

Transcript – The Digital Access Show: Season 3, Episode 3 — Guest: Shannon Towell

[music playing] [Narelle] Hello, and welcome to The Digital Access Show. New season. Season three. We've been going for a few weeks now. And I want to introduce you to a concept, a very important Web Content and Accessibility Guideline rule, which is digital accessibility standard. The reason why it's so important is it's all to do with colour. Colour blindness, depth perception, you name it. And it is... success criteria in 1.4.3, and it's level A, so you've got to have this right to actually meet the standard. Why is it so important? Well, if people can't see the colour, you've used the wrong contrast ratio, whatever it is, you're not actually getting your message out properly. What I've actually done is this, and she is a good friend of mine, Shannon Towell from Shannon Towell Design. Shannon, welcome. Thank you for coming. Shannon has actually developed some stuff to work and help you analyze your colours. Shannon, thank you. [Shannon] Hi, Narelle. I'm so happy to be here. It feels like a long time since I was on here last, I think season one. So, it's just great to see you going from strength to strength. [Narelle] Oh, thank you. And the things that I like about what you're doing and for people that are not aware, Shannon's actually developing a series of tools that can be used to... ensure that your accessibility does meet the standard. Shannon, why is colour so important? [Shannon] Well, colour's important cause they're used as semantics everywhere. So if you're driving, there's a red light and a green light, but that may not... mean as much to someone that

struggles with colour blindness. And so, that's why you shouldn't rely on colour alone to convey a message, but it is really important. And the impact of it... is way more important than you think it will be. That's part of the reason why I started offering brands as part of my services, because every time I was doing websites, in order to make them accessible, It always came down to a brand conversation. And so that's kind of... led to me developing these tools, because these tools have been around for ages, but had their own limitations. And I got tired of them and wanted to build my own. And other people have started to like them. [Narelle] Yeah, look, I've seen it and I'm using it now. When I do my audits, I find it easy just to drop the colours in, do what I need to do, run reports. Shannon, you said that you can't always rely on colour... to deliver a message. Why not? [Shannon] Well, just that we've talked a little bit. You brought up colour blindness previously, depth perception. So, if you're doing an error message, say for an input field, so if you're filling out to sign up to a newsletter, first name, email, if you have a typo in your email and don't have the at symbol, and it has a message underneath, If it's red, it could... No. If it's just a red outline, people may not be able to know the difference between it, whereas if you put a... help text underneath being like, hey, there's an at symbol missing, and or putting an icon to just make it especially clear that something is wrong, but it also works the other way just to ensure, and give positive feedback that you've done something correctly, because it's just another way that you can... help users understand what they're doing on your site. [Narelle] Yeah. One of the facts I

learned last year, and I still find it fascinating, there's a part of the brain called the B4 area. And Allan Parker from Peak PD is really good at doing this. When he writes on a board, he uses different colours. And when I sort of, I said, why did you do it? And he said, when the brain sees a difference in colour, it goes, oh, hang on. This is important. I need to remember it. So, it also triggers the brain to work, and to notice differences, doesn't it? [Shannon] Yeah, it absolutely does. And that applies... not just to digital, but everything as well. People may be able to see that I'm wearing blue today. I wear this to every event. It's a core part of my brand. And that's the way that helps me stand out. But it isn't just the colour, there's patterns and all of that as well. There's a lot that goes into it, but colour at the heart. [Narelle] Colour at the heart. What are the Web Content

Accessibility Guideline rules in relation to colour? [Shannon] So, it works on a ratio. So you may have heard Narelle talk about before that there's A, AA and AAA as a standard. I don't know the ratio quite off the top of my head, but you know, there is a little bit more flexibility. For the colour contrast in particular, there's more nuances as well, so there's normal text and what's considered large text. It's typical that large text is anything over 18 pixels, and so that fail, pass ratio is lower than... normal text, which is anything 18 pixels and below. And so, what is really great about WCAG is it's pass, fail, and there's not usually much room for ambiguity. Orange can be a different story, but it's all in ratios,

and so

it's a mathematical formula. [Narelle] Yeah, cause one of the things that I learned from you, is there are actually colours that you don't use. And does that make a difference with the WCAG? Every colour, you're able to... Normally every colour, you can either get it to work with white or black. But there's just some of those ones that are in the middle that they're workable, just a little bit tricky. And so, I know what

Narelle's getting at. I did a blog post recently about... why I don't tend to use orange as a primary brand colour, cause that falls into one of those tricky colors. Now, the bright orange, and I'm holding up a bright orange fidget toy on my desk. This is what people would use as part of their brand. It's bright, orange, zesty. It's great. What people normally do is pair it with white. And that can look really great to some people. But... this orange and this white fails WCAG contrast checks. But if you put it against black, another random thing on my desk, it can look quite strange. And so, there has been a study previously done in 2019, with a small sample group, seeing colorblind users,

what they preferred, and real split the middle difference. [Narelle] Really? [Shannon] Yeah. For some, the luminosity for the white was easier to read. Some, it gave people headaches, and the same with black. And so, that's typically why I don't use it, because your brand colours are so important. And you know, if you have that ambiguity about people perceiving it, yeah, it doesn't make a good colour choice. And so I typically steer clear

from orange as a primary colour, and that's one that you see everywhere. So for me, blue... DASAT, yellow, which yellow doesn't have the same issues, as long as you're not using it with white text. [Narelle] Yeah. [Shannon] But yeah, orange is just a tricky one. [Narelle] I think people forget to, I remember when I was doing uni first time around, that's a long time ago. And we were talking about, and don't forget back then, we didn't have much control... over the amount of colours we could use on a computer. Initially, it was black background, green writing. When desktops came in and we were able to start using colour, and the rule was if you could sit at a screen, and look at it for a few minutes without hurting your eyes, five minutes is the general length, you're pretty spot on. I was looking at a website the other day and 30 seconds, I felt physically sick. And it was actually an NDIS provider website. I just got straight off, and thought I can't even go back on to get the email address, to say, hey, guys. you've got a problem with your website. The colour that you're using... will make people sick, because colour can have that effect, can't it? [Shannon] Yeah, it can. While I personally don't get that sick feeling, it is pretty common... for people to have a physical reaction to a colour combination, and it's usually a bad one. And so, you know, that's what I'm wanting my tool to help with. We haven't talked about it that much, but typical colour contrast checkers can... check two colours at a time. That's one of their limitations. As a brand designer, when I'm going and developing a palette, I may be looking at like... eight to 12 colours all at once. And so, I built a tool that... helps you see how

they all work together and so multiple colours. And so you're not just limited to two. [Narelle] Okay. [Shannon] Yeah. [Narelle] And so tell us more about the tool itself, cause that's one of the things I liked about it. I've got to admit I stuck all our brand colours in and thought, oh, yeah, make that change, fix that, fix that. And it was only slight changes, and it was not that I had to change much. It was where I was using a couple of things. But the tool gave me the information. Tell me about the tool. [Shannon] Yeah. So, it's been kind of in an alpha state for the past year, and so I developed it initially, just my own use. And it looked pretty ugly, in all honesty. It wasn't responsive, and it wasn't accessible at all. And so, you know, it worked fine for me but I could already see the value of it the past year, just working on it, and so, in the last month or so, I worked really hard to... develop it to get it into a place where, you know, it looked great, did what I needed it to do, also expanded the functionality that it had as well. The original version was only the color contrast checker itself, but it gives you previews of how colorblind people perceive it. There's multiple types of colorblindness, about six or seven from memory. And so, it shows how it looks to them. Not only are you checking that it complies with contrast for WCAG, but also to ensure there's adequate contrast for people who... see things differently than you. And for the brand designers and designers in the room, it also at the bottom has a... list of every colour styling. So hex code, RGB and CMYK, paste it directly into your brand guidelines. [Narelle] Yep. When you talk about the different

types of colour blindness, when you're designing a website and considering WCAG, you obviously have to take that into account, but by how much? [Shannon] Yeah, so, you know, I talked a bit before about those traffic lights, like red and green are commonly used for green, good, red, bad. But there's multiple types of colour blindness, where you have a green deficiency or a red deficiency, and they can look similar. And so that becomes a problem when, like that scenario before, you're typing in a form, and that red border comes up, and you're like I don't know if this is good or bad, because there's no additional information. So, that's where those texts or icons come in. And so it's just important. Colour blindness does affect males more than it does women, which is something that I find interesting. But... it's just a very small thing to make sure that your... colours work well for everyone. That was the purpose of the tool, just to make it as easy as possible before you get to a stage where you have to make compromises, or retrofit, or... go back on any branding, because that can put people in a tricky situation as well. [Narelle] What about the greyscale? That one fascinates me, because obviously for me with my level of sight, I really struggle with greyscale. I'll look at it and think, yeah, it all looks the same to me. Why is greyscale used? Why do you test for that? [Shannon] So, there is a type of colour blindness where people... don't really interpret colour at all, and it is like a gray scale. And so, it shows you that as well. And it's, from my knowledge, the

same way that gray scale, if you're changing a photo on photoshop, and desaturating it, like the red turns to this type of gray. And so, yeah, it kind of falls into all those other colour blindness, and being able to see the colours that you're wanting to assess... all next to each other, it gives you really clear, quick input of being like, yep, you're on the right track with all of this stuff. [Narelle] Okay. So, you plug your colours in, your five or six colours, and it's come back saying, fail. Tick, tick, fail, whatever. How do you use... that to fix the colours? Is it a case of just playing around with the values, in where you were talking about the values for the hex, and the CYMK, the RGB, until the... colour palette does give you all ticks, or how do you use it? [Shannon] Yeah so it kind of depends on the way that you... want to go about it. Like, using your yellow for example. Like, you've got the black text in the background. If you were testing yellow and white, it would fail and you'd be like, oh my God, do I need to change the yellow? No. Typically, if it fails on white, it will pass on black. And so it maybe, instead of using that white text on a button, where you'd have a yellow background, see how it looks like with black, or if you have navy in your colors. And so typically, it's just the way... you'd use them, not move away from the colour altogether. But if you were really keen on having... white text on the yellow, then you'd be able to play around and just deepen the yellow until you did get that pass result. [Narelle] Okay. This is interesting. Not sure where to go next. I've got about 100 questions

in my mind about the colour. So when you get, we've been looking at the reds, and yellows and oranges. What about the greens and the blues, and where they might be on the same side of the colour wheel? How do you deal with that? [Shannon] Kind of the same. A lime green wouldn't necessarily work with white text, but a deep forest green definitely would, and it would be more appropriate to have it on white text... rather than black, if you were using the colour as a background. And so, it really... It sounds simple, and that's because it is in some ways. If it doesn't work with white, it typically works with black, or vice versa. The thing that, you know, I've talked about with clients and presentations before, colour contrast is simultaneously one of the easiest things... you can do to improve accessibility in your business, but one of the hardest to achieve, just because the longer you've been in the brand, you build up brand recognition, you build up... patterns. If you've done a good job, you tend to like your brand and not want to change it very much. And so, yeah, if those things are down the road, people who have replied to my blog post about not using orange. And they're like, oh, well, I've used orange as a main... part of my brand for so long, I don't even know where to begin to fix it. And typically it doesn't need fixing, it's just tweaking. And so, the thing with most brands, you tend to have a variety of colours that you'd use. And it's typically... primary, secondary, and tertiary. So, your primary colors are the ones you use all the time. You see them everywhere. Secondary, half as much. And a third, a third as much. And so, yeah, the ones you're using all the time, way up front. And so, sometimes it's as

easy as tweaking those ratios. If you use that bright orange as backgrounds and all of that, that may not be the best case to use it, but it doesn't mean you have to get rid of it. It could be just using it as a highlight or a divider instead. So, yeah, there's ways to tweak it. [Narelle] Okay. So, colours also have meaning. And we've always grown up with yellow being happy and red means no and green means go, and those things. When you're doing a brand, and you're trying to work out, like for us, I mean, everyone basically chose their favourite colours, and most of us, it happened to be the same, which was everyone liked blue. I said, well, I'm doing this.

I'm throwing yellow in. That's probably not the way you should do it. There's an actual science to it, which is why... they should talk to a brand designer or a graphics designer. [Shannon] Yeah, they can. So, you know, using that approach, like your favourite colour, not the worst way to go about it. You should like your colour, but there's also other considerations that you can... take into account. So, I know when I was developing my brand, people ask me all the time, is blue your favourite colour? And believe it or not, no, it's not. [Narelle] Oh, really? [Shannon] I chose blue for the accessibility element of it. Blue, particularly this shade of blue, very accessible on white. And I know that that was what I wanted to go with. And this bright shade of blue isn't often seen in events, or branding. And so, that was a way to differentiate myself. But there's a few approaches when it comes to my clients. And so, I tend to do a competitor analysis, and so, see what other

people are doing in the space. And then you can go one of two ways. You can either... take elements, like if you're working in banking, for example, blue is considered a very... trust and authoritative color. And so, you'd find a lot of banks use blue. So, ANZ, that sort of thing. [Narelle] Yep. Yep. [Shannon] So, you could take elements of that, and be like, I'm using blue. I'm a banking firm. Or you could use that to divert and go the other way. And that can give you more brand recognition, but it can be a little bit harder at the start. You either blend in with the crowd at first to get authority, or you go out on your own path. That's typically what I do for my clients, is looking what's around. I mean, like, all right, where's the gaps in this market? And so, I did some work with a consultancy. They work with defense and government contracts. And so, I was looking at similar businesses. A lot of them use very macho colours, like your navies, forest greens. Yeah, Narelle's nodding. She knows exactly what I'm talking about. Whereas they had a pre-existing, pretty... kind of a feminine, and like, warm palette. So, they had, like, pinks and greens mainly. And so, it still had some of that green. The thing I love about their brand, and I'm continuing to work on them at the moment, is you can... Yet again going to those ratios of being like, well, their brand's already distinctive, and so how can we bring in that... pink where it makes more sense, or if it needs to present more masculine, and appeal to decision makers in government and defence, who are more than

likely male at the moment. Yeah, so there's all of those factors to consider, and cultural plays into it as well. I've done work with an IT company, and colours have a lot of meaning in their religion and culture. And so they really wanted to... use red for various reasons, because it was like lucky in their culture, and signified some other things that were relevant to... their clients. [Narelle] Yeah. It's interesting. The science of colour really is interesting. It's not something that I worry about anymore. I've got people that I go to, like yourself, and say, yeah, okay. Have a look. What do I do? And that is a bonus for me. Shannon, what are the takeaways that you would, other than using the tool, because it is a valuable tool to use, and it does make life a lot easier, What other takeaways can you give people that are listening? [Shannon] Yeah, so, as Narelle said, I would just take a couple of minutes, get all your brand colours and see how they... comply with WCAG. And so, my tool is a great way to do that. But other than that, just think about how people perceive your brand. And... if you're relying on colour alone anywhere on your website, I'd implore you to just add some secondary information, whether that's an icon or text, because that you can change pretty immediately without having a fire in your branding department. [Narelle] Yeah. Okay. How do they find your colour contrast checker? [Shannon] Yes. So, it's on my website, shannontowell.design, and it's in the resources section. So, the multicolour

contrast checker. [Narelle] Awesome. And if they want to find out more about colour, and how you work with colour, can they contact you? Is it the website again? [Shannon] They can go to my website, or always happy to answer questions. You can email me at hello@shannontowell.design, or there's multiple ways to get in contact with me, through my website or LinkedIn. [Narelle] Yeah.

Thanks

Shannon for coming on. I really appreciate your time. And... definitely get in contact with Shannon. Use her tool. It is a good way to check your colour contrast ratio. Sorry, for A, it is 3:1, AA, it is 4.5:1, and for AAA, it's 7:1. The ratio is important if you want your message to get across. If you like what we do please like, subscribe, review. Give us feedback, good, bad ugly. Love all of it. And we'll see you next time on The Digital Access Show. If you like what we do, please share, review, like, subscribe. You can find all our old podcast episodes on YouTube and also on our website, dasat.com.au. We do love to receive any feedback that you can give us. So. we'll see you next time on The Digital Access Show. Bye-bye. [music playing]