Intellectual Disability and Game Accessibility

ABSTRACT

Videogames are increasingly recognised as an important "quality of life resource" for people with disabilities [1], as has the need, within game industry accessibility advocacy groups, for guidance and assistance in creating accessible games. The IGDA's Game Accessibility Special Interest Group, for instance, was formed with the mission of helping "the game community strive towards creating mainstream games that are universally accessible to all, regardless of age, experience and disability" [2]. Creating universally accessible games is a tall order, however. First, accessibility is not on the agenda of many publishers and developers. While attracting a wider audience is very much on the minds of game publishers and developers—e.g. Microsoft's *Halo3* marketing campaign was founded upon a push to move the Halo game series from a "hard core" to mainstream playing audience [3] --many mainstream game creators have not considered the significant role accessibility could play in such expansion. Second, while game consoles such as Nintendo's Wii have highlighted advantages of games for people with physical impairments, "universal" accessibility requires acknowledging the often overlooked disability groups playing games, i.e. those individuals with visual and auditory impairments.

The intent of this paper is to raise awareness, within the field of game studies, of one of the most misunderstood and marginalised disability communities playing games: people with intellectual disabilities (IDs). Intellectual disability can be defined, somewhat simplistically, as mental impairment and low IQ, resulting in, for example: difficulty communicating or socialising; problems with activities like reading, writing and using money; difficulty understanding or controlling emotions or behaviour; and dependence on the support of others. Accessibility is particularly complicated in the case of people with intellectual disabilities, as often, they not only have a complex of cognitive impairments (e.g. autism and dyslexia), but accompanying visual, motor and sensory impairments (e.g. blindness and hearing loss). Consequently, efforts to ensure "access by everyone regardless of disability," have largely ignored the ID user group. The accessibility needs of ID gamers are often poorly understood, even by game accessibility experts whose expertise is more likely to lie in the fields of sensory or physical disability.

The paper first introduces the ID audience. Then, presenting results from a small qualitative study it discusses what characteristics of video games make them an ideal entertainment medium for people with ID. The paper continues by explaining the role video games can play in equality and inclusion for ID game players. It suggests possibilities for integrating ID accessibility throughout the game development process, focusing in particular on strategies for user testing. The paper concludes by calling for further research and dialogue within the field of game studies in both the area of ID accessibility and the wider game accessibility arena.

REFERENCES

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