Transcript for Joe Devon on Global Accessibility Awareness Day, Artificial Intelligence and Overlays

Robin Christopherson:

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So, sit back, grab your favourite beverage, and let's get started.

Robin Christopherson:

Hey, guys. Welcome back. This episode is an interview that I did with Joe Devon, co-founder of GAAD. That's Global Accessibility Awareness Day. If you weren't already aware and his other co-founder Jennison Asuncion is someone we've interviewed in the past as well.

But yeah, let's just get cracking and hear all about what impact GAAD has had this year.

Robin Christopherson:

So I am here with Joe Devon, one of the two massive brains behind Global Accessibility Awareness Day. How long has it been now is this? What anniversary is this?

Joe Devon:

This this is the 12th year of GAAD.

Robin Christopherson:

Wow. So yeah, we're actually recording this after GAAD week. It should probably be GAAW at the end because it's not like, well, it's not like a month, isn't it really? So hence why we're still bothering you even after the manic week of events. But yeah, so brilliant. Thank you so much. Many, many congratulations for another amazing you know event this year. So many events have been put on so many presentations and articles and blog posts. So how, how has it been for you? Like looking back last week?

Joe Devon:

As as always, absolute insanity. Lots of lots of talks every year, something crazy happens where you're like, what? So, this year Jennison and I, along with with his musical name, is AWOL + Coop. Have released a, a rap song for GAAD, so that was completely unexpected and never thought I would do that. Yeah.

Robin Christopherson:

Well, is that? Copyrighted or is it creative? Could we put it on at the end of? This podcast or?

Joe Devon:

Good, good question. I'll, I'll hook you up with with AWOL, who's a LinkedIn rapper, and he was the brainchild of this I I think that as long as it essentially, it's going to go to charity. So, I don't know all the details on the copyright, but I'll I'll hook you up and hopefully we can do that.

Robin Christopherson:

That probably means that you won't hear at the end of this guys, but you will be able to go away and find it and then obviously you know, donate to charity. So yeah, that's a brilliant, brilliant cause. Amazing. So yeah, it's been a manic time.

I don't know about you, but as well as all the kind of normal public events you know, public facing events in GAAD, week or month, I've been seeing a lot more internally facing ones and I've actually been speaking at more internal events, you know, within organisations than in previous years so. I don't know if you've been seeing that. I mean the the reason, why I I kind of flag it is because when it comes to public events, people kind of opt in, you know.They register, they turn up.

But and often they're kind of already on that page and feeling passionate about accessibility. But if you're doing it internally, you know it's to a whole team or maybe a whole department or even a whole organisation.

So, I suppose there's more potential anyway of getting to people that you know aren't on board and aren't really kind of passionate about. Digital accessibility already. Have you had any vibe about whether you know whether it's public or internal or both?

Joe Devon:

For me, GAAD has been internal for years, most of it, and what I mean by that is simply I get asked Jennison, I'm sure gets asked to speak internally at organisations and I really, really dive into that because that means that the organisation has put together has, you know, has a head of accessibility, has some kind of programme and I think that my heart is with those heads of accessibility who are sitting there very often.

A team of a small, team having to support thousands of employees.

And they're just doing God's work. And I think that that's amazing. So, I would say maybe by the Year 5 probably by the 5th year of GAAD, it got to about half of the events were internal. And by now there's so many accessibility teams in different companies that I would agree with you.

That I think probably 70% of the events are internal and most people don't ever hear about it.

Robin Christopherson:

Absolutely. And you know, I've done so many internal facing ones as well as you know public facing. But my last event with a GAAD label is on the 31st.

So, you know, this is kind of going right up to it should be GAAD month really, shouldn't it? So yeah, really really good.

Joe Devon:

Well, Amazon, Amazon about six years ago, I think had had created a GAAM. So, they're calling it global accessibility awareness month.

Charlie Riggle created that, and they are doing a month full of internal tutorial sessions in order to train employees on accessibility, and I'm only sharing that because they shared it publicly, so I'm I'm happy to talk about events where they have shared it publicly, but.

For the most part, it's private stuff and you know, we keep it out of the news.

Robin Christopherson:

Brilliant. And of course, we want to get to GAAY where basically it's all around, you know, everyday part of Peoples Day job.

They are confident with what they're doing and the tools they're using and that sort of thing. But yeah, GAAD is a brilliant kind of springboard for people to get to hear about accessibility and all its kind of varieties.

On all the new platforms and that sort of thing. So, what do you think are the kind of biggest challenges and maybe opportunities for digital accessibility or digital inclusion as we like to call it going forward, so well, at the moment, what would you say the biggest challenges are? We're definitely making progress, I think.

You know, everyone can see that that we're heading in the right direction. But you know there are still challenges out there aren't there.

Joe Devon:

I mean, when you're looking at the Web Aim Million where they do this yearly report analysing the top million websites it it was, what, 98 percent, 97%. And then back up to 98% and this year it's 96% of the websites are inaccessible and very inaccessible though, though I will say.

That I I think that when you're looking at the the top million, it's a lot of websites and I think it's important work, but we need to also be looking at where it's changing, and I think we we started to see years ago was at the very top end of tech. So, the big tech companies they which honestly you know, captures most of our attention right the 80 - 20 rule

So, there's lots of improvement and then and then now with the valuable 500 they've gotten all these CEOs of of Fortune 500 companies to take their pledge and and to make accessibility more of a of a serious initiative internally. So, I'd say that you're starting to see it being top down. Get better and better, but I'd love to see more metrics on it like I think that's something that we need to see. So obviously the the the challenges on the bottom.

Let's say 96%. We need to make it more, make it easier for the individual developer and to that end, you were talking about making it GAAY. That's the reason that we launched the GAAD Foundation because people kept bringing that up. We should be doing accessibility every day.

And we had several initiatives, but our mission is to change the culture of digital product development so that accessibility is a core value because we can sit here and from the CEO down, dictate accessibility, we care about accessibility, develop accessibly and then you get the realities of development where there are costs to it.

And people will cut corners, but the culture, you know, culture eats directives for breakfast. And if you have a culture that says, hey, there's an open-source project and it's not accessible, and then the peers are saying, oh, this project.

Yeah, they don't care about accessibility. I don't think I'm going to take this on and there's a you have to sort of hit that nerve of the code as craft or design as craft and make people feel like I don't know what I'm doing. Like I I've done something inaccessible. I didn't even know I did it inaccessible.And it's because I'm ignorant of it. Like you have to make them feel like this is important. And once you change that culture, then maybe we will.

You know they will always fight with the budgets, but you you once you have that part of the culture.

Then you've really turned the corner, and that's the big mission. And so, to that end, we've launched. I I, I did this years ago, the gap pledge and then and then we fold folded into the foundation. So, Facebook took the first pledge to make React native accessible.

Then Ember JS is another is a JavaScript framework as and then there's a. Drupal is another framework, so they took the gap pledge and then this year with AI (Artificial Intelligence) being so big, we went a slightly different direction and partnered with Intel, who took the gap pledge for the Open FL Foundation.

Which is a model that helps with the privacy. Of machine learning so that instead of having broken all these HIPAA rules and having the private data sent to a central location, they send their models to be trained locally at hospitals and different locations, and then they return back the training data which is completely anonymized and there's no real like. Meaty data there, and they've had tremendous success. So, they've taken the gap pledge to make their open-source project accessible.And and we've seen a lot of good work out of out of Intel. Darrell Adams is doing an amazing job there.

Robin Christopherson:

It's so brilliant and I love the idea of, you know, coders, UX people taking pride in doing things in an inclusive way because, you know, they take pride in making things look beautiful.

Coders you know, gone are the days where you get paid by the line of code submitted. You know it's been a long time that you know, organisations have seen the value of quality code over the volume of code, you know. So, if you can then really embrace the idea of of doing things in a in an inclusive way as well and taking pride in that.

That that would be really amazing. And you mentioned about ML and let's broaden it out then and talk about AI more generally, because obviously you know you don't wanna do a kind of a drinking game with people mentioning AI at the moment. Otherwise, you constantly be horizontal. But so how would you see AI playing its part?

Maybe on the dev side on the coder side or UX or on the user side.

Joe Devon:

Oh, on everything. I think it's it's not to be cliche, but it's it's revolutionary. What I what I'm trying to get across to folks is that AI and accessibility are hand in hand. AI is accessibility. And what I mean by that is when you think about disability or impairments and and and you think about what artificial intelligence is trying to do is you've got sensory input and AI is trying to understand the sensory input.

And an impairment is simply some kind of disturbance in that input. So, whether that's pictures, the visual inputs video, or you're talking about audio, all of that is what the machine is trying to understand and what has been transformative is literally Transformers. The the LM came out of transformer technology, and what it is really good at is translating from one type of input to another. So here you are, you're trying to understand the visual of of a picture or a video you can do automated alt text.

And what I what I want to I I basically trying to work on AI and accessibility and one one place where I see it working that will change the way that we consume content is imagine you're watching a TV show like Game of Thrones which has hundreds of characters and there's some people who remember every character.

Really. Well, I do not remember the name of the characters in a movie during the movie. Certainly, after the movie and when I see a new character in Game of Thrones, which I love, I'd love to be able to stop the video and say who are you? What episode were you in just replaying me the scene?

And and basically query the the the the machine the video to understand from different people's perspective. So, this is something that it is an audio like a a a different audio description that we probably need a different term for it, and this doesn't exist yet. This is something that I'd love to to to build.

Or somebody or or see somebody build out and and it's inevitable. Like this is coming for sure. So. So now here you are. You've created something that is for the world of accessibility.

But everybody's going to use it, right? So, and and it's all about taking information that sensory information that an AI understood and and and sorry, I'm just thinking out loud as we're talking. I'm realising it's about ability and disability.

So, memory wise you could say that everybody has a disability unless there's a one or two that might have a perfect recall. The machine has got a full memory, right? So, the fact that you can query.

And say, hey, what? What episode did you first speak in that is, you know, taking of the impairment of being unable to remember everything that we've ever seen and boom, you have that information for you?

So that's why I'm saying it's it's it's tied in together and then I'll I'll finish with the point that.

As it gets personal to you, if you're if you're blind, you want to turn everything or most things into audio.

And please tell me if you if you agree with me or not here, because I would love to to have a challenge to you know what?

I’ve been saying but if you're blind, you want to have most things translated to you to audio. If you're deaf, you want to have most things translated visual.

If you're deaf, blind, you want to have haptics, right? So, the AI in the future should be translating all of the inputs and reality. I got this one from Darrell Adams at Intel.

Reality will be generated real time and you will be presented the right thing at the right time. How does that strike you?

Robin Christopherson:

Honestly, I cannot wait two to three years. I've heard people say before we have real time, you know, live transcription or, you know, analysis of of video streams. And that might be into, well, just name your preferred output.

You know, for me it would be audio description, you know better than any human I have been bothering over the years to.

Tell them what's Going on, what's going on? You know all those shows that don't have AD right down to being able to pause it and get infinite descriptions about, you know, their facial expressions, what they're wearing, you know, some other significant features of the of the video, whatever it might be.

Or kind of, you know, background context to the setting of the show or I don't know, whatever it might be or having it translated into a little video signer in the corner or whatever it might be. So yeah, that's going to happen. Like you say, I'm really, really excited about.

Like a revolution, it's not an evolution, and some of people, obviously a little bit concerned about how fast things are moving, but certainly you know at AbilityNet we have the Tech4Good Awards, and this is definitely an area where AI can be applied for good. Obviously, there are nefarious actors.

As well, but you know it's it's ripe for application to help people overcome whatever their particular sensory cognitive.

Physical impairment are et cetera. So yeah, really, really exciting. What about the application of AI on code, you know, to help people create better code.

We've talked about tools like, you know, Drupal, et cetera. It really helps to have a good accessible, you know, potentially compliant toolkit in the first instance.

AI for helping people with code AI for testing for compliance against the web content accessibility guidelines. How about that?

Joe Devon:

That's that's all starting to get better. I wouldn't say that it launched with accessibility. I've tested GPT 3, 3.5 it did. I lightly tested it. I won't say it was a something.

Like serious for a report, but I was just like, hey, generate some code for me, some HTML. And then what I found with 3.5? It was so, so probably better than than the average coder but it.

It it needed some Work. GPT 4. This is not perfect, but it was. It also got better. Copilot, not perfect but got better.

But if you specifically query it and ask it to do things accessibly, it does way better and then and then I saw some announcement from Microsoft or GitHub about.

About accessibility copilot thing I I didn't have time. Obviously, it's been been pretty busy month, but I I I know that the I'm I'm positive that they're working on that and that's gonna going to be massive improvement. So, and co-pilot for those who don't know is a coding assistant, an AI coding assistant. So, the day that that spits out code that's accessible by default, that's a huge game changer, no question about it in terms of the automated tools, that's been the Holy Grail really, of of getting the percentage that automated up I.

I think that I think the cutting edge that probably isn't really out there yet is probably at 80%.

And and I think it can I, think it can go up from there. But we'll see, we'll see. Give it, give it a few years.

Robin Christopherson:

Yeah. I mean, at the moment, the best accessibility, you know, automated checkers can't touch JavaScript. So, you know there's plenty of room for AI to really get stuck in there and and help remedy issues at source rather than, you know, overlaying.

Fixes when it comes to the user client like the browser or whatever it might be. So yeah. And talking about overlaying.

Joe Devon:

Wait, wait, Robin. Before you go there. Let, me just interject one more thing here.

So, I think that we're one other thing that we're going to see is that AI is going to be.

Sort of a new.

A a new screen reader because you're going to be able to point to a URL and it's going to some.

I mean, you can already sort of do it today.

But I think the, the Be My Eyes app that is going to be a real big game changer when it comes out of data. I mean they're they've got some interesting things cooking if you've seen.

Some of the, the news releases and some of the video. Microsoft released information there that's going to be a game changer, so I would definitely download Be My Eyes and watch that closely. Are, are you a user?

Robin Christopherson:

Ohh, absolutely yeah. We actually interviewed Mike Buckley, the CEO of Be My Eyes last week. I think it's gonna go out after this one, though.

So yeah, it's gonna be a weird chronology there, but absolutely that is gonna be an absolute game changer. And I have heard that too that it's going to be, you know, almost supplanting other UI's.

Or other kind of ways of interacting with technology a bit like you knows, smart speakers brought in the age of ambient computing, where you can just talk to the air. You know, this, this, these large language models are really in their element when.

You are just dealing with language, and you know you can query a website rather than having to just mess around with pages of code and that sort of thing, you know and.

You can you.

Don't even need to know.

Anything about that website, except that you know you you can buy stuff on it, for example, and you could say, you know, find me such and such on this website and.

You know, buy me that thing and you know, using the payment details of my choice, whatever it might be, I'm really excited about that too. Absolutely. Yeah, yeah.

Cool overlays just very quickly not to bring the conversation down too much, but I definitely see those as one of the challenges today and maybe going forward because for people that aren't aware, these are bits of code that web owners are embedding their website that can.

Change the presentation of the page. In some cases, it can change.

You know how the page is formatted and coded for screen reader users for example, and they have pluses and minuses. What's your thoughts on their use?

Joe Devon:

You know the the first thing is how do users feel? And I think that that's a question to ask users.

But if you're looking at at Twitter, whenever there's a hashtag or a lot of these companies, you know, you can look at the responses and decide for yourself if it's working.

But taking a look at it from both a business perspective as well as a technology perspective, my take on it is there's some good things there. It's it's AI based which I think they they they really overplay. But the the the approach for an overlay to me would be an assistive technology.

And that means that the user installs it on the user side and then you can get used to the tool and how it works and what your how, how you configure the setting.

That's the appropriate solution. Like any any piece of the features that work well, that should sit on the client side that needs to use it, but instead if you're having it installed as a line of JavaScript to tell a business that you can pay X100 dollars

A month and then you don't actually have to care about accessibility and that this is going to solve the problem is.

Really, it's an it's the business model that makes most sense for what? For the technology they've got. But if the if the idea is to solve the problem, then they're approaching it on the wrong angle, because now as a user.

You, I don't know how many overlay companies there are. Probably 10, 15 and they keep growing. So now you have to configure on every single website brand new.

You have to configure what works for you. You have to learn the system in all these different places. So, imagine if, if somebody that's not a screen reader user has to go in and the browser changes on them in every single website, that's really what it seems to me.

The experience would be with the approach they take. So first of all, it's a shame because there is, there is some technology there. I I believe that there is, and I know that there's pieces of it.

That that might be helpful, but the approach is wrong to me because you're going to the to, you know, like I said, you're going to the website, and you have to learn a brand-new system every time.

In addition, I've seen where it messes you up when you're trying to fix like I've. I've had some clients where they're getting sued, and they they wanted their websites fixed and we're trying to fix it.

And then they had a what do you call a settlement where they had to install one of these. Overlays and the overlay was clashing with.The fixes that we need to put.

And so, you know it, it really puts you, it puts the client in a real bad bind.

Because if they remove the overlay then they're breaking the settlement agreement. And if they don't remove the overlay, it it can be a struggle to fix the underlying website. And so, one thing I would just say is do not sign. Any settlement agreement that that's prescribes, that you you put an overlay to fix it. Because then you're really stuck.

Robin Christopherson:

Yeah. Or at least gain feedback from your end users about the popularity or the efficacy of these overlays before signing anything.

Absolutely. I mean as a screen reader user myself, one of my worst fears when I hit a website is that not only is there one of these overlays present.

But that the screen reader compatibility mode is kind of on by default because it detects that I'm using a screen reader. And that, you know the the the bigger updation in user in usability and the the likelihood that I'm going to be able to turn it off is really low.

I might as well just leave that site well alone and and go elsewhere. It's basically killed that site for me. So yeah, I think screen reader users we’re the hardest customers to cater for.

Probably the least well served, in my opinion anyway, by these overlays, I'm sure they look really sexy in what they can do for, you know, low vision users, et cetera. But yeah. Anyway, so that was a really good answer.

Thank so much.

Joe Devon:

You know what? I'll add something else that I've never shared publicly, one of one of the one of these overlays of venture capitalists that wanted to invest in.

And wanted my opinion on it, I gave my opinion, and they were just saying, look, it's a I, it just solves it automatically, you know, can I?

Just show you.

And I'm like, OK.

Show me and then they go into it to a really big brand site that has it installed and I didn't really have to tell them anything because they tried to.

I said here try to use this. Turn this on, turn that on. It did not take 5 minutes and they saw it was broken.

So, there you have it.

Robin Christopherson:

They demo well, I'm sure, but yeah, well, when the when the salesperson is here doing the thing.

Joe Devon:

It did not. It did.

Not that. Ohh. You mean when they do their? Yeah. Yeah, right, right, right.

Robin Christopherson:

Hmm. Cool. OK, well, let's wrap up then. Any have you got any kind of aspirations about GAAD and where it might go in the future or, you know, by all means broaden out to accessibility, although we have kind of talked about.

The excitement around AI and its potential. But yeah, what? What are you most excited about? About the future?

Joe Devon:

You know for for me, I don't approach it like I I I believe in celebrating GAAD, don't get me wrong, but I am pretty mission driven and for me like that 96% always bothers me. I I don't want like all this celebration without making sure that there is effort toward the the changing of the culture, right? So, I'm just focused on that honestly. And and I think we're making a lot of strides.

I think AI will change the game in the next year, so by next year the entire landscape will look different.

And I have.

No idea what it's going to look like.

For the world of accessibility, but I believe that it's going to to to bring lots of improvements, but we really have to keep on working on the cultural issues and and I will add something that a lot of the culture around building digital products lives on GitHub and I'm so happy they hired Ed Summers to head up accessibility.

There and he is doing an amazing job in already a very short period of time, and I believe with some of the things that he's working on, what we're going to start to see that cultural shift and for that I'm really excited.

Robin Christopherson:

Cool. And Microsoft announced a GitHub copilot this week. So yeah, they had so many really amazing cool. Thank you very much indeed.

Before we let you go, do you want to tell people where they can find you? If you want to be found, or if you want to plug anything else, feel free.

Joe Devon:

Sure. I'm. I'm at Joe Devon, pretty much everywhere. I'm heading up accessibility for formula monks, which is part of media monks.

And we're building, we're working on AI for accessibility product, so if anybody's interested in exploring some kind of AI accessibility work, please do hit me up and and the best is probably to send me a DM on LinkedIn. And again I'm, you know, linkedin.com/joedevon.

Robin Christopherson:

Fantastic. Thank you, Joe. It's probably not your last guard related interview, but yeah, keep it up. Nice one. Thank you.

Joe Devon:

Thank you. I really appreciate it, Robin.

Robin Christopherson

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Current legislation you can speak with AbilityNet’s accessibility experts. Just head over to www.abilitynet.org.uk/accessibility-services. Thanks again for tuning in and more hot discussions around accessibility will be coming soon.