Welcomed by Design Episode 1 - Reginé Gilbert Transcript

[Transcribed by: Lynn Priestley and Ashton McCool]

[Introduction]

[energetic guitar plucking opens the show, with speaking layered over it]

Lynn: Hi, I'm Lynn Priestley, and you're listening to *Welcomed by Design,* the show where we discuss the many ways of making design more inclusive, accessible, and welcoming. [0:13]

[guitar plucking slowly fades out]

For our first episode, we get the chance to sit down with Reginé Gilbert. With over ten years working in the field of technology, Reginé is a highly experienced designer. [0:25]

She is also a prolific public speaker and an industry assistant professor at New York University, with her research centering around digital accessibility, inclusive design, and immersive experiences. [0:37]

With collaborator Doug North Cook, she has an upcoming book, *Human Spatial Computing*. Her first book titled, *Inclusive Design for a Digital World: Designing with Accessibility in Mind*, was published in 2019. It's one of the first books I recommend to people looking to get started in digital accessibility. [0:54]

My personal copy has what I can only describe to listeners as *too many sticky notes.* [0:59]

So, it feels only fitting that Reginé is our first guest on *Welcomed by Design,* to really introduce us to the idea of what accessible design means in a digital era. Without further ado, welcome, Reginé. [1:12]

[sound of door opening into a soundscape with birds chirping, wind, and someone softly writing on paper]

[soundscape audio fades]

[audio shifts into live recording sound]

[Main Interview]

Reginé: Thank you, I'm really happy to be here! [1:19]

Lynn: Yeah, thank you so much for joining us! So, as this podcast is meant to be a sort of beginning point for newcomers to inclusive design, I was hoping to start today off by talking about your own beginning with inclusive design. In your book's introduction, you mention this one accessibility meetup in New York City, and I was wondering what led you to go to that initial meetup and get involved with accessibility in the first place? [1:43]

Reginé: Yeah, so I literally woke up and said, "I– I need to make the world a more accessible place." And then, you know, where do you go [laughs a little] when you have that thought? Like, where do you go to even start? Google! [1:59]

So, I went to Google– I googled "accessibility". I think I googled "accessibility in New York City", and then that's how the meetup came about. I saw that there was an upcoming meeting, and I really didn't know much at that point. I was really early in my UX Career. I didn't know much

about, um, accessibility. During the time that I took my course for user experience design, there was one slide on accessibility. Just one. And so, yeah, I started learning about it and got very, very interested in it. [2:38]

And, it's very interesting, because a few months after, um, that first meetup, I actually became like a teacher's assistant for UX. That's how I started. And I said, "Can I do a lesson on accessibility?" [laughs a little] And that's, you know, that's what started me bringing it into my teaching. And yeah, it just kind of has snowballed from there. [3:06]

Lynn: Yeah, that's so cool! I feel like there's such a range in what brings people to be interested in inclusive design. Some people, it's like witnessing a particular moment of inaccessibility, and then I guess sometimes it's just kind of a lightning-strike, epiphany moment, but whatever brings you to the space to get involved. [3:24]

Um, so I was wondering, now that you're thinking about that initial meetup– looking back, what would you say to yourself, if you could go back and talk to yourself at the beginning? Um, what's something that you wish you knew sooner in your inclusive design journey? [3:41]

Reginé: Oh… That you're never done. [3:43]

You're never done. You're never done learning, um, you… and– and– because you know, you think "Oh, well, I learned this thing," or "I got this certification," or "I did this thing," or "I made this website, I'm good." [3:59]

No, you're not. [laughs a little] You're actually never done. So, that's the thing I would tell myself is: you're never done learning, really. You– you will always be learning something new, each and every single day. There are opportunities we all have to make things more accessible, and so that's

kind of what I would go back and say. It's like, you're never done learning and don't– don't feel like you have to have a finish line for it. [4:25]

Lynn: Yeah, I– I think that's also something I wish I knew sooner. I'm certainly not like– I'm still very much at the beginning with inclusive design. But, I think it's almost a freeing idea that you're never done. Because if there's no perfection to achieve, it's much easier to just try. [4:41]

Because if the goal is just "do better next time", um, and like, learn as you go, it's so much better than, um, striving for a single– a singular perfection. [4:53]

Reginé: Yeah, there's, you know, I'm a big Peloton fan– [laughs] Well, you don't know, but I'm a big Peloton fan. And one of the instructors with Peloton, uh, will say, "Progress, not perfection," right? And Meryl Evans, who's an accessibility advocate, has like, definitely picked that up, and she says that. [5:10]

And I think we have to remember that, right? We need to progress, right? What– what does perfect even look like? We don't know, um, but we can always progress, and even when it feels that we're not there. Nothing is– is, you know, Rome wasn't built in a day they say, right? Things don't happen overnight. Things happen over time. [5:31]

Lynn: I think someone trying to build something accessibly, and maybe not getting all the way, hits so much different than, um, someone who doesn't consider accessibility and then that design requires a retrofit. Like, the "going back", revision process, I feel like, when someone initially tries, I'm a lot more patient with that. [5:55]

Um, so, it's been a while since that first meetup, and now you are a public speaker on topics around inclusive design. So I'm sure you know better than most people just how many definitions people have for inclusive design, and what inclusion is– I feel like every book that I read on the topic has, like, a slightly different way of putting it. So I was wondering, how do *you* define inclusive design? [6:21]

Reginé: I don't like to– because, you know, it's a really hard thing. Um, you know, Kat Holmes wrote a great book called *Mismatch,* and, in that book, she basically says we don't– we don't know what inclusion is. But we know what exclusion is, right? And we know what it means to leave people out. And so that's generally what I'll say when it comes to "what is inclusion?" What is it? [6:45]

I say well, we know what it means to leave people out. We know, you know, one of the things that I'll– that I'll ask my students, or if I'm doing a talk– I ask people, "Have you ever wanted to do something, and you couldn't?", "Have you ever wanted to go somewhere and you couldn't get in?", and then "How did that make you feel?" [7:04]

Because people can identify with that feeling. [7:08]

Lynn: Right, yeah. [7:09]

Reginé: Right? And that feeling is not inclusive. [7:12]

Lynn: Yeah. [7:13]

Reginé: Right? And so that's where I generally go. I try to hit people in the heart…

[laughs] Like what– you know, what do you feel? You know, regardless of all this inclusive design, whatever you want to call it. We are human beings with feelings. [7:27]

Lynn: Yeah. [7:28]

Reginé: Right? And one of the things I think, as human beings, is we want to be connected to each other. And we want to be, you know, included. And so, we– we oftentimes don't do that. Um, you know, folks with disabilities are oftentimes left out of conversations. Even these diversity conversations that are happening. It's like yeah, you'll bring in, um, different groups of marginalized folks. But you are not bringing in folks with disabilities, right, into the conversation. [8:00]

And so, stop leaving people out! I mean, [laughs a little] it's like– it's so simple, yet, you know, I don't know– Lauren Hill has this song that starts off, “It could all be so simple, but you'd rather make it hard.” [8:14]

Lynn: Yeah, yeah. [Reginé laughs] And I– I think too, seeing disability get left out, um, so frequently is kind of shocking to me, because 25% of adults in the United States live with disability– So, it's not a rare thing. Um, and then there's the saying that we're all only temporarily able-bodied, so everyone's going to experience their abilities change. [8:39]

So, if we design more inclusively, it'll fit our future selves too. [8:44]

Reginé: And I think the numbers are higher, since the– the pandemic, um, because things like depression, which so many people have, is, you know, considered disability as well. And so there are so many folks that were– that are included in this– in this community who may not see themselves part of it. [9:06]

But um, the things that, you know, like having designs that are more accessible in general benefit us all. And yes, I think that we need to think about this. This is something that I've done in the past is a, is a workshop designing for your future self. Some people don't like that, you know– Some people will say, “Well, it's not good for people to think about it. They need to think about, you know, the folks in the present.” [9:33]

But the truth is, what I have found, um, through teaching– I've been teaching now almost eight years– is that, in order to get people to care, I have found it works best when they think about themselves. [9:51]

Lynn: Yeah, yeah. [9:52]

Reginé: And, that is something that has been... It's not– Although some people's stories and things like that may have an impact, to me, that's more temporary. When someone thinks about the fact that they have bad knees. The fact that they have a bad back. And that this is not likely going to change, because they already don't work out. Um, you know, what– what does that mean for you? What does that mean for the things that you do in the future? And then how are we doing things now, to make things better, for our future selves? [10:28]

This is, you know– I know you have other questions, but this is part of the reason why I started looking, uh, and researching inclusion and accessibility in augmented reality and virtual reality, was for my own selfish reasons, to be real. I said, “I want to use this stuff when I get older,” and I don't know if I will. I wear glasses. I have hearing issues. [10:50]

What's– what's happening with this stuff? Like how are these things being designed? What are the tools, um, being used? And are those tools

accessible? What do people need, in order to use those tools? What knowledge do they need? Um, and then the experiences themselves, right? Um, what– what are they offering in terms of accessibility? So, that's kind of what got me interested in looking into augmented reality and virtual realities, was for my own selfish reasons, and it's kind of expanded. [11:24]

Lynn: Yeah I think, I think the “for our future selves” reason is so much, um, more productive than a, like “benefactor,” like we're designing things “for” other people, um, because– thinking about the book you mentioned, *Mismatch* by Kat Holmes– She says, “Inclusion isn't nice,” and it's one of my favorite things in that book. [11:48]

Because she points out that this idea of like, if we're the “superheroes” designing for the “victims,” um, then there's always going to be separation between “us” and “them.” And, if we start designing for a common future, it's built on like, common humanity, common motivations that will benefit, like, everyone including ourselves, so. [12:09]

Reginé: And I have to say, you know, I am American. Um, and we in America are pretty individualistic in our way of thinking. We're not more of a collective society. And when you're thinking about inclusion, um, you have to think about culture, right? And the different cultures. Because I think we oftentimes– everything gets Westernized, [laughs a little] and we cannot continue to do that. [12:40]

We really have to think about and approach things from an intercultural lens, versus, like, this is the Western– and even, you know, the way that I've spoken so far is kind of slanted toward Western. In general, the way that we talk is very much geared toward who we are around, right? But

we– we do need to incorporate and include, ah, different cultures, and different cultural context within what we're doing. [13:10]

Lynn: Absolutely yeah. [13:12]

Um, given that your book is, um, often talking a little bit more about accessibility, I was wondering if we could turn towards accessibility specifically and talk about the distinction between accessibility and inclusive design, in terms of definition– I know you don't like to, uh, define inclusive design. [13:36]

But, I think that like, when searching for reading on inclusive design, the search results often seem to kind of imply that the two are one in the same? And I think that some authors feel like accessibility is different than inclusive design. So, I was wondering if you could define for our listeners who might be new to topics around accessibility and inclusive design, like the difference, if there is one. [14:01]

Reginé: Sure. So yeah, there is a difference. I mean, you know, you can ask why different people. They'll give you five different definitions, right? So, the way that I like to think about inclusion and accessibility– They are two separate things. They are not one in the same. However, there is a lot of overlap. [14:18]

But I like to think of inclusion as the big umbrella. And accessibility falls under it, right? Because when you think– when you're thinking about inclusion, inclusion is about gender, uh, socioeconomic status, right? It's different cultures, right? Um, you know, all these different things. Whereas accessibility, digital accessibility, tends to be focused on disability, and so that is different than inclusion. So that's how I like to look at it. It's– it's like if you're making something inclusive, then accessibility is part of that. If

you're making something accessible, inclusion may not be part of that. [15:05]

Lynn: Right. Right. So culture– cultural would fall more in inclusion design, and then accessibility gets a little bit narrower. [15:14]

Reginé: Right. [15:15]

Lynn: Um, so when– in my classes at least– when professors do talk about accessibility, I think one thing in particular gets brought up right away, and it's the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, or the WCAG. [15:27]

Reginé: Yeah. [15:28]

Lynn: Um, and I was wondering for listeners who may never have heard of the WCAG, if you could explain to us what that is. [15:36]

Reginé: Sure, so the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines has been put forth through the W3C, the World Wide Web Consortium, um, which is a governing body for the internet. There isn't like any– in general, it's um, looking at things from an international perspective. And the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are a set of guidelines that tell folks how you could go about making something accessible. [16:08]

Um, there is a lot of good stuff in there. There's a lot of debatable stuff in there as well– there's ongoing debates. Um, and currently the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines are going through an update, um, because a lot of things have changed since it first was created. Um, you know, when we think about the internet of the 90s, we didn't have mobile, right? And so then mobile came along and really mobile, um, and our touchscreens and all that around 2008. And so since 2008, between 2008

and 2022, where we are now, a lot of things have changed, so a lot of updates have been made to these Web Content Accessibility Guidelines over the years. [16:58]

Um, there's four principles, which are Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust. Perceivable, refers to like, can I perceive something, whether I have sight or not, right? Operable: whether I have hands or I don't, can I operate a thing? Understandable refers to, uh, cognition– can I understand things? And Robust is a combination of like, can I use this thing physically, maybe, and can I understand it, right? [17:29]

So I think that it's important for folks to have an understanding that, uh, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines exist, first and foremost. Because I have met you know, computer science people, designers, who have no idea that these things even exist. So I think just knowing that they're out there, but going beyond knowing that they're out there. And then getting to understand what they mean, and then how can you use that to incorporate it into the work that you're doing? Whether you're a designer or developer, marketer, however you're working in technology. I think it benefits everybody to have an understanding of what they are. [18:12]

Lynn: Yeah, I– I think that they usually get kind of, referenced but not really, ah, kind of dived into in the same way as some other like, UX (User Experience) principles. Um, and I think that that means that it can feel pretty daunting at first, because there are quite a few success criteria. [18:33]

And I think there's a default mindset around accessibility where, like, you look at it at the end, and it's a series of checkboxes that we have to, like, go through and meet all of the criteria. So I was wondering, like, in terms

of how we should be aware of these guidelines– like how does it work best as a resource for beginners? Like how do we use it without falling into that mindset of series of checkboxes? [19:03]

Reginé: Yeah, what I would recommend is– yeah, the checkbox piece is very difficult to– [laughs] for people to get out of, like– or "Oh, we have to be compliant." [19:15]

Um, so I would say take it in small pieces. I think, you know, again, nothing is built in a day, and you're never done learning. So don't think of it as something that you have to go and read the whole thing. You would just not do that. [19:32]

I mean, so, for example, if you're working on designing a website, I think it's good to just kind of scan it and do an overview of, like, what– what things am I working on that maybe I can apply some of these principles to, right? I think that you can– you don't have to approach it from the perspective of "I'm going to read this whole thing," and "Oh my goodness, I'm feeling overwhelmed." Saying no, scan it, see what pops out to you, and see how maybe you can apply that to what you're working on. [20:03]

Lynn: Yeah, when we were first making sure the accessibility on this podcast– like we were considering everything– we really honed in on, like, the audio components of what there is to know about accessibility, with things like transcripts. Um, but when I was looking for, like, say a portfolio website, I was looking at things like color contrast and how should links operate. So it's very much, you can take chunks, um, like bite size pieces. [20:30]

Um, and then I think what you mentioned about that acronym POUR is really useful. I was wondering– because I feel like Perceivable, Operable, and Understandable, you gave some good, quick definitions that I think

they're a little bit easier to kind of get from the jump, and I'd like to get a little bit more into what Robust means? Um, because I think it's the one that's a little bit harder to describe without, like, an in-depth example? [21:02]

Reginé: Yeah. Yeah, for that, I think one, it needs to be like, Understandable and Operable, right? So if we refer back to those two, it's like, is it clear, right? And is it easy enough for me to do, regardless of what might be going on with me? So it's more of a combination, uh, and this is, again, my interpretation. It's more of a combination of those two things, of Understandable and Operable, means it is Robust, Robust enough for me to use it, or anyone to use it. [21:39]

Lynn: Gotcha, so it's like, kind of, a “Can it hold up to the test” of different access points, different people coming to your site, can they all– like, does it stand up to multiple types of user testing? [21:52]

Reginé: Right. So, regardless of like, what type of assistive technologies I may be using, can I still use it? And if, you know, I maybe have some sort of cognitive issue, can I still use it, right? So thinking about it from the perspective of, of Operable and Understandable. [22:14]

Lynn: That makes a lot of sense, and I think that one of the things that, because there's not as much accessibility talked about in traditional design education, we aren't as like, versed in assistive technology. So, it's very easy to kind of default to the assumption that everyone's going to come to our digital designs using a mouse. [22:34]

When just having, I think, this idea of Robust and the rest of the acronym, um. That's a very good way to kind of keep ourselves in check to make sure that we're considering multiple ways of accessing the site and kind of

broadening our perspective and the things that we're looking out for, in our designs. [22:56]

Reginé: Yeah. [22:57]

Lynn: Um, so moving away from the more technical Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, you give some really good, what I'd call “gut check” definitions in your book, that I think would be really useful to listeners. I especially liked the title of your third chapter, “If It's Annoying, It's Probably Not Accessible.” Um, and I was wondering if we could talk through an example of that, to get a better sense of how we could potentially use this “gut check” to look back at some of our old designs, or designs we're currently making. [23:34]

Reginé: Well I think everyone has experienced frustration while using a website at one point or another. Um, I oftentimes think about a form. Where you're filling out a form, and you feel like you filled it out completely, and then you go to hit submit, and then nothing happens. And then it's like, “Oh, there's an error on this page.” But it doesn't tell you where there's an error on this page. [24:04]

Now for someone who is non-disabled, this may not– this just is, like, annoying and an issue. For someone who has a disability, this could possibly be really the end of them trying to even get this thing done. So thinking about that, “If it's annoying, it's probably not accessible,” meaning that if it's annoying for some folks, it means it's impossible for others. Impossible. Because if I'm using– Let's say I'm using a screen magnifier, and there's this error on a form. But there isn't a clear indicator of where that error is, I am trying to, with my magnifier– I'm trying to go all over this page. And I still can't see it, because there isn't a clear indicator. [24:56]

And that's a design issue, right? Because it wasn't clearly given. And so that's– that's an example. If it's annoying, it's probably not, you know, it's probably not accessible. Also it's probably impossible for certain groups of folks to even get something done. [25:13]

Lynn: Yeah, based on that example, it sounds like we could almost use it as like a yellow flag or a red flag. Almost like a heat map where we can kind of find areas that might warrant further inspection, where like, oh, I'm using– trying to use this website I just built, and this is a little annoying. Maybe I should go and further inspect if there are some underlying accessibility reasons for why this is annoying. [25:40]

Reginé: Yeah. [25:41]

Lynn: Um, so that's definitely something I will be asking myself in my audits in future designs– like, is anything here just, like, flat out annoying? [25:48]

Reginé: Yeah. [25:49]

Lynn: Um, so I've noticed that in some of my design classes, even when we're not explicitly talking about accessible design, sometimes what gets branded as “good UX design” also leads to more accessible design by default. And I was wondering if this is something that you've found to be true in your work, and if so, maybe, do you have a favorite UX principle that works sort of “double time” by both expanding broad user experience and also creating greater accessibility? [26:24]

Reginé: Well I think we've seen this, um, repeatedly with captions and adding captions to videos. I think we have seen the benefits of this, right? It's not only, um, helpful for folks who, maybe they're in a loud place, and they can't hear. But also it's helpful for folks, if what's being said is in English,

and if English is a second language for people, this is a great thing to have captions. So, making sure captions are added to whatever videos people are uploading to sites. I mean, just in a class I taught this past semester, one of the requirements we have is for students to make a two minute video of, you know, of their projects. [27:15]

And I co-teach a class with Gus Chalkias, it's called “Looking Forward.” We teach students about the assistive tech that blind and low vision folks use, and in the class, the students learn, because Gus is blind, that when they do– when they made the video, not only did they have to have captions, but they also had to audio describe anything that was, uh, visually there. And this past semester I actually brought in a professional person who does, um, audio captions for like, movie trailers, and their minds were just like, “Whoa!” [27:55]

And so it's one of those things that– this is something that I've had to learn. Over the years is, when I do presentations, I never used to describe what was on the screen. I didn't. Because I assumed that everybody could see it. And then I got told otherwise, right? And so this is part of the “You never stop learning.” And so now I do my best– and nobody's a hundred percent ever–, but I do my best to always explain what's on my slide. So that's a roundabout way of answering your question of seeing, but I– I like to throw stories out of real things that happened. [28:33]

Lynn: Yeah, yeah, I think that it kind of sounds like the UX principle there is like “Give your users choice” and like, flexibility. So the design can kind of like, give them multiple routes to be able to perceive information with audio descriptions, captions, and the like. [28:51]

Reginé: Yeah. Gus– Gus says that, you know, accessibility is all about options.

And then I say that too. I'm like, yes, you have to. If you give a person the choice, I can play captions, or I can not, right? Or I can read the transcript, or if I don't want to watch the video. Please give me those options. You know, it's– it's nice to have. [29:15]

Lynn: Yeah, yeah I think about, um, autoplay, in particular, when it comes to choice. Because some people like autoplay. But I personally don't like to be scrolling through a streaming service, and then having different shows, like, just yell at me on occasion. [29:31]

Reginé: Yeah. [29:32]

Lynn: Um, but for some, it's an accessibility issue. It can, you know, trigger panic attacks, seizures. Um, while others, it improves their accessibility. So that's another case of it working double time, by giving that choice. [29:47]

Reginé: Things should not autoplay by the way, that's just my [laughs] two cents. [29:51]

Lynn: [laughs] Yes. That's– [29:53]

Reginé: Uh, I find it incredibly annoying, and I don't like it at all. [laughs] And it's not very accessible. [29:59]

Lynn: Yeah. [30:01]

Reginé: You should always give the user the option to stop something. [30:04]

Lynn: That's definitely one of the things that I learned later on, and then went

back to my portfolio site, and like, turned off even the fact that it would load with the site, because I didn't want the chance for it to start playing. [30:17]

Um, so while we're on this topic of, kind of, constant learning process– I think one of the things before we get into more technical, like, "how do we do this?" um, is talking about the– the experience of the constant learning process. Because part of the "how" is you make mistakes, and you make missteps, and you learn from them. And you mentioned learning about needing to verbally describe things on your slides. But I was wondering if you could speak to, like, another misstep maybe that led to the most growth for you personally, when it comes to inclusive design? [30:58]

Reginé: Yeah, so I had an experience, um, where I spoke at a conference. Um, I think this was back in 2018. I was– I had just started. I think I'd spoken a few times about accessibility, and I was asked to speak at a pretty big conference. It's called "HOW." It's a graphic design conference. [31:21]

And, initially, I was told I would be put in a room with, like, 400 chairs. And I said okay. And I remember testing my presentation before, making sure it looked okay, and then I ended up being put in a room that had, like, a thousand chairs. It was a much bigger room. And although there were two screens, um, one, I wasn't being descriptive back then with my slides. Although I would pretty much read everything that was on my slides I just, um, didn't. And that presentation people who were in the very, very back could not see a thing. Ah, people like mean-tweeted about it. And it left me feeling horrible, because I spoke about accessibility, and, um, I didn't provide an accessible experience to the audience. [32:18]

Um, and so I wrote about it in the book. For me, it was a very painful experience, because it's something I don't ever want to feel like I'm leaving

anybody out. And so that, uh, changed everything for me, but it also, out of that conference, somebody heard me speak there or, I don't know, somebody heard from somebody else. But that's how I ended up getting the book deal, so th– [laughs a little] that all worked out. [32:49]

However, uh, it changed my perspective about presenting. Um, and it changed my perspective about, what does it really mean to make something accessible? And how am I making sure that I am being inclusive of everybody who's in the room, even if they're in the back. [33:06]

Lynn: Yeah, I think that there's really no way to do it otherwise– other than like, make attempts and then kind of realize “Oh, this is like, because we've always done it this way. But this isn't necessarily like, the most productive way to do it.” [33:25]

Reginé: Yeah. [33:26]

Lynn: Um, so thank you for sharing that, because I think what doesn't get emphasized enough is the fact that it's active learning. Because people don't want to talk about mistakes, because they think that that's like, going to get them in trouble. [33:41]

But I think that knowing that everyone is going to make mistakes on this, again, is one of those things where it's like, you feel more free to try when it's okay not to be perfect. [33:51]

Reginé: Mm-hm. [33:52]

Lynn: Um, so I think one of those perhaps misunderstandings, when it comes to

accessible design, is the difference between, um, compliance and true accessibility. You write in your book that “being compliant does not mean you are accessible,” and I was wondering if we could talk about that distinction and maybe clear up that misunderstanding. [34:17]

Reginé: Yeah, I think– so when it comes to accessibility and laws, uh, there are laws that exist in different countries, right? So, depending on what country you're in, there may or may not be laws that are related to accessibility. In the United States, we have, um, the Americans with Disabilities Act which, although when it was initially created, didn't include the internet, it's kind of become this blanket thing. Although the laws around accessibility, um, and the web are still ambiguous, because nobody has made a decision. Uh, there's also section 508, which refers to government sites. [34:59]

So there are all these things, right, that you can become– you can be compliant, right? And you can also follow, ah, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, which will help align with being compliant. Um, but just because you have things that are, let's say “by the book,” by these rules that are laid out, it doesn't mean that, you know, it's going to be usable. [35:30]

Um, so for example, I'm just going to refer to a physical building. You can have a physical building. That physical building can have a ramp. But the ramp could be at such a height that it is not actually going to be easy for somebody to get up it. However, having that ramp is saying, “hey, we're compliant. We have the ramp.” But is the ramp actually usable? [35:55]

That's the question. And so that's the big difference between whether something is compliant and usable– but actually usable, right? Compliance means a business is like, “oh, you know ADA says we need a ramp. We got a ramp.” However, can a person who is using a walker, a

wheelchair, or maybe they've hurt their knee, and it's too steep for them. Then it's not very usable, yet it is compliant. [36:32]

Lynn: So, usability is one distinction, but I feel like there's also an emotional component to true accessibility– For example, I'm thinking about descriptive alt text for images. If they are providing context for the design, they need that alternative text. But if they are purely decorative, they don't need alt text. [36:50]

So technically, you could be compliant with an image that doesn't have alternative text. But i-if there's like an emotional, rather than purely functional meaning that the image adds, it becomes a grayer area. I feel like I'd want to add that text, but I'm not always sure what's too much. So, I was wondering if we could explore that gray area, that is this emotional component to accessibility? [37:19]

Reginé: Yeah, there is– I mean, I think there's a fine line when it comes to what you're speaking about alternative texts, and what is considered meaningful, what is considered decorative. Um, and I think if– if something is conveying some sort of meaning. If you were showing something visually, that's supposed to mean something to whoever's looking at it, then you need to add that descriptor, right? [37:46]

Um, there definitely is, you know– we humans are funny about our emotions, right? [laughs a little] And what they mean. But our emotions mean different things to us. Um, and again, when you were thinking about creating something, who are you incorporating? Like, who are you including, and who are you leaving out, right? So, if someone– one, you don't know how people are going to access, um, what it is you're creating, right? [38:17]

There's multiple means of the ways that we can engage in things. Also, people are not paying attention to things, uh, and one thing that I've noticed is people don't read anymore much, right? Like, uh, there's a big– we skim. Ah, we skip. But we don't oftentimes fully read something. There's a lot of skipping things. So how are we making sure that what we're trying to convey is really getting, um, getting what we want out there? [38:49]

Lynn: Yeah, yeah. [38:51]

So, I think where a lot of, myself and– and other students in the digital design program here at Pitt fall is, we buy into the arguments for why inclusive design is important, and then the next roadblock is kind of, how– How do we do it? Um, and across books, and I think based on your book, you would agree that nothing beats real user testing? We need to design *with* our users, instead of relying on assumptions and designing *for* users. [39:28]

But what's the next best thing when students may not always have access to a diverse user population for every class they take? Because we can't always compensate our users for their time. Um, so I'm wondering how do we start creating more accessible work even in school? [39:46]

Reginé: Yeah, I think it's one, by having an understanding of how people interact with technology. Um, different folks with disabilities, the different types of assistive technologies that are that people are using, um, which is easy to find on Youtube, right? You can see how people are using screen readers. How people are using transcripts. How people are using um, different things. So there are ways out there. [40:14]

Um, and I would say you know one of the things is like, through observation, right? Um, two, again, I think we have a plethora of resources on the web, and so observing what you see on the web. How people are interacting with things? What are people saying, on Reddit and chat rooms on Facebook? You know, what are different folks saying? And then how can you use that information to help inform your design? And– and always like doing your best to get feedback and work with communities. I know it's not always possible. There are, uh, folks out there who will scream, you know, at the top of their lungs, like don't make– Liz Jackson has said, "Don't make a disability dongle," right? Which is, don't make these things without talking to folks, right? And so that at the end of the day, you– you don't ever want to design for anybody. You want to design with, always. [41:14]

And I know that that is not always possible. However, you can do your best to make sure that you are doing um– creating things that are informed by, maybe, through your observations of the community. But not making the assumption that you know better. [41:29]

[audio shifts to studio]

Lynn: So quick clarification about the term "disability dongle." It's essentially making the assumption that you know better. It's shorthand for a well-intended solution that is built based on assumptions about what disabled people want, rather than designing *with* the disability community to build relevant solutions to access issues, as defined by the community. So as Reginé says, "Design with, always." [41:55]

[audio shifts back to interview]

Lynn: Uh, before we get into kind of, a couple crowdsourced questions, there's

one more question I wanted to ask, um, while we've been touching on the gray area of accessible and inclusive design. So I'm wondering, where do we draw the line as designers, when we are making something meant for broad audience use? How far should we go before accepting that assistive tech might be needed in some cases? [42:24]

Reginé: I mean, ah, many things– when you're working on projects, and whether you're a student, or whether you're working for a company– Um, I used to be a project manager back in the day, and there was a triple constraint of time, money, and resources. And that's what it involves, right? How much time do you have? How much money do you have? And what resources do you have, in order to, um, complete something? [42:51]

So, I think it all depends. That's a classic design answer of what– what do you need to do? It depends on you. And what you have time for, and if you have a team or not, um, and that's, I mean, that's it. It depends. [43:10]

Lynn: Yeah, I think this is one of those questions that as much as we would like a checkbox answer, um, it really resists it. It's just a matter of, like, we need to be mindful. Our choices will always include some people and exclude others, because some like, disability accommodations can directly conflict. So, um, I think it's– [43:32]

[piano music with quiet, but active melody slowly crescendos]

Lynn: –you're right. It depends! [laughs a little] [43:35]

Reginé: It depends! It depends. Yeah. [43:38]

[Crowdsourced Question Segment]

[piano music becomes layered with keyboard typing, followed by the email send “whoosh”, then slowly fades out]

Lynn: Um, so I'm obviously a design student with a lot of questions when it comes to inclusive design. But I'm certainly not the only one. And prior to our recording session, we put out a call for student questions from my peers in Pitt's Digital Narrative and Interactive Design major. Unsurprisingly they had some excellent questions, that I am also now very curious about. So in this segment, we're going to pass the mic over to them, and let them do some of the question asking. [44:11]

Student Q1: What does accessibility mean across different mediums, beyond the web, like Virtual Reality? [44:18]

Reginé: Well that's a very big question. [laughs] That’s a– it means lots of things. So, if we are thinking about– let's take Virtual Reality for example. Virtual Reality, you can access via web. There's web VR. You can actually access it through a mobile device, or you could access it through a head-mounted display. Or there are other mediums as well. [44:42]

So when you're thinking about approaching, uh, accessibility, uh, you have to think about the platforms that are being used as well. Um, certain things have things built into them, and then how could you use the things from those operating systems with whatever it is you're building. [45:03]

That's a very big question that I can't answer, because it's like, if you're thinking about each of these– if you're thinking from web to Augmented Reality to Virtual Reality to, uh, Mixed Reality and to ah, not only that, but I

think we oftentimes leave audio out of this mix. Like there are so many different things that we could do for each of those. [45:26]

Uh, the W3C does have, um, some guidelines around Extended Reality. Um, Extended Reality is a blanket term for Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality. And so they do have some, uh, usability guidelines that I would recommend, uh, folks who have interest in, uh, learning more about how to approach accessibility. Um, for AR and VR, they could take a look at the W3C's guidelines. [45:56]

Student Q2: How can we keep up effectively with accessibility, when new technology is constant? What are some transferable thinking and skills that can help us? [46:05]

Reginé: I mean, I can ask you? How do you keep up with what's going on? For me– I'd love to know your answer, like how do you keep up with everything? [46:16]

Lynn: [both laugh] Um, man, I think that the one thing that I've found helpful is to like, learn how assistive technology works. Um, and then once I've learned like, okay, a screen reader needs to know the language, um, that a document or design is in, so it knows how to pronounce what's on the screen. Um, it needs alt text. It's a matter of looking for how to do these things across InDesign, when making accessible PDFs, or websites. Um, that's the one thing that I've found useful, but it's definitely still a big question, uh, for me too. [46:58]

[audio shifts to studio]

Lynn: I wanted to take a minute to clarify what I meant here. Learning how

assistive tech works prevents us from starting at square one every single time we have to learn new platforms– which, in the tech field, is inevitable. By learning a screen reader needs linear structure, alt text, etc., we can jump into new platforms simply looking for the platform-specific way to implement them, rather than having to restart all accessibility know-how. Understanding the *why* to an accessibility tutorial turns this knowledge into a transferable skill and allows us to make connections between platforms to get acquainted with accessibility in a new platform much faster. [47:40]

[audio shifts back to interview]

Reginé: Okay. Yeah, I mean, for me, I would say, this is another question where I'm going to answer in the same manner. It depends, on you, right? It depends on you and your interests, and what you want to be doing, and where you see yourself. I think if you are a designer– one of the things that you can do is– and I learned this years ago. Never stop learning, right? Never stop learning. [48:11]

So if there are new technologies. Let's say you have an interest in VR, but you have no idea of what to do? Um, go to Mozilla hubs, and check out web VR, right? There are things out there that you could just, you know– you want an intro into, um, whatever technology, I don't know, voice, for example, if you're interested in learning voice. There are so many resources out there that are specific to what you have interests in, and then on top of that, you would, you know, look into the accessibility of those things right? What is happening in those worlds around accessibility? So, that's what I would say is to keep up. [48:57]

For me, I keep up through Twitter. That's where I find out what's going on. I look at that “a11y” hashtag. I look at VR. I look at AR. I look at what the latest is. I follow people who are journalists, who cover VR and AR, to see

what they're reporting on, right? I follow the brands of, like, Augmented Reality glasses. I was so happy NReal followed me back. Like they're Augmented Reality glasses, right? So I, you know, that's how I keep up. I think because everything is changing so quickly, and yet it's not, at the same time, right? We have a long way to go. [49:37]

[plucking music fades in and out]

[Final Questions]

Lynn: Alright, so a big thank you to everyone who sent in questions and helped ensure we got the most out of her time talking with Reginé. We've covered a lot of ground in today's discussion, so before our time to record is up, I was hoping we could do a couple “key takeaway” sort of questions. [49:57]

I think my favorite quote in, ah, the entirety of your book is “Get comfortable being uncomfortable. Maintaining a research mindset means realizing that bias is rampant, certainty is an illusion, and any answer has a short shelf life. A good question is far more valuable in the long run.” So with that in mind what– what types of good questions should students be asking? [50:24]

Reginé: I think the ones that come to their mind, right? I think that a lot of times– and I've seen this with students– students don't want to be wrong. You don't learn, if you don't get things wrong. [50:39]

Lynn: Yeah. [50:40]

Reginé: I get things wrong all the time. And I think that we need to get more comfortable with being wrong. It's okay. You know, we're not always going to do things right. Um, and you know, sometimes people will take things in

a way. Just don't take things personal. I've had students, you know, reach out to different folks. And they're like “Ahh, they, like, yelled at me in the email they responded.” And I said, “Listen, don't take things personal, right? You– you've tried and you've learned something in the process. Sometimes things don't work out.” [51:14]

I think that we do need to, again, I– I do recommend that people understand that when you are, um, working with folks with disabilities, that there is certain etiquette, right, that you need to understand. Also to keep in mind, that if you are dealing with anybody who is not from a Western country, or from a different country, that there are different ways of asking different questions, and to keep that in mind as well. Um, because you have to be mindful. You know, my students will say “Well, I want to ask people direct, like, what– what is your disability?” And I say “Well no, that's not the way that you would go about it.” [51:57]

However, you can ask if they use any sort of assistive technologies, right? What type of technologies do you use? Potentially even glasses, they count, as assistive tech. Um, some people will use their airpods to hear better, right? Like these are different things that people are doing. So, you can ask different types of questions. And I think that in general, when people are doing research, that it's important that you understand that there are dos and don'ts to the questions that you ask. I think a lot of folks ask leading questions, oftentimes. And so it's having that understanding about what questions to ask. This should be a whole class, [laughs a little] like for a semester, right? About what questions, and the way that you go about asking questions. Um, because it is important. [52:48]

One of the things I would recommend, I actually have it sitting here is Dr. Lesley-Ann Noel has, uh, it's a set of cards, but she also has a website. It's the “Designer's Critical Alphabet,” and it's really an excellent set of

tools to be used by any designer. Um, as a basis of– I'm actually doing a talk in September based off of these cards because they're so brilliant. Um, and so thinking about approaching research from a different perspective, thinking about approaching your research from an inclusive perspective. So planning for that, ahead of time. I think people just want to jump in, and they don't want to plan, but I have this– I say this to everybody in my family: if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. [53:41]

And so therefore you need to have an understanding of who– what communities are you going to be reaching out to? What is acceptable, and what is not acceptable in those communities? And what kind of questions can you ask? [53:56]

Lynn: Right. [53:57]

Reginé: Right? And so that takes you as the individual doing your own research, to have that understanding, and not just going, “Well, I have these questions.” [54:05]

No, it's not about you. Right? User experience is not about you. [54:10]

Lynn: Mm-hm. [54:11]

Reginé: It's about the other person, and so that means going into something with, beyond empathy, compassion and understanding. [54:19]

Lynn: Yeah, it seems like the– the starting question should have, from me, should have been, “How should we be asking questions?” And then what should, like– etiquette is number one, to figure out how to ask the “What types of questions?” [54:33]

Reginé: I think we've become so afraid to ask questions. This is just like, we need to ask questions. And listen, sometimes people will be offended, but it's not– that is not the intent, right, to offend. Like, I think people should be able to ask a question, and I think we should be able to have conversations and dialogue, without somebody having to be right or somebody having to be wrong. This is not, you know, this is the world we've kind of live in now. [55:03]

It's like, can I ask a question, or may I ask a question that, you know, I'm not sure about? And if someone finds that question offensive, then they should say so, and– and then, you know, how can we better dialogue, right? There– there are ways, and this is a learning process for the individual. You know, we all have our own different communication styles. So that's what I would say. [55:30]

Lynn: Yeah, yeah, I think it goes back to that broader idea of inclusive design itself being an active learning process. And it– it feels so much different when you can feel the individuals are coming to the conversation, and they're trying, um, even if there are minor missteps in the conversation. [55:50]

Um, so in terms of final question, I wanted to do a sort of “call to action” question for listeners, and ask you: How do you recommend listeners who are very, very new to inclusive design and accessible design get started after this episode? Are there particularly high impact areas with accessibility that we can begin with? [56:15]

Reginé: Oh, such a good question. I think that one of the things to think about is, you know, if you are creating something that is on web, on mobile. The fact that people may not be able to see what you're doing, but they may interact with it using assistive technology, such as a screen reader. And so

have you created things, um, in a hierarchical way, that people can understand it, right? [56:50]

I think, when you're thinking about making a website, does the layout make sense? Does the content make sense? If I'm only using a keyboard to access the site, can I do that in a way that makes sense, right? [57:06]

I think having, ah, again, having that understanding of the fact that people will access what you're creating in multiple ways. And so with those multiple ways that someone might access something, are they able to get what they need done? Are they able to reach their goals? And if the answer is no, then you have work to do. [57:30]

Lynn: Alright, well, I think that is the end of my very long question list. [laughs] So thank you so much Reginé for joining us and for introducing us to inclusive and accessible design. This has been super fun. [57:45]

Reginé: Yeah, thank you. Thank you, everybody. [57:48]

[the birds chirping from the beginning of the episode fade back in, eventually giving way to calm, soft electric bass fingerpicking]

[Credits]

Lynn: Thank you for joining us for our first episode. We hold that citation and acknowledgement are inclusive acts, so we want to give credit! Sound design for this episode is by Ashton McCool and Clare Sheedy. This episode was produced by Dr. Jessica FitzPatrick and me, Lynn Priestley. This episode's student questions were pulled from an anonymous survey taken by Pitt students on accessibility and inclusivity questions related to

design. In the order they were played, the student question clips were voiced by Alex Morris and Daisy Mandl. [58:22]

This episode was recorded and edited at the University of Pittsburgh, an institution on the ancestral lands of the Haudenosaunee, Lenape, Osage, and Shawnee peoples. [58:33]

Music in this episode is by Blue Dot Sessions. For an extended discussion of this episode, including a fact check, check out the supplement for this episode. [58:42]

Other resources, like the readings and tools recommended by today's guest can be found in our podcast's resource library. The link to that library will be in the episode's description, along with a link to the transcript of this episode. If you have questions, guest suggestions, or comments about the accessibility of this podcast, please don't hesitate to email us at welcomedbydesign@gmail.com. [59:05]

With that, this has been the very first episode of *Welcomed by Design*. Thank you to Reginé for being our very first guest! We hope that you enjoyed, and that you'll join us for our next episode– See you next time. [59:16]