

You First Podcast - Accessibility Outside the Box Episode 5: Video Gaming

Keith Casebonne: You're listening to You First -- The Disability Rights Florida Podcast. On this episode of our series "Accessibility Outside the Box", let's learn about accessible video gaming.

[background music]

Keith: Hi there. I'm Keith. Co-host of the You First Podcast. We are excited to be back with our fifth episode of our series Accessibility Outside the Box. This one, all about video gaming. This is one of my favorite episodes so far because I find tech and gaming accessibility really interesting.

Maddie Crowley: Yeah, me too. Hi everyone. I'm Maddie. The other co-host of the podcast. So far, our series has covered accessibility and traveling, city planning, fashion, and recreation.

This episode is going to focus all about accessible video gaming, where accessible gaming was back in the day with our first consoles that came out, where it is now, and the future of accessible gaming.

Keith: On our podcast today, we've got James Rath. James is a legally blind film director, accessibility advocate, and speaker. In his accessibility efforts, he provides video game and console accessibility reviews, acts as an accessibility consultant for video game companies, and drives the future of gaming in a positive direction.

Maddie: We had such a great time chatting with them. It's an awesome interview and we both learned a lot in our short conversation with.

Keith: Hey, James. Thanks for coming back to the podcast. We really appreciate it.

James Rath: Thank you for having me.

Keith: Indeed. Tell us a little bit about yourself and how you got started with accessible video gaming.

James: Yeah. Full-time, I'm a video content creator who has been legally blind. A lot of that work just stem back into creating online videos about my experience with my visual impairment and the technology I use.

A lot of that goes back into entertainment because tech and video games intersect quite a bit, and once just more of an entertainment form. I grew up playing video games, but not many because many weren't very accessible for a visually impaired audience.

Even the ones that I could play weren't necessarily designed for me in mind, but maybe had some accidental design that just happened to work out. It's just the way that they were built. I just became a bit more interested in gaming around...

Video games are oftentimes separate into generations, based on when all the consoles are coming out around the same time. It was this last generation that I had fallen out a little bit because I become an adult, responsibilities, moving, and trying to focus a little more on work.

Then there were some connections. I did pick up like a Mario Kart and just to play casually with friends. I'm like, "I wish this was easier to play. I wish this was a little bit more accessible for me. I know it's, we're just having fun, but I found a few games that just take me back into gaming a bit."

As I talked about it online through connections, I met Jeff Keeley who is a big name in the gaming space. He runs, going back to G4 TV, even like he currently is running the summer of games fest, which is what's been helping to keep the flow of announcements in this drought that is without E3, which is the annual biggest gaming expo of the year.

E3, of course not happening this year, I got to speak, thanks to Jeff, at E3 of 2018 on stage with a few other, Pauline, who had just got to meet up again during a accessibility consulting gig, which is really cool. Pauline, fantastic. A disability advocate and a gamer as well.

Some representatives from Sony and Microsoft. We were all on stage to talk about the current state of accessibility and gaming. We talked a lot about how there's movement and there's a lot of talk, but there has been a lot of action. This was around the time when Microsoft was releasing the adaptive controller.

Long story short, after that meeting and opportunity, I started getting involved with game accessibility, consulting through those connections and helping to forward the industry, going to this new generation, do my part.

Again, there's many other people involved with this, but helping to preserve our ability to play these games down the line as are, the accessibility features we're adding today is what's helping us to be able to play these tomorrow. Whether you need these now or when you're older.

Keith: That's really incredible. A very interesting path that you've taken, and the industry is at least seeming to be interested in taking. Let's cut back to more of the basic questions. What would you say makes a video game accessible?

What are accessibility features you'd want to see in a game that you would consider it to be accessible, playable by as many people as possible.

James: There is a few approaches. Some gaming companies take one and others are taking others. I'm not afraid to sort of name names, because it's a good point of discussion.

Keith: Yeah. Go for it.

James: Way to draw some examples. Nintendo, for example. They make some pretty approachable games, right? They are very family friendly. They're easy to oftentimes pick up. They don't tend to make their games technically accessible.

Some games are accessible in that I've been able to play a lot, some Nintendo games. Not all, but some just because of how the gameplay elements are, or maybe in the art style is high contrast and cartoony enough where it's easier for me to see.

Nintendo isn't considering, when you go into the options, when you have the settings on you having a whole section for accessibility, like some other game developers are now, and I wish they would do more and other developers too.

Now when you look at the other side of it, you have Sony going out of there and Microsoft implementing entire global teams who can help be resources within the company. Because again, these companies are huge.

You have the publisher and under the publisher, tons of studios that are either acquired, coming in later, some that are maybe built up within, under the publisher. A lot of disconnection between these teams. By having these global accessibility teams that are certain to be rolled out, they're trying to tackle more of the technical accessibility. Allowing for things like not just colorblindness modes, but options for constant control mapping, being able to skip puzzles, if they're too complex or that require too much input, that maybe someone doesn't have the ability to do.

That's where accessibility and video games, there's really two ways to look at it if there's approachability and then an accessible video game. Sometimes people, especially in the mainstream, overlap these terms where they're like, "Yeah, no, We Sports is a very accessible game."

No, that requires motion controls. There are some people who cannot, and there is no other option to not do it with motion control. Accessible games give you options, or they give you options to see, to hear, or relay that information in different ways, or to relay your input, physical, motion, or buttons in a different way that would make it accessible game.

Keith: The more options, the more accessible.

James: Absolutely.

Keith: You've mentioned Nintendo, Microsoft, Sony. Of course, when I hear that, I think of consoles. Is that sort of where the accessibility's work is focused on? Or how does accessibility between, let's say, console gaming versus UPC gaming, and then even the mobile gaming, which is getting bigger and bigger, obviously.

What's the difference between the accessibility of those different modes of play?

James: The interesting advantage with PC gaming, most of these games that are a AAA titles or multi-platform, they're available also on PC, whether they're on a storefront like Steam, or Epic Store, or EA, if that's still around. There's a lot of storefronts.

With the PC, you had the advantage of these things are technically built for PC first and then re-considered for the console that they're being made for, because consoles tend to be limited in power and hardware, and that'd be reworked a little bit for that specific ecosystem.

With the PC side there's usually community around that. If there's an active player base or community interested, you start getting mods made. Modifications to these games that are open source and you can download. There's an entire Grand Theft Auto mode for visually impaired and blind players to really enjoy the game even more.

That's something that not even the developer put in or implemented, but as far as I'm aware, the developers like hands off, they're like, "Hey, you know what? Do it. Go for it. We're not going to..." Then there were some companies like the Nintendos of the world who don't want you touching anything that they built.

They want to sell it to you. That's like a license for you to play it, but not to open it up, reconstruct it, and change anything, add accessibility to it. That's a whole other dialog, and almost like moral thing to dissect, but that's where you can find on the PC side is a lot of community support for accessibility.

On the console side, you are kind of reliant on the platform a little bit. What is Microsoft doing? What is Sony doing? What does Nintendo have? There's a few things on a system level to even get into your game, to maybe interact and overlay with a Zoom feature or button mapping.

Then you have to rely on the developer themselves to include that accessibility feature in the game. Because games are built in all these different engines. It's a little hard for...It's one thing for Android or iOS to develop system level accessibility features, but then those apps can easily interact with those system level accessibility.

Games are a bit more complex than that. Being built in different things like engines like unity or, again, a number of things just cannot communicate or interact as well with the system at hand. You just have to do a little bit more research right now, a lot of it's still being developed and awareness is still being brought across the industry.

Keith: That's really interesting and how different it is. In a way it's not too surprising that PC games would be the most accessible considering obviously it's a more open platform than a console game would be. Even the benefit of having a keyboard and mouse, you could go in and probably do some tweaking and controlling.

It just opens up more possibilities, but I really love the idea of community and how disability advocacy is part of making these mods for PC games. That's really great. If you could expand a little more on the community aspect of that, and the kind of things that people might be doing, or even other ways that others could get involved, that would be really wonderful.

James: Gosh. A lot of these older games too. When you go back and find emulators, and this is whole other, maybe topic of discussion. Because emulation itself is legal. As long as you have the original rom and that's something...

[crosstalk]

James: ...you can do what you want at least here in the US with that.

If I had a copy of the Nintendo 64 game, and I had the hardware to output the rom of that game from the cartridge onto my PC, and then start playing. If I wanted to start building upon that, like a zoom feature or a way for it to OCR the texts and then have it start reading it and relaying it to me, I do have the right to do that.

There are people out there already doing that as far as I'm aware. Then when you get into obviously like more modern PC games, there's all these mod communities that are oftentimes communicating in forums or online.

I'm not as much into PC gaming personally that has to do with my other profession, being a video editor and video creator. That living on the Mac ecosystem side. I am not as involved with PC gaming.

Keith: Gaming is not quite the same on the Mac...

[crosstalk]

James: Not a lot.

Keith: ...a PC.

James: Definitely not, and for a number of reasons. I've been trying to keep up a little bit with it, but I know it's quite accessible over there, especially if you can find that community and find the resources needed.

Maybe you need to have a bit more of a technical mindset going into it, and technical understanding for a lot of these things. I have a lot of that surface level knowledge, and I maybe can start to research it as I come across terms I don't understand.

I'm not a coder. I'm not a programmer. At most I'm a play tester and I can consult accessibility, a user interface feedback, as a consumer with visual impairment to companies I work with.

Keith: Narrowly or you brought up Microsoft's adaptive controller. I want to talk a little bit about that. One specifically, it was opened the door and then some of the other permit have been...There've been a couple now new controllers that have come out to help people with disabilities play games they may not have been able to play before. Tell us a little about that.

James: Microsoft really made a splash in the headlines, and I'm glad they did. They even did a Super Bowl ad. It really shows their commitment to the project and just their values of accessibility. I Then Solve For You, which is another company that makes controllers, make a very similar controller for Nintendo Switch.

They have a very, I don't know exactly how well it runs, if there's any limitations with it. Maybe it works as well. It's made for Switch, but it works across platforms. The way that these work is they have very minimal controls on a flat kind of surface, and then a ton of inputs that can, on the back that you can basically input different sorts of buttons or switches.

Great for people with physical disabilities who have more customized or ordered options that can work with the hardware that they already maybe own, or get specifically for their needs.

That way they can map those specific controls, such as like a C stick or an X or B button that maybe isn't as reachable for them on a standard traditional controller, to something that is more at home for them. That's the cool thing about the adaptive controller. It's meant to be very adaptive to anyone who needs it.

It's really like you got to deck it out a bit and invest a little bit into it. It opens doors and possibilities for many people. With that, we've seen Microsoft very open about like supporting this across, if Sony wants to let this work on PlayStation...It does, they're open to it.

Same thing with Nintendo. If they're like the lettuce will open the door for their console too. That has helped bring a lot more awareness to accessibility, especially from a hardware front to the mainstream. An interesting kind of thing to note is Nintendo as a whole, but Nintendo of America should have an adaptive controller back in the '80s.

Early '90s, maybe, but I think it was the late '80s and it was for children typically in hospitals could get it provided pretty easily, but it was for the NAS. You could blow into a straw to, if I'm remembering the article correctly, because it's like it was scanned from a magazine.

You could basically order it by calling Nintendo and it would help you just basically, if you had physical disability, interact with your games and remap those the D pad and the AB buttons very easily to just different actions.

So really cool stuff. Nintendo never made a follow-up for the Super NES. Really hasn't been consistent with accessibility sense, which is a shame. Hopefully that changes. That's something that we're seeing across, especially from other developers going into the software side.

Again, the adaptive controller is one of the biggest things to really come out of the last few years. It really brought some awareness.

Keith: Yeah, definitely. That's incredible. I'd never heard about that from the original NES. That's fascinating and it's too bad that they dropped the ball on that. Nintendo was a leader in so many aspects that unfortunately gave up over the year. Maybe it's not too surprising, sadly.

A lot of what we've already talked about and generally think about when it comes to accessibility for video games would be, of course, the physical aspect regarding the controllers. Things like close captions or text to speech, things like that.

What about someone with a developmental disability, or a sensory disability, perhaps someone who has autism spectrum disorder or something like that. What kind of aspects of accessibility are out there for video games to make that experience more enjoyable for them?

James: It's a little hard for me to speak on that. I'm just not personally identify identifying with being on the spectrum myself, but I know at least like having...I had pretty bad ADHD. I'm pretty open about that. Some things that do help me are when there's even things like voice acting, or I know text to speech just helps in general for the vision side of it.

If there is large texts and if I can read a bubble of texts or menu, but if it's also just being read aloud as I'm going through menus, it's just sinking into my brain a little easier. That this is where I'm at in the menus or UI.

Other things are just colors, being very aware of your color palette, whether it's in menus or even the game itself, what all those are. There's plenty of resources to not have like over simulating, an over censoring color choices.

A lot of that goes back to when you look at the web accessibility content guidelines, it's a lot of it will just transfer over to video games in many ways. By following a lot of that and implementing those practices, it can go a long way.

Of course, reconsider things for the entertainment in the cinematic aspect of what video games have to offer based on your artistic direction. There's a lot you could definitely do to really...Again, that's more certainly a question that could better be answered for those on the spectrum.

I don't necessarily want to speak for them, but I definitely think there's a lot that could be said there.

Keith: One thought that comes to mind is a setting that maybe reduces the volume of loud sounds or something like that. I don't know if you've run across that or...?

James: Yeah, no, but for sure, even my Apple TV has a great feature like that, where it will know ahead of time, it just processes the audio for whatever you're streaming and it will reduce anything that's about to peak in that moment, which is great.

I thought about that the other day. I'm like, "I do wish that was in other forms of media or even just other hardware." That's something that could be maybe like, again, if that's on a system level for an Apple TV, why can't that just exist on a Switch, a Xbox, or PlayStation?

Maybe that feature is somewhere deep in there. I could double check the PlayStation settings, but that's something that should definitely be implemented on a system level.

Keith: Hopefully all the big companies are listening to this right now. That'd be great. Really multiple accessibility features all working together, having the ability to adjust to your individual needs. That's really the panacea here, right?

Essentially just having everything that someone needs at their fingertips and customizing the experience just for them. What kind of resources are there out there for gamers with disabilities to help them find games that maybe would be playable? What types of equipment to use, or maybe even games and equipment to avoid? That sort of thing.

James: A lot of it is community efforts, but you'd always first check if you're going to look at a platform, Microsoft or a PlayStation's website. They oftentimes list out accessibility settings that they offer. Many have been added with the recent software updates for the Xbox series XS and the PlayStation Five.

I think the PS4 has also gotten some new updates in the last couple years with added accessibility. Those are some great places to first look in their support areas of their sites. Then beyond that, I'm joining in on the conversation for on Twitter, on other social media.

If you're not there, one place I do know that is community-driven of journalists who review games and accessories to for accessibility, and that's going to be Can I Play That? CIPT. I think it's playthat.com. I'll just double check that, but that's one that I personally support on Patreon.

Because I love what they're doing. Yeah. Caniplaythat.com. They're a fantastic resource and they have a good team of people who are just as new games are coming out, they're doing it almost as far as I'm aware, at a loss because they all work other jobs and they're putting their resources into just trying to have a great place for gamers with disabilities to go to.

"OK. This new X-Box game just came. Would this work well for me?" They try to cover, "Here's what it has to offer for those who might have a visual impairment. Those who might be hard of hearing. Those who may have a cognitive disability, like here's, what is all there."

Maybe it doesn't have something in a certain area, so then it will note that. It's great. The other places it's just YouTube is a great resource too. Looking up at individual video. Maybe including terms like accessibility review.

You may find, depending on...I cover a lot more like consumer tech these days and kind of the surface level things like I just did a PlayStation Five vision accessibility video, and Switch One, where I go over the features that I use, and then what's there.

I don't dive too deep in individual games, but a blind gamer Steve Sailor is a great resource for that. He has made it a niche to cover games individually, one by one on that accessibility front. Again, there's Ross Miners and other totally blind gamer who does that.

There's Grain Stoner who's a journalist with a physical disability who tends to review games and do a lot of opinion pieces on pushing the gaming industry further with accessibility.

Keith: Can I play that calmness. It's a great resource and other straightforward name too. That's perfect. Last question. What are some of your favorite games, or let's say maybe your favorite gaming experiences in the accessibility realm?

James: I got to say I've been on a kick since really the whole pandemic period of social multiplayer games. Great way to engage with folks from all over and friends. I've been playing a lot more. You party online, Fall Guy has been one that I've been playing on recently jumped back into Splatoon Two as the anticipation for Splatoon Three has come up.

Probably locked in nearly 200 hours in Pokémon in the last year because of the Legends Archaes, and the last of remakes that came out. In terms of overall accessibility experiences I've had recently, I got to say Spiderman remastered for PS5. Fantastic.

Beautiful world, recreated, while also at the same time as a visually impaired gamer, I can strip the textures all the way. I can live in this sort of gray scale world where all the interactables are individual colors. My enemy is maybe red where the big bosses I can set them to purple and the biggest enemies could be orange.

Like you can set all this and like people who are NPCs that aren't bad guys, I can make them blue, green, and...

Keith: That's phenomenal.

James: Yeah. It's a fantastic feature so that I can...

Keith: So cool.

James: It's also works with 3D audio, like the Sony 3D pulse headphones, you can really hear a lot of audio signals. Spider-Man has been an incredible experience from Insomniac Games. The other one, Last of Us Part II, it came out a couple years ago, low bias towards it because I did the accessibility consulting for that one.

It also won the accessibility game of the year award.

Keith: Oh, sweet.

James: It's easily one of the most successful games in the market. Really set a gold standard for developers to really try to maybe aim for, if not even try to surpass with what it has to offer.

Keith: Nice. Oh, that's phenomenal. James, thanks so much. This has been really interesting. I've learned a lot and I'm sure our listeners have too. Thanks so much. Really appreciate your time.

James: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Maddie: Thank you James, for being our guest on our fifth episode of Accessibility Outside the Box. We hope you all enjoyed the episode. Be sure to subscribe to the podcast. We're on all podcast platforms, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google, Amazon, YouTube, and more.

You can also find us on our website at disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast.

Keith: We will be back next Thursday for the final episode of our Accessibility Outside the Box series. Thank you for listening to the You First Podcast or reading the transcript online. Please email any feedback, questions, or ideas about the show to podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org.

[background music]

Maddie: The You First Podcast is produced by Disability Rights Florida, a not-for-profit corporation working to protect and advance the rights of Floridians with disabilities through advocacy and education.

If you or a family member has a disability and feel that your rights have been violated in any way, please contact Disability Rights Florida. You can learn more about the services we provide, explore a vast array of resources on a variety of disability related topics, and complete an online intake on our website at disabilityrightsflorida.org.

You can also call us at 1-800-342-0823. Thank you for listening to You First -- The Disability Rights Florida Podcast.

Transcription by CastingWords