**Down to the Struts**

Season 6 Episode 5: Disabled Gaming with May Wong

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Guest: May Wong

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**Introduction**

“So in my point of view, disability setting is not just for people who have dis disability, it's also actually for all the players as well.”

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui and welcome to another episode of Down to the Struts, the podcast about disability design and intersectionality. Today we'll be diving in to the world of video games with Maye Wong. May is a lead game designer at Interior/Night. May received the 2023 MCV Women in Games Award for her work on Interior Knight's debut game As Dusk Falls, which was also nominated for best debut game at the 2023 BAFTA Games Awards As Dusk Falls is an interactive drama that explores the entangled lives of two families across 30 years. According to Microsoft, owner of the Xbox Video game console, there are 400 million disabled gamers around the world. The disabled gaming charity Able gamers highlights the importance of creating access to play, to combat social isolation, build community and foster inclusion for disabled people. May Wong has also centered access in the production of As Dusk Falls, which received high praise for accessibility, particularly among blind and low vision gamers. May and I talked about how access was built into the game design and the lessons she learned from the experience. Okay, let's get down to it.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you so much May for joining me today. It's really nice to have you.

**May Wong:**

Yeah, it is my pleasure to come to your show as well.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

I was wondering if you could start off by just introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about what got you into designing video games.

**May Wong:**

So, yes, uh, so my name is May Wong, so I'm from Hong Kong and I live in, in London. I'm lead game designer at Interior/Night. And then we just release our first game As Dusk Falls. I want to let you know the reason I'm interested in video game is actually go back to my childhood. Um, I grew up from a big family, so, um, my parents have like six children. So when we were kids, we always are playing like video game together. And then one of the best memory I had is that when I playing game with brother and sister, like party game. And sometimes we play MMMRPG games. And then when I think about that, it's like playing game has always been um, like cover interaction between everyone. And then you also like have like making a memory For me, spending time to play with my friends and family, is that actually the bonding moment for me. So after I graduated from my university, I kind like start looking on what I actually want to do. I studied multimedia design. So I kind of like, at that time I was like, I can do web design, I can do different things. But at that time I was like, I got opportunity to be a game designer in WeTech. It's a college shooting game. Uh, the company. So they have a console called We Smile and We Fashion. Um, so that's how I start making games. The games that we make is, at that time is like, like for children, so it's like educational entertainment game for three years or past. So I think at that time it's like you need to make a really simple game. I think it's like accessible for everybody and that is like up the challenge. I remember at that time it's like they have the We Smile console. When I joined they already had like the joystick. Which is a, uh, you can swap side for the stick so you can really easy to play by right-handed and left-handed. I think from that moment on, I just, I feel like actually when you decide a game you need to consider for different type of player, you want to cater as much as possible when you design the console and the games. And then I moved to London after that, like after two years there I moved to London. I working london Sony Studio and doing like, uh, PlayStation games. Uh, so I joined in the I Toy team. I don't know if you know that I toy game, it's like cover a camera base game. So it is actually, um, you have a camera set up. So, and then you have like use your body movement to play the party game. It's kind of, at that time it's quite groundbreaking because a lot of game at that time, it's like all about the controller. You do like first person shooter or adventure game. But by using only your body to control the game kicking, like enemy kicking people or like swapping windows, it's actually a really low entry player. Doesn't need to learn a lot of the button, everything and they able to like just say using like they can just really easily to get into the game. So its kind of like it's pushing the boundary. From there I work on in Sony for iPad and also like Wonderbook. All those games is actually quite of a intuitive game. So it's like a not transitional game. But I think from what I learned from there, it's like when you need to decide a game there for everybody, you need to have a different mindset, really. You want to be as simple as possible for people able to pick up and play. And I think we, we have like learning a lot and achieve a lot and that after eight years in Sony and then I moved into interior/Night, which is my current job.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

That's such a cool story, May, and I love that you first came to love games because they were something that you did with your family and friends. Can you tell us a little bit about your new role at Interior/Night?

**May Wong:**

So, uh, I joined in interior Night in November, 2017, uh, which is after Sony. So Interior Night is a narrative Game studio. So we make like story game, interactive story game, um, So 2017 is also the year that our CEO and founder Caroline, who set up the studio, she simply decided in contact ring, I dunno if you know the game, like heavy ring and beyond too. So, so she's like of the pioneer of a really cool narrative designers and then she got an idea about like the game that we are making, At Dusk Falls, she got prototype. So at the time she pitching to different publisher and then she got funding and then she kind of like started , like gathering a team of like core team member at that time. Uh, that's how I joined, on to her team because we met in Sony because she also worked in Sony London studio. That's where I met her. Actually, I was like the first employee from the team. So it is like a really, really fun to be able to, like, from a big company moving to a really small studio. It's really different experience really, like when you're in a big company, a lot of things, you got like got all the structure, like all the, uh, layer of, uh, management, but when you have a much smaller team, you feel much more hand on on doing all the this work. When we first started, I think we did a lot like brainstorming idea and like thinking about, I mean, we already kind of have the idea about the game, uh, but I think at that moment we would really want to put in a lot like the multiplayer mechanic, as I say, like I enjoy playing game with my friends and family, so a lot of, like, at that time we kind of like put in a lot of like how we can make sure the game is as approachable as possible. That's why we come up with the one player, local multiplayer and online multiplayer game that, uh, people can play together. And then when we are looking at the story as well, I think, uh, we were already clean to have a mature story that are relatable. So that's why like the game, uh, real life person and that you can think that maybe they're existing in the world or you, you know, someone similar to that or you have someone similar to that. So it's still zombies or , things that are not scientific.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

So your debut game, As Dusk Falls that you mentioned, uh, recently released to rave reviews. So I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about as Dusks Falls, what the story is and kind of uh, just a little overview of the game itself.

**May Wong:**

We're really happy about the really good, reviews, really, and then so As Dusk Falls, it's a original, interactive drama. and there is actually about two family, like their life and trying together when a very gowrong. So the story actually said in America, in Midwest, in Arizona, and then beginning with like Finns Walker and his family driving to the new home when they actually meet the other family, the Holt family. So the game itself is really simple, you're making choices which is impacting the playable character. And then the story is all about like making choices. [00:10:00] You can like thinking about like, choice is are covered underneath value, and then it depends on your kind of personality or what value deep down in your heart, you cover choosing for the playable character, and then it's also the story it doesn't have a cover path or correct choice or good ending or bad ending. It's all about like your choices and make you to create a different experience. There's no game over. So even we have like some really simple like quick events, but no matter you fail or success, it is the same thing brings you to game over. We can't like keeping the story fold and then make sure you, no matter what path you go down, you will have satisfying end story and cool ending. I think for us it's like the waiting is definitely one of the key thing because like we want the story to be like a, a really mature grand story that you may not normally see in game, but more like in a TV show and we say also is that because it's a real life situation and real people, you will cover, sometimes you may feel empathy for the character because of what they go through and what they like kind like experiencing. And I think that is actually how they make you more into the character and feel much more into the story. From the game place, uh, the game as they say is like, 1, 2, 8 players. So you can play by yourself or you can play by your friends. You can mix between playing some people like locally, you can play with you and your partner, and then you can be online with someone else, with their partner as well. So it's kind of a game that can bring everyone together. but because of the eight player, you can play eight people in your room, like in your home as well. But I think, I think one thing we did think about is like, but no one will have eight controller at home. Right? So I think that's why we, come up with like using the, your phone as a controller. So it mean that you can actually download, uh, phone apps and then you can, uh, because everyone have a phone, right? So you can download the phone apps and then you can be using it to connect to the game so you can actually use it to perform, like making the choices and also like perform the QuickTime event. So as we say, like yeah, it is a really simple gameplay. So everyone should be like able to like, just pick up really minimal learning and then they can be like all sharing the, uh, story and experience together.

**[Musical interlude with bright sparks of sound evoking a video game]**

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

One of the positive reviews of the game was related to how accessible it is. So I wondered if you could share a little bit about how you thought about accessibility as you were building this game.

**May Wong:**

As you say, like the game is so like the mechanic and the control are so approachable and simple. So I think for us it's like the accessible for everyone is like one of our key pillar from the beginning. So as you say, like we were thinking about like using, you can using the phone, you can using the mouse and you can using the controller and then like you don't need to worry like how you, you can spend all your time just thinking about making the choices instead of looking at your controller or looking at like learning the buttons. And then I think we can like go through a lot of like user stories and understand what kind of player we wanted to play. I think at that time we are looking at like AccessAbility, like looking at if people have the motor disability or like if people have vision impair and there are hearing impairment, and then what kind of thing we can support to them. I think like at that time, like for example, the motor disability, we kind of thinking about like our QT, how we can able to let them to have more time to make the choices. What can we held on the QuickTime event or like making them to be able to easily to make this success and failure. So when we are looking at like, we call, like gathering a list of things that we want to do, and then we like that action on it. One thing for me, like we did it really well is that we do from really beginning and then kind of like go through the whole list of things that we want to put it in for the hearing impairment we cover, like looking at like mainly the subtitle and closed caption, how we can improve it for everyone to be able to like read when they come here in the sun. Because like we kind of got like quite a small team, so I think in sometime when we making decision, we need to make the choice on like what can be more easily to add. So when we, for example, when we look at closed caption, we're not like captioning everything, but we come like have come up with our own rules about we capturing maybe only the item that is a story related, uh, really strong show like hearing queue from the audio that able to help the player who can't hearing, to be able to understand the story. For the show side. I think like, I think in the beginning we kind of, we know that we want to do the, uh, We, we know that we want to do the in-game narration, know that we want to do the screen in, but it's actually, we spend quite a lot of time doing research from other game because for us it's like, it is kind of a really big area, really like to able to like find someone who understand the player. So we are really fortunate to have like, I think it's close to the end of the project, we have like got really one of the, our designer and one of the co team is actually they spend a lot of time to help on the innovation side and they spend a lot of time there collaborating and adding in a lot of like screen narration and with them actually like, like flowed really well. So I think, yeah, it's a really good job from the team on the research and also implementing other items. So from us it's more like we want the game to be able to play by everybody. So in my point of view, like a disability setting is not just for people who have dis disabled ability, it's also actually for all the players as well because like when you set up. We decide to put in extended timer. It's not actually for, only for the people who have all the skill like problem. It's actually for a lot of other players that it will help on them as well. Like for example, if I play with my mom, I can set that up and that would be much easier for us to play together. So I think when we design games, we need to think about like how we can make it more approachable.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

And you make a good point about the fact that oftentimes accessibility features that are mainly designed or intended for people with disabilities have benefits for lots of different people with all different kinds of circumstances. Did you actually test the game at any point in prototype with someone with a hearing impairment or a visual impairment to get their feedback?

**May Wong:**

Yeah, so actually like we were very lucky working with, um, Microsoft and Xbox. So they actually have gaming for everyone, team. And also like within Xbox, they actually have like a few people can help us to test out the game. So they give us that some really good feedback. But I do think that like in the future, we definitely want to do even more ourself because sometimes like having xbox to help us to test is really good, but somehow I think because we don't see in person, I think it's also because of Covid, it's quite difficult to see people in person to do the test. But like if we can actually like more like organizing it, it would be like, To see it firsthand, maybe even better. But I know that some of our team is actually like, like some of the screen narration feature, they will actually close their eye and then correlate just like using hearing to actually go through the menu to see do they get enough information to start a game, but it's definitely really helpful to have Xbox to help us to do some of the testing and get feedback.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Sounds like a really good lesson learned for the future. Are there other things that you learned in this process of really trying to think through how to make the game sort of usable and playable for everybody?

**May Wong:**

The lesson then is kind of still like consider the feature as early as possible. And I think if you have someone in your team that feel really strongly about all those feature, definitely have someone to be the champion on the area because I think I have someone there who come, like looking after all those area is really key way to get everything done because like sometimes if you have like everyone looking at it and then everyone making decision, it's not as easy to have one person to go for. And now I think UI is also a really important element. I think at the end of the project we have a lot like issues about, like, for example, the font size is not big enough or the contrast is not strong enough. I think those are the things that we should definitely do it better next time to have them more ingrained in our UI to able to meet all those requirements. It's also like how maybe have some accessibility consultant or viewers to get in more early on. I think one when, when we almost released the game, I think there was a few like consultant and viewers uh, send, like, have like article online and send us feedback about what they think about the screen innovation where there was like, uh, sign and Grant or Ross Minor, I think they they, they give us really good review and kind like feedback about how we can improve our game so we can take in some of the comment to improving like when we had our patch, I think yeah, we are doing our patch at the moment, so we definitely include some of the easier fix fixed feedback into our game so we'll be able to Helping out on those community to able to play better.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

That's fantastic. Sounds like it's an iterative process that with lots of community feedback. After having gone through this experience and thinking as deeply as you all did about access, what advice would you have for other video game designers who really want to center accessibility and make the game playable for as many people as possible?

**May Wong:**

I think the designer should, uh, kind like look at their game and then understand what game they're making and then to see like what features they can include in their game. So I think for me, I think in the beginning we did a lot of research on other game. I know that like some game, like really good in accessibility features. And by playing those games you kind of like understand how they implementing, how they spend the time and investment on the features. And then you kind of like can look at like, depends on your budget, depends on the team size. You can list out all the features and prioritize what is the most impactful for your player to be able to have and then kind like go through the list with, um, your team. And then I think also you can like help getting inspiration from other media as well, but not just from game with a lot like research on Netflix and BBC like guideline on the subtitle. Netflix doing really well on the post caption as well. So at the moment, As Dusk Falls doesn't have audio description. So we kind of like, at that time we kind of doesn't, we don't really have the resources on adding into At Dusk Falls, but we kind like now we kind looking at it and then hopefully in the future portion we can implement it. But we were really amazed on like some of the Netflix title, like The Stranger Thing, like they have really good like audio description and that's definitely something that we can learn from. I guess this is the benefit that we kind of interactive narrative game. So it's like somehow like related that we can learn from as well.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

So where can our listeners find Interior Night and as Dusk Falls?

**May Wong:**

So At Dusk falls is in, Xbox, Xbox Game Pass and then also on PC and Steam so you can be able to like play on your PC or on Xbox Game Pass as well. I really recommend you playing on the X Cloud, so if you have Xbox, you can play on X Cloud. It mean that you can use your mobile phone and then we have later touch that you can actually make the choices with the touch screen. If you don't have pc or Xbox, then actually our game can also play on Twitch. So, we have a Twitch mode that allow like streamer to actually broadcast the game, and then the audience actually cannot using a test chat to vote on the choice that they want to make. So it's a kind of interactive evolving into the game to vote the choice and the path as well.

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

Well, thank you so much May, this was such an interesting conversation. Congratulations again on as dusk falls.

**May Wong:**

Yeah, thank you so much for having me as well. And then I really appreciate how you helping the community and then doing all the podcasts to get everyone more awareness on the accessibility as well.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

**Qudsiya Naqui:**

This episode was produced by Ilana Nevins and me. Our social media manager is Avery Anapol. Special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo and to Eiffel Gangsta Beats for our theme music. If you like what you're hearing or reading, be sure to subscribe and drop us a review on Apple Podcast, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you love to listen. You can follow us on Twitter and Instagram at down to the struts and join our Facebook group down to the Struts podcast. If you want a monthly update from me, including news from the disability community, you can subscribe to our newsletter getting down to it. If you have disability news or thoughts to share, drop us a line at downtothestruts@gmail.com. Thanks for listening and see you in a couple of weeks so we can get back down to it.