

Ubisoft Game Makers Podcast
We Need Diverse Games
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(PLEASANT ELECTRONIC MUSIC)

TANYA DEPASS:

We want you to have the best game you can minus the harmful tropes and stereotypes that have pervaded gaming since I could pick up a controller.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

You're listening to the Game Makers podcast. I'm Charles-Adam Foster-Simard from Ubisoft. In their 2021 Key Facts Report, the Interactive Software Federation of Europe found that women represent 47% of video game players in Europe, and that girls who play video games are three times more likely to pursue a STEM career than girls who do not. And yet, and this is still in Europe, but the numbers are similar around the world, this same report estimates that women only represent 20% of the video game workforce. And that's just talking about women. It is a fact that in our industry, people of colour, people with disabilities, people from the LGBTQ+ communities, non-binary folks, neuro-diverse folks, and all other forms of diversity are simply underrepresented, both within the workforce, but also in the stories and characters in our games. I think it's safe to say that we find ourselves at a turning point in the industry, with a lot of work being done to improve inclusion, representation, diversity, and accessibility in recent years. But at the same time, a lot of work left to do to ensure an even more inclusive industry for all. If you've been following this conversation, there's a chance you've come across the speaker I'm welcoming on the podcast today. Her name is Tanya DePass, and one morning in 2014, she was angry about video games. She Tweeted out to the world with the hashtag: #INeedDiverseGames.

The tweet went viral, it sparked a conversation, and it led Tanya to form a not-for-profit organisation called: I Need Diverse Games, which is dedicated to improving diversification of all aspects of gaming. Tanya's accomplishments are too many to list here, but she is among other things, an RPG developer, a Twitch partner, and a diversity consultant. Tanya joined me remotely from her streaming studio in Chicago to talk about her experience as a gamer and expert in the industry, the work I Need Diverse Games is doing, and challenges and opportunities our industry faces today in terms of diversity and inclusion. Hello, Tanya DePass.

TANYA DEPASS:

Hello, how are you?

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Good, how are you? Thank you for joining us.

TANYA DEPASS:

I'm good, you know, state of the world notwithstanding, I'm doing good.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

That's good to hear. You know, Tanya, I had all these questions set up for you and that I sent you in advance, but thinking about them this morning on my way here, I thought that I really want to start with the end, or not the end, but the most recent thing, for me anyway, which is that you participated as a consultant, you helped the team that's working on Far Cry 6, because Far Cry 6 is coming out right now, and it's exciting. And so, I was wondering if we could start by you just talking what that role of being a diversity and inclusion consultant is, and what kind of high-level feedback, if you can share any, you gave to the Far Cry 6 team.

TANYA DEPASS:

So, being a diversity consultant is interesting because a lot of people seem to just not realise what a diversity consultant is, what we can do, how we can help improve the end result of your games and things that you're making. And it's gratifying to also get people to see that, see things that they might not have noticed previously, because we all have our biases. We all have things that we don't think about because we were raised with it. And being able to point out, hey, here's a thing that you might not have realised, and it's inherently problematic or what have you, but because of your life experience, it never occurred to you that say, this depiction of someone who has dark skin, but wearing like baggy pants and looking thuggish would be an issue, because you're playing into a stereotype.

And with Far Cry 6, I looked over the script, I looked over some of the art, and I also looked over a lot of the weapons and the character outfits that you can eventually go out and get, just for things that are, that could be culturally insensitive. And I'm glad that I had a chance to do that. Because again, there are very simple things that without the cultural context, without thinking about it, you could inadvertently offend a lot of people or hurt a lot of people. For a lot of people, video games are more than just entertainment. They are a medium, they're something they do with friends. Those of us that stream, you know, we're showing this game to our audience, we're showing this game to our communities. Or just me as a US-born-and-raised black person, if I see this game, it's like, Oh wow, you didn't talk to anybody black, did you?"

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Well, that's the interesting thing too with the game or with your work, right? It's not necessarily of going always down the middle route or making everything kind of

bland and lifeless. It's just kind of navigating those stereotypes and those tropes and making sure that the story is authentic, I guess. Is that right?

TANYA DEPASS:

Yeah, and it's also, you know, just kind of things where, you know, again, it's something where someone let's say based in France or Montreal or Toronto may not think about it because it's out of your life experience, or just something that once you see it, luckily, most people can't un-see it, so going forward, they think about these things. But one thing that I think a lot of people assume diversity consultants do, or sensitivity readers in the realm of film, books, et cetera, is that we want to destroy the developer's vision; we want to ruin the artistry of the game. When that's the polar opposite. We want you to have the best game you can minus the harmful tropes and stereotypes that have pervaded gaming since I could pick up a controller.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Yeah. And just digging into the work, you mentioned script, and I know scripts of video games can run to thousands and thousands of pages.

TANYA DEPASS:

Uh-huh.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

When the team, which I guess would be a lot of work for you.

(BOTH LAUGHING)

So, when the team sends you that material, those assets, do they ask you to look at specific things? Or do they point out specific things that they're not sure of or that they'd like some feedback on? Or do they leave it open to you to do your thing?

TANYA DEPASS:

It usually depends. So with this, it was, Please read through it. It was quite a few pages, quite a few words. But most of the time, if the client, in this case Ubisoft, doesn't give me a, Hey, this chunk of script, this swath of art or assets is something we're concerned about," I'll ask that question of, OK, I'm going to read all of this, but is there a section that is of particular concern? And if so, what are those concerns so I can look at it and go, 'OK, you're right. This is something that could be a concern.'" Or, "You may be overthinking it." And I've rarely had to say, You're overthinking it to a client, but I always like to err on the side of caution, because as we know, the internet being what it is, if even one person finds offence in it, and this isn't for anyone listening to say, "Oh, well you're just saying we should never be offended."

I'm not, 'cause there've been plenty of things in video games that have deeply offended me over the years. But as we know, that small match can light a giant fire.

With everything going on in the world and in the industry, I want to make sure that the game that goes out the door, I've done my best, I've done everything I can to get rid of as much unintentional bias, any racism I see. And you know, for what it's worth, I don't think developers go into this intentionally wanting to make a terrible racist game.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

But building off of what you just said, from what you're seeing today going on in the industry and the conversations that are happening and the work that companies like Ubisoft and others are doing, you know, what would you like to see developers maybe doing more of? Or where are we at in terms of, you know, promoting and improving diversity and representation in our games? And what more can be done?

TANYA DEPASS:

What I think can be done is, one, hire more people so that you don't need to have an outside consultant necessarily come in. Because ideally your studio should be diverse enough where you can take this to people and not in like a, Hey, you're the only black or brown person, you're the only queer person, please rubber stamp this." But in a, "You should not be so bereft of inclusion that you have to go to an outside source." Also, the industry itself needs to be more welcoming in both bringing in people that are not cis-straight white dudes, and keeping us there, 'cause even when people get in the industry, a lot more people of colour, a lot more queer folks, divergent, disabled, leave because the industry's just too hostile, or they bop around from studio to studio.

And it's just, this isn't fulfilling because the other part that I encounter, especially when games are released to the public, Well, why didn't the studio do this? How come no one said anything? It's like, if there is someone in the room that could say something, there's a risk of, I could say something and lose my job, which is probably your sign to not work there, but not everybody has that luxury. Not everyone can be like, "This is terrible, I don't want my name on this game," and walk out, because we all got bills to pay. We got to keep the lights on.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Sure.

TANYA DEPASS:

But you know, if there were more people in the room, it wouldn't fall on the shoulders of that one person of colour, or that one out queer person to go, "Hey, maybe doing this character this way is not the best thing. Or, "This character sounds very stereotypical." Because you are kind of putting yourself at risk when you speak up and you're the only one in the room.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Yeah. And on the flip side, because you mentioned the internet, a lot of the conversations of course are happening online, and a lot of vocal players go online to talk about these issues. What can players do to also help move things along in a positive direction with regards to these issues of lack of representation, lack of diversity?

TANYA DEPASS:

For me, the easiest thing, if you are covering games, bring this up in your reviews. Bring it up and talk about, Hey, I played this game for 60 hours, I didn't see any people of colour. And if the game is set let's say in modern times, or especially if it's set in the future, science fiction, and be mindful of it, have these conversations. And so, the main thing is for gamers is learn what nuance means; use that in your reviews and your discussions about the game. And also don't conflate someone streaming a game or doing something because of their contractual obligation with, "I'm just going to ignore everything going on in the industry and I don't care. And granted, some people don't care, but give people, and this is me saying it, the benefit of the doubt at least once. And then if they continue to prove you wrong, well, there's nothing you can do about it. But don't scream and yell at developers. It doesn't help anyone, it doesn't do anything.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

But I think what you're saying also, especially with the reviews thing is still having open, healthy conversations, right? When something's amiss, when something was not done well, to kind of have a respectful conversation about why it's not OK, and what could have been done better. And I think is that the way to kind of move things forward?

TANYA DEPASS:

Oh, absolutely. Because too many times reviews just focus on, oh, the game's pretty, or 10 out of 10, or I paid \$70 and the game only lasted two hours. And they don't look at the things like, how's the representation in this game? You know, how are the female characters, even though I hate phrasing it that way, how are they treated? Are they there as cannon fodder? Are they there to motivate a male character to go do whatever the story requires them to do? And learn nuance and have broader conversations in reviews, which has been a conversation happening for years, even several years ago when I was in game journalism, nobody was really having those conversations.

And when you did, you got the vocal angry minority that didn't want to hear it. They didn't want to read a 5,000-word review that was, Hey, this game has serious issues, and they do them well. They don't do them well. I think that's the kind of discussion

and review we need to have. Versus a, "Oh, it was pretty, 10 out of 10, the gun play is great. Cool, but what about the story?"

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Tanya, you're a pretty passionate person, I think.

TANYA DEPASS:

I think that's a fair assessment.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And you're very passionate about video games. I wanted to ask you what games mean to you? How did you get into them? And what space do they occupy in your life?

TANYA DEPASS:

You know, I grew up going to arcades, playing D&D; games mean a lot to me because they were an escape, they were a way to make friends, they still are a way to make friends. I've gotten to know so many people who make the games that I love and enjoy. And some people, for games that I absolutely did not like, but I like them as a person. And right now they occupy a lot of my time because I now play them as part of work. I make them as part of work, I review them. And what I'm struggling with and what I'm trying to do is not let games become simply work and lose that joy in them.

I mean, I'm sure you know, when games are work, it's a whole different thing, that, you know, clocking out, it's flopping on the couch and playing whatever game you're really into in the moment. And they mean a lot, and you know, I wish people understood that it's a medium, they're a genre. They can be very powerful. There are people I've met that talk about games literally saving their life and being good for their mental health, and they've made friends. Especially in the two years with the pandemic going on, gaming has been the way a lot of us have been able to socialise.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

You've had a tonne of different roles in the industry and you still occupy a lot of different roles. You said yourself, you used to work in game journalism. You're a streamer, you're a spokesperson an advocate, a consultant, as we mentioned, a content creator. How do you juggle all of those different roles? For you, are they all kind of part of the same general thing of just what you do and what you do is all these different things? Or do you see yourself more on a trajectory of evolution in the different things that you're interested in that you do?

TANYA DEPASS:

For now, I think they're all parts of one very messy pie that is my professional life. You know, getting to work on games and getting to see them kind of from the ground up is great. And then getting to experience it on the flip side, when the game is done and

it's out there, and seeing people respond to it. Streaming is a strange beast, especially right now. I actually have been doing a lot more tabletop RPG stuff than video game stuff and it's just... It's weird because, you know, I have no shame in talking about my age.

I am closer to 50 than some people may realise, and I would have never thought even 10 years ago that this would be where I'm at. I just thought I'm still working in higher ed, I'm inching my way toward retirement, you know, streaming on the side. But now doing consulting and writing and creating my own tabletop is where I'm at. So it's kind of weird. Gaming in one way or another takes up basically most of my brain space right now.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

(LAUGHS) Now, you've managed to kind of carve your niche, I think, in the industry. And you said, you know, 10 years ago, you wouldn't necessarily have imagined that you would be doing this today. Do you have advice for people who are either setting off in the industry or working in other industries and maybe would like to work in video games? Do you have any advice for those people in terms of, yeah, finding their path and working in this industry?

TANYA DEPASS:

Make sure that you want this. Make sure that you're willing to put in the work, because so many people think just playing games is all they need to do. Like, if you are able to go to conventions, make connections with developers, try to go to things like PAX, when it's safe to fully go to all PAXs again. If you're a content creator, get a content-creator badge. Reach out and see who influencer managers are. A lot of times they're easy to find on Twitter, easy to find on other places. But if you have a passion, let's say for inclusion review, diversity consulting, be able to articulate what it is that doesn't work in the game. Be able to go to a company or a studio and go, Hey, I played your game. I noticed let's say, there's a lack of women of colour. Here's some data on why not including women of colour is leaving out a whole segment of the gaming population.

Did you consider this as you made your game? I know it's out, but maybe think about this, or think about a consultant before you put out your next game or the DLC that may be coming." Be able to articulate why a lack of inclusion is harmful. You have to be able to offer solutions. Just like any job where if I went to a manager and said, Hey, this thing doesn't work and you're terrible, and you should have thought of this. If I can't also offer you solutions, no one's going to listen. Start writing game reviews, put yourself into it. And just reach out to, when you see people going, hey, early-access keys, let's say, you know, if there was one for Far Cry 6, reach out and go, "I'd love to review it, I'd love to talk about this. And also be able to show your work; create a portfolio of what you've done. And don't be afraid to put yourself out there and

realise that your name is your bond, and you have to put out quality work. And the last thing is, don't be afraid to network with other people already doing what you want to do. Yeah, I see so many people do kind of a Highlander mindset of, "There can only be one."

(CHARLES-ADAM LAUGHS)

I mean, I do, it's sad. But you know what, let's say I can speak about an American black cis-female queer experience, but someone else may be able to speak from a Latinx perspective or pending which part of Asia we're talking about, Asian perspective. If there's a lack of representation or bad representation, realise that no one person can cover every aspect of diversity when it comes to games. And don't be afraid to say, Hey, this isn't the right fit, but let's talk to this person.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

I think that's good advice. I'm taking notes.

(TANYA LAUGHS)

Tanya, you're also the founder of I Need Diverse Games, which is a great organisation. Where's the organisation at now? What kind of work is it doing? And yeah, can you just give us an update seven years later on what's going on with I Need Diverse Games?

TANYA DEPASS:

I Need Diverse Games is still very small. It's still trying to help people where we can. And with the current events of the world, there's not been a lot of travel, even though I just went to PAX West not too long ago, we didn't do a table.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Right, so normally those big events are an opportunity to bring the community together and bring the organisation to the forefront?

TANYA DEPASS:

Yeah, normally we are in the diversity lounge at most PAXs. I do a lot of public speaking, I do a lot of panels. We get tapped for diversity consulting. And I'm hoping as, you know, knock on all the wood, things have improved and we can get back to conventions at some semblance of normal, we can safely table again, it's safer to go and to, you know, talk to people and not have to be behind like two inches of plexiglass and three masks.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

And if anyone wants to join the movement or participate or help out in any way, I assume they can go straight to the website?

TANYA DEPASS:

Yeah, it's www.INeedDiverseGames.org. We have a Patreon. We also take pitches. So, if you want to write about games and give us that perspective, we take pitches and we pay.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Wow.

TANYA DEPASS:

Cause I do not believe in unpaid labour. And it's just INDG@INeedDiverseGames.org. Drop us a note, address it to myself or Tauriq Moosa who is our managing editor. You know, I'm excited about games that are coming out. And you know, we want to get games in the hands of people and showcase what they're doing, but also you have space there to talk about inclusion and things like that.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Well, Tanya, best of luck with all your many, many projects. Thank you for coming on the show and for this conversation.

TANYA DEPASS:

You're so welcome. Let's do this again.

CHARLES-ADAM FOSTER-SIMARD:

Sure. This episode of Game Makers was produced and edited by the team at Engle. I'm Charles-Adam Foster-Simard from Ubisoft. Transcripts of our episodes are available on Ubisoft News. For more from Game Makers, remember to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening!