The Social Impact of Video Games

Executive Summary

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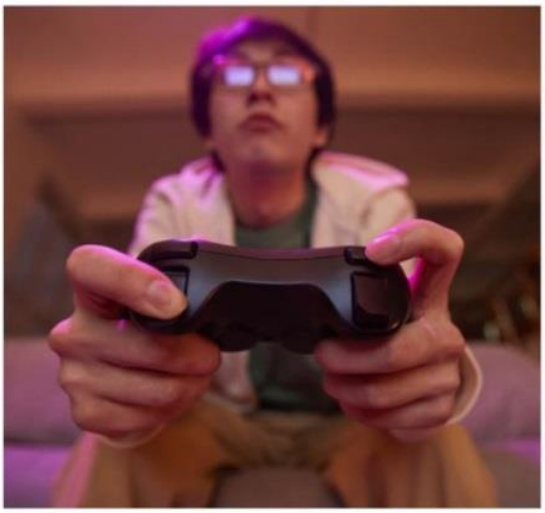

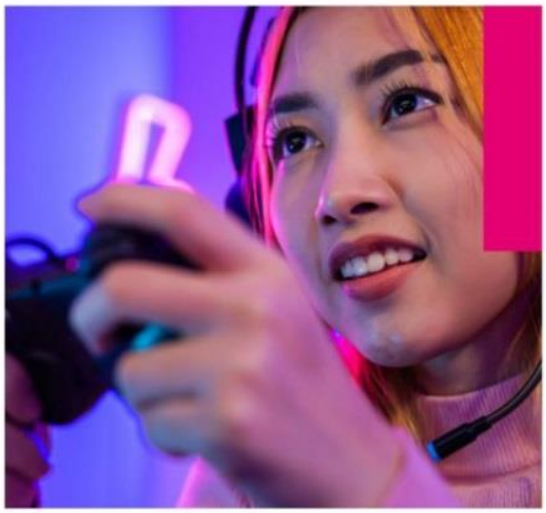

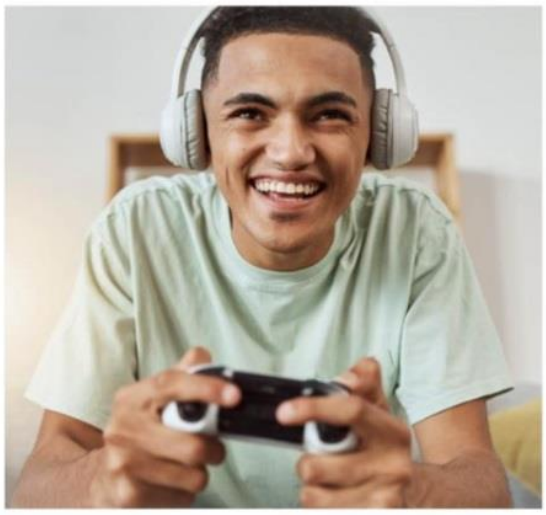

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How playing video games has a positive social impact on blind and partially sighted people

Commissioned by Activision Publishing

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A special thank you goes out to the gamers with sight loss who participated in this study. Your experiences, feedback, and enthusiasm gave us with a deeper understanding and have driven our passion to make gaming accessible to everyone.

Executive summary: Gamers with sight loss find gaming vital for social interaction

For many blind and partially sighted people gaming is not just a pastime; it is vital for social interaction, mental health, and a sense of belonging for blind and partially sighted individuals. In the report, blind refers to people are severely sight impaired or have very little usable vision. They are often users of screen readers or a combination of screen readers and magnifiers. Partially sighted, also referred to as low vision, refers to people with significant sight loss but who may often have some usable vision.

Our report, based on a study conducted by RNIB for Activision, offers several critical insights into the gaming experiences and accessibility challenges faced by blind and partially sighted individuals.

The findings provide actionable recommendations for game developers to enhance accessibility, representation, and engagement in gaming for players with sight loss.

Our study combines qualitative and quantitative research into the experiences and views of more than 250 gamers and is complemented by an in-depth theory of change consultation with Activision.

We designed the study to understand two key factors: (a) the social impact of video games on individuals with sight loss and (b) studio perspectives on the opportunities and challenges they face in prioritising and designing with accessibility in mind.

In addition to the social impact of gaming, the findings identify the specific accessibility features that enable meaningful participation with accessible audio and navigation support being the features that players with sight loss value most.

Top key takeaways

1. Social impact: 84 per cent of blind gamers reported that gaming positively affected their social interactions, helping them connect with friends and family and foster new friendships through online communities.

2. Accessibility: 71 per cent of respondents to our study identified a lack of comprehensive accessibility features as a significant barrier to gaming, highlighting the urgent need for better customisation options and audio descriptions.

3. Engagement: This is a high level of daily gaming engagement among gamers with sight loss; blind gamers often prefer shorter sessions due to accessibility challenges, while partially sighted gamers benefit from improved accessibility features for longer sessions.

4. Representation: Only 12 per cent of individuals with sight loss feel that characters with sight loss are well-represented in games, underscoring a significant gap in inclusivity.

5. Mental wellbeing: A significant majority (87 per cent) of respondents found gaming to be a source of stress relief and relaxation while 71 per cent reported its mood-enhancing qualities.

6. Helpful features: Beyond addressing barriers, respondents identified the features that most enable participation. Audio cues and feedback are the most valued accessibility feature (77 per cent). Text-to-speech or screen reader support and accessibility settings and customisation are valued by 65 per cent, and audio description is crucial for 60 per cent.

Key findings from the user study

Why people play

The love for gaming among blind and partially sighted individuals is profound and multifaceted. Many gamers shared how gaming began as a childhood passion and grew into a significant part of their lives, fostering emotional connections and providing a therapeutic outlet. For some, gaming offered a means to cope with stress and stay connected with loved ones. Despite sight loss, the desire to play persisted, with accessibility features playing a crucial role. However, challenges remain, such as difficulties playing with sighted friends and the need for more accessible games. Gaming is not just a pastime; it is vital for social interaction, mental health, and a sense of belonging for blind and partially sighted individuals.

Engagement

Gamers with sight loss show a high level of daily gaming engagement, indicating that gaming is a significant part of their routines, potentially compensating for other inaccessible activities. Blind gamers tend to engage in shorter gaming sessions compared to partially sighted gamers, likely due to the challenges associated with playing games that lack accessibility features, leading to additional effort and possible fatigue. Conversely, longer gaming sessions among partially sighted gamers suggest a higher level of comfort and immersion, allowing for more in-depth gameplay experiences. This could be attributed to the growing popularity of accessibility features such as customisable text size and high contrast settings. The variation in session lengths highlights differing engagement levels, where shorter sessions may limit sustained interaction, and longer durations may enhance overall engagement and enjoyment.

Accessibility barriers

A significant 71 per cent of respondents identified a lack of comprehensive accessibility features as a major barrier to gaming. Specific issues include limited customisation options (57 per cent) and the absence of audio descriptions (59 per cent). The reliance on visual cues and complex controls further complicates the gaming experience for players with sight loss, limiting their engagement and enjoyment. Addressing these barriers is crucial for improving the gaming experience and expanding the player base.

Cost of playing games

The financial implications of gaming are significant for individuals with sight loss. Only one in four blind and partially sighted individuals of working age are employed and they are twice as likely to have financial difficulties compared to the general population (16 per cent per cent vs. 7 per cent per cent). Additionally, 19 per cent per cent of working-age individuals with sight loss live in households with a monthly income under £1,500. Gamers in the research emphasised the impact of rising living costs, forcing difficult financial choices. Subscription services like Xbox Game Pass and PlayStation Now are valued for their affordability, providing access to numerous games for a monthly fee. This highlighted the need for affordability and inclusivity in gaming.

Social impact and dynamics

Positive social interactions were reported by 56 per cent per cent of blind gamers, who found that gaming helped them connect with friends and family and foster new friendships through online communities. This is crucial in mitigating the isolation often experienced by individuals with visual impairments. However, a small percentage (1 per cent per cent) reported negative social impacts, mainly due to over-engagement and time management issues. Participants also highlighted the importance of social connections facilitated by gaming, as well as the negative attitudes and discrimination they sometimes encounter in gaming communities. Gaming was often described as a therapeutic tool, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation and providing a sense of purpose and belonging, particularly relevant in the context of mental health.

Mental wellbeing

A significant majority (87 per cent) of respondents found gaming to be a source of stress relief and relaxation, with 71 per cent reporting mood enhancements. Additionally, 59 per cent indicated that gaming helped with cognitive stimulation and problem-solving skills. Despite these benefits, some challenges remain, such as feelings of frustration due to inaccessibility (30 per cent) and increased feelings of loneliness for 18 per cent of respondents.

Representation in games

Only 9 per cent of registered blind or severely vision-impaired individuals felt that characters with sight loss are well-represented in games. This highlights a significant gap in the gaming industry, with a strong call for better representation of characters with sight loss to enhance inclusivity and relatability.

Helpful features

In response to the accessibility barriers identified, respondents highlighted a clear set of game features that make gaming more playable and inclusive. Audio cues and feedback are the most valued feature (77 per cent). Text-to-speech or screen reader support and accessibility settings and customisation are each valued by 65 per cent, while 60 per cent identify audio description as crucial. Over half of respondents value comprehensive tutorials and training modes (51 per cent) and alternative interface navigation options (51 per cent). Other helpful features include high contrast modes (49 per cent), tactile or haptic feedback (47 per cent), community and developer support (42 per cent), and cross-platform compatibility (35 per cent). Among daily gamers, reliance on these features is particularly high, with 80 per cent valuing audio cues and 71 per cent valuing text-to-speech or screen reader support.

Recommendations for the industry

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to improve the gaming experience for people with sight loss.

Enhanced accessibility features

Audio feedback and customisation: There is a clear demand for improved accessibility features, such as enhanced audio feedback, tactile feedback, and customisable interfaces. Developers should focus

on integrating these features to make games more accessible and enjoyable.

Inclusive design: Adopting an inclusive design approach from the outset can help create games that cater to a broader audience. This includes considering the needs of visually impaired players during the game design process and conducting accessibility testing with this demographic.

Representation

Diverse characters and storylines: Accurate and positive representation of characters with sight loss in games can significantly enhance the sense of inclusion and relatability. Developers should strive to create diverse characters and storylines that reflect the experiences of blind and partially sighted people.

Community support

Accessible communication tools: Providing support for accessible communication tools within games can help gamers with sight loss participate more fully in online gaming communities. This includes integrating text-to-speech and speech-to-text functionalities.

Recommendations for future research

While this study provides valuable insights, it also highlights the need for further research to track the long-term social and psychological impacts of gaming on individuals with sight loss.

Longitudinal studies

Tracking long-term impacts: Future research should continue to explore the experiences of gamers with sight loss with a focus on the long-term impacts of gaming on cognitive and emotional wellbeing.

Accessible and positive experiences

Effectiveness of features: Investigating the effectiveness of specific accessibility features and therapeutic games can provide evidence-based recommendations for game designers and mental health professionals. Collaborating with blind and partially sighted people throughout the research process can ensure that their perspectives and needs are adequately represented and addressed.

Conclusion

Enhanced accessibility features, inclusive design, and better representation can significantly improve the gaming experience for gamers with sight loss

Our study reveals significant insights into the accessibility barriers, social interactions, mental wellbeing and representation in gaming of people with sight loss. Gaming offers substantial cognitive and social benefits, but many barriers to community participation remain and there is dissatisfaction with representation in games. Addressing these needs through enhanced accessibility features, inclusive design, and better representation can significantly improve the gaming experience and promote greater social integration for blind and partially sighted gamers. Future research should continue to explore these areas to ensure a more inclusive and supportive gaming landscape.