

WHY NOT JUST MAKE AN EASY MODE?

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Why do people enjoy video games so much? Whether it's to feel that sweet rush of adrenaline and pride at performing a difficult maneuver, to find comfort in a fictional world far away from the boredom and stress of reality, or even to exercise that creative yet chaotic brain, video games have always catered to a variety of conflicting entertainment interests. But, according to a 2021 statistic, out of the more than 3 billion people in the world who play video games casually, a third of them can't enjoy their hobby without varying levels of physical and/or cognitive difficulty (Baltzar et al., 1).

Although game developers have become more aware of their disabled audience in recent years, including closed-captioning and subtitle options for in-game dialogue, high contrast UI options, and integration with accessible controllers such as the Xbox Adaptive Controller in their games, there's still a lot more that can be done. According to a 2021 survey, only 42% of the gaming population believe developers do enough to accommodate mentally and physically disabled gamers (Gardner). A major reason for this attitude, and which still stands as the biggest barrier to accessible gaming, is developers' refusal to implement, or even consider, accessibility options that would influence core gameplay features.

Think of how players may need to move and interact with a game environment: mashing buttons to perform rapid actions, holding triggers to move objects, and using gyro controls to aim long range weapons. All these maneuvers can be extremely difficult or time-consuming for people with certain motor control or mobility issues. Some games, specifically action games with

combat and/or platforming elements, require players to execute these actions quickly and accurately, which only exacerbates the existing issue. Any mechanics that require speed, accuracy, and precise timing can also be problematic. Quick-time events, which require players to press a specific input or combination of inputs within a certain time frame to avoid negative in-game consequences, are an egregious example of this, punishing players who may have a hard time handling a controller in the first place or just can't physically react fast enough to the game's prompts. Games that require visual and audio cues, such as a stealth game that needs players to listen for incoming footsteps to avoid a deadly enemy encounter or an action game that requires players to observe enemy attack animations to predict their next move, can prevent those who have auditory and/or visual processing disorders from fully enjoying them. They may have issues properly discerning these sensory cues or find them overwhelming and distressing.

All these concerns force developers to consider how some of the gameplay mechanics they come up with may unintentionally create barriers that prevent disabled people from enjoying their game the intended way. Unfortunately, many of them believe it would take too much time and resources to integrate these kinds of accommodations into a game most players can play without them. From their perspective, accessibility options are inconvenient and unnecessary to implement and may even undermine their artistic intentions. It doesn't help that a sizable portion of the gaming community supports this perspective, fueled additionally by the misconception that accessibility means dumbing down a game for those who can't be bothered to play it properly.

A game that perfectly demonstrates this problem and most discussions surrounding it is *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*. Released

in spring of 2019, it quickly gained notoriety for its harsh technical skill curve, which demands unforgiving levels of precision and timing from its players to defeat even the most basic enemies. To land successful attacks, players must watch each frame carefully to find an opening in the enemy's often quick and unreliable movement patterns, all the while guarding their own character from a potential onslaught. Many players with disabilities complained about the game's inherent inaccessibility, with one critic explaining that because of his chronic pain, he's 10% clumsier with controllers, making the game 10% harder than intended. These complaints, combined with critiques from able-bodied players that the game's difficulty is unnecessary and unenjoyable, lead to a discussion on whether *Sekiro* should have an optional easy mode. Some people from the community quickly rose to oppose that idea, claiming that an easy mode, or any kind of accessibility option, would tarnish director Hidetaka Miyazaki's creative intent and the studio FromSoftware's core philosophy of creating games that challenge players to a high degree and encourage trial-by-error gameplay. They also argued that if people have such a hard time with the game, they should look elsewhere for less intensive games instead of dumbing down *Sekiro* to appeal to players who were clearly too lazy or incompetent to properly learn and master the mechanics. Beating the game with any kind of assistance feature was seen from their point of view as another form of cheating. A hollow victory that should be shamed.

Many of these points were brought up by able-bodied people who never had to worry about whether a game would be unenjoyable or unplayable due to factors outside their control. Video games are a great source of comfort and amusement for disabled gamers, with 68% saying in a 2021 survey that gaming improves their mental health and 47% saying gaming brings them happiness (Gardner). It's not fair for the community to

decide whether their disabilities should prevent people from engaging in a casual hobby. This gatekeeping mentality that's present in the Sekiro fanbase and others like it ignores the fact that difficulty is subjective. It's reductive to claim accessibility options make a game easier because different people have different physical and mental limitations. Merely increasing player defense and decreasing enemy attack power isn't enough. In fact, I believe implementing an easy mode isn't an effective way at all for games to address inaccessibility because it assumes a one size fits all solution to a nuanced problem. Accessibility is about providing options. Options that remove invisible barriers of access and allow disabled players to get the intended experience without having to sacrifice the experience of other players.

It may seem like an insurmountable task to integrate radical accessibility options in a way that still preserves the core fun behind the game mechanics, but many indie developers in recent years have gotten closer. *Celeste*, released by Maddy Thorson in 2018, became known in the industry for implementing revolutionary accessibility options in its acclaimed assist mode. Known across its fanbase for its challenging platforming maps and unforgiving movement mechanics, it seems surprising at first glance that there are options to slow the game speed and give players infinite stamina or invincibility, all presented in a non-judgmental way. Thorson said in an interview that the assist mode was intended to "accept that every player is different" because "people come into the game at many different skill levels" (Klepek). Although the mode was a relatively late addition to the game, Thorson claimed it didn't require many resources or time to implement. With the amount of positive reception assist mode has received, especially from disabled players who were overjoyed that it gave them the opportunity to experience a game they'd written off before as "not for them", Thorson says she and

her team were happy they decided to go through with the idea.

Celeste has inspired various other indie games to include accessibility options that change the very fabric of gameplay and influenced the community's view toward accessible gaming. *Celeste* fans have even programmed mods, which are fan-made alterations to an existing game, that implement an assist mode feature in games such as *Cuphead*, another beloved indie game with notoriously challenging mechanics. Although we still have a long way to go in terms of making games playable to everyone, especially since the disabled community encompasses people with a wide variety of cognitive, mental, and physical disabilities that extend beyond motor control disorders, game developers and accessibility consultants have been working hard in the background to create a better experience for all.

Works Cited

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