S3 E21 — Feel the Rush of Action-Packed Parasports with the Game Phenoms from Big Karma

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 00:01

Hello everyone, and welcome to Changing What's Possible: The Disability Innovation Podcast brought to you by Cerebral Palsy Alliance Research Foundation or CPARF. I'm your host, Dr Marie McNeely, and this season, we're excited to bring you cutting-edge stories and insights on research, technology, and innovation for people with CP and other disabilities. Before we introduce you to today's guests, I'd like to take a moment to tell you about 3forCP, CPARF's grassroots fundraising initiative for cerebral palsy research and disability innovation. Whether you level up a read-a- thon, a sip-and-paint event, a comedy show or something else that you love, 3forCP gives you the chance to make a difference in your own signature way. Head to 3forCP.org, to get started, that's the number 3, F, O, R, C, P, dot O, R, G. And in this episode, you'll hear from two guests, Pascal Clarysse and Matt Scott. Listeners, Pascal is founder of Big Karma, one of the startup companies and the 2024 Remarkable US accelerator program. He'll be talking more about Big Karma in the first half of the episode, and in the second half, you'll hear from Matt Scott, a five-time Paralympic athlete who has played the game Phenoms from Big Karma, and is one of the playable characters in the game as well. We are looking forward to hearing from Pascal and Matt, learning more about the story behind Big Karma and getting the inside scoop on their flagship game, Phenoms. So Pascal, thank you so much for joining us today.

**Pascal Clarysse** 01:34

Thank you for having me, Marie.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 01:36

Well, we are looking forward to learning more about you and more about your work, but perhaps we can start with some background. So Pascal, can you start by telling us more about yourself?

**Pascal Clarysse** 01:47

Yes. So I was born in Belgium, some 40-plus years ago, started my career in video games out of love for video games. 25 years ago. Worked in hardware, in e-commerce, in mobile, lots of marketing, lots of influencer marketing for some companies that you may know, Ubisoft, Angry Birds… yada yada yada. I'm also a business dad. I'm the father of Ariana, who changed my perspective about life. To make it short, she's born with congenital disorder, and that was the spark that led me to start Big Karma, which, as you said, is a company that makes video games starring awesome action heroes and champions who leverage their disabilities to win. We call the video game Phenoms. Our tagline is be impossible.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 02:36

I love it. So you mentioned you've got this family connection your daughter perhaps motivated you to start the company. Can you share a little bit more about this story, and what were those steps that led you to founding Big Karma? How did you get started?

**Pascal Clarysse** 02:48

In reality, there are two steps. one which was in 2010, I want to say it was in Belgium. We were playing soccer. Football depends where you're listening. I call it football, but I respect some of the listeners to call it soccer. We were playing once a week in Belgium and Eddie, one of my best friends in Belgium, plays with us. He's amputated. He plays with one leg on crutches, and we are all able bodied, as one would say, but he has the strong personality. He wants you to go all in. He wants you to push he wants you to show off. He kicks me with his crutches, which parts. So I came back and he has that great personality, but one day, and more importantly, because he practices Kung Fu, he was impatient as we were waiting for the key to get to the pitch and on the parking lot, he whirled on one leg with his crutches in the sky, as if there were weapons to fight imaginary enemies. And I saw like a ninja on crutches. And I thought, I've never seen that in a video game. That's interesting.

I pitched that idea a few times at previous employers, who said it was a great idea, but it’s always last in priority versus more commercially obvious opportunities like licensing this or that or the other. And then one day, Arianna was born, and she was born with congenital disorder. She suffered a lot in her first year of her life. The medical field helped us, but it took a long time to figure out how to feed her, basic survival.

In the second year, though, we figured it out thanks to great doctors, and there was that key moment where we were at peace, so to speak. And it became on us as parents to figure out the question of joy, entertainment, living life beyond survival, so beyond the medicine, beyond the feeling, now that she's alive and well, what do we do?

And the first breakthrough for me was through dancing. I started dancing with her on music and shaking her a little bit because Daddy plays rough. And a mom said, Hey, watch out. She's for. Ajay, and I said, she's smiling, though. The key performance indicator is the smile. She seems to enjoy it. But it changed something in me, the relationship to joy, the right to joy for the disabled community. And that's when it hit me that my little idea, that vision of Eddie whirling on one leg, was not just a cool idea. It was something important, and it was not on the medical doctors to solve this issue.

It was on me and my cool, funny friends from the video game industry, who are very skillful on top of being funny, to take this mission and make it ours. And yeah, the rest is history. It's been five years since we began Bell bootstrapping, and a few years since we are a real company and working on producing this with so many allies and athletes. We call ourselves Big Karma. We are going to use all the force of gaming, marketing, everything we learned and everything we know for a good mission, karma is kind of playing its role, and we're not telling a story. The story is leading us where we have to go, and it's been amazing, the encounters we've been making along the way, and the support we've been getting along the way.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 06:10

I love that. So if you had to encapsulate it, perhaps in a sentence or two, what's the mission of Big Karma?

**Pascal Clarysse** 06:17

It's a representation mission. There is a lack of representation in the media of all forms of disabilities. And it's not just a quantity problem. It *is* a quantity problem. Definitely. You're looking at between one and 3% of representation in lead characters in linear media, depending on which country you analyze in gaming. It's less than 1% representation. Meanwhile, for those who may not be aware, I'm sure you are Marie, it's 15 to 20% of the population who identify as people with disabilities, so one to 1.5 billion people around the world. So it's a quantity problem, but it's also, more importantly, a quality problem.

In countries where we have telethon or more often than not, it's tear jerking, it's condescending. It's a pedestal rather than a platform. It's inspiration porn, so often on social media where the greatest athletes of the Paralympic are not named and used for messaging that is like, “hey, this kid, no name, with no arms is doing this, what's your excuse?” And more than not, your excuse is, well, I'm not the greatest athlete that ever lived in that sport, arms or no arms, and I haven't trained 20 years to get to that point, arms or no arms.

And you would never do that to Michael Jordan or LeBron James or Lionel Messi or to Serena Williams, you would never, ever do that. So there is this lack of respect, this lack of identification, and that, I think, is our mission to try and change that through video game first and possibly other storytelling vehicles and entertainment forms after that. The advantage of video games is that it's interactive. So there is a trial and error element, and play in my shoes, it's playful. We don't have to teach them anything. We just can make them think.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 08:07

I love it. So you mentioned that part of the reason that you got into this video game industry was your own passion for gaming. What is it like for you being able to combine this big and very important mission with this innate passion that you have for gaming and entertainment.

**Pascal Clarysse** 08:21

It's what the Japanese people call the ikigai — I've learned when your vocation, your profession, your skills, when everything meets together, and basically you never work a day in your life again, because it's just passion all along, and it fuels you to make plans a little bit longer.

I was lucky to start in the industry at age 20. There was always selling pirated video games. I think the statues of limitation had passed, but when I was in high school, I was selling pirated video games. I make my own puppet money since I'm 14, thanks to video games. By age 28/29 some court cases with Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo, some traumatic experiences, I became a bit ungrateful in that I was living my passion, but I was wondering, what's the purpose? My impact is pretty neutral. But is it positive? Is it really positive? What's the purpose? I got lucky. I met the founders of Angry Birds, and they gave me two purposes, one immediate, another one delayed. The immediate one was the joy of children is not insignificant and is a purpose. And video games are about the joy of children who play them. That was immediate and that rekindled my love for video games and working in them. But there was another one which was Angry Birds Space. Angry Birds Space is a great game for anybody who has played it, but it's also the number one traffic source for nasa.com between 2012 and 2014 and it's a partnership between NASA and Angry Birds. And it teaches a lot about physics, micro gravity. And then there are some side missions. When NASA goes to Mars with the rover, there is the rover. The mission Mars in Angry Birds. It's what Romeo called it a stealth learning platform. It's not an educational game. We're not teaching you. Bur while you're playing. There are bits and pieces. There is a gateway. What jack up from NASA said, for me, for NASA, Angry Birds Space is the recruitment tool for the astronauts of tomorrow. If you don't fall in love with space, you're not going to crack the physics book. We're not going to be able to send you to space.

You get to be in love and have a passion to get through the hard and difficult tasks that are going to take you years of preparation. And that is halfway my brain that probably leads to Big Karma, because realizing that video games are not going to solve problems, but they can be the gateway or the spark to make people think about the subject matter differently and then maybe dig deeper into them on the Internet or start watching videos, start reading books about a subject matter, which a video game cannot teach them fully. But if we can be the spark or the gateway, that's wonderful. And if you think about the classroom or characters with these abilities are awesome. They are inspired by athletes who will participate in the Paralympics. If you've got a kid aged 13/14, gets into a new high school, enters the classroom in a wheelchair, on crutches, and he's going to face some bullying. The real world is hard, especially as a teenage, if he has an ally in the class that tells him or her, “Hey, you look like my favorite character in the video game *Phenoms*, let's be friends,” life is slightly incrementally less hard for that kid, and I hope he can be that spark so video games so far,

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 11:43

certainly you touched on this a little bit Pascal and talking about your mission. But can you share, perhaps in a little bit more detail, what problems that you're hoping your products will solve?

**Pascal Clarysse** 11:53

So they are true at the core, it's a representation problem. But what does representation mean? Right? Here is a word we use a lot, and sometimes gratuitously. There are two things I'm going to start with. What Matt Scott told me two-time Paralympic gold winner, possibly the COVID Bryant of retail basketball. And very eloquent, very articulate, amazing man. And when we came to him to say, Hey, do you want to be a part of finance. He said yes immediately. And this is why, “when I was 14/15, years old, and I was a black man in a wheelchair, I wanted to be a basketball professional, but there was nobody looking like me on TV who had made the dream a reality. So there were no steps to my dream, and it was hard to sell it to my parents, my family, my friends, my teachers, that my dream was achievable, and even for myself, he said. So know that he has achieved this dream. He's been a professional in Spain, in Germany. He's been playing basketball for 15 years now. He retired. He works at NASA. He's a host of the Paralympics and Olympics for NBC. He's a successful man. He made his dream come true, and he said, “I want to be the role model for the next kids in a wheelchair watching TV to know what the steps are to his dream.” Role models are important in society. He makes so many teenage situations, again, easier when you can find somebody who has done it before you. So that's for the community. Beyond the community, somebody explained to me in much wiser words than I could come up with that it's also important for everybody, including what we would call able-bodied kids, because if you consume entertainment in which everybody looks like you, by the time you encounter differences in real life, you're not prepared for that, and your reaction might be creepy or cringy, and I've seen it a lot with my daughter. People praying for you, people kids who are scared, kids who run away. It's because you have never seen it before. If difference is normalized through the consumption of pop culture and entertainment, then when you get to it in real life, it's less awkward. It's not going to build perfection for everyone everywhere, but it's a little contribution, I believe, against ableism.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 14:17

Definitely. Well, Pascal, I think these are remarkable and very important problems to be solving. I think these role models, as you describe them, can be so powerful in transforming how somebody thinks about themselves or what's possible, and also this idea of helping people become more familiarized with different disabilities, and just thinking about what life is like for people with disabilities can also have a tremendous impact. So we're really excited about these games that you're creating. So can you share with us more about how your games or your products work?

**Pascal Clarysse** 14:47

So it's a mobile game we are making at the moment, producing free to play. When it was going to come out in 2025 you're going to be able to download it from Google Play, an Apple App Store and 42 characters from 18 different nations competing in different sports, top athletes. They were wondering, who's the fastest, who's the greatest, who's the strongest, who's the toughest, who's the most accurate? You're going to be able to unlock them and recruit them in the game, trying to become the greatest coach in the world, and going to compete into mini games that are sports challenges.

For example, the three pointer in basketball, the penalty shootout in football, track and field, swimming, some of them in the stadium, some of them outside the stadium in more fantasy worlds. And you asking yourself the question, which of these athletes is the best at this sport and has the capacity to win for me? So looking beyond the obvious, visual or nonvisible disability that they have, and beyond the label, and looking at who's the best of basketball, who's the best at archery? And some of these athletes are also able-bodied and are willing to embrace their vulnerability in the brain, making the entire experience really inclusive. And so at the end of the day, you are trying to maximize all your athletes and become the greatest coach in the world through asynchronous playing versus player challenges. You know these sports is so for example, Marie, you would say, Hey, we're playing basketball. I'm sending David Aguilar from Andora, who made his own arm out of Lego. He's pretty bit of basketball. And I say, Yeah, but I have my start is two-time Paralympic champion for the new team USA. Let's see who does best and then replaying in short term, asynchronously through the internet and who has the best points win that particular round and gets rewards and goes on in the video game because it never ends right.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 16:43

I think that's so cool. And for these products, do you anticipate it will be an international audience? You mentioned 42 different characters from 18 different nations. I think that's amazing.

**Pascal Clarysse** 16:51

Yes, and they're all based on a real-life game. It's the magic, I think, of what we're doing, hopefully for consumers, but for us as producers, that's been the life changing part. We're working with 42 athletes under the license. Many of them are from the US, Australia. . . They are from all over the world, and they have right personality, great messages, spectacular visuals in their YouTube and Instagram, which is important to us making a video game as you would expect. There are stars who don't yet know they are, for the most part, and who have been ignored by the video game medium, and it's awesome to play as them in video game 40, if I say so myself, because I'm trying our builds every single day, but also working with them, interviewing them, getting to what they love, what is their vulnerabilities, what is their strengths? It's been an amazing journey, not just for me, but for all my co-founders and the entire team at Big Karma, and they're also excited about the process, which tells me we are onto something, because 18 of them told us, I've always dreamed of becoming a video game character. That tells you there is a representation problem.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 18:01

Definitely. And you mentioned Pascal that this game is going to be free to play when it launches in 2025 which I think makes it more accessible for more people to play. But can you share with us, what is the business model? How will you ultimately make this profitable?

**Pascal Clarysse** 18:15

So if you’ve played candy crush saga, angry birds, some of those games, or any mobile game, you probably have noticed that every now and then we show you an ad. It might be, hey, you succeed at this level. You don't want to double the rewards of your level watch an ad if you do so, reinforcing these positive moments of gameplay. To watch an ad any then collecting ad revenue as a TV station would do, or as a YouTube channel would do, and then with one to 3% of the audience, they're buying in-app purchases. So the competitive mind is people, or the young Pascal might be, hey, I'm going to collect all the possible medals and win at all the sports on my own, blinding and playing hours and hours every day until they beat the game. Others might say, I have kids. I have to rush. I'm going to upgrade this character right now, because it cleans up my progression in the game. Here's $5 well invested. Let's carry on and multiplying those transactions over potentially millions of players, because mobile now is in the pockets of 2.7 billion people playing mobile games every day, many of them not identifying as gamers, but playing games anyway. And the massive scale of the platform, thanks to Apple and Google, is how we monetize. Eventually, two or 3% of the audience subsidize it for the rest of us.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 19:37

I think that makes sense, and we touched on the fact that you were able to connect with people with disabilities, these 42 characters you actually made contact with, talked to them about incorporating them into the game, and kind of built them into it. Can you share how you built in these perspectives of people with disabilities, whether it's from these characters that are actually in the game, or other people with disabilities who you may have spoken with as you were developing them?

**Pascal Clarysse** 20:00

Characters in the game. It's a multilayer process. There is the pre interview where we discuss about the possibility of working together. Once we sign, there is a longer interview conducted by John and Cheryl, who have worked on Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Walking Dead, Dragon Ball, Curb Your Enthusiasm, Game of Thrones, yada yada yada. Amazing people, amazing writers, amazing creators, endured deep dive interviews of all facets of the personality and how they want to be represented, not just visually, but also their message, their own attributes of what makes a multidimensional person. And it's very important to the core what we do, not just in this video game, but the long term. So we want to plant that multidimensional, real people aspect, but along the way, we can tell the story in longer form and show in different entertainment forms. Where we're planting the flag there, we also get to know what they like, what they don't like, what they think is funny, what they think is cringy, which is very important when you're going to deal with someone's virtual character.

And then the visual magic to the source is that we're doing motion capture sessions. So before us, if you look at all the asset stores, wheelchair animations, running with crutches, jumping with crutches, all these animations of the asset stores are either not existing or very poorly done compared to running on a BMX bike or driving a motorbike, this is much easier to acquire from asset stores. They are existing routines that have been done by many other game developers before and that are for sale.

We are kind of pioneering there, which is to bring the realism of these novel movements. And working with athletes is an incredible opportunity to bring that kind of realism. Without them, we couldn't do that. Then there is what they do in real life, their achievements. Some of them have inspired the entire mini games based on something they've done one day on their social media or in a YouTube video. Others inspire a special move or special feature in a game like the basketball three pointer, it's actually the basketball shootout, because there is a five point shot, and that's inspired by Matt Scott.

Once in an Instagram story, he dropped his wheelchair on his back and shot from his back, lying on his back into the basket. And I asked a couple of NBA players if they have ever tried that. He said, No, I've never seen that before. They said, that's a flash point. And he invented it, and with his blessing, that's how it is in the game.

Matt Stutzman, the armless Archer, has inspired us so much, will you say? And then Messina, the blind skateboarders, some of what we do unless we see it, our imagination is limited, just humans and yeah, it's really along the entire process. And obviously, if anybody out there wondering, yes, we are paying them and giving back for that, we are giving 20% of all the power ups and in-app purchases that I mentioned earlier. They are each tied to the upgrades of the characters, and so we can track that. Some people complain that in mobile, we track too many analytics. It's true, and in this case, it's to our advantage. We could track all the revenue source to each athlete, and 20% of royalty, which is more than the traditional 10% for licensing, will go in their pocket. And we are very excited to build up that passive revenue source for them, because as you may or may not know, being a Paralympic champion doesn't pay the bills

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 23:27

Absolutely. And I love that you're presenting these characters, not just with their sort of real-life skills, but also building in their personalities, their personal histories. And I think that really helps people see, like you said, this multifaceted person, which I think really furthers the mission. So can you talk a little bit more about some of the key features of your products, the game that makes it different from other mobile games that are out there for people with disabilities or just people who like mobile games?

**Pascal Clarysse** 23:53

I think if you just love games in general, lots of sports games out there, but they are usually about one single sport. And I remember, when we were kids, we were always wondering, Hey, if LeBron James goes against Lionel Messi and Serena Williams, who's the fastest, who is the star first? Who is the whatever superlative you want to throw over there? And that's what this video game gives you a chance to do.

It's, I would say, like Olympics plus-plus, Olympics in a fantasy world, so more fun than Olympics and with no categories, women versus men, running with blades against running with crutches. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. Obviously, I get that in the real world, you cannot do that, because when you prepare for four years for the Olympics, you want to have a chance to win in your category in a video game, you can lose and try again in a minute, and so we can have that kind of fun. So for anybody out there, I think that's the hook. And also, anybody who's been to a gym knows that everybody else in the gym thinks they're the best coach in the world, well, download the game later being 2025 and prove it.

Now obviously you asked the question, what Is the difference for the community? Well, luckily, the last three to five years, we've seen a lot of breakthroughs and a lot of great work with The Last of Us to street fight and a few other great games, paving the way and becoming more and more accessible what others call inclusive design, or universal design. We've been also seeing Microsoft releasing controllers, PlayStation, releasing new controllers, the quad state. So it's more and more the case that people with different disabilities can play different games, but it's still less than 1% of the offering. And surely none of these games offer accessibility of play and representation at the same time with intentionality, and that's what we are offering. And in terms of accessibility, obviously, we want to be at the forefront of everything that's being done. So we support already in the current prototype. Actually, you can play with all forms of Bluetooth controllers, including specialty controllers. And we work with Remarkable but also with Foundation Once in Spain, with special effect Able Gamers to put the game in the heads of as many better tests as possible with as many different settings as possible. To really test those accessibility features, we also already support speed adjustments so that you can play the game at 100% speed, but also at 75% 50% 25% and we adjusted the control so that this still works, so your input is at full speed, but the game itself plays slower, which is extremely important for many situations in life, and some people, might use this to cheat while so do it, you can win and go to your mom and say that you won. If you want to cheat for other people, it's super important that we have it in, and it's not trivial. So we are going during this path that competition is secondary, and there are other things that are coming, one that I'm extremely excited about, that our sound designer is working, and it's going to take time. It's probably the hardest one for us, but everything, like in Street Fighter, is going to be playable through audiocue, which means the going to be playable by the blind community, too.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 27:06

Very cool. I love this idea about being able to adjust the game speed, because even just thinking about how people may play games over the lifespan, you know, when you're younger, when you're just kind of learning how to play these games, you might need it to go a little bit slower, and it can kind of speed up as you build skill.

**Pascal Clarysse** 27:19

Absolutely. And you know what, Marie, that's been a breakthrough moment in my ignorant mind over the last few years, that inclusive design is universal design. And the reason why is because when you build for one, you build for everyone. I didn't know that the lift when invented actually for accessibility, originally the lift that I sensed so depending on which countries you are. But there are many other examples like that. And finding out that it's the case in video games too. When you add subtitles, you think, Oh, they're deaf and they're hearing impaired, yeah, but it's also people with a second language, people who are commuting, yes. So many reasons why it ends up that when you add subtitles for anything that you say on screen, 38% of the users turn on the subtitle and setting so way more than what you expected. And there are so many other examples, but there was a visceral breakthrough for me when I saw the speed adjustment feature in our game for the first time, and it was just a couple of weeks ago. We finally had it implemented and I saw it, and we were in the meeting looking at it, and I was like, This is awesome, because it's not only for people with learning disabilities, or it's not only for people who just suffered in accidents. It's not only for people who are regaining movement. So it's not only for all the accessibility cases that we have thought of. It's also if you are very young, or if you are very old, or if it's the first time in your life that you're playing a video game, which we all have been there at some point, right? And Microsoft is a big proponent of that, that you think about one case, but there are millions, a lot of cases you didn't think of. So when you think of one case, just do it.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 28:55

I definitely agree. And I think you brought up some really important points there, Pascal, and you touched on this a little bit in your response there just now. But when you think about the world out there and the people who enjoy playing games, who might benefit from or enjoy, in particular, playing this game, Phenoms?

**Pascal Clarysse** 29:10

Anybody who wants to have fun playing a cool sports game would enjoy Phenoms. Obviously, we love the idea that some people, and especially kids with disabilities, will have those emotional moments saying, Oh, finally, I'm playing with somebody who looks like me. We know, since we started this that there are lots of family and friends and allies who are hiding in the woods and waiting for a moment to come out and have a debate in society, and we hope we can trigger that and be that fun conjured for that. When talking to people around, we realized that, yeah, those moments where they tell us, Oh, but did you know that my father is blind? Did you know that I had this when I was young? Did you know that my brother and oftentimes it's no You never told me in all these years we know each other. And many times they talk back to me and say, Well, you didn't sell to me that much about your daughter, Ariana, either, and it's because it's with us all day, every day. So when is the right moment to bring it up in a job interview? You meet somebody the beginning or at the second time or the third time, and then later it's too late, so it's too early, then it's too late. And so I hope we can be the country to have the debate and ensure that lots of our lives and family and friends will embrace playing the game or being vocal about the game, because they are actually much more familiar with the issue and what we are trying to open up here than we assumed originally. I think half of the world is actually ready for this, and we're just too shy to have a big debate as a society.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 30:47

I love that idea of having this game sort of be a vehicle for starting some of these really important conversations and dialogs. I think in the broader community, I think that's amazing. And you mentioned, of course, that this game Phenoms is coming out in 2025 but if we take a step back, Pascal and look at the big picture, what is your vision for the future of Big Karma?

**Pascal Clarysse** 31:08

Having worked a little bit on Angry Birds, and as I said, my co founders have worked on Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, so they see how from toys and animation, many things can happen. And I've seen it too. And I think there is definitely a character-centric entertainment story to build here. It could be through animation, Netflix, if you're listening, there are so many ways…comic books. Again, the more we flesh out the story of the characters, the athletes, the more we feel like one video game is not going to be enough to do them justice.

And actually, even staying in gaming, there are so many other things to do. There is this platform game idea that we have actually these characters have such unique attributes and such unique gameplay attributes, which these are the core video game that it's actually exciting because they bring a new twists on popular genres, and you can bring them in many different genres. You could bring them into a fortnight map. You can bring them into Roblox, and that's where the motion capture of the animations and the movements are very useful, because that's the crux of bringing new movement into these different Metaverse platforms that you see at large, you're going to bring the physics into it. So having those physics in the bank for one game open up the doors for many other games after that. And again, if you followed the success of Angry Birds, it started with 15 levels, and now I think there's been 33 different games with those birds in many different genres, and there have been two Hollywood movies, and there's a third one in production.

So there are many ways to tell a story once you get the party started, we like to start with sports video gaming in particular, again, because of the interactive element, because it's all day, every day. It's all phones, and we can work with so many different athletes, whereas with more story-driven genres, you have to start with a few characters, focus on them and then grow. And we want to work with as many of them as we can, because they're really the styles of this show, definitely.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 33:10

And I really like this idea of introducing new ways of characters moving into games. And I think that is tremendously innovative. And like you said, a new way to bring new excitement to even some of the similar game styles that people may be already familiar with.

**Pascal Clarysse** 33:24

That's right, it is exciting, and we found that along the way. To be honest with you, and our current investors know that, it made us slower and more expensive when we found out how much work was necessary to get to in other game developments, you see, there is the saying you don't have to reinvent the wheel. In a lot of video game development, that's true. Because you have the wheel, you buy it, you just have the tie of the color you want on it, and you have an asset you can use. You know, you build the next asset, and you assemble three assets together. Now you have a scene. It's going quite quickly in our days, because we rely on 40 years as an industry, 47 years, actually, since 1977. If you do something innovative, there is no wheel. You have to reinvent the wheel, or in this case, to make a bad pun, you have to reinvent the wheelchair in video game circumstances. It had existed before in non-playable form. But that's actually just video. It might be video with 3D and CGI generated, but it's just video. You just watch it. When you start moving an object, physics come into play. And so if nobody has done it, you have to do it. When we realized that it was not necessarily good news at the office, but you absolutely right that for the future, it's very exciting that we've done it, that we are still doing it, it's literally done. And also it's exciting that AI and machine learning makes th leaps and bounds. I know it's scary to solve. There is the great, awesome tool I need to shout it out, which is move.ai which allows us to do motion capture with iPhones, rather than the super expensive equipment and super heavy equipment of the past, which was very difficult to ship around the world, needed to produce it to our company. To nowadays, we can just ship the iPhones in a box to somebody and do the motion capture from home, and if it goes wrong, we retake it tomorrow. That's for startup is groundbreaking. We can do things that only EA or Disney was capable of doing 10 years ago in pandemic circumstances on a low budget. So shout out to move.AI that technology is amazing and opens a lot of doors for us.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 35:31

Well, Pascal, the game you are developing phenoms, sounds really cool, and we are really looking forward to the big launch next year in 2025 so if our listeners want to learn more in the meantime and get ready to download this game once it's available, what is the best way for them to get in touch or learn more?

**Pascal Clarysse** 35:47

We have an Instagram and a Facebook on Big Karma HQ. we have we — identified as Big Karma on LinkedIn as well. And phenoms.com is our website if you want to email us, to say something, to support us in any way, shape or form, or to ask questions, I'm pretty sure there is an email at the bottom of phenoms.com and we're easy to find, and we're very responsive.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 36:13

Perfect. Well, Pascal, we appreciate you joining us today to share your insights and experiences with all of our listeners. It's been a pleasure to chat with you.

**Pascal Clarysse** 36:21

Thank you so much for having me, Maria. Thank you so much remarkable for everything you've done for company. It was great to chat with you, too.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 36:29

And listeners, now I am excited to introduce you all to our second guest, Matt Scott, two-time Paralympic gold medalist for team USA wheelchair basketball, an Olympics and Paralympics presenter for NBC, and also Executive Director of Fly Without Limits, a global disability empowerment organization. And listeners, Matt has had an opportunity to play Big Karmas game Phenoms, and he's also one of the playable characters in the game. So Matt, we are so excited to have you here with us today. Thank you so much for joining us.

**Matt Scott** 37:01

Thank you so much for having me. I'm very excited to have this discussion. I can just tell you right now that my inner child is very happy.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 37:11

I love it, and I'd love to hear more about this inner child and perhaps more about your life in general. So can you tell our listeners a little bit more about yourself?

**Matt Scott** 37:20

Of course. Well, we'll start from the beginning. Most people know me for the Paralympian that I am. I'm a five-time Paralympian, two-time gold medalist for team USA’s wheelchair basketball team, and wheelchair basketball has been my vehicle to make a name for myself and to be an advocate for disability as a whole. Now I see myself as much more than a Paralympian and much more than an athlete, but an advocate, an Executive Director, a corporate professional, and now recently a personality on the news with the Olympics and Paralympics being able to broadcast for NBC. There's just been like this holistic advocacy that I've been able to be a part of and wheelchair basketball has been the vehicle to get me there.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 38:03

I think that's absolutely amazing. And Matt, for listeners who might not know your story, if you're comfortable sharing it, can you tell us a little bit more about your disability?

**Matt Scott** 38:13

Of course. So I was born with a congenital birth defect called spina bifida. It affects my L4/L5 region in my vertebrae, which means that I am a full-time wheelchair user, a quite stylish wheelchair might I add. You mentioned Fly Without Limits earlier. And it's the disability empowerment organization that I run and executives direct. We like to push confidence. We like to promote feeling good about our disability in the situations that we're in. So I am a full-time wheelchair user, a very proud wheelchair user. So when you see me, whether I'm on the court or off the court, I'm usually in some stylish wheels.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 38:56

I love it. I love how the sense of style pervades everything that you do, and I know you've got some fun things going on with Big Karma. Can you tell us maybe first, the story of how this all came about? How did you first find out about Big Karma and the game that they're working on Phenoms?

**Matt Scott** 39:12

Well, I started this interview telling you how excited my inner child is. So I grew up as a gamer. I love to play games, whether it be on my phone or whether it be on a console, and just very fun. And I still, to this day, I still find myself when I’m traveling or on a road trip, finding myself playing these games. So when I had the opportunity to play phenoms and see myself as a playable character, it’s really hard to put into words, but it really felt like a dream come true. I know I try to avoid cliches, but this is truly something that I’ve dreamed of playing different games like NBA, 2k when I was a kid, I used to think, “Well, I wish there was wheelchair basketball player in that,” and then as I became a better and better wheelchair basketball player, and started to see myself in the higher ranks of players in the world. I'm like, “I would like to see me as a playable character in a game.” And meeting the makers of this, meeting Pascal finding out the passion that he has for adaptive sports. It's really this infectious enthusiasm that I also share, and it just made sense to make that collaboration, see myself in the game, and like I told you, when I first got a chance to play and play as myself and make those shots, oh, my goodness, I am so happy. It's like something I can't describe in any kid that grew up as an athlete or a gamer would dream of an opportunity like this.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 40:41

I think that is remarkable. And can you share with us, I guess, what were some of those initial conversations, and what really sold it for you? What made you want to get involved with this particular game?

**Matt Scott** 40:52

Wasn’t a hard sell. Pascal — anybody that has a conversation with him can just feel his enthusiasm, and they can just feel how deeply connected he is to this vision. And I think five minutes talking to Pascal, he can convince you of just about anything, because he is a passionate person. He has a lot of passion about this. As I said, I share that passion with him, and also just the global advocacy of adaptive sports. So I've been wanting to fight for equity as a adaptive sports athlete, and have us on TV and have us represented in different spaces. But gaming isn't something that I ever thought was going to be possible. It's something I dreamed of, but it just wasn't an area that people were taking the opportunity. It's a tremendous opportunity, but people weren't diving at it. I commend Pascal for it. First of all, his vision, his bravery, and his just forward thinking in this, because this gang didn't just come out today, the ideation of this didn't just start today. He's been at this for years, and I cannot wait to see this in front of the general population and people get a chance to play with me. I'm a video game character!

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 42:05

I think most people in this world will not have this amazing opportunity to be a video game character. I think that's so cool. What was that like? Or, I guess, what was involved in becoming a character in this game?

**Matt Scott** 42:16

It is quite the process. They have to get down the character and make sure that it reflects the different athletes. And I have quite a few distinctive attributes about myself, so I'm not sure that I was the easiest character to create. When I play basketball. How can I explain this? So every athlete has their signature thing, right? So when I was growing up, I used to watch Allen Iverson. He had a sleeve, arm sleeve that he wore, and that was cool. Kobe had a leg sleeve that he wore. Let's see. Some players have headbands like a LeBron James. Some people, it's with their signature shoes. I turned one of my shoes forward and one of my shoes backwards. It's my signature.

Well, both of my feet are amputated, so I have the ability to just turn my shoes, any direction that I please. It's something that I've always done. I'm a little bit superstitious. That's kind of how it came about. It turned backwards when I was playing, and I didn't realize it. I had one of my best games, and I decided to continue doing that, but that signature is in the game. So when you play as Matt Scott, you see one shoe forward, one show backwards. I think that attention to detail is outstanding. You see the very distinctive dreadlocks and a headband. It's really interesting. I'm not sure how they did it, but they were able to capture who I am as a player, as an individual.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 43:33

I think that's so cool. And I think in addition to your signature style, I've heard there's some signature moves as well in the game. If you could comment on those, Matt.

**Matt Scott** 43:41

That’s awesome — I'm so happy that you went there, because it's really cool to have sort of invented something and for something to be your signature. And I think that is so cool. And a few years back, I was playing a game, of course, and I was trying to think of creative ways to score the basketball, maybe half or maybe behind the back. I just feel like everything's been done. So I laid on my back, in my wheelchair, strapped into my chair, and I shot the hoop. I shot the basket. I scored. It's a pretty difficult shot to make, and I've made that a signature shot. In the game Phenoms, when you get on fire and you hit, you know, one in a row, two in a row, three in a row, you start to catch fire. You have what's called a special shot, and then my character lays on his back, and he shoots it from a laying down position. It's super unique. It's something that the creators of Phenoms and I thought up as my signature, and now that's a part of the game. So now, when this game comes to light and everyone starts playing. That is the Matt Scott shot, and that is just the coolest thing ever.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 44:45

I think that's so cool. So has the Matt Scott shot caught on? Are other people trying it?

**Matt Scott** 44:50

Well, once this game goes live, there will definitely be some people trying it. I have seen some people try it, not as successfully, of course.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 44:58

Certainly. practice makes perfect. So let's talk about the process. Then you mentioned it was sort of understanding your style, understanding some of your signature moves, what else was involved in kind of becoming this character?

**Matt Scott** 45:09

I think one thing that Pascal has done really well is his research. I think that he understands all of the characters that are in the game and what they individually bring to the adaptive sports movement, and he's been able to convey that through the game, even when I first started to play the game. So you have to unlock my character, which I think is very cool.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 45:31

Premium. Yeah.

**Matt Scott** 45:32

I used to play Mortal Kombat all the time. And, you know, I used to have to get through this fighter to get to that fighter. I just thought it was so cool. I can't say enough about this game. It's really awesome. I can't wait for people to play it. So I had to play as another player to get to my player. And you can just see that all the players that are able to be unlocked. You can see how Pascal has or the rest of the creators of Phenoms as well. But Pascal specifically has done his research and he understands the uniqueness of these athletes that he's put in there. And I think his research and his understanding really shines through in this game. It's very easy just to take generic characters and say, Hey, this is a wheelchair basketball player, or hey, this is a skier, or this is a racer. It'd be very easy to do that, and I think people would still be excited to see themselves represented, but when they can play the game and they say, “Oh, hey, I know Matt Scott, that's awesome, I'm gonna play as Matt Scott,” and they maybe feel a little bit more connected to the game. And I think that's what this game has done really well. They weren't generic about it. They were very specific, and that really shines through.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 46:40

Very cool. So let's talk about the game play next. Matt, what was it like the first time you turned on this game and started playing?

**Matt Scott** 46:49

To be honest, I just let it sit there for a second. I would just kind of let it play out, listening to the music going around on the settings. I was just kind of feeling it. It's almost the way I can describe it is like when you get something that's really tangible that you could hold, and you just kind of take back and looking at it, checking out exactly what this is. I pushed every button, I went to every settings menu. I was just very impressed by the thought process behind this, the attention to detail behind it. It made me feel like the adaptive sports movement is really taking a giant leap forward, and that's really special.

And in no point in the game did I feel that disability was the focus. And I don't know if that makes sense, but let me try to break that down for you. The players in this game all have a disability, but I didn't feel like that was the point of the game. I felt like sports were being highlighted. I felt like athletes were being highlighted, and I didn't feel disability was the takeaway. I felt like each of these athletes were this phenom, the name of the game, and they did something truly remarkable. They all had special moves. They all have these go to things, and I wanted to unlock these things. I was less focused on their disability and more focused on what I could get them to accomplish, what ability they had. And I think that's a really special takeaway.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 48:15

Absolutely, and for gamers out there who might be interested in playing, or even for people who aren't very familiar with mobile games. Did you find it easy to get started and learn how to play the game?

**Matt Scott** 48:24

I did. I found that the user experience was very, very smooth. I was very happy that I was the first character I could unlock, because I just wanted to play as myself. I couldn’t wait! The gameplay was great. I feel like I learned very quickly how to excel in the game. But it wasn't too easy. It was also very challenging at first, to get to the special mood, to get consistent with it. I'm a fast learner, but I'm also someone who likes a challenge, and I think that this game has a beautiful balance of very smooth and easy gameplay, but also leaving you feeling challenged and giving you something to aspire to do.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 49:03

Definitely. So would you say Matt has playing this particular game maybe changed how you think about your disability, or even just other disabilities in general, as you played other characters?

**Matt Scott** 49:13

Oh, without question. Well, first of all, this game gives me an incredible hope for the future. I told you that as a kid, it's something that I really dreamed of to be a part of something like this, but didn't know if it was possible. The fact that it is possible, the fact that I've played it, that I've seen it, that I've been able to see other Paralympians and other adaptive sports athletes a part of this game, it's really remarkable, and it gives me just a great hope for the future. It makes me feel like this runway to LA 2028 — this next Paralympics — is really going to be groundbreaking for the Paralympic movement, for the adaptive sports movement. And I hope that people are going to be leading up to this game. They're going to be playing a game like Phenoms and catching the Phenom bug, and then being able to see different sports live in LA, 2028 that they've played in this game.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 50:05

Absolutely. I think that excitement, that enthusiasm, is just going to be building from now until the 2028 games, and then being able to see characters who they recognize as well. I think is really cool.

**Matt Scott** 50:16

Absolutely.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 50:17

So let's talk about who might enjoy this game. I know, Matt, perhaps you have a biased opinion as you are part of it. Who do you think might benefit from playing Big Karma’s games?

**Matt Scott** 50:27

When I think about who can benefit, I don't think that there's a cap on that. I think everybody could benefit from playing this game. I don't think that it is specifically for adaptive sports fans or adaptive sport athletes. I think this is for anyone who enjoys gaming. It's just fun. The game is just flat out fun to play. It's fun to unlock the different players. It's fun to unlock the different moves. If you're a fan of gaming, you're going to enjoy this game. If you're an adaptive sports fan, you're going to really love this game. If you don't know anything about adaptive sports, not only are you going to learn something new, you're going to enjoy this game.

I think it's for everyone. I'm in my 30s, and I'm sitting here with the biggest smile on face playing the game. I think college kids can enjoy it. I think teenagers can enjoy it. I think youngsters can enjoy it. I don't think that there's a cap on who can enjoy this game. It's just really enjoyable all around.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 51:19

Definitely. And what do you think might be some of the impacts as more people start playing this game when it becomes available? How do you see people maybe changing how they think about disability?

**Matt Scott** 51:29

Absolutely, so I think there will be a domino effect of games like this. I think Phenoms would definitely set off a generation of people who no longer see disability as a negative thing. When I grew up, disability was always taught, or even told to me, that it's just this negative thing where a game like this doesn't highlight disability, it highlights ability, and it shows that people with disabilities are truly capable of great things. And it's almost like they're in this heroic position where they're the good guy in the game, they're the phenom in the game. I think that's going to change perception and really be a catalyst for change.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 52:08

I love that. And for listeners out here who are getting excited already, Matt, what would you say to people who might be considering trying this game?

**Matt Scott** 52:16

First thing I'm going to say is get to the level where you unlock Matt Scott, you know, hit some threes, and then make sure that when you hit that special shot that you tag me on Instagram, because I'm easy to find there— @MattScottFly.

But honestly, the thing that I can tell people who are getting excited for this game is share it with people. Don't just be excited individually. Don't keep it to yourself. This isn't something that you should just play in a silo and not let people know. This is something that can spread like wildfire, and it can really change people's perception. So not only does it have the impact, but it also is just fun. Tell a friend to tell a friend. Phenoms is here, and it's going to change your view on adaptive sport.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 52:58

I love it, and I think you made some really good points about how this is going to potentially change people's perceptions of disability, or how they feel about their own disability. But can you comment on what this might mean for people who might be interested in pursuing adaptive sports, sort of the next generation of Paralympians?

**Matt Scott** 53:15

Well, when we start to see where adaptive sports takes us, when we start to see that success in adaptive sports can not only lead to medals and accolades, but it can also lead to representation in things like this, like video games, it's going to give people bigger aspiration. I think that you can't know something until you see it sometimes. The adaptive sports athletes, the Paralympians that you see in this game, are the example, and we're showing the next generation what they have in store and what they can aspire to reach. So we're going to start to see more representation. We're going to start to see more participation, and we're going to see more competitors in the adaptive sports space because of things like this.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 53:56

Absolutely. I cannot wait to see these changes unfold, Matt. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience with this game, or about your experience working with Big Karma?

**Matt Scott** 54:06

The last thing I would like to share is just that I'm excited for the future, and Big Karma is responsible for a lot of that excitement because of games like Phenoms. I'm super grateful to be a part of this project. It's incredibly forward thinking. I think adaptive sports is the next win, and the forward thinking here is truly admirable. I think that we've seen a huge surge in women's sport right now, and I think that adaptive sports is next, and for Big Karma to be leading the way in that with Phenoms just says a lot about the vision behind it.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 54:43

Definitely. And I know, Matt, you have the inside scoop on the game, and I know people may be itching to get their hands on it right away, but it's not available yet. Can you give our listeners a sense of when they can expect to be able to play this game?

**Matt Scott** 54:54

I would say, look out for Phenoms in 2025. It's definitely coming soon. And let the anticipation build, because this game is really fun, and if you're excited to play it now, you just wait until this comes out. It's going to be even better.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 55:08

I love it. Well, listeners definitely start learning about this game now. Get ready for the big launch upcoming next year. And Matt, thank you so much for joining us on the show today. It's been such a pleasure to chat with you.

**Matt Scott** 55:20

Of course, thank you for your hospitality.

**Dr. Marie McNeely** 55:23

Well, Matt, thank you again and listeners. It's been so wonderful to have you here with us as well. We would be grateful if you could take a moment to leave us a review on your favorite podcast platform to let us know what you think of the show. We look forward to connecting with you again in our next episode of Changing What's Possible.