The Digital Access Show – Tim Durrant, Lightmare Studios

Introduction

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Narelle: Hi, welcome to today's episode of The Digital Access Show. I've been looking for someone with this particular issue for a while because it's an issue that affects many people. Do I class it as a disability? What's normal? That's all I can say. What is normal because I happen to think I'm normal. And I know this bloke is very normal because he's got an interest and he works in an area that my adult sons have an interest in. And he works in an area that, you know, that's a very proactive area and a very innovative area of the world. Please meet Tim Durrant from Lightmare Studios. Tim, thank you so much for coming on.

Tim: Hey, Narelle. Thanks for having me and honestly to your point as well, I agree. What is normal? And, I think, I would class what I've got as a disability, but it is also my normal. The normal that I've lived with for years.

Tim’s background and Lightmare Studios

Narelle: Yeah, and that's it. Tim, can you tell us a bit about yourself and your work because other than what you class as your disability, I'm a bit fascinated with your work. I don't use the tools that you produce, but it still fascinates me because I love IT.

Tim: Yeah, sure. So, I'm the operations manager for a company by the name of Lightmare Studios. So for years I've worked in and out and around the government, specifically the NDIS. And Lightmare, it's been around for about 20 years and I got started with the company about 15 years ago when I was in grade 10 at school. They were offering an internship program, and that was six months worth of your time to work directly with them to learn how to make video games. And that's where they got their start, creating video games for Australia and the worldwide market. I started out as an intern with them and they realized that a lot of the students that I was with had autism or were on the spectrum in some manner. And they complained quite significantly of being disconnected from their communities. So yeah, about four years ago, Lightmare started up essentially a social program, an online connected social program that allowed NDIS participants and non-NDIS participants to essentially connect up using video games, hobbies, digital interests like 3D printing. And it's one of my weaknesses as well. I love 3D printing. But yeah, we're using interest points to be able to help connect our participants up to help them build up their social communication skills, hopefully reconnect them with their communities and help them find friends.

Social connection and gaming

Narelle: And actually that's a really important thing because people don't realize just how, I think the word's probably, locked in you can get. So I know for me, if I go outside my immediate area, I really struggle when I'm by myself, like I was at Chermside today. And I can't get to Chermside by myself. I can't get home by myself. I can get around Chermside. But once I'm in a shop I can't do anything by myself because of my sight issue. And being able to connect up with other people that have similar interests. And in the, you know, in the young of today are into games and gaming and the things that you talk about. So I find it a very valuable resource.

Tim: Yeah. So do we. Yeah, we saw it as a valuable resource. I've got my own unique view on it, which I actually, no, won't even say unique. I think it's a view that a lot of people will share, at least those that have definitely had the kind of experiences that I have. But with Lightmare, we've come to the realization that gaming can be used in a very positive manner. We can connect people up that were, as I said before, disconnected from the community, but might be afraid to leave the house, might not have those friends or that friend base to be able to reach out to, to get things started up. So, yeah, we try to use an easy access point with the interest that we know that they're already going to love and use that as the focal lens to be able to get them to connect with one another and overcome the resistances to either receiving feedback with regards to social skills or just trying to subtly introduce those social skills without them even noticing.

Epilepsy and fine motor skills

Narelle: And there's one more thing that I think people forget. So one of my sons has autism and one of the problems he had was very low muscle tone. So his fine motor skills were just not there. And we ended up, I think it was a PS3 or whatever it was, one of the reasons we got it was because he was able to get stronger fine motor skills through playing the computer games. And it actually worked with his finger movements and now you wouldn't know he had the problems he had. He couldn't write with a pen or cut anything. There's so many things he couldn't do. You wouldn't know it now.

Tim: Yeah. I can relate to that on a complete level. So yep, what you're alluding to before is, I have epilepsy. I try to say I had epilepsy, and I think that's a bit of a... it's incorrect. I still do have it. I just haven't had any episodes for probably the better half of nearly 10 years. So for me, I see it partially as a thing in the past even though I know it's very much still present and underlying. Yeah, still very much there. But yeah, I have epilepsy and it really created havoc with mine and my family's life in my much younger years. From what I'm told, from ages of two starting up, and I think it really stopped bothering me around the age of 10. And that was through the administration of Epilim, which really helped out a lot. But at the same time, it knocked me out. I had absolutely no energy, especially during my first years of school. And I think that was potentially the greatest impact. Grade one, I slept through the majority of my classes. So I well and truly fell behind my peer group to the point that my mother requested that I get held back for grade one, because most of my report cards showed that I didn't really pick up or progress with any of the classes.

Narelle: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Tim: Yeah, much like your son, my fine motor skills were pretty much non-existent. I couldn't hold a pen. So, up until about grade four, grade five, I had to have the small, almost a rubber diamond on pencils.

Narelle: Yeah, I know exactly what you're talking about. And it just sits on the end and allows people with no fine motor skills to hold them.

Tim: Yeah, and that was myself. Up until about grade five, I had to have one of those little rubber diamonds there to be able to help me hold a pen and pencil. I didn't get my pen license for quite some time.

[Narelle and Tim laughing]

Narelle: Hey, I was about grade five before I got a pen license too. And I didn't have those problems. I was just untidy.

Tim: Yeah, I'm still untidy. I was raised around doctors. But yeah, absolutely. My fine motor skills were absolutely destroyed for quite some time there, so I had to work very hard. It started out as a Nintendo 64, but the PlayStation was the thing that really fixed that for me. The intense hand-eye coordination that came with playing a console. And yeah, I'll give my mother credit on that one. She had heard some feedback from other parents saying that their kids had gotten some benefits from playing PlayStation. She got me one very quickly after that one. And I'd say within two years of getting a PlayStation, I was pretty much caught up with my peers.

Triggers and healthy screen use

Narelle: You know, technology has such good uses. Mind you, as a mother, I hated that PlayStation with a passion sometimes. And yeah, OK, I was the mum that took all the PlayStation cords to work. What I didn't know is my boys actually worked out how to get hold of some more. But that's history, they're adults now. Tim, one of the things that I'm very much aware of is the amount of movement on the screen can cause epileptic fits. And it's also, there's a colour of red. There's a few different things can do it. How did you deal with that? You know, you're of the age where it's, you've always been, as you said, involved with the digital environment.

Tim: Yeah. I was lucky enough in that the vast majority of my epilepsy wasn't really triggered by strobing lights or bright activities, although it could sometimes be triggered off by that. So, sometimes it was really just a matter of turning down the brightness of the TV screen. I have an astigmatism now in my eyes, so I try to tone down the brightness of a television screen because sometimes it's those streaking lights. But yeah, it was mainly just my mother implementing time away from the PlayStation. I try to do it in a regimented schedule, let's say, of being integrated with the PlayStation for a small amount of time, taking a healthy break and then coming back to it. I wasn't allowed for it to take over my life. Now that I'm much older, I would love for it to take over my life. But with two kids, I get maybe 40 minutes here and there. Yeah, it's really mainly been about healthy engagement and taking that bit of a break. And that's also something we teach a lot at Lightmare, a healthy engagement with regards to consoles and gaming.

Narelle: How do you, in the area that you're working with coding and with gaming, can you really control that? Are there ways that you can control it because there will be still a lot of people that will be affected by those, you said, the strobing lights or those particular shades of red or quick movement, sudden movements? What do you do in the gaming world to deal with that?

Tim: For these days we're really lucky. A lot of your higher AAA titles, your games that have received a lot more of a financial input, tend to have modes and settings these days that can take into account different needs and different abilities. So there's a lot that will do for colour blindness, where you can swap up the colour palettes within a game to be able to help accommodate for that need. Same in some cases for epilepsy. There's always a warning before a game, but there'll sometimes be settings there that help to take out different components that could help trigger those as well. So it's been great to see the industry move along and implement a lot of safety measures around the different lives of those engaging within gaming. For my own staff, it's just a matter of, like any good workplace, stretch your legs, get away from the screen. They're staring at a computer screen for the entirety of the day programming games. So it's just a quick reminder here and there: step away from it, take a break, take some water, stretch your legs, get some fresh air because there will be days where you don't see the outside of your house or the workplace. So, yeah, just get some fresh air and try not to be sitting in front of the computer screen for eight hours.

Narelle: Cause really, we're not talking just about gaming, are we? We're talking about websites, those gif animations. There's all types of things that have those, and like the Christmas trees, you know, you get the Christmas trees at Christmas time with all the bright twinkly lights and they're all going like crazy. It's everywhere, isn't it?

Tim: Yeah, absolutely. I'm really lucky in that my epilepsy isn't triggered by strobing lights because there are a lot of situations that I could walk into, a shopping centre or whatnot, and it could have very easily been set off if strobing was a thing for myself.

Narelle: With the barrier, or I don't like it as a barrier because it's just what, you're normal. With the epilepsy, are there still areas that you go, oops, I don't go there on the digital environment? Or is it, you know, you're just so aware of it, you do it without thinking now? How do you?

Tim: There's kind of two sides to that. So with gaming and my normal everyday life, TV and whatnot, I'm just engaging and it's there in the back of the head as, okay, just be careful and be aware. But my biggest thing has always, or at least my doctors have advised, my biggest thing at the current point in time is alcohol. So I try to steer away from that as much as what I can. I'll have the casual drink here and there, but I'll never have enough to become inebriated or drunk because that's where the epilepsy can, and has recently, been set off: consumption of alcohol.

Accessibility settings and AI

Narelle: That's an interesting one. With the knowledge that you have of epilepsy, you've talked about settings on the gaming front and everything else. Are there other settings on computers that people should be aware of that can be used to minimise it?

Tim: Apart from really dulling down the brightness and maybe a couple of other settings to reduce flashing, blue light glasses, I've found it, and it maybe doesn't even directly relate to my epilepsy, but blue light glasses are the best thing for myself.

Narelle: What are blue light glasses? Sorry, I don't know that.

Tim: They're glasses that you can get with a bit of a bluer lens to them. And it helps to filter out some of the brighter lights that you'll get from TVs, computer consoles, and your computer screens. From what I see online quite frequently, longer periods of exposure to blue light, or at least the lighting that can come from computer screens, can help offset your sleep schedule, make it more difficult to be able to fall asleep, and result in greater unrest. And I mean, that can also impact my epilepsy a little bit. If I'm too tired, that can help lead to things potentially setting on. So blue light glasses help me to not be too affected from sitting in front of the computer screen for potentially eight hours in a row. And it means it doesn't take me three hours to get to sleep at the end of the day as well.

Narelle: Actually, that's quite interesting because now I remember where I've seen them because I used to have to wear glasses with, I think it was like a yellowish brownie tint because I had such an extreme reaction. I was very light sensitive. And I used to end up with migraines and the way we stopped that was I had to wear these glasses with this sort of yellowish brownish tint to it to cut out that light. Do you think AI is going to make a difference to people with epilepsy?

Tim: I think it could be. I think with the right kind of development and things in mind, there could potentially be an AI application that could be introduced onto a person's computer that would take in different needs, that could potentially even monitor the way that someone's interacting or reacting to their computer screens and then make setting changes on the fly.

Narelle: Oh wow.

Tim: But unless it was something like that implemented, I couldn't really see AI in and of itself making a huge difference with regards to the way that people use websites or whatnot for myself. It would probably be the individual actions of companies to keep in mind that some of their customers might have different disabilities, such as epilepsy, and try to have the websites created in such a way that they either have those warnings ahead to make sure that people potentially aren't triggered by that or at least just to have those elements dulled down a little bit.

Narelle: Interesting. I hadn't thought of that with AI. So you're basically talking about them being able to monitor people's reactions and change settings on the fly, which could be used more than just for epilepsy. It could be colour contrast, it could be a whole heap of things, couldn't it really?

Tim: Yeah, I was actually speaking to a colleague about 20 minutes ago and they raised something with regards to a person they had met recently that had an eye condition that meant that both their eyes were moving constantly. And my first thought was that I've seen technology related to computer screens that uses one or two different cameras that track the movement of the person's eyes to essentially create a 3D image at all times on the computer screen. And I could see that more or less kind of being tweaked in a manner that tracked the movement of the person's eyes to ensure that the computer screen was more or less adjusted to the way that the eyes were sitting at that point in time to allow for a greater clarity.

Narelle: Yeah, technology's brilliant, isn't it?

Tim: Yeah, there's a lot of potential applications if someone wanted to just sit down and spend the time doing something like that. The potentials are there. We have all the technology. It's really just having someone with the interest.

Other conditions, resilience, and advice

Narelle: Tim, what's a couple of pieces of advice that you could give anyone that's listening, whether they be NDIS providers, software developers, or even people with epilepsy, with regards to computer use and movement and everything we've talked about?

Tim: I think, so for people with epilepsy, or at least even with anyone with any form of disability, if I have to count them all off, I have a couple. So epilepsy being one of them. I have a heart condition as well, which has made life a very interesting experience for myself. And dyscalculia, which is essentially dyslexia for math.

Narelle: Yeah. For those that aren't aware, dyscalculia is where you really struggle to read numbers.

Tim: Yeah. In my case, I can read numbers perfectly. I can see them there. But the connection sometimes from a number to the value that it has... my wife tried to introduce card games to me quite a while ago, and I can play them. It usually takes me a little bit longer to be able to sit down and think with regards to what each of those numbers or symbols represent. Or in some cases, I just don't connect that value, the supposed value of that game, to the number that's presented in front of me. And that will just never connect, unfortunately.

Narelle: And when you think about it, our whole world is based on numbers. So it's another interesting limitation that you've got to get around.

Tim: It is. Yeah. And I haven't really found a way of navigating that in any manner. It's just a reality for myself. Phone-based apps and web banking have been perfect, especially keeping that number right in front of me as to this is how much is left, this is how much you want to be saving in a month. It's an absolute blessing. Because without that, I'd like to think that I'm really good with saving my money, but I could probably very easily spend it without even taking into consideration that it's money that I'm throwing around.

Narelle: Yeah. It's just amazing, isn't it? Just the differences in people. And I think whenever I meet someone like you, you've got such a positive mindset as well. And that must have made the difference. Was that something your parents built up in you as well, that just because you can't do it one way doesn't mean you can't do it?

Tim: I think I've got my father to thank for that. He's horrifically stubborn, but he's also very matter-of-fact. It's not about taking emotion into it. He's always been stiff upper lip, just... things happen to you in life. You absorb that and just find a way around it. I guess that's always kind of been, okay, I'm not going to have an emotional interaction from this myself. And that can potentially have a bit of a negative effect here and there. I become a little bit too logical. But it has meant that when it comes to obstacles, and like you called disabilities before a barrier, that's exactly how I've seen it. It's not something that stopped me. It's something that I've had to slow down and find a way around. It's never been a complete stop. It's a speed bump of a barrier. It's never been a complete stop. It's a, okay, you can't do this the normal way, but there is going to be another way that you can handle it to be able to get around.

Narelle: And that's the best part of living, isn't it? Because that's what we've all got to do. It's what life's about.

Tim: Yeah, absolutely. And if there's anything I can ever take out of having a heart condition, epilepsy and dyscalculia, it's a form of resilience. I definitely got dealt a harder hand from the very start. But I think the hand that was dealt to me is the reason why I'm able to take the positivity and the attitude that I take into a lot of things now. I know how bad things had been, and then I managed to overcome them. So that can still be applied to everything else. And I'm hoping my kids can also absorb those kind of life lessons and learn a lot of resilience. And I do hope that they avoid having to experience the same things as myself. But at the same time, there's a resilience there that I think they could very much learn from and hopefully take into their own life and know that there's never one thing that'll be able to stop you. You just need to find that different approach.

Narelle: Yeah. So back to the piece of advice. I told you we get sidetracked. I'm good at that. What are the pieces of advice, Tim?

Tim: I think it's going back to what I said before. It really is just a matter of there's always a different approach that you can take to things. There's never one thing that's ever going to truly stop you. It's just a matter of remaining positive. Especially with epilepsy, there are always going to be different severities. I think I got lucky and I got a bit of a lighter side to it where I was able to more or less navigate it with a little bit of medication and then being careful. But it's just that: find what you've got, and then you'll be able to customize your approach to it to be able to better overcome it.

Closing

Narelle: Tim, thank you. Thanks so much for being on the show. How can people get in contact with you?

Tim: Oh, yeah. Through a cacophony of different ways. You can always find me at Lightmare Studios through the website there. Just Google Lightmare Studios. You'll find us there as the first result. And then, yeah, my email address and my phone number will be on the website. Tim@Lightmare.com.au is also my email address. So feel free to reach out if there's anything that you'd like to discuss, explore or learn.

Narelle: And I think, considering both of us have made our careers out of technology... technology's fun.

Tim: It is. It's amazing.

Narelle: Yeah, it is. So, look, podcast, more technology. So if you like what we do on The Digital Access Show, please like, subscribe, share, review. We love feedback, good, bad and ugly. And we'll see you on next week's show. See you later.

Tim: Thank you.

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