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Dan Axson (DA) Interviewing David Sloan (DS)

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(Dan Axson) Actually David if you don't mind I'm gonna get started, if you could introduce yourself as if you're at dinner party, the dinner party question. What do you do?

> **(David Sloan)** What do I do I am officially user research accessibility lead but more prosaically I I work as a consultant providing advice and support to organizations trying to make their digital products more accessible to people with disabilities, and that advice ranges from helping people who make the stuff whether they're developers or writers. Through to thinking of things in a more strategic perspective how does an organization organize itself in a way that makes it possible for people to deliver accessible digital experiences.

(DA) Okay thank you for that and and this this work takes you inevitably over the world to some extent and you mentioned earlier, I should say for the benefit the podcast that you gave us a talk earlier to colleagues at the University on this topic, and you mentioned you spend a lot of time in the States.

> **(DS)** Yes so my company is based in the US, I work from home in Fife in Scotland, but I quite often travel to work with clients. Usually in North America and the traveling is almost always to perform some kind of research, either it's working with disabled people to watch them use a product in order to figure out how it could be improved and identify the problems and having with it or it might be to ask them questions about an area that a client is interested in learning more or maybe interested in developing a technology for, or we're going to organizations to talk to them about what they know about accessibility, what they're doing what they need, what the challenges that we might be able to help them with. So when we go on site we learn a lot about the practical challenges.

(DA) Okay and would you say that you know the US and UK are quite comparable in the challenges is there unique challenges geographically?

> **(DS)** I would say that the challenges for accessibility are pretty much standard in terms of the technical challenges and the social challenges that we're dealing with, we're trying to provide digital resources, digital content in a way that doesn't exclude people because of a

disability, and that holds across the world. But inevitably there are differences for example in legislation or the legislative climates yeah in the U.S. there tends to be more of a an eagerness to you look at litigation as a way to persuade somebody to do something, whereas in the UK the the system, your things are slightly different there's more of a desire to negotiate and and have an agreement so you tend not to see legal action as quite the the motivating factor here in the UK that is in the U.S. So there's a bit more of an awareness. I think one other difference is that because so many big tech companies are based in the U.S. They are very conscious about the legal requirements, not necessarily on them but on their on their customers yeah so if they want to sell a product to the government in the US for example, they need to be thinking about accessibility but if they have a product that people in the UK want to buy then we're gonna benefit from them.

(DA) That makes sense and yeah you made a quite you know you use the stick carrot analogy earlier like that you know this this legislation is the stick, but actually there's more opportunities from a carrot perspective as organizations and and people who are interested in more specifically around what you talked about earlier I can listen back to that because we record it as well. What I'd like to do David if it's okay is talk to you a career. So it's approaching 20 years I think?

(DS) Yes getting on for yes so 199.. yes in 1999 would be when I started working I would started getting paid to do stuff related to accessibility.

(DA) You mentioned earlier that, so one of my questions before before your talk today was what interested you around accessibility and digital accessibility. But you mentioned that your initial path or career path so to speak actually pardon the pun was cartography.

(DS) That's right, yes.

(DA) And I like to hear more about that in a moment what I particularly liked was the parallel to accessibility and you know you're mapping routes, access and so on and land and actually the challenges with mapping access to land probably quite parallel into access on the digital world.

(DS) I think there are all sorts of parallels one is that there's an art and a science to cartography and there's also an art and a science to to accessibility. There are things in digital accessibility where there's a very clear definition, do this and it will benefit don't do it and you're going to provide barriers, but in other situations there's a bit of an art is as to what works in a particular situation. So providing a text an alternative for a graphic for example, is a nice black and white thing you have to do it in order to be accessible. Yeah But then the next question is well what is the what is an equivalent text an alternative for a particular graphic. And then you start having to ask questions about what purpose does it convey, and what would I communicate to somebody who couldn't see it, but allow them to get a similar experience and that's where that I guess the art comes in and then you're

thinking about characteristics you're thinking about circumstances. And I think in cartography there's an aspect to that as well with it with a map it's a graphical representation of our physical space. Sure. And you can't put everything on the map so you need to think about what people are using the map for is it - is it a road map, is it an orienteering map or something where you need much finer detail. Is it a map where you're comparing population of different countries in which case yeah it's almost the data that much as much as the physical space so so yeah I guess there is a parallel.

(DA) I guess that's a conversation and then certainly I you know I found myself guilty of that when putting images into slides for example, for presentations. Is you know if I really sat to think and decide exactly why I put that image in for a description often, actually might as well just take it out as it serving no purpose, just to look pretty. But I suppose there is and argument for both sometimes.

(DS) Absolutely yes. I mean one, there is certainly an argument to say if you have a big block of text then an illustration can help to make that text more accessible for people who have difficulty reading and processing text, so it's not necessarily a case that accessibility is provide text. Sure that will help people who are listening to content rather than seeing it, but there are people who can see content that may have difficulty processing it. So a graphic whether it's a map or a pie chart or something or a photo just helps to provide illustrations that kind of works both ways.

(DA) And do you still dabble in cartography is that something you do still get involved in?

(DS) I love, I haven't drawn a map unless I'm in a really boring teleconference, in which case I will doodle maps. I love looking at them and just diving in. When I left my previous job to come in to the accessibility world, yeah. Google Maps didn't exist, okay, and I don't know what my job would have been like had Google Maps existed where you can zoom in to a point. I can say oh I'm going to Brighton tomorrow I'm gonna zoom in and then I'm gonna go to Street View and I can, yet sort of walk along the road and see what the building looks like. That's just amazing to me to think to me that you can do that now.

(DA) It's incredible and actually from an accessibility point of view you know, it's now more accessible for people to contribute their own content as Maps you know we've got cameras we can walk around campus and contribute to Street View.

(DS) You can connect you can correct stuff as somebody who has, maybe a wheelchair user I could go in Street View and check oh there's a there's a curb cut there I can cross the street there, there's a staircase and I don't want to go that way you can almost start to do some background research about accessibility.

(DA) Be nice if there's an accessible digital overlay map layer wouldn't it.

(DS) Yeah I mean I know that there are there are lots of apps out there that provide aspects of accessible descriptions, Euan's guide which provides accessibility descriptions of public spaces, restaurants that kind of thing. So the whole app culture has freed up information and allowed people to contribute.

(DA) Yeah well actually that that brings us on nicely because you know it talked a bit about the beginning of your career and but of course, in the digital world 20 years or nearly 20 years is a long time, yes, and a lot changes, yes, right and fast, yes, and can you could quickly become blindsided by that. So what what what are some of the significant challenges that have maybe come and gone maybe changed or generally stand out for you as or just haven't gone away there's still a challenge despite the work that's gone in.

(DS) That's a really good question and one where if I was really prepared I'd bring up all the statistics. In 1999 this was the most the the WCAG web content accessibility guideline that was failed the most in in audits and this is how it's changed. I don't have those numbers to hand but I think something that has persisted over time, is an assumption that people use the mouse to interact with digital content, especially web content and providing for keyboard accessibility which, you know, perhaps people using a keyboard on its own to interact with a web application is a relatively rare situation but, people who are using other input devices like switches, yes that represent a keyboard type interface they are still encountering all sorts of issues. And now it's largely because of custom, complex user interface components that are kind of constructed with HTML, that doesn't by default take keyboard focus, so you've got to add all that behavior in. You're kind of throwing away what HTML had, yeah, recreating it and a lot of solutions forget about about non Mouse users.

(DA) Going for style over substance in a way.

(DS) Yeah there's that there's that and just and choosing a more complex solution but forgetting to say to cover all our bases. So that's something I think that hasn't really gone away. I think the the alternative text for images is probably still there, it's maybe not quite the issue that it was. One thing that has gone away as a problem is using javascript. You know back when I started out any interface that was scripting that requires scripting for functionality. We would recoil, yeah, that's what we inaccessible. Now assistive technologies can handle JavaScript and JavaScript generated functionality without any problems, so generally there may be other reasons for not relying too much on JavaScript for performance or security or just robustness but as an accessibility issue it's something that tends to help improve accessibility rather than hinder it these days, whereas back at the start it was definitely something that we were worried about.

(DA) Okay so is that, you think that's because over that you know over that period of time that web standards have been been developed and worked on through consortiums, so actually people can start to develop sort of standard robust stuff around this.

(DS) I think yes certainly awareness of standards and following standards and not just amongst content creators and developers. But also the devices that expose that content content to users whether it's a browser or an assistive technology, there's been good progress towards following standards in the AT world and in the browser world. There are always changes in the browser the browser wars and what's yes, which engine is dominant and which is disappearing but the the assistive technologies have certainly improved in terms...

(DA) Yeah and you mentioned in your talk earlier about devices many of us have in our pockets you know, Android, Apple devices yes and some of the assistive technologies that now certainly on iOS devices are well they're they're sort of world leading in some aspects aren't they, for free off-the-shelf software?

(DA) Yeah, I guess well, relatively free.

(DS) Yeah that is I think that's the that's the big the big challenges like the cost of the mobile device and the plan that you use is still something that excludes a lot of people who who would benefit from it. But certainly for people who have access to a smartphone the fact that assistive technology comes bundled with it and the fact that you could get apps that provide specific solutions to support your particular accessibility needs. On a device that everyone has you walk down the street and you count you know how many people smartphone so here's a device that somebody with a disability can use and it looks like everyone else's, it's not a special PC that's clunky and it has to stay in one place, it's a mobile device, it's something that people can take with them so it's liberating in that respect. And it's you know there isn't a social stigma yeah of using an obviously medical device it's just it's an iPhone or an Android device.

(DA) Just just brought quite an incredible flash back to me from when in my previous job we purchased one of the sort of first iPads as it came around as and as a an augmentative communication device for a student. Previous to that they were carrying around when these sort of trolley supermarket type things right that had a gigantic yeah purpose-built thing that battery lasted about an hour, it didn't sound like them in the slightest is you know and and you know this is quite a young quite a weak student who had to cart around this thing and rarely used it. And it's no surprise but of course the iPad came out everyone else had them, it was common, it looked okay, it was a cool thing to have for a young person, yeah that's really important isn't it.

(DS) It is, it reminds me of a book one of the best books have read in the last, well since I started in accessibility it was by a former colleague at Dundee, Graham Pullin who wrote this book Design Meets Disability and it makes that point that a lot of, historically a lot of devices

to the assistive technologies in it's widest sense, came from the medical world and they were intended to solve a medical problem. And the aesthetic, and the user experience was it just wasn't wasn't something that was considered, and Graham's book looked at how you design as a force for good, we can can interact with disability and be something that's that that helps produce more desirable assistive technologies and more desirable devices that have accessibility built in and it just kind of re framed how you think about, accessibility and aesthetics which often historically have been seen as two opposing things you can you kind of accessible, or you can have beautiful and you can't have both well actually you can.

(DA) Yes absolutely. It's just a case of thinking about it. Yeah and you know you mentioned earlier and actually just now a moment ago is you know these big companies are bringing it to the forefront and Microsoft most famously recently with their Xbox controller, game controller here with the Superbowl ad and Apple you know making this stuff important. And it reminded that the BBC One show as well recently had a specialist college National Star talking about how they were using augmented communication communication devices with voices that sounded like them right you know. Black Country accents not you know standard Queen's English, you know or whatever. right. Microsoft Sam. You know.

(DS) Coming from Scotland I know that if I needed something that represented my personality yeah I would have a trouble I would have trouble if it if it was an accent from another country so so yeah it's you know there's an aspect of personality. But all of this conversation is it's it's great as examples of how technology can enable and provide independence, overcome accessibility issues and that kind of complements the responsibilities of people who create digital content, yeah, that those devices and solutions are intended to interact with, so you know you've got this great innovation and the smartphones have really helped, but that doesn't get away from the fact that people who are writing creating digital content still have a role to play as well.

(DA) I think one of your slides earlier with the most most amount of bullets on it was who's responsible.

(DS) Yes.

(DA) And actually there's very few people aren't responsible for this. That's right. That's everyone from the hardware vendors the software vendors through to the end-users making a module site on a VLE.

(DS) Absolutely yeah and my the point of my talk today, you know if the one thing I really wanted to get over was that a successful organizational strategy for accessibility, is one that supports the idea that responsibility is distributed, across all of the different stakeholders. So that it's not all left to a developer or to Disability Services or one small group you do

accessibility, you clean up everyone else's mess, well that's just not a sustainable way to deal with accessibility. The more you can distributed, distribute it across the board, so that decisions are made that are informed by accessibility needs, wherever they might influence the digital environment that the organization controls.

(DA) Absolutely and and and actually if you don't mind we'll jump on slightly, because you know we've talked about the current state of Technology, we talked about where you'd where you jumped on board to accessibility yeah the current state. I'm quite interested in in the future of this and just you know we can do some ridiculous future gazing if you like or if there's any specific thoughts that you have, but you you had a quote earlier from a student or a young person called Jessie.

(DS) A participant and one of our usability studies. I didn't write the whole quote. But yeah it's if I I'm paraphrasing but it's something along the lines of 'I really believe that technology can mitigate disability in terms of overcoming some most of the practical issues that blindness presents'. So this is somebody who's is a screen reader user and has seen. I almost use that that that word literally to to emphasize a point, she is using technology to do things independently that previously she wouldn't been able to without vision, without somebody to describe a scenario, allow her to choose make choices. There are apps out there that allow somebody to point their camera using a smart phone point there a camera at a scenario. And either it might be an automated system where with image recognition and AI it can describe to some degree of accuracy this and the the scene that somebody's experiencing. Or it puts them in in contact with a human describer, so quickly you can call somebody there's a service called Aira this out in the US where it's a subscription service and you call somebody and point you're your smartphone at something and say okay can you and tell me. You know you're pointing at that wardrobe or something my jeans where're my jeans hanging up or what which is my, my yellow t-shirt, wanna where my yellow t-shirt today. Oh well it's the third one in the left okay that's great. So it's a way for somebody to have a pair of eyes a describer and a trained describer, to help them. And we've asked about it what about the security issues do you feel okay with somebody that you don't know describing something in your house for example? Yes, that seems to be seems to be fine and obviously there is a you know there's a need to make sure that a service isn't open to abuse but, that kind of enabling thing that technology offers certainly for for some people or some some accessibility challenges seems to be.

(DA) Yeah it's it's incredible and for those that are interested we've talked on this podcast a while back about an app called Seeing AI yeah Microsoft one and that's yeah I mean it's hit and miss it's described me as a year older than I am. It's pretty good.

(DS) Yes no that way it added 12 years to my age so I don't like. But there are other tools like it and I was gonna ask you offline I'll mention it offline but you mentioned that Aira, yes. Yeah there's a post grad student at Sussex called Daniel who's developed a software for people with low or no vision. Called his company's called Grapheel the product is called iris and it's it's for, so he's a physics student and the app takes a photo of a chart, a graph, some

data and then it sends it to a volunteer, who then describes what's in there to sent back so similar service but for specific like quite specific use case for academics. Which is great and again you're connecting somebody with a way to get that description. I guess there'll be people we say well, you know that's that's maybe giving that student a head start over interpreting the graph. But I mean I don't, I think the purpose is really to give somebody an equal playing field in terms of the information that they then might need to interpret and be assessed for some academic purpose on their ability to interpret the information but just having access to it. It's about equality rather than giving them an advantage.

(DA) We've mentioned AI a bit what you know and that's that's now that's kind of the now, near future it you know AI was playing a large part in this it's not getting a it's getting a lot wrong but it is enabling us to do a lot right as well. What do you see is is going to be the challenges, do you think we'll still see some of the same challenges, in twenty, thirty years time is is have have you know do people at that far ahead in this space?

(DS) I don't know I'm probably the worst person to ask about what technology is going to look like in 20 to 30 years time.

(DA) But maybe around the challenges around accessibility.

(DS) But certainly there are challenge, I think one of the ongoing challenges is the more we have, the more people in the world we have as content creators, the more people we need to provide basic assistance and accessibility. Right. When I started out an accessibility, we had people with a lot of people writing office type documents, we had some people doing web development but now we've got millions and millions and millions of people blogging through WordPress or whatever. Putting stuff on Facebook you know all organizations have used Facebook as a web publishing platform. So you've got people who've had no training, you know you think about where you might learn about accessibility, yeah. It's typically all in computing science degree or a master's in digital communications or whatever. Or you might be looking at it from the assistive technology or the disability studies part. But a lot of people end up in positions where they're publishing web content or in charge of a whole team of people publishing web content who haven't been through that educational process, and I think that's one of the big challenges we need to solve. Which is in the one hand to include accessibility and inclusive communication as part of core digital skills that are taught way back, primary school, secondary school and also improve the authoring tools that we use whether it's a virtual learning environment or a Facebook or a blogging tool or whatever it may be. To make sure that those tools help people publish accessibly. Yeah. And if we can get to that point then we'll have a really inclusive environment. I mean I do think there's a there's a greater awareness than ever before of diversity, disability is more prominent I think we've got a lot of work still to do in comparison to other minority groups, but disability is more prominent and more aware. You know younger generations are more aware of diversity on a disability dimension. So they're aware of the benefits of doing it but, knowing

what to do yeah I think we've still got some work to do there and I think that's gonna take a long time.

(DA) That's interesting I really like the what you say there about and it being a core component of digital capabilities and digital skills because yeah I think I imagine the significant proportion of people who are content content creators, don't see themselves as content creation exactly people posting on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. So we've seen Twitter recently add the option to add alt text to their images and that's relatively new and that's now gone across all the other platforms so people do have this available to them but it's knowing it's there isn't it.

(DS) Exactly. Knowing why they need to do it. Still some sometimes you'll get the functionality but it's switched off by default or it's hidden, you've got a you've got a know about it to find it and there's no prompt. It's almost like well we provide the functionality but we don't want to put it in people's faces and say hey you need to do this and I think I think we could do more to make it more obvious rather than have it as an option that you've got a turn on.

(DA) So maybe maybe this is this another paradigm shift that's waiting to happen there we've had sort of you know these all these words banded about they're kind of you know largely useless in themselves but you know digital by default and mobile default by default when web design and now maybe accessible by default is absolutely you know the next thing.

(DS) Absolutely yeah it should be and if it isn't we do something wrong.

(DA) I'm gonna jump onto the digital capability side of things and actually you mentioned there about in schools there's basic skills. But on the other end of life you know elderly people you know who acquire some of these traits that cause them to have some kind of disabling access to digital content. Such as vision and motor skills but there's also there's also digital capability problem with this isn't there so it's and I don't I don't really know the question I'm asking other than there's some bridging, some kind of blurring of the line between accessibility and digital capability in that. Would good accessibility practice help bridge that digital skills gap?

(DS) I think good accessibility practice and good user experience design will help. So what you're talking about is something that we we've kind of been thinking about for for for a little while now without necessarily having solved it because, inevitably the aging process it it takes a period of time so it's studying a cohort of technology users now in ten years time we will find out something interest we gotta wait ten years for that to happen. So a former colleague at Dundee Chris Lim he came up with he works in the our Art and Design School and Dundee and has a focus and technology and an aging and he had this idea of this concept of Technology generations. Whereby for a given generation you could map the kind of technologies that they were familiar with yeah from day to day, yeah and then as new

technologies are introduced whether it's a smartphone or whether it's a graphical user interface or whatever it may be. Before at that point a certain generation didn't know it was there it was introduced during their lifetime whereas certain generations have always lived with it, yeah so it's something that's second nature to them. You hear stories of kids know that go up to TVs and Stroke them because they think they're iPads, yeah I've seen it. So I think back to times when I was at Dundee we did a lot of we had this drop-in center for retired people to come in and just get familiar with using various technology in a kind of friendly environment. The the advantage for us was that they were available as participants in research activities, yeah and there was a guy there who was in his 80s and he was really struggling to use PowerPoint. He was having the most awful time just because of the his unfamiliarity with the interface and perhaps some usability issues with PowerPoint. But this was a guy who wasn't a complete Luddite when it came to technology, this was somebody who'd been a navigator in a second world war and had flown from the UK to Japan and back, yeah safely well using the technology of the early forties in a wartime environment, was able to navigate halfway round the world and back again. And you know here's somebody know he was struggling with today's technology and yes, I suspect that we will have problems in the future when we transition into different kinds of interfaces and the people who are perfectly comfortable with today's digital technology are a little bit older, there their own capabilities are changing gradually, so almost imperceptibly so they're not even aware that their change has happened. And yet there's a you know there's a subtle change in interaction paradigms I think being aware of that as a problem gives me hope that we will help that transition process. I think we do have to be we have to pay attention otherwise yeah you know we could be in trouble we could finding ourselves repeating problems over and over again.

(DA) So this it it reminds me about I don't I have no idea if it's correctly attributed the Douglas Adams but I've seen it as a slide many times which is 'anything any technology that was invented before and I'm paraphrasing but anything before us 20 is normal, anything invented between 30 and 40 is new and exciting anything invented after I'm 40 is against the natural order of things it should be burned'. Exactly so yeah okay.

(DA) David thank you I'm gonna wrap up there on the sort of main content unless anything else you'd like to talk about but I do have a couple of quick fire questions that I'd like to ask. One is what's your favorite keyboard shortcut?

(DS) Keyboard shortcut, that's that's a great question because the ones that I like the most the ones I don't even remember, they're just almost automatic so I guess it's the the the copy-paste and and cut ones that I can't I just do them.

(DA) So that's a good ones do you notice you know I still come across people who don't know if that's what cut short cut on a keyboard so and it's such a handy one to know you and have. So copy and paste and that's going to be our shortcut of the show. So because I started that last episode

shortcut of the show it's the least exciting segment of any podcast ever, but probably the most useful.

(DS) The other one the other one is the one that I can type an ellipsis once I learned that an ellipsis was a single character and not three dots okay and I use a Mac and I think it's alt and the semicolon key, okay that types an ellipsis.

(DA) I'll have a look at that one I did not know that was the single character either.

(DS) Yeah so I think it's yeah and again when it comes to a screen reader reading out do dot dot vs. ellipsis or even not reading a lip the word ellipsis but just have pause or that.

(DA) That's the kind of gold so you know I could strongly encourage those who weren't able to attend the talk earlier to watch the video back because you gave away some brilliant nuggets of advice at the end and what to do around office documents and web development.

(DS) I was told I had to make sure I concluded some nuggets of advice.

(DA) It was great and my colleague earlier noted that when you mentioned you're about to give out some advice like that, papers shuffled yes, pens came out it was great.

(DS) It's such a good rule of thumb you know you haven't got nuggets of advice as part of a presentation then think about including some.

(DA) It's very useful and you know it's good practice so an important practice. The, your most used app I don't know why this came to mind but I think I was rearranging my own smartphone of the day of the homescreen and thinking about which ones I want to use the most and then I looked at my own screen time and realized I was quite disappointed by the one that apparently I used the most because I've been trying to use it less. But what app is indispensable to you and which one to use the most.

(DS) I would say the app that I would miss most if it didn't exist was Strava. Strava for people who don't know it is it's like a social media tool for runners, cyclists, hikers, it allows you to record any kind of activity you have a network of people who will give you kudos for runs, there's a level of encouragement. I I love it because on the one hand it helps me track my own physical activity and when I work from home I could spend if I don't take care to to literally take steps to get away from my desk yeah that's it because I work from all my that I could sit at my desk all day every day. So I need to get out I love running I love hiking and

walking and it's also a way to find out what others are doing and you because it's focused on activity you don't have any chat about Donald Trump or Brexit or anything else that might put you off other certain social media platforms. So for me Strava is absolutely brilliant. And does it tend does it it's got maps in it as well yes it does.

(DA) Does it encourage your competitive nature with those segments?

(DS) Yes it does yes to some extent yeah yeah, I've been I have been known to create my own and one really cool thing about Strava is the use of the attention to user experience, so one thing I've done a couple of times as I've gone for a runner gone to my local park run, finished, gone home and forgotten to stop my watch. So Strava will see I did this erm 11 mile run and the last six miles of it were done at a ridiculously fast speed. But the trimming tool it allows you to select your run and then as a slider that you just pull back to the point where you you stopped running, and you got in the car and then you clip it and it's it's so well done but and they've clearly identified yeah that use case where people finished whatever it was we're doing got in their car drove home and forgot to stop driver it's really cool.

(DA) Personally I use the Nike Plus app for tracking running and it doesn't have that feature that way you can manually edit but what I have noticed since the Apple watch itself if you go out for a run and forget to start it. It will remind you about a mile in, it looks like you're running yeah do you want to track it and it will retrospectively track, And the same will happen at the other end as well when you stop.

(DS) That's really cool today we have this new feeling that's like that run didn't count because it wasn't on Strava but if your watch is looking out for you, that solves that.

(DA) Alright David thank you so much for your time and it's been really interesting chat listening to you, I could talk to you much longer but I can't because you know you've got to get prepared if your park run in the morning.

(DA) Thank you this has been great fun.

(DS) Thanks a lot.