

# Asymmetric Play in a Competitive Landscape: Attitudes and Fairness

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## INTRODUCTION

More games companies are implementing accessibility features in their games. For those who require additional accessibility needs in their daily lives, games can often be exclusionary. Developing accessible game adaptations often falls to the wayside or is not prioritised during the production process (Bierre, 2005; Game Accessibility Guidelines, nd; Hassan, 2024; Horowitz, 2024). Competitive games such as *Valorant* (Riot Games, 2020) and *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), offer little to no accessibility assistance, causing some players to avoid the genre entirely (Dalglish, 2024; Porter and Kientz, 2013). Asymmetric play is where each players (or team's) experience has "variations in gameplay" and likewise asymmetric competition is when these differences are present in a competitive sense (Neto *et al.*, 2022).

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This presentation asks:

- 1) To what extent can asymmetrical adaptations be implemented in competitive games?
- 2) How can these adaptations be made fair to sighted players and blind and partially sighted players?
- 3) What do players perceive as fairness in asymmetrical competitive gameplay?

This presentation utilises Woodruff's definition of fairness as "equality, agreement, and transparency" (2011, p. 111). Thus, we will map accessibility onto these three factors of fairness.

## **THE CURRENT COMPETITIVE LANDSCAPE FOR ACCESSIBILITY**

In recent years, there has been an identifiable shift towards asymmetric experiences through in-game accessibility options and adaptive hardware. For example, *Street Fighter 6* (Capcom, 2023) has been praised by lived-experience users for allowing more motor-disabled players to engage with game (Matlock, 2023).

Advocacy for accessibility in games has also increased and is becoming more mainstream (Anderson, 2024; Kaigo and Okura, 2020). More games are implementing accessibility adaptations (Guzsvinecz, 2025). Single player, AAA titles like *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020) have been played by fully blind gamers (Molloy and Carter, 2020). However, this shift of increasing accessibility has not carried over entirely to the competitive, multiplayer space.

### **Asymmetry in Competitive Games, Balance, and Player Attitudes**

Blind and partially sighted people experience the world differently to sighted people. In competitive sports, it is not unknown to have asymmetrical additions to the core sport. Performance Handicap Racing Fleet (PHRF) in sailing is where different boats have a handicap factor, and the elapsed time of each boat is multiplied by the handicap factor. This makes the boat with the lowest time after the result is calculated from the multiplication win the race (US Sailing, nd). Video games can benefit from the same openness to asymmetric adaptations, linking closely to the United Nations disability principles of equality of opportunity and full and effective participation and inclusion in society (United Nations, nd).

Currently, competitive video games are concerned with balance and fairness of mechanics and gameplay. The craft of balancing in multiplayer games has been studied both academically (Beau and Bakkes, 2016; Jaffe, 2012) and via industry-led event conferences (GDC Festival of Gaming, 2017; GDC Festival of Gaming, 2020). The overarching factors of balance in multiplayer link to design goals and equality of opportunity. Frustration, aggression, and general player dissatisfaction can stem from an improper balance in systems. Hodent argues, "Humans can have a strong reaction to unfairness, so if the game is not well balanced – or simply perceived as unbalanced whether that's true or not...it could create some significant frustration" (2018, p.145-146).

Some studies have looked into the balance and enjoyment of games played between sighted players and blind and partially sighted players. Grabski *et al.* (2016) examined asymmetric play between sighted and partially sighted players. The competitive game study found that as rounds continued, both player types had near-equal enjoyment. Conversely, Trindade *et al.* (2025) focused more on perceived fairness. Notably, some sighted players felt they had an advantage, but also believed the asymmetric competition was engaging. The aspect of challenge was seen as fair by both groups.

## METHODOLOGY

We will investigate asymmetric play in a competitive landscape through:

- 1) The creation of a competitive game with asymmetric adaptations
- 2) User testing of both sighted players and blind and partially sighted players
- 3) Analysing of quantitative player data and qualitative interview data from players with lived experience of sight loss

### Visual Obfuscation

Two versions of gameplay will be compared and analysed. This study will investigate aesthetic adaptations within a competitive game. One adaptation will be varying levels of visibility in a high contrast mode that shows enemies clearly. One version would be of an entire screen overlay (see figure 1) and another which only makes edges of walls and other assets glow when an enemy is behind them.



**Figure 1:** Developed entire screen overlay high contrast showcase. Screenshots from TATS, our custom developed game (Bicker *et al.*, 2025).

Eye tracking will be utilised for this study with sighted players to identify player fixations on the screen and explore how the adaptations cause players to react.

The second aesthetic adaptation is an adaptive camouflage system developed in-house which will be applied to the player mesh. This system can react dynamically to the player environment, obscuring the player using the adaptation and increase fairness for blind and partially sighted players. Their player character will be better camouflaged while the sighted player will be more visible.

Data from the studies will be collected via a mixed-method approach with interviews used to ascertain their personal thoughts on how balanced and fair they felt the experiment. As well as player performance data informing whether the experience was fair and balanced.

## CONCLUSION

The research we are undertaking directly draws from the United Nation disability general principles, raising fairness and equality within competitive games. We will be developing asymmetric adaptations while working closely with lived-experience blind and partially sighted players for direct continuous feedback. Our aim throughout the practice-based study is to foster inclusive competition while acknowledging each player may have different requirements for inclusivity. The need for acceptance and proactive development in this space is evident as progressively more games have a competitive angle to them. Inclusivity and equality begin through action.

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