Enduring Play Season 3 Episode...-Creators Sabrina and Jonathan

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Game Development, Prototyping, Dressmaker, Self-expression, Fashion, Indie Games, Narrative, Disability, Creative Process, Community, Remote Work, Storytelling, Player Agency, South Africa, Game Design

SPEAKERS

Cheryl Platz, Jonathan Hau-Yoon, Sabrina Becker, Enduring Play Computer

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E **Enduring Play Computer** 00:00

Initializing Enduring Play Podcast, Season Three engine. Decompressing audio. Synchronizing waveforms. Reticulating splines. Launching podcast lobby.

C **Cheryl Platz** 00:14

Welcome back to Enduring Play, the podcast where we explore what it takes to make games that don't just survive but thrive. I'm your host Cheryl Platz, video game developer, author, professor, just... video game person.

E **Enduring Play Computer** 00:27

Loading podcast demo level.

S **Sabrina Becker** 00:30

Yeah, it was really only this this first sort of prototype that you made in April last year, where you were already like, oh no, this is something. Yeah, and that was when you brought me on, and you were like, "What do patterned pieces look like?"

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 00:44

How how thick is a bolt of fabric?

S Sabrina Becker 00:46

Yeah

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 00:48

I hadn't figured out what what actually made it fun yet.

S Sabrina Becker 00:50

Yeah, yeah, but you made a very beautiful princess seamed dress.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 00:54

Yeah.

S Sabrina Becker 00:55

Yeah.

C Cheryl Platz 00:59

Dressmaker shipped to Steam on September 21, 2026, and since then has sold over 700,000 copies. Today's episode is a celebration of creativity, self expression, and companionship. The second I played the indie hit Dressmaker, I wanted to know more about how such a unique love letter to the art of fashion had made it out into the world. I was not prepared at the time for how joyful today's conversation is in practice. Sabrina Becker and Jonathan Hau-Yoon, co-creators of Dressmaker and partners who are Definitely Not Married (TM), sat down with me just a few weeks after their initial launch went viral to talk about the very intentional march through prototypes and community outreach that brought them to this perceived overnight success.

C Cheryl Platz 01:39

Their backgrounds are a delightful contrast. Sabrina is a former costume designer whose first video game is Dressmaker, where she applied her skills as a subject matter expert to inform game design. Meanwhile, co-creator Jonathan Hau-Yoon already worked at indie studio Free Lives as a technical artist and game developer, contributing to games like Bro Force and the BAFTA-nominated Terra Nil.

C Cheryl Platz 01:58

Today's conversation covers video game prototyping and surprising insights about how disability inspired and drove the creation of this game. It also covers the power of self-expression and immersive narrative as motivators of play, the power of creativity to inspire joy in all genders, the power of constructive pushback in creative environments, and the rich South African game dev scene, and so much more. From prototype to launch in a little over a year with a team, you can count on two hands? Let's learn more.

C Cheryl Platz 02:27

As a reminder, this podcast is sponsored by my book, The Game Development Strategy Guide. So if you like what you hear, if you like our perspectives, you want to learn more about the motivators of play, head to RosenfeldMedia.com and use the discount code you can find at the end of this broadcast. The Game Development Strategy Guide helps you level up your game career at any stage of the game, whether you're new or a veteran trying to explain what's hard about video games to partners. And this conversation will leave you inspired to make games. Let's get into the game.

E Enduring Play Computer 03:01

Player one, Cheryl Platz, pronouns she/her. Player two, Jonathan Hau-Yoon, pronouns he/him/they. Player three :Sabrina Becker, pronouns she/her. Podcast level: start.

C Cheryl Platz 03:17

Welcome back to Enduring Play, the podcast where we discuss what it takes to make games that don't just survive but thrive, and I have been so thrilled this weekend playing the game to get warmed up for this conversation because today we have the co-creators of Dressmaker, the darling Steam hit here with us, Sabrina Becker and Jonathan Hau-Yoon, thank you so much for being here today.

Jonathan Hau-Yoon 03:44

Thank you for having us.

Sabrina Becker 03:44

Yeah, it's our pleasure.

Cheryl Platz 03:46

There's so much to explore about because this isn't an overnight success. This has been a very intentional process from HIO to release. So while the world is like, oh, dressmaker, where did it come from? There's so much to talk about about all the intention that went into getting you to this point, that I'm really excited to walk through. But let's start like we do most of these podcasts. I'd love it if you could both introduce yourselves to our audience the way you would at a conference or a party, because it's always better coming from your perspective than mine.

Jonathan Hau-Yoon 04:16

You want to start?

Sabrina Becker 04:17

No.

Jonathan Hau-Yoon 04:17

No. Okay.

Jonathan Hau-Yoon 04:19

I'm Jonathan. I've been working in games for I think this is my 16th year. For most of my career, I've been a tech artist, and I've mostly transitioned into being more doing management and direction. But on Dressmaker, it's been a little bit of like a a little bit of everything, where I do some programming, some art, a lot of emails and spreadsheets and meetings.

S Sabrina Becker 04:42

Hi, I'm Sabrina. I've worked in games for one year. I come from art and costume background, and I got roped into making video games.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 04:54

Somewhat against your will.

S Sabrina Becker 04:55

Somewhat against my will.

C Cheryl Platz 04:58

Well, it's gone pretty well. So that's well, and what a wonderful contrast of perspectives, right? We get to see both ends, both the new and the experienced. And I love that your background is tech art because it's one of the least understood and most underappreciated fields in game development. I'm not surprised that you're able to draw in that background to do something like this, it's very helpful to to be able to sort of jack of all trades and master of many. There, So Well, thank you for being here today.

E Enduring Play Computer 05:33

Loading Tutorial level: Itch.io.

C Cheryl Platz 05:34

Before we get too deep here, we've got to cover a term you're going to hear a lot, which is itch.io. They style themselves as an open marketplace for independent digital creators with a focus on independent video games. Unlike platforms like Steam, itch.io is a lot more open. Responsibility is placed on creators to hit a quality bar. So they have over a million projects, and you have a lot of freedom over what you charge, how you distribute, how you position yourself. It's creator-driven. It's a very popular place for indie game developers, student game developers, people who are just getting started out and just want a low friction way to get games or prototypes to their audiences.

E Enduring Play Computer 06:16

Loading podcast level one: the power of an early prototype.

C Cheryl Platz 06:21

What prompted you to build your first prototype of Dressmaker? It's still available at itch.io. What's launched you into to making that first public-facing prototype for the dressmaker game?

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 06:35

We've worked on some prototypes before.

S Sabrina Becker 06:38

Then they never made it to the internet.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 06:40

We've we've had some interest in making something along the lines of Dressmaker before, but it was very difficult to figure out. I think at the time, I just- there was there was some definitely something here. Sabrina really really loves clothing and costume design. I've seen her watch YouTube videos from creators who are, who are absolutely obsessed with the activity, and and they're very popular. There are there are massive communities that that are very in in love with making costumes, and so I just felt like there's there's definitely something really wonderful here, but actually making a piece of clothing is is a really really long and complicated and sometimes very tedious process, and to try and figure out how to translate this into something that is more gamey is not was not an easy thing to do.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 07:31

And so there were multiple prototypes at first to try and figure out which part would be the thing that makes this a video game. And the the first one that actually felt like it had legs? Was was one about cutting out fabric, where the exact piece of fabric that you cut out is the exact piece that would appear on on a dress. And this felt like there was there was some meaningful decision making there. How do you want to rotate the the panel on the fabric? Do you want to align to the grain line or cross grain? Where on the fabric do you want to be? Which fabrics do you want to choose? They- there just felt like there were so many decisions there that that mattered. But there was no there was no rest of the game. That was really all there there was. And a friend encouraged me to to just make a TikTok video and just show this progress. So I made a very short video, and it had almost nothing in there, and it got half a million views, which is more than any other video that I've ever made before. And a lot of the people who were commenting on this video were just very vocal about what is the name of this game, where I get it, I want to play it right now.

E Enduring Play Computer 08:41

Loading Tutorial Level: The Motivators of Play

C Cheryl Platz 08:49

In my book, The Game Development Strategy Guide, we talk about nine common motivators of play: six classic motivators seen for decades in gaming, fun, comfort, meditation, competition, immersion, and mastery, and three modern motivators made possible by newer technology: companionship, education, and self-expression. Putting my video game adjunct professor hat on for a second, the dressmaker game hits both the self-expression and education motivators deeply in a way previously unexplored in the gaming sector. Infinite combinations of self-expression via fashion, but in a way that teaches you some basics about dressmaking, sewing, and patterns. Combine that with the extremely visceral immersion and mastery elements of giving some people back a hobby they've lost when disability, aging, or long COVID came, and you have something incredibly potent. Don't sleep on the power of self-expression as a modern motivator of adult gameplay. It has the power to move mountains of fabric.

E Enduring Play Computer 09:49

Loading podcast level two. Transitioning to internal development.

C Cheryl Platz 09:55

How did that surprising reaction change the way you were approaching this project?

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 10:00

And so initially, this this prototype was going to be a thing that we worked on together in our own time for fun, just to explore making something that wasn't, that didn't have necessarily like a commercial goal. It didn't have to reach a certain audience. It was just a thing that we would do because I like making games and Sabrina likes making clothing, but then because the the player base was just so, or at least the social media commenters were so passionate, it felt like if if we continued working on things ourselves, especially because we'd be doing it after hours, it would take us years to make something that we could show. So then I brought the project to Free Lives. I work at Free Lives, so that wasn't a hard hard connection to make. And suggested that we prototype an actual playable thing there that we could that we could post publicly. So I was joined by Ruan Rothman and Sarah Labs, and the the four of us made the initial three week prototype.

C Cheryl Platz 11:00

Three weeks once it went inside the studio. It's such an efficient sprint to go into the studio. Like I'm just so impressed that you were able to like take everything from outside and bring it in. I've worked at a lot of studios. Sometimes it takes a lot longer to go from idea. And you had done a lot of the groundwork between the two of you, right? But still impressive transitioning into the the company barrier.

E Enduring Play Computer 11:21

Loading narrative cutscene: The Saga of Free Lives

C Cheryl Platz 11:27

Free Lives is an indie game development studio located in Cape Town, South Africa. It was founded in 2012 by Evan Greenwood. The studio was previously best known for games including Bro Force, Genital Jousting, and Gorn. So, while Jonathan says it was an easy connection to make to bring Dressmaker to the studio at which he worked, the title itself was a huge departure from their normal slate, thus making this whole thing a little more amazing. While the studio did go on to create Terra Nil in 2023 before getting to Dressmaker, it's still a departure, and it's great to see a studio stepping out of its comfort zone like this. It should be an example and an inspiration to other indie studios that you're not locked into your first genre, and that innovation can come in many forms at many times. And while Devolver Digital has published most of the Free Lives games since 2018, Dressmaker was developed by a sub team called Cozy Lives and published by Free Lives itself, so there's always room for breaking out on your own. As you'll hear Jonathan mention, the core team for Dressmaker was three people: Jonathan Hau-Yoon, Ruan Rothman, and Sarah Laubscher. Co-creator Sabrina Becker was in charge of the dressmaking design, and then a group of contractors and other staff helped with the extended production.

E Enduring Play Computer 12:40

Loading Level 3: A Prototyping Partnership

C Cheryl Platz 12:47

What was your lived experience in that first period? Were you obviously you were exposed to Jonathan's games? You were playing games like what as you were doing the early prototype. What were your thoughts and feelings about that journey to the first prototype that clicked?

S Sabrina Becker 13:03

Yeah, I mean, I think before we worked on this version of Dressmaker in the early prototypes, you were doing them mostly without me.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 13:15

I I would get Sabrina to to try and teach me how how dresses were made, but then I'd I'd go off on my own and then try and make things.

S Sabrina Becker 13:25

Yeah,

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 13:25

and because at the time nothing that I was making was sticking, I wasn't really even showing them to Sabrina either.

S Sabrina Becker 13:30

Yeah, it was really only this this first sort of prototype that you made in April last year, where you were really like, oh no, this is something.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 13:40

Yeah,

S Sabrina Becker 13:40

and that was when you brought me on, and you were like, "What do pattern pieces look like?

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 13:46

How, how thick is a bolt of fabric?"

S Sabrina Becker 13:47

Yeah, because what, in the beginning were you just cutting out rectangles? I don't even remember.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 13:55

No, I definitely wanted shapes, but I hadn't figured out what what actually made it fun yet.

S Sabrina Becker 14:02

Yeah, yeah, but you made a very beautiful princess seamed dress.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 14:05

Yeah.

S Sabrina Becker 14:06

Yeah

C Cheryl Platz 14:08

Which is something, right? That must have been a really kind of beautiful moment to get to share something you were passionate about with somebody that you care about, and and kind of transition it into this this new space.

E Enduring Play Computer 14:21

Loading podcast level four: from prototype to production overnight.

C Cheryl Platz 14:26

What did you find was most challenging to transition. It sounds like it was also a little unexpected. Like wait, wait, we're doing this?

S Sabrina Becker 14:34

Oh yeah.

S Sabrina Becker 14:36

I think I I was like you know Jonathan was like oh I want to pursue this in my own time, and I was like, "Cool, great, you know, we'll we'll mess around with it a bit on weekends, like whatever." And then you were just like, "I'm taking it to Free Lives now," and I was like, "Okay." And then you were like, "Oh yeah, no, people have signed up to work on it, and we're going to start like tomorrow." And I was like, "Okay."

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 14:55

Did we really not talk about this at all? Oh no.

S Sabrina Becker 15:00

I mean, it worked out great, so it's fine.

E **Enduring Play Computer** 15:04

Loading: Narrative Cutscene: The Definitely Not Married Couple

C **Cheryl Platz** 15:04

This is actually an outtake from before we started, which I don't normally include, but I'm I'm so moved by the connection between Jonathan and Sabrina, that I wanted to share this clarification about the relationship that came up right before we started the full recording.

J **Jonathan Hau-Yoon** 15:29

The co-creators of Dressmaker.

S **Sabrina Becker** 15:30

Yeah, that's usually - co-creators of Dressmaker is great. And we are partners. But in spite of what the news would have you say, we are not married.

C **Cheryl Platz** 15:38

It is funny how the human brain wants to put everything into a box, like everything sorted, nice and yeah. But all right, so we will avoid putting your lovely relationship into that box. Excellent. Thank you for that clarification.

S **Sabrina Becker** 15:52

I I feel like totally robbed of steam because like before Dressmaker launched, we were like, oh, when dressmaker is done, we should probably get engaged, and now everyone is like "The married couple...", and I'm like...?

C **Cheryl Platz** 16:06

Now you're like, "I'm not going to do it just for spite!"

C Cheryl Platz 16:11
Oh goodness gracious! This is gonna be a fun conversation. Well, thank you.

E Enduring Play Computer 16:19
Loading podcast level five, flexible working environment.

C Cheryl Platz 16:24
So, how did you do it? How did you make the transition from partners to working partners?

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 16:31
I do remember that. I think your your health wasn't super great at the time.

S Sabrina Becker 16:35
No.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 16:36
So, so Sabrina was very nervous about getting involved, or very nervous about there being any expectations on her.

S Sabrina Becker 16:44
I didn't want to let people down with things that were like outside of my control.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 16:48
Yeah,

S Sabrina Becker 16:49

But like it was really sweet. Jonathan figured out how to make it so that, like, worst case scenario, I could do all the work that was needed on my phone from bed, and I think I did most of the work for the itch prototype on my phone in bed, and it was actually only when the software that I was using to add the images and the notation and stuff was like, "There's too much stuff on here to run on a phone," that I was like, "I guess I have to use a computer now."

C Cheryl Platz 17:16

That's amazing. Well, and I mean, it's a great statement about how powerful it is to allow remote work because it includes... you know the power of inclusion and how it it brings different perspectives into the room. Like you were bringing this very powerful perspective from your your costume design training, and but you needed the ability to work remotely to do it. So that's that's awesome. I wish you didn't have to overcome illness, but it's great that you found a way to not quite melt the phone, but get get a lot of stuff into it before before it gave up on on life.

E Enduring Play Computer 17:52

Loading tutorial level, Ehlers Danlos syndrome.

C Cheryl Platz 17:58

To appreciate the next segment, you'll want to understand EDS or Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a group of 13 inheritable generic conditions that alter the body's connective tissues due to faulty collagen production. Or as I tell people, it's like my body is built out of pool noodles. The many subtypes, which range from the most common hypermobile EDS to the rare classical and vascular EDS, all share common symptoms like overly flexible joints that lead to common dislocations and subluxations and weird party tricks, soft, stretchy, delicate skin, and common comorbidities like postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome, aka POTS: One of the hardest pronounced things I've ever encountered in my medical lifetime. For a variety of reasons, EDS diagnoses seem to have spiked after COVID, and I am one of them. Diagnosed in 2020, it is unclear whether I always had full-blown EDS or whether COVID pushed me into activation, but it impacts me every day. I use a cane to walk in challenging spaces where injury is a risk, like workplaces and airports. Much to the chagrin of people who think I'm too young for that. I dress like a superhero with compression garments to help my POTS, and I had major reconstructive surgery on both arms and hands to regain full function. I can completely, totally empathize with Sabrina's story as she shares it, and I imagine many of you can too.

E Enduring Play Computer 19:15

Loading podcast level six from disability to Dressmaker designer.

C Cheryl Platz 19:21

I suppose now is a good time for us to maybe take a moment and discuss that challenge that you were facing. And my first experience with Dressmaker was a couple of weeks ago when I was streaming, and one of the male members of my community air dropped into my channel and was like, "Dressmaker is a masterpiece!!" and I was like, "Oh, wow, that was unexpected context." So I went and started looking into it, and then I immediately - the community mentioned, "Yeah, it's a game that was made and it was inspired by a woman who is a costume designer who couldn't do that as much anymore because of EDS." I have hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. I'm like, "Whoa, wow, that went from zero to I need to play all of that immediately." Boy, that went very quickly. And so I, it means a lot to me personally that you're open about what you have gone through. It means a lot personally to me that you, that that this whole thing exists. But can you talk to me about your your journey, you personally and the pair of you together, like how the EDS has factored into the Dressmaker journey?

S Sabrina Becker 20:20

When I first met Jonathan, I was wearing a dress that I made myself, and I was on crutches. So I think it kind of got the the whole summing up of everything first go. Yeah, I mean Jonathan and I have been together since before I was diagnosed with EDS. He's been with me through the diagnosis, through being like really ill and bedridden and in a wheelchair and with me now through my recovery and getting better and now making a video game together.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 20:54

Yeah, it's been a long journey.

S Sabrina Becker 20:55

Yeah, I mean it has been eight years, so we have fit a lot in there.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 21:01

Yeah,

S Sabrina Becker 21:01

Yeah. When I met Jonathan, and I was still relatively well, I just kept having like really unexplained, spontaneous, recurring injuries, and everyone was kind of like, "It's fine." And so I had like really grand plans, and I was really career motivated and driven, and then sort of everything degraded very quickly. I think there was like a three, four month period where it just sort of like took a nosedive, and that led to my getting the diagnosis of EDS. And that led to me also having to make you know very difficult calls about my future and my career. And like I had to give up on a lot of opportunities that I'd worked really hard to get, and this was also during COVID, so that was helpful...

S Sabrina Becker 21:55

Yeah, and then I I kind of put a lot of the the costume stuff and the and the fashion design behind me because sewing is such a like massively physically intensive process and I just did not have the capabilities to pursue that and I put a lot of time into like rebuilding my health and also into like focusing on the things I could find joy in and focusing on like the creative acts that I could do, so I didn't think about costume stuff for a long time. And for a while, it was really difficult for me. Like I couldn't watch a period drama for years because it would just like make me cry. But like you know, I also started making my peace with that and watching period dramas again. And but I was like, "oh cool, this is just something that I'll enjoy as like a spectator."

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 22:40

Yeah, you also started doing other sort of fiber arts that are similar but not-

S Sabrina Becker 22:47

Similar but not the same. Yeah, and then I was like, I was in a good place. I was, you know, my health was questionable, but I was, you know, doing my own thing and I was quite well. And then Jonathan was like, Hey, do you wanna do you wanna make a dressmaking game? And I was like, "Do I?"

E Enduring Play Computer 23:04

Loading podcast level seven: discovering healing through passionate purpose

C Cheryl Platz 23:10

It sounds like it was pretty fraught to step into this working situation, given everything you were going through. How do you feel it worked out for you, knowing everything you know now?

S Sabrina Becker 23:20

I mean, I'm I'm so so happy that I did it now. But in the beginning, it was quite difficult because it meant that I had to like drudge up all of this stuff and all of this grief, and you know, so much of the act of costume design and and fashion had like become so tied up in like this sense of loss and disappointment and pain.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 23:41

Yeah, I didn't realize I was doing that to you.

S Sabrina Becker 23:43

Well, you were so excited! I didn't want to be like...

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 23:46

Because from from what I remembered, it was that when Sabrina was so into costume design, it was this this like, brightly burning, powerful thing that I recognized in myself when I sort of doggedly pursued a career in game development, where it's almost as if nothing else mattered because this being a game artist or being a game tech artist was just something that I I liked so much that I I don't know pursue over any other possible job, and so I guess I I remembered her thinking of it this way, and just assumed that I was doing a good thing.

S Sabrina Becker 24:24

No, you did, you did, you did in the long run. I just had to deal with a bunch of stuff, but like it was-

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 24:30

I'm sorry.

S Sabrina Becker 24:30

Really no, it was good, it was good. I'm, I'm really glad that I that I dealt with that. I mean, Dressmaker has turned out to be like the most like emotionally healing journey that I could have possibly gone on, but in the beginning it was just a little bit rocky.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 24:45

Yeah, it was also like a "You really don't have to work on this. We can we can we can make this work without you. But also look at how terribly we're bumbling along, not not really knowing what we're doing. Wouldn't-"

S Sabrina Becker 24:59

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 24:59

"Wouldn't wouldn't, your saying a word or two or showing us a bit of reference be, um... make this game so much better?

S Sabrina Becker 25:09

Mhm!

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 25:09

And and so I basically coerced Sabrina into into making this game with us.

S Sabrina Becker 25:15

Yeah, and I'm so glad you did.

C Cheryl Platz 25:16

Thank you so much for sharing for that candor, and you know, it's it. It speaks so much of the relationship that you two have, which is not marriage by the way

S Sabrina Becker 25:29

C Cheryl Platz 25:29

And that's okay. But the the relationship that you two have, that you're able to talk openly about, like, hey, it's not always 100% perfect, or we can like misinterpret signals from each other, but we're trying to do the right thing for each other, and you know I'm trying to do this thing to help you, and I'm trying to do this thing to help you, and maybe we think the signals are different. But you ended up in this healing place. I love that you're like "I I thought I thought this brings you joy," and you're like "Yes, and also that was a very large box to unpack, full of costumes."

S Sabrina Becker 25:57

Yeah

C Cheryl Platz 26:00

And it's very relatable. It's very, I mean, and and yet not at all because very few people have lived the meteoric rise of this kind of prototype.

S Sabrina Becker 26:09

C Cheryl Platz 26:09

And I think a lot of that is because of the authenticity of it, right? This this leading with curiosity. This like, hey, "I really do need this authentic perspective of somebody who's built these things and done this stuff." I think that's part of what makes it sing. It just feels so grounded.

E **Enduring Play Computer** 26:28

Loading podcast level eight: paving the way for self expression.

C **Cheryl Platz** 26:34

One of the things that astonished me too was the range of self expression in the game. You know, I make games, and I'm in the tutorial. I'm like, what I'm making is obviously entirely different from the 10s of 1000s of other people who are doing this right now, and that's a big risk to take when building a tutorial or something like that. You don't know. I, I, there's so much to unpack there. Like, it's- self-expression is so powerful for players, and I think that that really sings for people. But I'd love to hear a little bit about how you ended up in a place where you could enable so much self-expression in a video game. More than I've seen in a very long time.

J **Jonathan Hau-Yoon** 27:10

You want to go?

S **Sabrina Becker** 27:10

Okay. I mean, I think sort of very quickly in the development process, we realized that like, creativity was kind of the cornerstone of Dressmaker. What- after we'd kind of put the itch prototype out, we were seeing people in the comment section, like posting all of their dresses. And we did not give them a lot to work with in the itch prototype, and they made wildly creative things. Like they went so above and beyond anything that we thought they'd be able to do. I don't think there was even trim placement at the time.

J **Jonathan Hau-Yoon** 27:45

There was, but it was incredibly janky.

S **Sabrina Becker** 27:47

Okay, yeah, and we were like, "Oh, oh, this is what people want." And then as soon as we saw that, we were kind of like, we just ran with it. We were like, "As much creativity, as much choice, as much expression as we can possibly like squeeze into this game, we will put in there." And so much of what we were designing for was, you know, the dress pieces are modular, so you can put them- What's the word I'm looking for?

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 28:13

Mix and match them.

S Sabrina Becker 28:14

Mix and match them. Thank you. Yes, you can mix and match them with each other. And it was like, "Okay, what is the broadest possible expression of combinations that we can achieve with one and a half artists in a year?" And similarly with the fabrics. And so much of it was in the accessory placement. I mean, we've seen people do absolutely insane things with sculptures out of feathers that look like a giant three-dimensional fox, and you know people go wild! And I think we've got such an amazing team where whenever any of us see something, we're like, "How do we enable people to do that even more?" You know, like people were trying to do crazy things with feathers, and they're really difficult to place. And so then Ruan was like, okay, "I'm going to change the UI so that people can place feathers even more crazily."

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 29:03

Yeah, and I think initially the thinking was, "Oh, trim normally goes on the edge of panels," and we were like, "No, we we should actually just let you place them wherever you want." And then we ended up seeing, "Oh wow, giving giving players that level of freedom gets us rewarded with such a massive variety of of completely unexpected things," and so we should just enable that whenever we can. And then Ruan also had the the great idea of having the the photo mode to be able to share dresses, which I think has gone down incredibly well.

S Sabrina Becker 29:34

Yeah.

E Enduring Play Computer 29:36

Podcast level paused. Begin host commentary.

C Cheryl Platz 29:41

These stories are a reflection of why it is more important than ever for employers to consider remote work and in-office accommodations. There are more capable people than ever before, marginalized by previously acceptable working conditions.

E Enduring Play Computer 29:55

Voting podcast level nine: supporting immersion and companionship through narrative.

C Cheryl Platz 30:02

Thank you for walking through all of those intentional choices. You take them for granted when you're in it. That like there might be a world where you can't just put trim on everything. That was a game design choice that had to be made. And was I sitting there at midnight last night being like, "Yeah, I'm just gonna put a little bit of extra trim here and here, and I don't need that seam showing." I've seen people like writing cursive. I've seen a Garfield dress. I've seen all kinds of things. It's and that's because you were paying attention to the signals.

C Cheryl Platz 30:26

The other thing I've noticed about the game design too is that it doesn't rush you and it doesn't force you into conformity. Like it's okay for in early parts of the game for you to just do. To just be there and be like, yeah, if I if I want to take a little extra time on this, that's fine. And I really like that.

C Cheryl Platz 30:42

I also loved the fact that unlocking new pieces is relationship driven, right? So you're you're not just speaking to the motivator of play of self expression, but also sort of companionship through digital relationship building and immersion through narrative. And I have to tell you, like that choice now, where I was like, "Okay, now I've streamed the game, and I'm gonna stop, and I'm gonna play it locally," and then I'm like, "I wish I was streaming this because I think my community would really love the writing." There was a there's a note where I think it was like I "I've made many questionable dresses for a funeral," and it just like I it's like no, I have to stream I have to stream that line. I'm so sorry. Can you talk to me about the choices you made when deciding on your characters, your narrative, and the time period? Because those are also all very intentional choices. You could have gone in a lot of different directions.

S Sabrina Becker 31:32

I'll sort of just start in the order that we made decisions for like ease of of discussion. I knew that I wanted the game to feel historical without being actually historical. As soon as you pick a decade, you lock yourself into so many rules, right? Like what was invented, what hadn't been invented, what fabrics would have people had access to, what would have been like societally appropriate to wear at certain times in certain stations, and like, while I think that would be a really interesting game. It just wasn't the game that we wanted to make.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 32:06

It also feels like if you pick a specific time period, you might you might limit your audience and limit the amount of creativity you can have.

S Sabrina Becker 32:13

Yeah. So with with our cornerstone of creative expression, we were like, okay, but I - we - it still was important that like you know it should still feel like a time and a place where you would have gone to a dressmaker to have something custom made to you, you know, not like nowadays where you just go to a store and buy a standard size of something badly made. And so like there are things with like the shop design and the vintage sewing machine that were very intentional. I think a lot of that also came through in the music that Meydän made for us.

S Sabrina Becker 32:49

And then with the characters, initially we started off. I think it was just Prudence and Rose were our first two characters. Kind of like Rose as like a sort of base, sort of vaguely historical type, and then Prudence was basically there just to be like, "What's the antithesis of everything Rose has to offer?" And then from there, we started building them up very intentionally as like aesthetic archetypes because we always knew they were going to come in and commission dresses, and we wanted as like broad of a type of commissions you could have that would still work with the modular pieces that we would have available. So I was like, "Well, we'll need a goth character, I guess," and that's you know how Vivian was born. So we did have a lot of fun with brainstorming the characters and their aesthetics.

E Enduring Play Computer 33:40

Podcast level paused. Begin host commentary.

C Cheryl Platz 33:44

Did you hear them say, "With our cornerstone of creative expression?" What a great example of how shared goals and values make difficult creative decisions easier in the moment. And narrative driving game design with strongly defined characters motivating a wide variety of commissions that are joyful to discover through gameplay. It's easy to overlook conversation like this for what it is, which is a great example of thoughtful game design.

E **Enduring Play Computer** 34:11

Loading podcast level 10: opening the door to really, really good words.

C **Cheryl Platz** 34:18

So it sounds like you were involved in the character creation, but in the end, you didn't write all of the text in the game yourself, right?

S **Sabrina Becker** 34:25

Some of them did have some writing and some personality that had gone into the itch prototype that Jonathan wrote, which I think was really cute. But then our producer was sort of encouraging us to bring on a writer, just from like a time save point of view. Which we were really initially hesitant of, because everyone talks about how having writers on games is horrible.

J **Jonathan Hau-Yoon** 34:48

Well, it's it's more that it's like it's really scary in that in our... in some of the other games that we've had where we've had a writer. The amount of power a writer has can be very enormous. It is so easy for a writer to say "There were armies that clashed," but then the kind of knock-on effect of of the rest of the project and what what that actually means for everyone else is is very very large. And there's also, I think, a a general thing with game writing, maybe where I think a lot of people think that "Oh, we don't need a writer, we can just we can just sort of make do the writing isn't very important. It's just there as like a plot device" or something, which which to some degree was what we were doing too. We were just saying "Okay, we know that we aren't professional writers, so we just need to write just enough that you know what your commission is and no more." To to make it so that if we're not good at writing, we'll just reduce the amount of writing as much as we can and just not look bad that way. But but having to do any writing at all was still time that would be spent on writing, and and there was a lot of work to do

S **Sabrina Becker** 36:04

In a very small amount of time.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 36:05

Yeah, so so our producer was like, "Have you considered a writer?" And we sort of were very hesitant. But then Sarah recommended an acquaintance of hers,

S Sabrina Becker 36:15

Kirsten Hall,

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 36:16

and we read a writing sample of hers, and it was so funny. It was like really kind of like understated but hilarious.

S Sabrina Becker 36:24

It's like this amazing like dry sense of humor, and like we were both like laughing out loud. And she- she did this. I don't know if it was intentional or not, but the the writing sample it doesn't end. It like leaves like halfway through, and we were just we have to know what happens!

S Sabrina Becker 36:37

And so we were like, so we emailed her, and we were like, "We'd love to chat to you, but also, can we have the rest of the sample?" Like, please. And then, like, immediately from talking to Kirsten, we were like absolutely blown away. She's a she's a novelist, like a science fiction and fantasy novelist,

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 36:56

Award winning!

S Sabrina Becker 36:57

Award winning, yeah. And Dressmaker is so not what she writes, both in like tone and content and like structure. And immediately from the get go, she put in so much effort to understand sort of game- the game design of writing and like how you structure a narrative. I've chatted to her. She even like put effort into- like she was like "Okay well if the text comes up in like these paragraph text boxes that changes how the punchline of a joke lands." And she like factored that all in there. And so she wrote all of the sassy player responses that the dressmaker gives to their clients. And while we did have some characters sort of already partially established from the itch prototype, with all of the ones that hadn't been in yet, we were basically just like, "You go, you run with it." And she, I'm, she did like the most amazing job. I mean, the narrative has become my favorite part of the game, and so many people's favorite parts. And like, we almost didn't have it!

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 37:59

Our initial pitch to her was well not a pitch but the sort of job spec was "This is not a visual novel we don't want the writing to try and steal the spotlight. At the end of the day this is a dressmaking game the writing is really just a-

S Sabrina Becker 38:13

Flavor, yeah.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 38:14

-flavor for for giving you a reason to make more dresses and so we didn't give her a word limit.

S Sabrina Becker 38:22

We gave her a soft word limit.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 38:24

We didn't give her a hard word limit, and so she just exploded with words and gave us many words. And we, but they

S Sabrina Becker 38:32
were really, really good words.

S Sabrina Becker 38:33
And they were really good words.

C Cheryl Platz 38:34

S Sabrina Becker 38:34

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 38:34
So I was like, "Oh, this is going to make localization so expensive, but also so good that we can't we can't not have them."

S Sabrina Becker 38:43
Yeah.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 38:44
So, yeah.

S Sabrina Becker 38:45
Yeah, because she was like, "Look, I can write you just 50 quests of just like fluff and jokes," and she was like, "Or I could write you a really good story." And I was like, "Well, I mean, you say it's going to be really good."

C Cheryl Platz 39:01

Oh my goodness! Thank you so much for walking us through that. And I think there's something really powerful. Again, thank you for the candor because that- "We didn't know if we we wanted that or needed that. We were worried about the power dynamic," and that "Hey, the game is about dressmaking. We're worried about bringing the narrative in?" I've actually had that conversation with other indie devs where they're like, "Do I need narrative? Because I have a game, like I have a game concept." And you know, especially for some players who play for immersion, or doesn't have to take away from the core game. It can just expand it and create enough space for both like story-driven gamers and mechanic-driven gamers if you do it in the right way, and if you integrate everybody and everybody's on board and everything. What a great example of doing it in a really collaborative and connected and curious way, so that it's like, "Yeah, the story doesn't have to take over the game, but it lifts it up and it makes it richer."

E Enduring Play Computer 39:55

Loading podcast level 11: embracing the scope of linear storytelling.

S Sabrina Becker 40:03

I mean, I would really love to get Kirsten to talk more about like her thought process behind writing for this game because I feel like she did it like perfectly, no experience in the genre. And when I chat to her about it, she's like, "I mean, I've only done it well once." And I was like, yeah, but you did it really well.

C Cheryl Platz 40:22

You've done it well once! And I've only I've got like seven or eight hours in, but several of the characters are like burned into my brain already. Like Alice, I met her last night. I'm obsessed, but but no spoilers. I'm not going to do that.

C Cheryl Platz 40:35

I did want to bring up because I was looking at the patch notes last night, and I was looking at some of the Steam write-ups, and it mentioned sabotaging clients, and I'm wondering is that a game mechanic? We talk about player agency. I'm a lawful good, right? I'm like, "Cool, that's the dress you want. I'm gonna make it." What was your philosophy as far as player agency in the storyline?

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 40:55

Yeah, so that changed over development. What the plan was initially is that there's there's a narrative framework called Storylets. It's these sort of very small bite-sized bits of of story that that appear based on certain condition, conditions happening. So I think a somewhat recent example is is with Hades or Hades Two. There's lots and lots of dialog that that you keep discovering as you play the game, as you meet certain conditions. And so the thinking was that maybe there would be a society where there are people who have different reputation or different conditions, and then as these happen, you get little bits of of of story snippets tying things together. That was the sort of grand vision pitch that just never really happened.

S Sabrina Becker 41:55

Yeah, and then we we wrote that somewhere and we forgot to delete it.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 42:01

I mean, there's still there's still the intention of there being a feeling of agency, and so we try to we still try to have it as especially in the in the spilled tea...

E Enduring Play Computer 42:12

Podcast level paused. Begin host commentary.

E Enduring Play Computer 42:16

The Spilled Tea is the name of the in-game newspaper that brings you sort of a wrap up of a series of dresses going into an event, letting you know how everything worked out.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 42:28

Where the Spilled Tea reports on an event that happened, and then sort of based on the dresses that you made, whether you succeeded or failed at different people's dresses, there would be some some different things that happen. But it isn't this grand branching narrative. It's more of just a feeling of oh yes, a different thing happened, and and I had some influence over that that that happening. When we were talking to Kirsten about having more of a Storylets driven narrative, she asked: "If you can experience these quests out of order. What is the difference between that and a fully linear one, where everything is is designed and appears in a specific order?" Because from a player point of view, what what you experience is still just a sequence of quests anyway. And she was just saying that if if she can control the sequence of the quests, then she has more control over creating emotional or like meaningful narrative, and so she was sort of lightly pushing for a more linear quest line.

S Sabrina Becker 43:31

Or even if it wasn't linear, that it would branch in pre-decided directions. And I think sort of we were we were talking about it, and we were going back and forth on it a lot. We had a lot of meetings where we kept changing our mind, like as a team.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 43:47

There were a lot of there were a lot of meetings with Kirsten where she would ask us questions, and we just didn't have ready answers for her.

S Sabrina Becker 43:53

Yeah, and I think coming from like a publishing background, that was really weird. We'd just be like, "ah," but she was she was great. She was like, "okay, well, I'll help you figure it out then, because clearly you you guys need help!"

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 44:06

Yeah, but also also I think - I think she just I think from from my point of view, it's that if she if she hadn't written very branching things before, then it didn't really make sense to to kind of give her some... You know, if she's already new to writing for games, it it feels a little bit unreasonable to to give her something that is so different.

S Sabrina Becker 44:26

I mean, she already just for the linear narrative created this like giant board of like all of the characters and the sequence of events. There's like arrows, like there were like this thing is related to that, and this is a tidbit in this one.

S Sabrina Becker 44:39

Yeah, exactly.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 44:40

She called it the murder board.

C Cheryl Platz 44:41

Yeah, red string everywhere.

S Sabrina Becker 44:43

Yeah. So, but also sort of as we were talking about it and the decisions in the office were that you know we were worried that the writer would distract from the core of the game, which is about making dresses. But actually, it was us and all of our like back and forthing about branching and decisions and like. "Do the dialog choices change the branching and everything?" And we realized actually, like, "No, we're actually just trying to make a game about making dresses." And so we should just focus on that and make good dresses and let Kirsten write a good story.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 45:13

Let Kirsten do what she's good at.

S Sabrina Becker 45:15

and not actually like overcomplicate things just for the sake of like

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 45:20

making it gamey,

S Sabrina Becker 45:21

Yeah.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 45:22

Yeah.

C Cheryl Platz 45:23

Thank you so much for sharing that. I think one of the big takeaways there is that scope is a gift, and it can be so hard in a creative environment because often, yes-and-ing is seen as a virtue. I'm a former improviser and everything, right? But when you have a date, and you have a limited number of people, and you're trying to create a literal virtual world, which is, you know, like magic. Being able to say like, "And the line stops here, and we're making this decision based on our principles that this is a dressmaking game and not a narrative game." That's really... all of your processes are working. You know what you're- You've all agreed on your pillars, you're talking. And I love that you created a safe enough environment that your your new team member, your writer Kirsten, was able to come in and be like, "Hey..."

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 46:09

C Cheryl Platz 46:11

"I I I love your, I love your expansive vision for for narrative, and also... less? But- or different?" I like that's you know like when I think about that, like

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 46:21

Right.

C Cheryl Platz 46:22

Some folks might have felt pressured to like, oh, do what the client wants or do what my new point. But like you created a space where it was open enough for them to say like, "Hey, what is your desired intent? What is your desired impact? Does this less expensive, less risky approach get the same thing to players? I think I can get better output for it." And you know, it also speaks to the fact that like sometimes we over-index on open world stuff, and open world stuff can be great for specific desired player outcomes. But people are loving dressmaker, and it does not need to be an open world game because it's open dress game. Like that's where the open like self-expression stuff came in.

S Sabrina Becker 47:00

Yeah, exactly.

E Enduring Play Computer 47:04

Loading tutorial level Storylets.

C Cheryl Platz 47:09

Before we move on, let's take a moment to honor that new term that came up: storylets. S- t-o-r-y-l-e-t-s, like chicklets, but stories, not gum. Narrative designer Emily Short provides a definition on her blog with these three criteria: one, there is a discrete piece of content like a chunk of dialog or a cutscene; two, there are prerequisites that determine when that chunk of content can play; three, once the content is played, the world state changes in some way. Emily goes on to point out that the pages in a classic choose-your-own-adventure book essentially perform in this way. They are chunks of content that can only be played when certain prerequisite pages are encountered, and they force you to a new page, which changes the world state further. Ian Thomas has developed Storylets Studio explicitly for working in this way, but there are plugins for more traditional narrative tools like Twine that can also add this capability. But when building a game from scratch, like Dressmaker, you're often confronted with the choice of complicating your core engine or embracing scope.

E Enduring Play Computer 48:09

Loading Podcast Level 12: Constructive pushback in creative spaces.

C Cheryl Platz 48:15

It sounded like you and Kirsten had a really healthy working relationship when she came on board. Can you talk more about how that worked?

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 48:21

Yeah, Kirsten's sort of giving us her feedback was also really good. Where she would say, "Look, if if you if you really want me to do this thing, I will. But this is this is what I think, and I just want you to know what I think is better. But I will I will change. Yeah, I'll do what you need."

S Sabrina Becker 48:41

Yeah, it was a really good balance. And she- I mean, she put up with us so much because she'd be like, "But what if we did this instead?" And we'd be like, "But why can't we do this other thing?" And she'd be like, "Because of these reasons." And then we'd be like, "Oh."

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 48:53

yeah, "She's thought it all through." And I think this is this is really what I think you would want out of someone you're working with anyway, that you ideally are working with someone who is an expert and is really much better at you at things. You know, if if if you were really good at the thing, then you wouldn't need to hire someone else to do it in the first place.

S Sabrina Becker 49:11

Yeah.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 49:12

Um. So that if you if you are getting other expertise to to listen to what they have to say,

S Sabrina Becker 49:18

But also I think on your thing of like yes-and-ing people, we've had like a really hilarious production. Because it was so short and we had to be so tightly, tightly scoped that we've had so much like NO .

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 49:32

Yeah.

S Sabrina Becker 49:33

Like I remember like we were having a meeting in the office and someone was like, "Oh, wouldn't it be cool if?" And before they even finished their sentence. Our programmer was like, "No!"

C Cheryl Platz 49:45

That's a very game development vibe. And I've been like in production and creative direction, and like I, I sometimes like hear that on other sides of the office. I'm like, "HAUGH."

S Sabrina Becker 49:54

I know. I really. I'm like getting. I like now. I'm like, "Wouldn't it be cool if..." is like the worst thing that you can start a sentence with. Because I'm like it might be cool, but it's probably we don't have time and the scope and the implications and the like.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 50:08

What actually helped us a lot is we we basically ended up with this with this empty void that we call Dressmaker Two, and then and then anything that seemed amazing that that we definitely wouldn't be able to get the time to do would say, "Oh well, we'll do that one day for a sequel." Not you know- whether whether or not it ever happens.

S Sabrina Becker 50:25

Our emotional support sequel!

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 50:27

It was basically the the the wardrobe that you go and hide all of the things in.

S Sabrina Becker 50:31

Yeah.

C Cheryl Platz 50:32

Emotional support sequel. Emotional support milestone. Like whatever you got to do to like honor the creative- And I I use that phrase a lot- that like, "let's honor the idea, and then we're gonna put it down. Come back to it later. Because it's not for right now." But it's I mean it's so relatable, right? Because I reflect on it all the time. Because what it's the worst consequence of bringing creatives together? They're ALL being creative all the time at once. And like, how do you get us to like take a breath and and do a thing for five minutes before going and doing the creative again, and and so that's. It sounds like you were able to walk that line reasonably well because, like, you're... it was actually a pretty aggressive shipping timeline for a game to go from zero to 60, and and here you are, and you're you're out there.

E Enduring Play Computer 51:20

Loading podcast level 13: What's next if not Next Fest?

C Cheryl Platz 51:26

What was your release model, and how did you navigate going back and forth with the community before you launched? Because you did itch.io, and then

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 51:34

yeah,

C Cheryl Platz 51:35

Something something something, profit.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 51:36

We were- yeah, we were intending to have a public demo, and then enter Steam Next Fest, and then launch the game shortly after.

S Sabrina Becker 51:46

Which is the classic advice.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 51:48

This is the advice of just about everyone, or what what a lot of people have.

S Sabrina Becker 51:53

Yeah, it's the advice that everyone we asked told us to do.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 51:57

And then the head of Free Lives, or the founder of Free Lives, Evan Greenwood. He went away with some friends of ours who work at Landfall, and they chatted a lot. And he came back and said, "We have done a really great job of making games, but the one thing that Landfall thinks we could do better is that we should maximize the impact of our launch. And however this however this works, we should just be thinking about that.

S Sabrina Becker 52:26

Yeah.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 52:27

And so then instead of thinking about oh well the default way to do things should just be to "Make a demo. The demo would do really well. Would get us loads and loads of wish lists. Get into Next Fest. Get even more wish lists, and then maybe loads of games."

S Sabrina Becker 52:40

Maybe do Early Access.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 52:40

Yes. We. we would instead not do any of those things.

S Sabrina Becker 52:46

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 52:48

Because the the way we thought about it was that the the itch prototype did a really really good job of showing what the game would be about, and so it kind of, it kind of serves the purpose of a demo anyway. And then if we launched the demo, it would be with new art. It would be with all of this new content, and it would- it would it would do really well. I mean, we we were pretty certain about that, so we would get way more wish lists. But then, people who were excited about the game would already get to play the demo, and then their excitement would somewhat be sated.

S Sabrina Becker 53:18

And they could have played the demo, you know, infinitely. A hundred hours.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 53:22

Yeah, this is the other problem. Is like, ideally, a demo is is a limited version that you can only play for a short short period of time. But for a creative game that's supposed to be about what are the possibilities, look at how much that there is to do. I I don't know if we could create a demo that properly showed what the potential of Dressmaker was without

S Sabrina Becker 53:42

giving people the whole game.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 53:44

I mean, if it was time limited, that that would feel bad too.

S Sabrina Becker 53:47
Yeah, because that goes against like how we do the commissions in Dressmaker.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 53:51
Yeah.

S Sabrina Becker 53:52
So we actually just decided to not do a demo,

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 53:56
And if we're not doing a demo, we can't do Next Fest.

S Sabrina Becker 53:58
Yeah, because we'd also told - we had PR partners. We were like all set to do the demo, and they were so excited, and they were like, "Woo!" And then we were like, "Um, sorry guys, we're actually just gonna...

S Sabrina Becker 54:10
We changed our minds.

S Sabrina Becker 54:11
We're not gonna do the thing you told us to do."

C Cheryl Platz 54:17
But I love this strength of a vision, though.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 54:21

It was it was definitely a risk. Like,

S Sabrina Becker 54:23

Yeah.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 54:24

We- we made this choice, and then I was I was very... I was very filled with anxiety. I think I think whenever you do something that isn't sort of the the default suggested thing, there's just like a "Oh dear, if things don't go well..."

S Sabrina Becker 54:39

Yeah. But also, if everyone is doing the default, then maybe you want to not do what everyone is doing? Maybe. I don't know; it's risky.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 54:50

Sometimes the default exists for a reason.

S Sabrina Becker 54:52

That's true.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 54:53

But yeah, at least in our case, I feel like we were we were doing the the default thing because that was just default. And just having someone ask us, like, "Hey, does this actually work for this game?" allowed us to sort of step back and be like, "Well, actually, a demo feels like it would do the game a disservice. It would, it would make it so that people who were- who played the itch prototype and were excited now get sated because now they've played the version that has all of this new art, and then actually going from the itch prototype to the full game is is super exciting.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 55:25

Yeah.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 55:25

Whereas going from the the game's demo into the full game is just more of the same.

E Enduring Play Computer 55:30

Loading podcast level 14: Launching with the community

C Cheryl Platz 55:36

So you make this build move. You shake off the default demo advice. What comes next?

S Sabrina Becker 55:42

We didn't do early access, but we did have a private playtest that we ran on Discord, and it wasn't super strict. People could just basically message and be like, "Can I join?" And

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 55:55

We would just be, "Sure." We'd just hand out playtest keys.

S Sabrina Becker 55:58

And I think it was like a really tight knit group, but towards like just before launch, it was about 200 people. But they were like avid players, and they were giving us so much feedback and making so many dresses, and that basically allowed us to have the like play test or like early access experience, but like privately in a controlled environment. And because we then like we got to like actually know the people in the playtest and like you could really then like understand where they were coming from or like what they wanted. I think it created like even better game design decisions than if it had been this like broader, more like non-specific sort of feedback.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 56:37

And they were also incredibly helpful because when the game did launch, and then our Discord just immediately got flooded with a whole bunch of new players, and we were completely unprepared for that because we hadn't thought about that at all. We had all of these fairly experienced players who could who could answer all the new player questions and help them out. They were- they were incredibly helpful for the the first couple of weeks where we were completely unprepared for all of the, all of the traffic. But the the the sort of statistics from the playtesters were also like actually really crazy. Where I think it was something like 97% of them had played for more than the first hour, especially for for people that we aren't recruiting. They're just, you know they just sign up and play. I I think that's that's really really high. I think the median playtime was just under 30 hours.

C Cheryl Platz 57:23

Median!

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 57:24

Yeah, median, and and some of there were there were a number of them who they were sharing their their playtime as screenshots. Easily over 200. Some with over 400 hours played. And this was before we had even had all of the content that we ended up shipping the game.

S Sabrina Becker 57:38

Yeah, and it was buggy and broken.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 57:40

And they they struggled through all of that because because they really wanted to play this, and that's that's part of why I think it gave us a lot more confidence in in what the game would be.

E Enduring Play Computer 57:51

Loading podcast level 15: private playtests as content incubators.

C Cheryl Platz 57:57

Let's talk about community reaction because you have launched. You did do that transition from private playtest. What was one surprising insight from the private playtest that transformed the game?

S Sabrina Becker 58:10

It's hard to pick because there's so many.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 58:13

Something that stands out to me is by having the the private playtest and having players who were making things, it actually gave us a lot of material to use in trailers and to use in social media. A number of the the social media posts that our social media team, Jess and Kesh, put together, they went viral with just content that players were supplying. And so we we just wanted to sort of set a bit of a precedent where we were crediting the the players who'd made them because these were effectively their their creations, and it sort of allowed them to to market the game for us.

S Sabrina Becker 58:48

Yeah.

E Enduring Play Computer 58:49

Loading podcast level 16: The joy of creativity is for everyone.

C Cheryl Platz 58:55

Amazing. Tell me about what it's been like since launch. What's been the most surprising insight or reaction since since you went live.

S Sabrina Becker 59:06

I mean, I'm I'm most surprised and delighted by the amount of men that seem to be like really enjoying our game. Like from the beginning, we were like, "Oh yeah, no, this is like a cozy game. It's a girly game. It's a you know a game for women." And there are so many guys who I mean we've watched like their streams and they they seem to download the game as like a joke and be like "Oh I'm gonna look at this viral game but like I'm sure it sucks." and then like you know not even like 15 minutes in they're already like "Do you like this placement of the flower or do you think I should like put it like over here instead?" And it's like been so incredible to me to like watch these people get engrossed, and I think really experience like the the joy and creativity that comes with fashion and that form of self expression that I think is like very much like removed from men for like no good reason. And I do really hope that it helps them, you know, hopefully like respect that interest more in their girlfriends and their partners and their friends or their children. It feels very like healing and positive.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:00:14

Yeah, I've I really enjoyed seeing social media accounts that have been started that basically post exclusively Dressmaker content. I find that really flattering. Um, yeah.

C Cheryl Platz 1:00:24

I love the anecdote about the gender response. I had a very similar experience on working on the Echo Look because coming in, it was a at Amazon, it was a fashion camera, Alexa, where you could kind of document your wardrobe and everything. And everyone assumed it was for women, but when we started getting into deeper testing with the actual product, we found like, "oh, there's this entire group of men who want to be able to take good pictures of their outfits so that they can send photos to like their trusted group of male friends to get genuine feedback on their outfits for dates"

S Sabrina Becker 1:00:54

Aw!

C Cheryl Platz 1:00:55

Or to document their wardrobes because like it's stressful or challenging, and or they just like that, but you wouldn't find them because culture doesn't support them, so they're not out on social media. You look if you're just tracking social media, you're like, "Oh, well, that's a that's a female coded thing." But they're there; they're just doing it privately. And so, like, it's it's very powerful to hear you say that too. There's perception about what belongs to specific genders, but self expression is joy for everyone.

S Sabrina Becker 1:01:20

Yeah, for sure.

E Enduring Play Computer 1:01:21

Loading podcast level 17: Making space after launch.

C Cheryl Platz 1:01:29

What are you most excited about right now?

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:01:33

What are you excited about?

S Sabrina Becker 1:01:35

Yeah, I am excited about secret things.

C Cheryl Platz 1:01:39

Okay, that's fair. That's fair. Secret things are good.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:01:43

I think I'm looking forward to having a break, but but I don't know when I can do that. So...

S Sabrina Becker 1:01:51

We can do that whenever you want. Oh my God! Yes, we can.

S Sabrina Becker 1:01:57

Yes, you can.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:01:58

It's great because before the game launches, it feels like oh no, there's a deadline. We have to work toward that, and then after the game launches, it feels like "oh gosh, there are hundreds of 1000s of people who are so excited about about new things" that that it becomes a bit hard to to take a break too.

C Cheryl Platz 1:02:18

Well, if there's one universal truth about making games in a live world, whether you're live service or not, is that they expand to consume the space. So I hope you are able to take some time to rest and come back recharged your many fans.

E Enduring Play Computer 1:02:34

Loading boss level, building a thriving South African game dev community.

C Cheryl Platz 1:02:41

One thing that I don't think people appreciate is that you're also- this game and this company are also a great representation of African game development, right? Like you're based in South Africa. What can the rest of the world learn from the expertise coming from your continent? Because I think there's a lot of focus on a lot of other continents, and I'm so excited to see stuff like this coming out of the African game development community.

S Sabrina Becker 1:03:04

Yeah, I mean, I think I I have been sort of on the periphery of the game scene in South Africa for years, and now I'm an active member of it. And I just think we have the most incredible group of people, and the the scene here and the community and the environment has been like very intentionally like built and maintained. You know, I think a lot of it started with like the founder of Free Lives, Evan Greenwood. You know, built this incredible company that lets us be like, "hey, we want to make a dressmaking game at your company that makes violent games,"

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:03:42

S Sabrina Becker 1:03:42

And he was just like, "Cool."

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:03:45

I, I, I mean, the the South African game community goes back through before Free Lives, but I think Free Lives has itself put a lot of money into building the community. There's the Playtopia Foundation that that runs something called the Makers Massive. It's a space where people can go and do co-working for free if they're working on games or game adjacent projects. We have monthly meetups where where people give talks, share the games that they're working on, get people to playtest every single weekend. The Makers Massive is full with- there's figure,figure drawing and painting, there's there are various game jams, ones about writing or making comics or. What what else has been recent things?

S Sabrina Becker 1:04:32

There was a music one, like a games music one.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:04:35

Yeah, and then and then there's there's Playtopia, which is an annual games festival that we have in Cape Town. Where pitch behind it is that that it's very expensive for South Africans to go to other international events. So we would we would have one of our of our own, and then we could bring some international guests over to give talks, and bring people from all around Africa. To share the the games that they're making in in sort of an an expo type setting, but there'd also be a lot of playful games where it's just it's people's jam things where there are alternative controllers and just very some of them very silly and definitely not intended to be commercial projects, but just somewhere to celebrate creativity.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:05:22

I think from Evan's point of view, there's just this really beautiful raw creativity that's here, and that he is very resistant to someone who's all business who comes in and tries to to use these creative people and tries to make a lot of money off of them, and turns the scene into something that is less creative and more about the money. And of course, the money matters, right? Like the money does. People do need to to eat and pay rent, but then Free Lives tries to have all of these these sort of free things where people can learn and build community. Free Lives also contributes to the Jam Dole, which is a a way for people to prototype while being paid to do so. Free Lives will pay people to make prototypes for two or three weeks. They have to be short prototypes, and then they have to upload them to Etch to have other people play them and give feedback. And if they do this, they they first have to submit what what they think the game, what their plan for the game is, so that Free Lives can say, the the scope is too big. The scope is too big. And and then when they successfully do this, then Free Lives pays them for two or three weeks of their of their time. And then Free Lives doesn't own any of this IP. This is fully owned by the developers themselves. The idea that if the game is good enough, if the prototype is good enough, that it will find investment somewhere, whether it's a publisher who picks it up, or maybe even if a publisher picks it up and or gives an offer, that Free Lives can also be step in and say, "Actually, we really do believe in this thing, and their offer isn't very good. So let us give you an alternative so that you don't have to take a bad offer if it comes to that."

S Sabrina Becker 1:07:11

Yeah.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:07:12

And so, so Free Lives is doing really well with the games that that we've made before. Instead of you know just putting them in a bank and I don't know buying yachts and doing whatever has has very much been a part of trying to put it back into the community and try and and and get other people to to find success. But we try to do it through through their following our processes. I think there there have been some bad experiences before, where there are games that require funding, and then Free Lives has funded them, but then or given them funding, but then the game still doesn't get finished, or... it just becomes almost like this this bottomless pit of trying to help, and then but it's it's polishing a turd.

S Sabrina Becker 1:07:59

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:07:59

Sorry,

C Cheryl Platz 1:07:59

No, it's okay. It's evocative.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:08:03

Yeah. So, so we we really try to have it so that the idea really has to be good from the start, and then the scope has to be very reasonable. And in a lot of ways, Dressmaker sort of mirrors that same kind of thinking.

S Sabrina Becker 1:08:16

Yeah. And I mean, it's really exciting that like two games that started in the Jam Dole are coming out in the next couple of months as like fully fledged, finished, funded projects.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:08:27

Really, they're coming out already?

S Sabrina Becker 1:08:29

Aren't they?

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:08:30

Not Get Yoked... Well one of them is? Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Get Yoked and Fossil Quest are both coming out soon. Yeah, two games that have come through the program, and I think I think there are like 80 or more than 80 games that have been prototyped. So I mean, that's it. Also, somewhat, it's it's not that different to to how how what the hit rate of of internal Free Lives games is either. You actually do have to just prototype a lot and

S Sabrina Becker 1:08:55

Make a lot of bad things

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:08:56

And make a lot of bad things.

C Cheryl Platz 1:08:58

Thank you for sharing that and for giving us a glimpse into what sounds like a healthy and thriving creator community. I have felt so seen by so many of the things you said. So I'm just so grateful that you shared your time with me and our listeners today.

E Enduring Play Computer 1:09:14

Loading bonus level: advice for our past selves.

C Cheryl Platz 1:09:20

As we wrap up, is there any advice you would want to give your past self starting this journey, starting the Dressmaker journey?

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:09:29

I know what I would tell myself. It's that when trying to plan out dressmaker scope and trying to figure out what this would be like, a lot of the decisions that we made made just made so much sense, and and I think those decisions made sense. But then I was still really anxious about them, and I would tell myself, "Ah, there's this thing that already has so much of our passion and has the right decisions. Worrying about it now is actually just a waste of energy." Yeah, I think I think. A lot of this would have been easier, actually, if I just didn't care as quite as much as I did about the game. Like maybe caring about it was the thing that made me so anxious as well. So I I don't know if it's possible to just be less anxious about it if I care about it so much.

S Sabrina Becker 1:10:15

Yeah, but I mean, all of the care that you have like shows in the final product.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:10:20

So, do you have advice?

S Sabrina Becker 1:10:24

Ooh, um, to my former self.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:10:27

Yeah.

S Sabrina Becker 1:10:28

Yes, there is. There's certain work that I put off because I thought that I had more important things to do, and then when I actually went and did that work, it was so much more important than the other things that I did, and if I'd done it sooner, things would have been easier.

C Cheryl Platz 1:10:47

That is great advice. It is tough, prioritization.

S Sabrina Becker 1:10:51

Very me specific.

C Cheryl Platz 1:10:54

That's okay. That's okay. It's always good to remind ourselves to take a step back. I need to do that, and both of those things are very relatable: the caring and the taking a step back. Well, thank you both so much.

E Enduring Play Computer 1:11:06

Loading final podcast level: links and follow up.

C Cheryl Platz 1:11:11

How can people follow you and your work as they end this podcast and they're like, "I want to see more of that?" Obviously, we'll put Dressmaker in the show notes, and I've got a couple of your other articles and interviews for folks, and we'll put some of the links to the other games we've mentioned.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:11:25

On social media, we have Cozy Lives games on TikTok and Instagram and YouTube. Yeah, and otherwise, it is just.

S Sabrina Becker 1:11:33

Or there's the Discord.

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:11:34

Oh yeah, we have a Discord server which has a URL of I think it's like Discord GG slash Dressmaker, but it is also the official Dressmaker server, so I think it should appear in the Discord directory anyway.

C Cheryl Platz 1:11:48

Amazing, yeah, and I think you also have that linked in the game, which is lovely. So it's easy to find and good community building. Well, thank you so much. It has been a pleasure and an honor to speak with you. I know that it's been just a total whirlwind of energy, but I'm wishing you all the best as you continue. I hope you do get some rest soon, and you get to take a break. But thank you for the gift of the community of of this this game of self expression and joy. And to our listeners, until next time, keep thriving.

S Sabrina Becker 1:12:15

J Jonathan Hau-Yoon 1:12:16

Thank you.

C Cheryl Platz 1:12:19

And don't forget to follow us on your favorite podcasting platform. We're shifting to a biweekly model so that I can thrive in a more sustainable way while continuing to bring you this important gaming content. So stay tuned for seasons three and four every other Tuesday from now on.

C Cheryl Platz 1:12:35

Between podcasts, you can keep up with me at Design Platzitudes, my mostly weekly free newsletter on LinkedIn with over 1,600 subscribers. We cover a mix of topics from video gaming to user experience design to whatever I'm thinking about that week. Continue exploring the craft of game development with my book that inspired this podcast, The Game Development Strategy Guide, available worldwide from your favorite online bookseller or from my publisher Rosenfeldmedia.com. Enduring Play listeners can get 15% off at RosenfeldMedia.com through december 15, 2026, with the code EnduringPlay2026. I'm your host Cheryl Platz. Until next time, keep thriving.

E Enduring Play Computer 1:13:24

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