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Disabled Design: An Early Approach in Engineering Games

In the book *Replay: Readings for Diversity and Social Justice* written by Tristan Donovan, chapter two is centered on how video games evolved over time in regard to their intended audience and the approaches that gaming engineers took in designing them. In the earlier stages of games, designers did not consider the needs of consumers with disabilities and ways of providing them accessibility. For those involved in the creation of games, their focus was strictly on a business model that would benefit retailers and generate industry profitability.

Susan Wendell, in her article “The Social Construction of Disability,” echoes the reality of this design oversight as she writes, “Much of the public world is also structured as though everyone were physically strong, as though all bodies were shaped the same, as though everyone could walk, hear, and see well, as though everyone could work and play at a pace that is not compatible with any kind of illness or pain, as though no one were ever dizzy or incontinent or simply needed to sit or lie down” (482-83). None of these aspects of disability were ever taken into consideration by early game designers.

The arcade game “Pong,” for instance, written by Allan Alcorn for Atari, was a digital simulation of table tennis that required players to stand and stare at a small black-and-white screen while using physical controls designed to allow them to slide on-screen paddles up and down in the effort to track and hit a digitized ball back and forth. According to the CVAA and its requirements, this game would fall under Class III and would certainly fail to “be accessible and to be usable by individuals with disabilities” (Miller). Anyone with visual impairments, those regulated to a wheel chair or unable to stand for any reason would have no accessibility.

People with disabilities are found throughout society everywhere and should be afforded just as much right and privilege to participate in and enjoy the wares of the video game industry that works so hard to entertain us. This means that although any business must pursue profitability, accessibility must also be considered in game design for those less fortunate in regard to their physical capabilities.

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