting problem solving. So, in the past, I've done some work for, very early on in my career, was helping optimize the David Jones checkout flow. I did the app design for Melbourne Spring Fashion Week app, like back in 2016. Not giving away my age there. And semi, most recently, was I worked with HCF and was doing their design system. And so that's the private health insurer here in Australia. [Narelle] What type of things do you consider for accessibility and usability for a website? [Shannon] Yeah, so, there's a mix of things. So, typically it's easier to get these businesses for the

stuff that directly affects them first, rightly or wrongly. And so, getting them to look at their colours, their typography, those are two big things. And that's generally a really nice stepping stone to get some of these like harder conversations. And so yeah, because it's something that they can see for themselves. And like particularly with colour contrast, you can't argue that much against math. And yeah, just making sure so as part of some of the auditing services that I do like going through and making sure it's all keyboard accessible. Making sure that their H1 to H6 headings are formatted correctly because a lot of. What is beneficial is a lot of the things that would benefit people who need that accessibility features. It also helps other areas. So, like colour contrast, it can help people with even perfect vision. Like, it's going to be very hard to see like blue on slightly darker blue, like no matter how good your eyesight is. But with the H1 to H6 headings, like they also help with SEO. And so, people who kind of used to these conversations around other areas about some of these things, but it's also just getting think about the accessibility and that as well. [Narelle] So, I was interested when you talked about the keyboard operability. What type of thing do you look for there? [Shannon] So, yeah, I look at the website. Sorry, I can't remember the URL right at this moment. Then you get into that and so have a rudimentary report and then go through. I typically just use my own keyboard as well and just make sure, particularly for the homepage that everything is good. While some of these automated tools are really good starting off point, I feel like it's still really useful to just make sure that it works myself. And yeah, just making sure that you get through all of the headings up the top and at least the first. It's not a very good practice to have like sub, head sub menu items, but yeah, the first ones making sure it gets to that, at least. And then going down the page and making sure that links to anything makes sense. And so, was intuitive, it's like really getting my clients to avoid having read more or click here. So, and that's something that slowly I think people are getting more around. I think what has really helped is some of these web builders that people are using are actually, improving in accessibility themselves. So, I've used Webflow quite a bit the past year and that's accessibility tools are fairly good at least as a starting off point. And so, I'll be like, hey, like, this needs some more context around this link or like you left alt text off this image like before you go to publish. And so it does have like that fail safe, which is really good. Because yeah, it's very easy for like you and me, like because we know about it, so like make sure that's included, but people who aren't as aware and don't have malicious intentions, but yeah, just like a backup and yeah, just like, maybe kind of get mad about software like telling you what to do. [Narelle] Yeah, and that's it. I've I know myself that, you know, like the click here drives me crazy because obviously, I use the screen, not obviously. I use the screen reader. And for me, when I use the shortcut and all I hear is click here, click here, click here. There's no context to what, where the target is and that can be quite, you know, do I stay on that web page or do I go somewhere else and find another provider that will do the same work. [Shannon] One thing that I have found that's really interesting this past year and I've been seeing it more and more, particularly on Woolworths. I think it was the first website I saw it, with links that do go to external sites and so it opens in a new tab like a lot of the time or have like another arrow to it to indicate that it's going elsewhere. That's one area that I could improve on myself. I have used a screen reader on and off, like to do some testing, but it is something that I know that I could get better in that area specifically. And so I'm not sure if that's something that you've come across yourself, but but for me, it's been really like nice to see

that and something that I've been definitely implementing for my clients myself. [Narelle] Okay, yeah, no, I haven't seen that, but I'll have to go and have a look. What about people that have neurodiverse disabilities. I'm not mad on the word disabilities, but disabilities? What are the differences that you think should be incorporated into a website for someone that's ADHD? [Shannon] Yeah, so, I'm in kind of two minds about that because I, this is probably one of my biases. Because I do come from an animation background. So, I do love adding animation where I can fit in. However, that isn't always the best when it comes to people who identify as a neurodiverse, particularly ADHD. And so ensuring there's backups to turn that stuff off. If it's over three seconds, making sure that there's a ability, the to turn that off very easily. I think a lot of it comes down to layout and hierarchy, and not just for people who are neurodiverse, but everyone, like having it clearly laid out. The webpage and very clear in the language and wording. Noone really likes to read paragraphs upon paragraphs of jargon and I don't think that's. I think that's pretty universal experience. Like, you don't really want a website to make you feel like you're an idiot for not knowing something. And so you're using clear language. Knowing when scaled back, text, I think that's something that I do struggle. Well, some of my clients struggle with, they just, some of them are writers at heart and like, they just love to put everything on the paper and I feel like I'm about, kind of wet blanket being like, ah, this is all great, but how about we reduce it by like 25, 30%, and so it will just make it... You want everything on your webpage to be effective in like making communication. [Narelle] When you go to design a website, you talked earlier about colour and typeface. What is your starting point? What's the process that you use to design a website? An effective website? [Shanon] Yeah, so with my clients, I generally get them to fill out a form on my website and so it goes into. Because there's some things like, accessibility and usability are important. They're also making sure that it works effectively for my clients. So, I get them to talk about what they feel is working well on their website Because a lot of the time it's for improvements rather than like creating one from scratch. And then what are the pain points? And so that can either be from them being like, oh, this is too difficult and cumbersome to maintain. They don't like the platform that I'm on or they've received feedback from their clients or potential clients being like, I'm not able to find the information that I need. And so, yeah, that can kind of shape what platform to use. Like if they are tossing off on whether they do want to change platforms, that's another question like are there integrations that they're using and like want to continue using or the CRMs? Having like calendar. Like Calendly is a very common integration these days. And so, getting them to do all about what have their target audience. Because like will also dictate the look and the feel of it. And also like there's sections. So, that's all kind of more like about their business, like technical. And then getting into the visual and be like, okay, well, what are some websites you like? What are some websites you don't like? And then having a stylistic directions. So, I have about eight different options. And I think I have it they can choose about three. So, just words that stand out to them. So like bold, cheeky, creative, minimalist, maximalist. Don't remember all of them off top of my head. But you've got a pretty good idea like of the look and feel of what you're going for once that form is filled in. And I typically meet with them face to face and just go through some other questions. And so, one of my, like, soon to be hopefully clients that I am meeting with tomorrow. So, he has a Calendly integration in his website that adds password protected on his current website. And so I was like, hey, well, did you, is this intentional? He's like, oh, like, kind

of, he's like, look, a lot of people try to book meetings with me that aren't actually my clients. And so I just wanted to limit that. And so my clients get the password others don't. But I couldn't figure out a better way to do it. And so I was like, okay, well, like now that I know that, then we can definitely figure out a better way to do that. And also his logo was nowhere on his existing website. And so personal branding is like quite minimal. And that's definitely like things I'm going to be asking him. I have a list of about 15 of the questions on top of that, like, form. Because now I've had a bit more context through that form and, like, having a bit more in depth look. And being like, yeah, I can really get to know what exactly the problems are and what you're expecting. And so, when I put together a proposal, it has like mood boards, like creative direction, like software recommendations. And they get to feel that they're really heard and like can really trust what I'm telling them because I know a lot about what their, like what the problems are. And if, if they have a particular way that they want to solve them or I can recommend something. [Narelle] Do you take SEO and the SEO requirements into count, into account when you design a website? [Shannon] I do. I, It is one of my, I do like to work with people who are a lot more knowledgeable about SEO than I am. And so, yeah, a lot of the time, I work with a copywriter. I have a few copywriters that I work with closely. And they know a lot more about SEO than I do. And so, while I do take every precaution and, yeah, really try and make it as best as I can. I'm not afraid to admit when something is a bit more out of my comfort zone. And so, get people who are smarter than me in that particular area to help me out. And so, that's what will be happening with this particular potential client tomorrow. [Narelle] What's the best part, do you think that you like about your job? Your work? [Shannon] I really like the variety. And I have a really big passion just to create the best user experience that I can, whether that's for a website or an interactive, immersive experience in a museum. And so, and every job is so unique. And I really like just making, thinking about all of the things that make that what it is and what it can be. And just making sure it works flawlessly. Because, a really good quote is "A good designer is invisible. The bad design is very obvious". And so, I'm sure we've talked previously about, you know, poor experiences online for you. Which is very frustrating. But even for people who can see, there's a lot of really bad websites out there. And like, bad ways that people have designed things. And I really like being able to fix that. And so, people are not even having to think about it and be like, yeah, I don't know have to think about this website. Like, everything just makes sense. And like, even if it's just a hop-on hop-off, I get like everything they need. Like, I really enjoy that. [Narelle] Fantastic. Shannon, what's one piece of advice that you would give to any person that's looking at updating or doing a new website? [Shannon] I would think about, like, the role that they want their website to play in their business. And so, thinking back about, okay, how is my website helping me currently? Or how is it not helping me? And so, I did one a couple of months ago for a lecturer. And so, she works on sustainability fashion. And for her, she didn't have an online presence. And so, she's done a lot of research. And she just wanted something like a spot that she would just direct people, like, when writing for grant applications, like awards. And so, that was what she needed. Whereas I've done work for, I did an audit early last year about a fashion retailer, like secondhand one. And so, their point of difference was they did verifications when working with very high-end items. And so, I think 300, pre-Grant plus. And so, they offered a verification service. And so, before I came in, they were like, uh once someone buys this item, then. So, if I was just sell you in this

instance, like a Prada bag. So, you'd be like, yeah, Shannon, going to buy this. And so, I'd be like, okay, well, in this original circumstance, and I would send it to that company, they would do the verification process and then send it to you. So, something that could already take a couple of weeks to send through has just added another, like, two to three weeks with verification. Now, that's great for you because you know that you're getting a legitimate product. That the better way of doing things is, like, to get a verification done ahead of time. And so, if I have, like, five bags that I know are over this threshold and will require verification, then I can send them to this company ahead of time, get them back. And so, that you would be, like, confident in that you're receiving what you say will. None of that, like, in a perfect world, that's what it would happen. Like, you'd, there's still, like, risks around that. But yeah, everything is so different. And I really like the variety that I've, yeah, I'm able to do with my work. [Narelle] So, is there a time when you would ever say don't put accessibility into a website? [Shannon] No. Like, there may be a point where, like, it's a give or take. And then, like, okay, here is like some non-negotiables and here are things we can work. But I'm, no. I like to make my websites as accessible as they can be. And so, even going as far as, like, delving into AAA where it makes sense. Yeah. Like, we've talked about this before. And you're, like, you've said this statistic to me, like, one in six Australians identify as disabled. And so, if you're not including accessibility, then you're potentially leaving out, like, a market that could be purchasing from you. Like, either a product or a service. And so, I just don't know why anyone would purposely not want to include it. [Narelle] Shannon, how can people contact you? [Shannon] Yes. So, you can find me at shannontowell.design/DASAT. I've put together web page, specifically, from this podcast. And so, you ever use ability checklist if you're interested. You can go there and I will give that to you. [Narelle] Wonderful. Thanks. Thanks, Shannon, for your time. Thanks for coming on. It was really interesting to hear about your work. And the process's that you use to get the information to build the website and make it as accessible as possible. Thank you. [Shannon] Thank you. That was really great. Thank you for inviting me.