GDC | March 20-24, 2023
San Francisco, CA

Shifting Perspective of Disability

Rachel Voss
Co-Founder
Forge Ahead: A Party To Access

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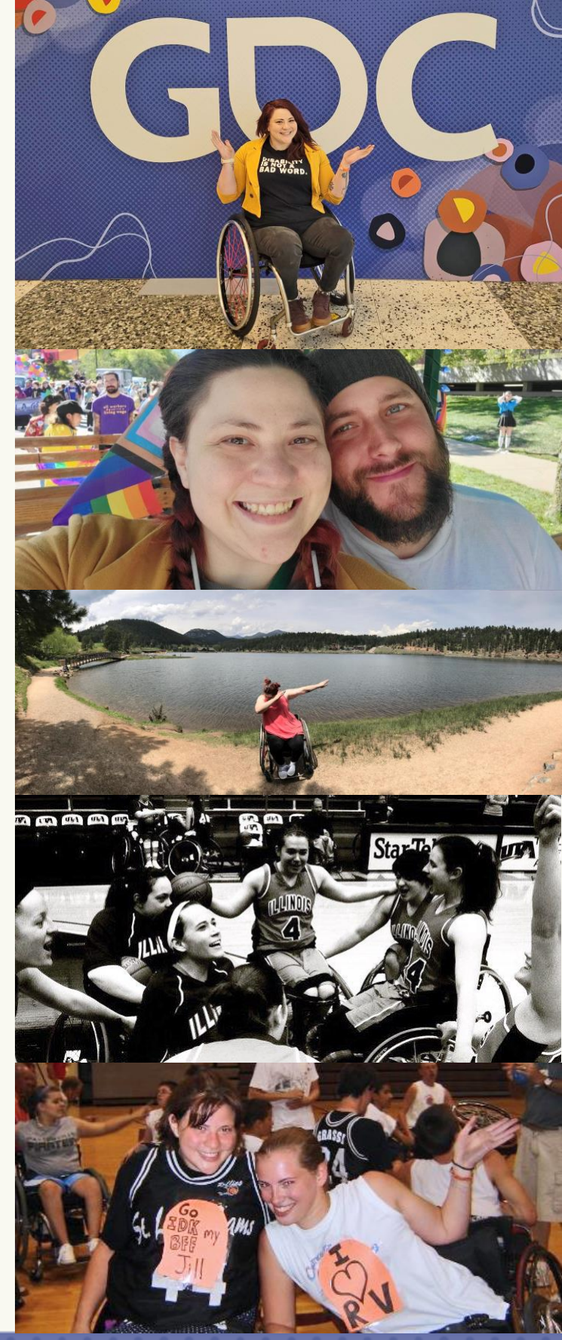
Before We Begin…

- Disability is NOT a bad word!
- Identity-First Language

RV 101

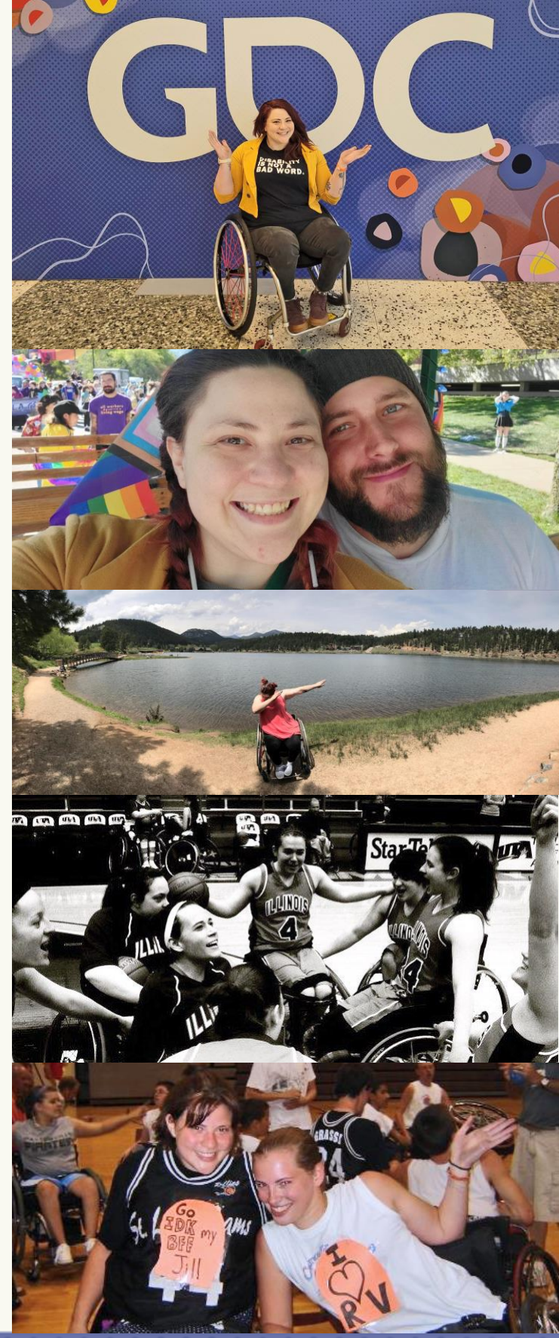
- Rachel Voss (she/her)
- Co-Founder of Forge Ahead: A Party To Access
- 15 Years Recreation Experience
  - Last 8 years with Award-Winning Champaign Park District
  - IPRA Disability Safe Zone Conversation Facilitator



HELP KEEP YOUR PARKS CLEAN!
CHAMPAIGN PARK DISTRICT

RV 101

- Rachel Voss (she/her)
- Co-Founder of Forge Ahead: A Party To Access
- Recreation Professional (15+ Years)
  - Last 8 years with Award-Winning Champaign Park District
  - IPRA Disability Safe Zone Conversation Facilitator
- Retired Wheelchair Athlete
  - Captain of the UIUC Wheelchair Basketball
  - Team USA Track, Field, Swimming, Powerlifting, & Wheelchair Basketball.
- Full-Time Manual Wheelchair User for 20 years
  - Experienced the most ableism:
    - Medical Professionals/Industry
    - Tabletop Roleplaying Game Community



STRATA MINIATURES

Ableist Player Reactions

- “They’d be easy targets.”
- Laughing at the idea of a disabled fighter.
- “I’d be okay with them spellcasting but they can’t fight hand-to-hand in combat.”
- “A ‘wheelchair-bound’ person can’t produce deadly force.”
- “Disability wouldn’t exist in a world where magic is possible.”
- Directed towards me specifically…
  - **“You’d be a burden to the group.”**

To a large portion of the TTRPG community, what I have to bring to the table doesn’t matter because I use a wheelchair.

WE NEED YOU TO SHIFT YOUR PERSPECTIVE OF DISABILITY

5 Questions to Ask Yourself to Shift Your Perspective of Disability IRL & In-game:

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Where am I experiencing disability representation?	2	3	4	5

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What is the #1 Wheelchair Representation Worldwide?

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James Cameron’s Avatar

- #1 Grossing Movie of all time
  - $2.923+ Billion Worldwide

Jake Sully, the world's wheelchair representation

- Played by Sam Worthington, a typically developed actor.
- They took casts of the disabled legs of John Rosengrant to create rubber "fake disabled legs".
  - Physically made disability into a prop to drive the plot
- Was only seen happy and full of life when walking.
- Showed us that disability is a prison that can only be remedied by walking again or by death.

Reign Vosgrove

- Hill Dwarf, Monk of the Waking Gravity (Secular)
- BFF, Mimic Friend, Flux
- Designed to showcase:
  - The relationship one has with their own chair
  - How a chair gives us independence and freedom
- Began to shift the perspective of what mobility aids are at the table so it can transfer IRL.

5 Questions to Ask Yourself to Shift Your Perspective of Disability IRL & In-game:

Where am I experiencing disability representation?	What causes disability in my society?	3	4	5

2 Perspectives of Disability

MEDICAL MODEL

- Ableism Runs Rampant
- Views disability as resulting from **an individual person's physical or mental limitations**, and is not connected to the social or geographical environments.
- The Medical Model focuses on finding a "cure" or **making a person more "normal“.**

SOCIAL MODEL

- Accessibility Thrives
- It is society that places limits on a person**, not their condition.**
- Removes the blame from the individual and gives it to the **designed environment.**
- This is the perspective we want you to have when designing.

5 Questions to Ask Yourself to Shift Your Perspective of Disability IRL & In-game:

Where am I experiencing disability representation?

What causes disability in my society?

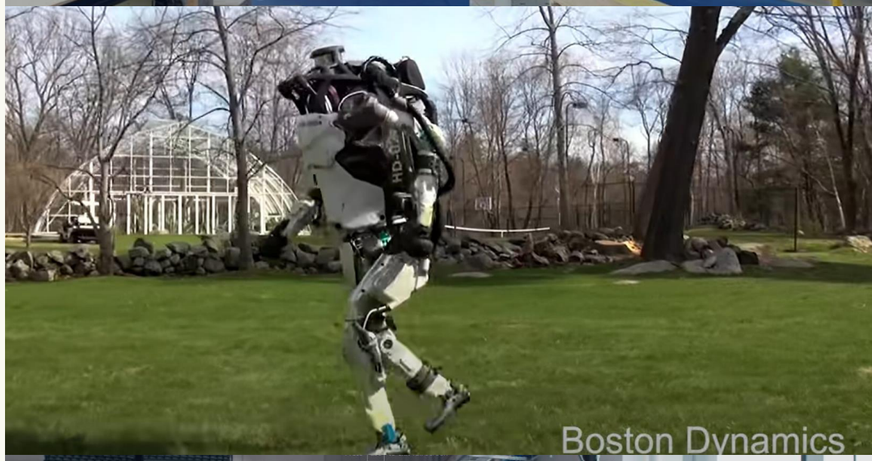
Am I trying to make them “normal”?

4

5

Designing Mobility Aids

- Mobility Aid Study: Boston Dynamics – Atlas Robot
- Original Idea strap person with a disability's legs to the robot's legs
- My body would die….
- The goal is to increase mobility…not make people walk again.
- Seated Design



Chair of Equity

- Response to the haters
- Sara Thompson (@mustangsart) Combat Wheelchair Mechanics
- 2 Upgrades:
  - Dimension Door Wheels
  - Casters of Mold Earth
- Levels the playing field to make dungeons and difficult terrain more accessible for wheelchair users.
- Simple problem-solving in the Social Model
- Design with accessibility first and everyone benefits
  - Tread of Mold Earth

5 Questions to Ask Yourself to Shift Your Perspective of Disability IRL & In-game:

Where am I experiencing disability representation?	What causes disability in my society?	Am I trying to make them “normal”?	How can I design using the Curb Cut Effect?	5

Curb Cut Effect

- When disability-friendly features being used and appreciated by a larger group than the people they were designed for.
- You Access the Curb Cut Effect daily with Situational Disabilities
  - As Seen On TV Stuff
  - Open door buttons
  - Using a phone with one hand
- Accessibility First Design
  - DM/GM Burnout = Accessibility Issue

Guide Tether

- Simple strap for people with visual impairments and their sighted guide to use while running.
- Began adding magic/spells
- Guiding Mist Tether (Misty Step Enchanted Guide Tether)
- Started designing for people with visual impairments but every character benefits from these designs.

5 Questions to Ask Yourself to Shift Your Perspective of Disability IRL & In-game:

Where am I experiencing disability representation?	What causes disability in my society?	Am I trying to make them “normal”?	How can I design using the Curb Cut Effect?	How can I continue the disability & accessibility conversation?

A New Conversation Means A New Hope

- Disability Conversation IRL is Generations Old
- We learn best through play.
- If TTRPG players are more open to interacting with disabled characters, their players will be more open interacting with disabled people in their communities.
- Continued Disability Representation
  - Once makes a gimmick/trend/fad.
  - Consistency makes an ally.

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Thank you!

Rachel Voss
@apartytoaccess

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Building An Accessible Board Game

Carol Mertz
Senior Game Designer
Exploding Kittens

Morgan Baker
Accessibility Specialist
Independent (& EA)

Jesse Martinez
PhD Student
University of Washington

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What to Expect

- Introduction
- What is accessibility in the context of board games?
- How do we approach and implement accessibility?
- How do we get player feedback?
- How do we provide continued support?

Hi!

Morgan Baker
Accessibility Specialist
Independent (& EA)

Jesse Martinez
PhD Student
University of Washington

Carol Mertz
Senior Game Designer
Exploding Kittens

What is accessibility, really though?

Let’s redefine “disability”

Disability

≠

Personal Health Condition

VS

Disability

=

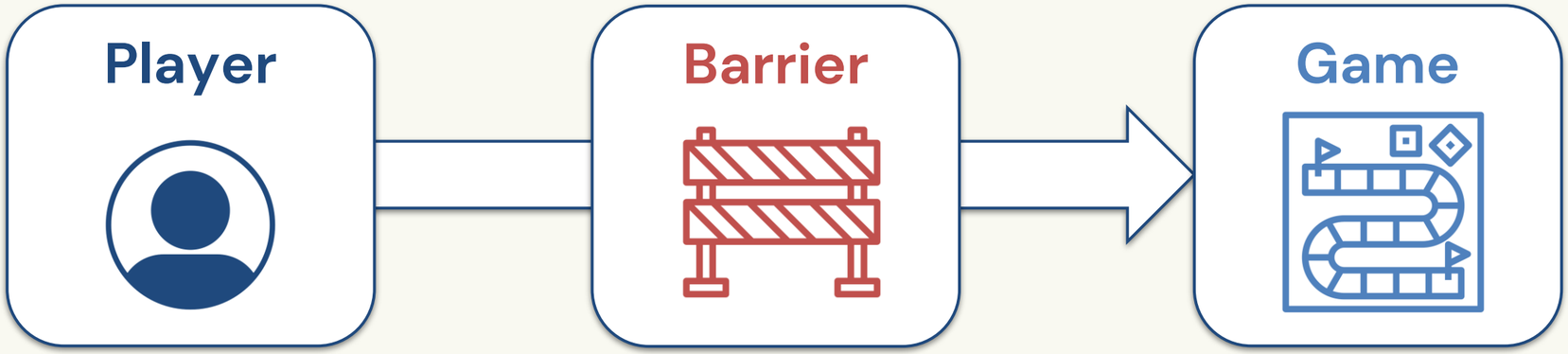
Mismatched Human Interactions

When a “mismatch” occurs, we call this a **barrier**

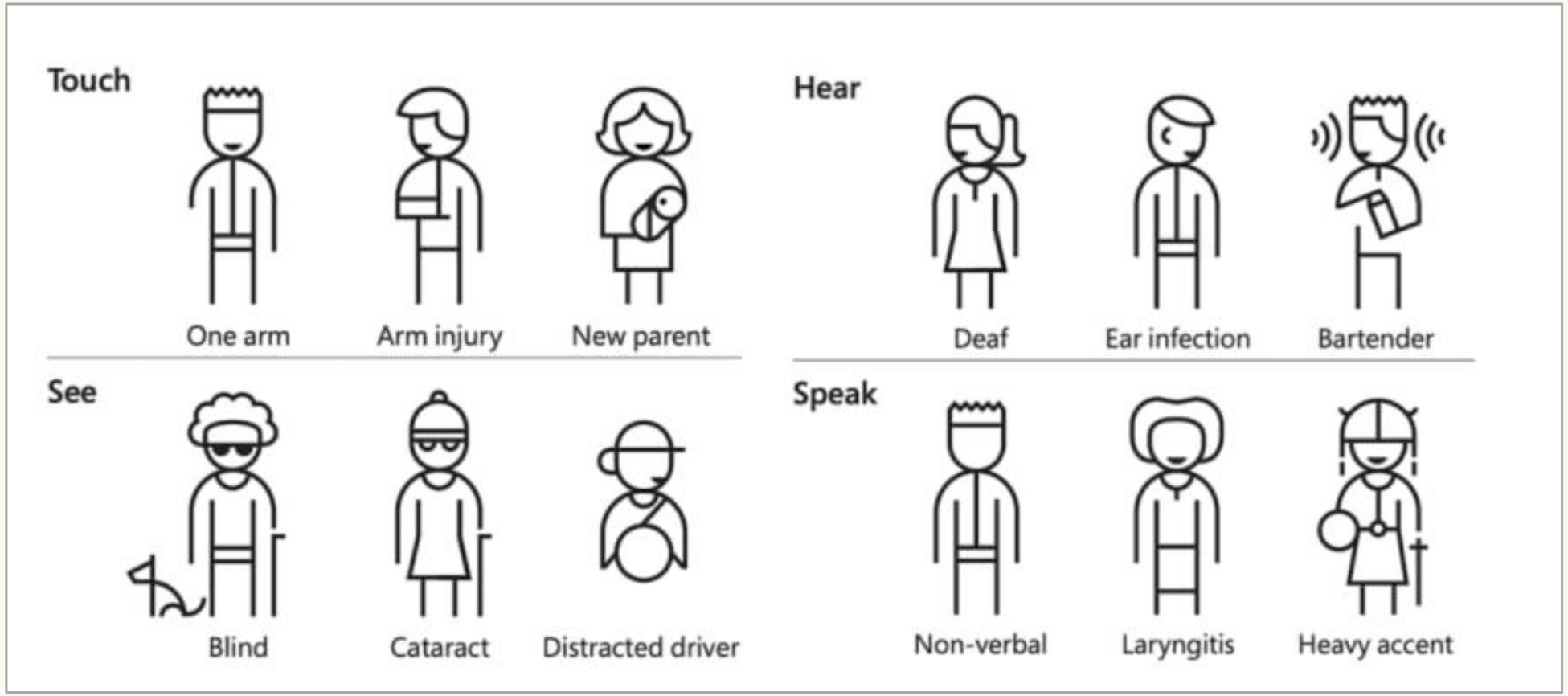
Source: World Health Organization

So how do we define accessibility?

- Disability = mismatch between a player and the product.
- Accessible Design = reducing, facilitating, or removing the mismatch between a player and the game.



How does accessibility help?



Further Reading: Inclusive Design Toolkit

How do we identify problems (and solutions)?

Source: igda-gasig

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Game Accessibility Research

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Accessibility Playtesting

Reasons this is important:

1. These players will have a *fundamentally different* experience with your game

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Reasons this is important:

1. These players will have a *fundamentally different* experience with your game
2. Disabled players are **experts**
3. **“Nothing about us, without us”**

“But Jesse,
How do I find playtesters with disabilities??”

Recruiting Playtesters with Disabilities

Local Resources

- Community Organizations
- University Student Groups

National/Global Resources:

- Accessibility Consultants
- Online Disabled Gaming Communities

Ability Requirements Analysis (ARA)

“What am I asking my players to do?”

Ability Requirement Analysis (ARA)

Ability Requirement Analysis (ARA)

- Motor Req:
  Flipping the timer

Ability Requirement Analysis (ARA)

- Motor Req:
  Flipping the timer
- Visual Req:
  Checking for time left

Ability Requirement Analysis (ARA)

- Motor Req:
  Flipping the timer
- Visual Req:
  Checking for time left
- Cognitive Req:
  Noticing when the timer is done

Accessibility Testing

Accessibility Playtesting

Ability Requirements Analysis

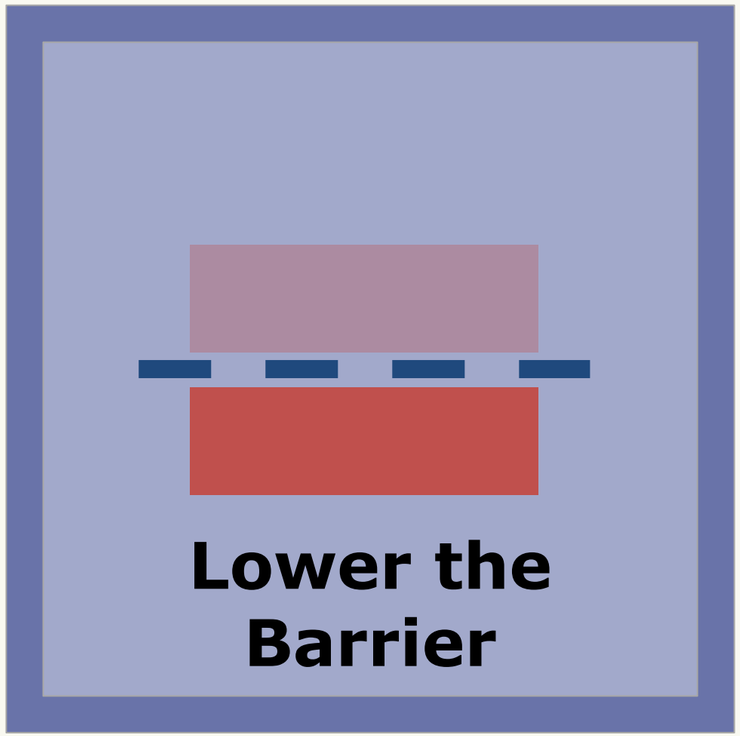
A

How do we turn Access Research into Design?

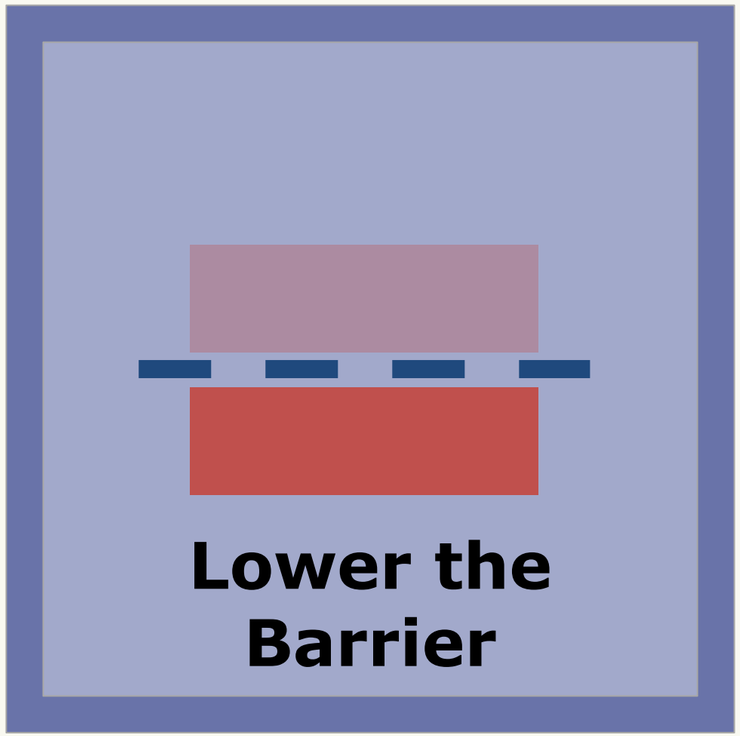
Enabling Custom Gameplay *Styles*

FACT: No single game will be perfectly accessible to *every* player*

Enabling Custom Gameplay *Styles*



Enabling Custom Gameplay *Styles*



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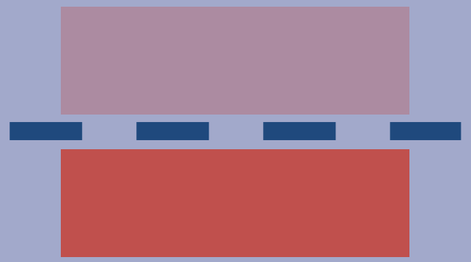
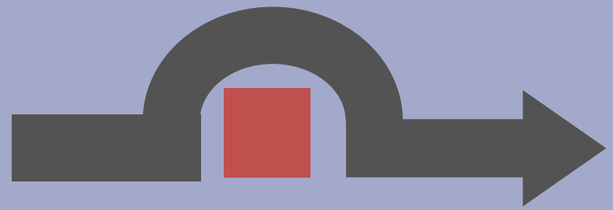
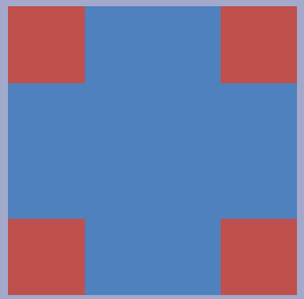


Lower the Barrier



Find Workarounds



Provide new ways to play

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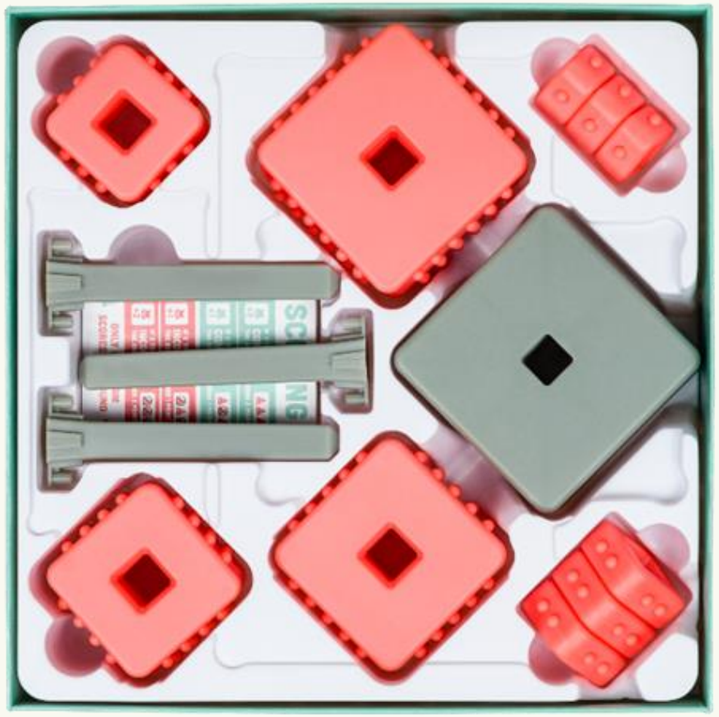
A case study: Hand-to-Hand Wombat

Case Study of Hand-to-Hand Wombat:

Practical Accessibility Implementation at Exploding Kittens



Considerations During Design:

- Learning
- Staggered Difficulty Ramping
- Component Tactility
- Non-visual Cues
- Opportunities for Player Modification

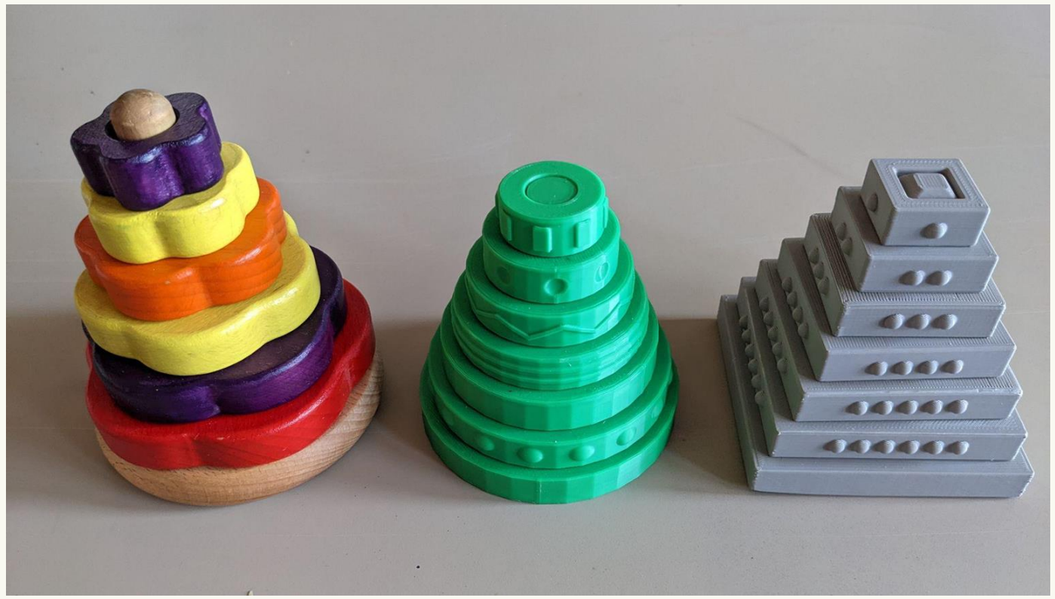
Learning

HAND-TO-HAND
WOMBAT
THE RULES
HEY!
DON'T READ THESE RULES!
Reading is the worst way to learn how to play a game. Instead, go online and watch our instructional video:
hand2handwombat.com/how
PLAYERS: 3-6
AGES 7+
CONTENTS:
• 3 Wombat Towers (3 bundles of 6 stacked bricks)
• A Boundary (Box Lid)
• 10 Wombat Cards (8 Good Team Cards, 1 Bad Team Card, 1 Confused Wombat Card)
• 6 Score/Role Reference Cards
• Score Card
• 2 Point Trackers
• Comic Book

HAND-TO-HAND
WOMBAT
A GAME OF TEAMWORK, TOWERS, AND TROUBLE-MAKERS.
Can you and your team build three towers before the other team destroys them? Can you do all of that with your eyes closed?
INCLUDES A WOMBAT COMIC BY THE OATMEAL!
PARTY GAME
AGES 7+
3-6 PLAYERS
15
HOW IT WORKS:
EVERYONE HAS A SECRET IDENTITY, EITHER GOOD OR BAD.
SCATTER THE BRICKS INTO THE PLAY AREA AND CLOSE YOUR EYES.
GOOD WOMBATS BUILD TOWERS.
BAD WOMBATS SECRETLY SABOTAGE THOSE TOWERS.
VOTE TO ELIMINATE THE MOST SUSPICIOUS WOMBAT.
COMPLETE THE TOWERS TO WIN.

Staggered Difficulty Ramping

Tactility



Non-visual Cues

Visual and Physical Design

Opportunities for Modification

Continued Player Support

Examples of Accessibility Recommendations

For Vision Accessibility:

- Download the accessible PDF instructions.
- Modify the Role Cards with stickers so that you can differentiate each one by feel.
- When playing Advanced Mode, have someone read the description of each role aloud before assigning roles, to ensure that everyone is familiar with what each role does before beginning the game.
- Designate a player to announce the score each round.
- Spectate by feeling inside the box during gameplay (but not picking up or moving pieces), allowing you to still observe the game.

Examples of Accessibility Recommendations

For Hearing Accessibility:

- We recommend playing a modified game mode, where you place a blanket over the play area and keep your eyes open while Building. This allows you to watch players' mouths and facial expressions, and allows you to communicate with your free hand.
- In this mode, you can implement a house rule for a shared signal to pause the game as-needed.

  (NOTE: This can be used for players with speech and cognitive conditions as well.)

Examples of Accessibility Recommendations

For Motor Accessibility:

- Consider adding more time on the clock for all players. We recommend starting at 2 minutes, and adjust as-needed depending on your group’s needs.
- Add a house rule that all players can only hold one piece at a time.

Conclusion

- **Accessibility is an important part of the design, development, and production process** to ensure that you're supporting as many of your players as possible.

- Integrating Player Research into your playtesting and development process ensures that you **get feedback directly from players who have accessibility needs**.

- Not every game can be playable by every person straight out-of-the-box, but with **user research and thoughtful implementation**, we can make thoughtful recommendations for how more players can enjoy our games.

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Thank you!

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