Transcript for Tech4Good Awards and Digit Music podcast episode

Robin Christopherson

Welcome to another episode of The AbilityNet Podcast, disability technology inclusion. I'm your host Robin Christopherson, Head of Digital Inclusion at AbilityNet, a pioneering UK charity with a mission to make a digital world accessible to all. This week's episode is about the Tech for Good awards, they're open for nominations, please get your entries in. Closing Date is the fifth of May, you can go to www dot Tech for Good awards.com That's tech the number 4 good awards.com You can download a transcript of this episode from www.abilitynet.org.uk/podcast. So sit back, grab your favourite beverage and let's get started.

Robin Christopherson

We're back I'm here with Mark again. How you doing?

Mark Walker

I'm good mate. How are you?

Robin Christopherson

Yeah, really good. Thank you. So this time it's we're going to be talking to Si, Si Tew again, of Digit Music, we've interviewed him before he is another prior winner, previous winner of Tech4Good. Do you want to fill us in on what Digit Music is all about.

Mark Walker

So Digit Music is, won the accessibility award back in 2019. And they created a music controller using the controller for a wheelchair. So people in wheelchairs will be familiar with the sort of joystick controller that they use to move an electric wheelchair around. They converted that into a music controller, which is a neat little piece of sideways thinking really, in terms of making the interface work in a slightly different way. They they created that as a sort of prototype there at that sort of stage when when they won the award. We subsequently had them performing at a couple of events that we ran, and particularly most notably the Tech, TechShare Pro and we, held in Google that same year. It was fantastic, everybody having great fun joining in with the music making that they did. But since then, they've gone from strength to strength through the lockdown and beyond. As you'll hear in the interview, they've really motored along and that they're growing at a huge rate in terms of the devices that they're creating, and how they're working with schools and other programmes they've attached to that. So the simplicity of that initial idea was what caught our eye. But, you know, the efforts of the Digit, Digit Music team generally are just really impressive and usually inspiring for anybody. Thinking about how you can start small and just scale up, connecting and making use of all the networks that are around them, including Tech4Good. Fantastic catch up with him, see how he's doing and they're doing great. It's just great to hear from them.

Robin Christopherson

Yeah, absolutely. So without any further ado, then let's hand over to you guys. And let's hear from Si. Si is brilliant. He's an inspiration himself. I'm a huge fan. So okay, let's hear from you talking to Si.

Mark Walker

So hi Si, how are you doing? How are things?

Si Tew

Very well. Thank you Mark. Very well, how are you?

Mark Walker

I'm very well, thank you. Could you just introduce yourself a bit more formally than I did. And tell us a little bit about Digit Music in terms of where it comes from, particularly in terms of your own interest? And, and you know, how it, how it came together in the first place?

Si Tew

Yeah, of course, no problem. Yeah, so my name is Si Tew. I'm one of the founders at Digit Music. And Digit Music, essentially, we are, we fuse gaming design, with musical know how to create an environment where anybody can make music and make music far quicker than was previously possible. And it kind of gets people round a number of the barriers that people often face. Musical instruments can often be quite difficult. And unless you've got full dexterous use of both hands, you can often be completely shut out of the party. So we've designed a system which includes an instrument, which is called composure, and notation system called arrow notes, and then kind of a bunch of frameworks and kind of experience to enable people to engage, to make music and kind of experience the benefits that come from that far, far quicker than then they could previously. And sort of everything that we really do as a business falls under the banner of music made easier. And we just want everybody in the world to be able to kind of access the joys that come from from making music really.

Mark Walker

Cool and I'm guessing that that has some sort of personal connection and sense of your own music making background anyway, that you know, the fact that you want people to share the same joy that you've had, I guess is the start of it.

Si Tew

Yeah yeah, definitely. Definitely. You know, I think there's so many things that come come from, from music, you know, from the personal enjoyment, and that kind of, you know, have been able to can be quite an insular experience in some senses where you're really just digging in and, and you know, in that kind of flow state making music and creating something that didn't exist before you started. But then actually, I think where the real importance comes as that kind of conversation and community element that comes with it, you know, playing music with people is, is one of the joys of life, you know, and it's kind of a phrase of sitting in the pocket, but which is playing not very much at all, but really sitting there and being in the zone with it. But, you know, previously, you kind of need to do your 10,000 hours on an instrument to be able to get to that point where you can sit and play those three notes effectively, and really feel that kind of, you know, that connection with people. So, yeah, we just thought, you know, it doesn't have to be this way, you know, with, with the kind of my input and the input from the great team that we work with over here, myself, and Owain my co founder, and, you know, we've able, been able to kind of design a system, that means that people can get that experience of playing music very, very quickly, people then want to dig in and kind of go into the technicalities, etc, they can do. But also, you know, obviously, we're at Tech4Good Awards, and discussing what's going on here. And as you guys know, when, when, when was 2019, wasn't it that I was involved, so long, long time ago, now, it may seem a little bit long in the tooth. But, you know, very much came from the work that I'd been doing with a group called the able orchestra, which was working with young disabled musicians, and just recognising the needs that, you know, the there are ways to, to adapt interfaces that people are used to using day in and day out, and have them do something new and kind of, you know, make them be become musical. And then what we ended up finding was that user experience and kind of designing with with certain young people that we'd worked with certain musicians in mind, meant that we came up with the user experience, that just means anybody can access it far quicker. So actually, we're seeing a lot of traction now in, in kind of colleges, universities, schools, like not specifically from an accessibility and inclusion standpoint, from everybody making music, which I guess is kind of, for us is really where we want it to be, you know, it's that it's ultimate inclusion, I suppose, isn't it? If you don't actually really talk about it, it just is so?

Mark Walker

Well, I like that sort of that that next step as well, because from the point of view of the accessibility award, you know, which is, as you say, where you started, we would always say that designing with any user in mind is the best place to start, put your users first. But we also say that when you start working with accessibility and inclusion in mind, you're very often going to create something which is much easier for everybody to use. And that's the, that's the perfect example you've given there, isn't it? You know, the background and where you came from is not relevant to the people who are using it tomorrow, now that you've built those, those features in, and you've got the interface. And so tell me a bit about the controller that you actually won the award for? Because that was that's also way back when I expect for you now and given all the changes. I know that had happened. But that was where it all started in terms of the Tech4Good Awards certainly.

Si Tew

yes. Yeah. Yeah, exactly. So back then it was called Control One, I believe.

Si Tew

So yeah, essentially, when when, when we came to Tech4Good Awards, it was still at the point where it was an actual wheelchair controller, it was a Shark 2 for anybody that's interested. And we, we just rip the insides out of it, and put our own electronics into it. So it was an interface that, you know, the specific musicians that we've worked with, throughout all of this. One of them being Jess Fisher, I know you've met, she came down and performed when we played at Google. And she works with us at Digit now as well, week in week out. But she's, she was involved right at the start. And that was actually the wheelchair controller that she used on her chair, so, and a number of her kind of classmates did as well. So it just seemed like the logical place to start. So it was a case of just pulling out the insides, putting our own insides into it, and kind of, you know, exploring how that interfaces with the computer, my background is in live electronic music and playing, you know, playing with various different bands and going out and performing with electronics, but trying to kind of build an environment where those electronics still feel organic and still feels like you know, real inverted commas. Musical real instruments. So we kind of tried to build all of that into control one as it was then the prototype, we had, I think we had maybe like had about five or maybe 10 of them. Yeah, maybe 10 At the point that we entered. But, but now it's it's moved along, you know, we've come through multiple iterations. And now we're actually yeah, as of last week, or the week before actually shipping units now. And it's now called Composer CMPSR. Composer, and it's kind of got still really true to where we were, we've just done a lot of learning along the way. You know, as as with anybody that kind of designs Well, anything really, but specifically when you're kind of in that inclusion space, is you've got to always be working with the people that are going to be using your products you know, from from literally from the genesis of the idea before you've even put pen to paper, you know, you need to be engaging with the community you are going to work with. So we've done that throughout. And, you know, through lockdown. We were, we got some got some funding from Arts Council, which meant that we were able to do loads of case studies, you know, and it really was, it was lovely getting good feedback, good feedbacks, great, you know, everybody likes it. But it's actually nowhere near as helpful as, you know, room for improvement and not so good feedback. So that's really what we were hunting for. And kind of what we still hunt for now as well, you know, yeah, we're going to market but not with a finished product at all, you know, well, it is a finished product, but you know, not with all the answers, not with everything sewn up and that's done, you know, here we go. It's out into the community now in seeing where people will be using it and how they'll be using it and looking at how things change. But the actual kind of musicality that was built onto the, onto the device, when we started, it was relatively rudimentary, you know, you could play play notes, and you had, you had some level of dynamic and control. Whereas now, the way that is, you know, so the interface runs on a joystick. So I should probably explain what the instrument is, shouldn't I really, so it's obviously for most of you have seen an electronic wheelchair controller, you've got a joystick, and then you've got a number of buttons. So what we've done is taken, taken that interface, but kind of mixed it slightly closer to a sort of traditional electronic music setup, where you might have a number of pads. So we've got the joystick, and then on a kind of angular plane, we've got another eight pads there. But all of the musical sort of notation in the musical input is driven by the joystick. So you move the joystick and it plays notes, which is quite a different way of doing things joysticks are known in this space, but they're often for controlling effects and things, you know, to actually playing notes. So this is seemingly quite different. But yeah, just over the over the years, just really fine. Just just getting finer and finer, with everything we've got, you know, if you're really interested in things on the roadmap that are coming up, that kind of take this into into a new space. But I think we've, we've been lucky in that we're very true to what the original design was. But actually now when I look at what the original design did, to what we're able to achieve now, and also how, how people are able to interact with it, you know, we've got, you know, world renowned jazz musicians on our boards. And they're able to play with composer and they love it. And it's got expression and dynamic and all the things that they get from a more traditional instrument, but just in an interface that's open and accessible to everyone.

Mark Walker

Cool. I mean, it's it's an amazing transformation in the sense of sticking true to the original concept, as you say. But that transformation in terms of usability, that the design process really isn't just getting further and further into the sort of understanding of what people are going to do with it, what they want to be able to do with it, how the systems around it can work, the software, the interface, I think it's a really cool story, just in terms of the development of the software, you know, not just the Tech for Good bit, but the element of sort of user led development for the product as well, is just fantastic. I just want to talk a bit about the Tech4Good Awards. Do you remember why you entered? Do you? Can you can you think back that far back? I mean, obviously we're sitting there with one in front of you thinking I might have 10 things one day?

Si Tew

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Si Tew

So I got it was working with so through the able orchestra, start working with a group called orchestra's live. Okay, I mentioned that they'd seen this award, and they thought that we should go for it and had a look. And you know, this was this was before we know, you guys are looking at flippin eight got, you know, Tech4Good, which is AbilityNet, you've then got BT, you've got Google, you've got Microsoft, you've got all of these people, you know, and I'm, I'm sitting here with one one joystick and a bag of dreams. Like, well, we might as well let's just throw in and out, you know, let's throw in an application. I think, you know, we're going to be probably too early, but at least we'll maybe get onto the radar with people and kind of, you know, be able to you know, maybe it'll open up a conversation, I'm not sure. And then got the got the confirmation that we'd been accepted and came down to the came down to it was BT Tower wasn't it was the kind of the sort of open down, we had the speed dating element there. And I just remember being kind of like a bit like, sort of blown away by or a little bit of a deer in the headlights really, because, you know, we had something which I, you know, I felt was was exciting and interesting, but I knew we were really, really early, you know. And coming down and meeting the people that were in our categories and seeing the organisations that were there and how well developed they were and the teams around them and, and the the kind of the depth of thought that had gone into what they were doing, actually, when I look back now at depth of thought had really gone into what we were doing, but because it was it was kind of just me, I didn't really have a team around me at that point. You know, other than the kind of support with actually putting the units together. I just thought you know, this, this, this, this is kind of the this is as far as we'll go with it. But I'm just going to get as much out of it as I can, you know, met some great people like for anybody who wants to get involved in the Tech4Good Awards, like the network's amazing like such such good people, you know really varied as well in terms of what people are doing and where people are from, you know, I didn't even have, we didn't even have social media accounts or anything like that. I don't think I remember when we got the, it was a crowdfunding element of it. And we had to kind of set up all of the social media and everything for that. But it's just, it's propelled us hugely, you know, the, the chair of our board, for instance, we met him through these awards. You know, so it's really, really helped helped carry us forward. And I think as well, it's credit to you guys as well, you know, for just seeing, I felt like, you saw that we had an idea behind all of the, you know, the bells and whistles, if you like, you know, it really was about the kind of the idea and what the core of what we were doing was that came, you know, that sort of came before how well we were able to present it with Yeah, quite so well, I don't think

Mark Walker

Well, I mean, I think I, you know, in the sense of the stuff we see coming through Tech4Good, I think it's worth saying, and for anybody listening, that we don't really have a criteria about where you are in the process, it's got to be beyond the fag packet, it's got to actually exist, and you've got to be able to show that there's something there, which you were, you know, you were just over the other side of that line, but it was quite clearly a meaningful product. And I think the other bit that we often look at, when we're looking at entries, this isn't necessarily about winning it, which obviously, you did in the end, but even just being in the finalist sort of bunch is, this could be good for you this is, you know, this is an opportunity to connect in. And I would say that you're one of the brilliant examples of somebody took with both hands, every opportunity coming your way, you know, you were, you were soaking it up from the moment that we first made contact with you trying to make sense of what it could do for you. And so, you know, we don't mind where you are in that startup process, but you happen to be at that particular moment, it just landed perfectly for you in terms of the connections and so on. But it's you and the people, you know, Owain and the others who really made it work. And um, you know, for me, it's great to see somebody taking advantage of all the opportunities, because, you know, we get those people lined up we do the date speed dating, and we don't do anything beyond that. You know, you're the ones who go off on the first day, you're the ones who go off and make the whole beautiful music together. You know, and you've done that amazingly well. And, and then, because it because it's also worth mentioning when you came down to the Google event for TechShare pro in, in December, I mean, November that that was that was only sort of few months after that, really. So, you know, you're telling a story about being in the early days. And then the next thing you know, you're on the stage at Google. I mean, yeah, genuinely, we were blown away by what you did that night, it was fantastic. And, you know, the whole way that you've sort of leapt on every opportunity, and you're seeing you again last year, and in November, coming down to TechShare Pro, again, being part of the network joining in with what you're doing. I mean, for anybody I think listening in, that's exactly the opportunity you're presented with, and you've got to do what you've done, which is to really just seize the opportunity, pick out what you're looking for, like you say you can be a bit deer in the headlights. There's so much you're being dazzled by everything around you. But I saw you make some really interesting relationships build up. It's Stefan, isn't it? Yeah, who's the chair. I mean, you know, and they're just good people, and you've met somebody, and he's got to get involved, and he's given you more support. And, you know, I think that there's genuinely a great example of how Tech4Good can do the best, you know, bring a great idea, get some people around it and turn it into something new and, and that's testament to your energy and your expertise. And Owain and others, of course, that that idea is, is really taking off now and becoming the next generation of devices are now starting to come out into the marketplace. It's a wonderful story for us. So

Si Tew

thank you. Yeah, and I think you're right there as well. It's, it's almost the winning isn't the kind of the key key outcome for this, obviously, it's great, you know, we've got a little, our little robot up there, like the award and stuff, you know, but actually, it was the network's I get the impression that had we have one or not, you know, the networks are there to be, you know, to be to be worked with, and to kind of, you know, there's so much knowledge in the room, and so much kind of, you know, ongoing work in this space. And people are just really willing to help, you know, it's one thing I've sort of always said as well, just seeing the sort of, you know, the Goliath of the tech world, that in that would be fun to sort of fight and hand over fist in others, other areas, you know, everybody's just mates in this space, you know, and everybody wants to help each other and work together. Because it's that whole thing of just bringing the whole bring it bringing the whole level of the of the space up, isn't it, you know, and everything working together to improve the kind of overall knowledge and sort of accessibility and inclusion of everything, which is, it's just a great thing to see. So yeah, I'd highly recommend it to anybody.

Mark Walker

Cool. So let's start just talk briefly about what's next for you. Well, you know, you've talked about this stuff going into the market, that composer going into the marketplace, how far ahead are you looking? I mean, you know, got any ideas where you're gonna be in two or three years time or what's the big dream? I know you'll have a big idea.

Si Tew

Yeah I mean, step one, hopefully actually getting to use some of these synthesisers behind me, rather than just being late in backdrops, because yeah, it's, you know, it's definitely quite, quite busy on the sort of the development side, you know, just been chuckling with Owain. I've got a warehouse boy today just prepping, you know, prepping orders and things like that, but it's actually quite nice being on that side of things. So yeah, we've got, we've got some really interesting things coming up, actually, some of which can talk about some of which can't so much, but we've got some nice performances coming up, there's gonna be a few bits and bobs of press coming out as well. So the kind of awareness of what we're doing is increasing. We've got new products in the roadmap as well, some of which are already started, one of which is a digital product as well, which opens up, you know, scalability quite massively. And again, everything that we're doing often falls under this music made easier, you know, just enabling more people to access what we're doing. And I think the fact that we're, we kind of fuse gaming design and that musical know how, but I think that's really exciting. Because, you know, obviously gamification gets a good and bad rep dependent who's speaking to and when. But I think it's a great way to get people into into things and kind of on the path, but historically, I think there's been a bit of a glass ceiling with with things, or the gamification can take you down a route where the industry is going in another route. Hopefully, we've been able to meld the two together. And so obviously, increased sales. We're focusing on the UK at the minute, but we've already got some inroads into Europe and out into the States, working with so many great organisations out there doing great things from a performance point of view, and kind of experiential engagement side of things. But then also, actually, just from a music tech point of view, being able to offer people more creative opportunities. You know, there's a lot of people in that space that we're in the process of working with, I feel I'm been a bit cloak and dagger, but there's some of the you know, it's one of those can happen. And then it doesn't land. Yeah. But it's, there's there's a lot on, you know, the team's growing quite, quite massively. We're in the process of scaling quickly, we've just put in, we've just put in an order for Yeah, for quite a lot of units. So the first ones that we've done that pretty much all gone already. So the next units are in, which should hopefully see us through to the next the next six months. So yeah, just just just moving things forward, growing learning, you know, and that, in fact, just with composure as as it is, at the moment, I think we're probably releasing with about 5% of the capabilities that we've actually designed. So as we're going we're going to be opening, opening those those out, you know, as we kind of get them tighter, software, etc. So yeah, lots lots going on. Sorry, I can't be sort of more more direct.

Mark Walker

We'll look out for the ads on TV. You'll be on the Superbowl next next year.

Si Tew

Yeah, that's it, that'd be nice wouldn't it.

Mark Walker

You're a wonderful champion for Tech4Good. Anyway, so thank you for the support that you give us as well, because we've seen you so many times at different things joining in. And as I say, you are a great example of someone who's taking those opportunities with both hands. So it is wonderful to hear how things are going and to see it continuing to go from strength to strength. I'm sure you know, we'll bump into each other and other tech for good stuff during the year because we're revisiting the networking stuff. And, you know, you can look back on people who are going to come in the room in the position you were in before saying, Well, what am I meant to do here? You know, all the stuff that you've learned in the last four years is going to be, you know, valuable, valuable input for them anyway. So you know, it's all part of that rolling process of connecting, isn't it? So? Yeah, right. Yeah. So good luck. And I look forward to some more performances. We'll have to think about getting you into TechShare Pro this year, I reckon.

Mark Walker

Oh for sure. We'd be well up for it. Yeah, we've got some great performances around actually at the moment. So yeah, a lot of people would be very interested. So give us a call for sure.

Mark Walker

We'll do that. Lovely. And if anybody wants to get in touch with you loads of stuff online, obviously at Digit Music and any and all help that they might offer. You're back in that position again, aren't you? You're sort of saying I don't know what you got.

Si Tew

Yeah, that's it. Yeah. If anybody wants to get in touch, yeah. Hello@digitmusic that comes through to all of us or all of the socials come with questions, ideas, whatever it is, you know, we'll, we'll be happy to help or happy to listen, if you've got, you know, got input on what we're doing, for sure.

Mark Walker

Perfect. Good to see you, mate.

Si Tew

Thank you, Mark, and you are too.

Robin Christopherson

That was cool. That was really, really good. So my takeaway from that is that we aren't talking about, you know, the sort of software and, you know, interface that will produce kind of the equivalent of like, stylophone type music, we're talking about major capabilities here, aren't we we're talking about people being able to really express themselves, whereas in any other interface, they wouldn't their disability would mean that they wouldn't have that that outlet, that channel.

Mark Walker

Yeah, I think I mean, it's certainly there's a number of things, wrapping the programme around it to make music accessible more generally is obviously part of it as well. And so, the interface is that they're building respond to the needs of the people that they're working with, which I think equally is an important element in the work they're doing. And then the software that they're wrapping around there, you know, as part of that enabling people to join in. And it's a creative process, of course, music. So, it's a collaborative process, people want to be as want to be part of a group of people making music. So, I think all of those things are really positive about that story, in the sense of how digit music is reflected that lots of people want to join in, and this is how we can help them do it. And I think they're looking ahead in the sense of this year's awards, I think we're really looking for those examples, that was such a simple example of what they started with the tech innovation in there is not the be all and end all of it, it's the smart sort of way that that enables somebody to join in with something that they were otherwise excluded from. That's a really great story for Tech4Good, I think.

Robin Christopherson

Absolutely. Now, some of the other award winners that we are going to speak to or have spoken to, are on much more kind of fundamental levels, about getting access to the internet, or being able to access technology more generally. But I mean, this is just so life affirming, you really do want to have the opportunity to express yourselves, and to be creative. And to go, you know, once you've got access to the technology to be able to do something really, you know, life changing almost with it. So, I really, you know, that, to me is my big takeaway from this is that, you know, people really enriches their lives, it's something that will really add to people's experience and also skill set as well.

Mark Walker

Yeah, and I'm meeting Jess, or met her a couple of times, she, again, so I mentioned, Jess, she, I think she was probably 15 or 16, when she first came down to Google to perform on the stage at TechShare Pro, it was fantastic seeing her, you know, in the in the public eye in that type of event. She was I met her again at another event as well, as she said, that was the scariest day of her life. Like you say, just having the chance to try something and do something which she was otherwise prevented from so yeah, and I think that, that assistive technology nature or you know, we hear those words, we don't always think about the fun and an old sort of, as you say, life affirming moments that technology can enable people to have. And, and, and also, you know, you know, to bear in mind with Si, he's trying to transform the education system from the inside out by trying to make music education more accessible, not not just for individuals, but across the piece so that all educational music making is it contains accessibility in some way. And that's a big picture that he's taken on there. I think he's even working with gaming companies as well. All sorts of stuff. He's, he's really going to change things in a big way, I think. Yes.

Robin Christopherson

Cool. Brilliant. Yep. Fantastic. Well, I can't wait to see who we're going to talk to next time. But until then, thanks, Mark.

Mark Walker

Thank you. See you soon.

Robin Christopherson

See you then.

Robin Christopherson

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