

Assist Modes: Provide Assist Modes

Written by Michelle Hinn

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Scenario Platform games have always been Mary's favorite genre but in almost all of the titles she tries, there are several points in the game that will stop her gameplay cold unless she can find someone to take the controller and, say, get past a very tricky series of jumps that require more fine motor skills than her muscular dystrophy allows. This is a pain because it means once she finds someone who agrees to try to help her move past the point where she is stuck (and more often than not she finds a lot of well-meaning but not very skilled volunteers), she has to swap out her accessible controller because, even though she can use it doesn't mean anyone else is going to have an easy time of it when used to a standard controller!

Mary uses a hacked controller that used to be a fighting stick controller from Japan but is now connected to several "switches" (large single-button pads, not unlike the buttons on the walls at school that open the wheelchair accessible doors, only more colorful). She has an arcade-style playstick on it, and someone has also drilled into the controller and rewired it so that the four main buttons that she uses are each connected to their own switch. It's cumbersome but it is "function over form" when it comes to gameplay, she always says.

The thing is, it would be nice if some of these companies knew about these specialist controllers because if they did, maybe they would understand why she doesn't care if it's "cheating" to call upon some kind of assist mode that would allow her to make the jumps a little more easily. For Mary, she just wants to play and enjoy the game -- she has no desire to enter some videogame competition where that would make a difference.

How to Solve It

Game design in the 1980s was necessarily challenge-oriented. The zenith of twitch gameplay was to be found in the arcades, an environment that made money by tempting the player to pay to play. Design elements like bosses evolved to provide reward (visually, and in terms of a significant post-boss score boost) while killing the player as often as possible. If a game were easy, skilled players would hog the machine on a single credit, and profits would be impacted.

The role of challenge in mainstream action games began to change when games became playable at home. Although home systems were available throughout the 80s, the games released for them were heavily inspired by arcade games. As the 90s progressed from SNES to PlayStation, elements other than challenge became part of the game designer's remit -- for instance, game environments post-1996, the year of Mario 64, Resident Evil, and Tomb Raider, attempt to mimic the logic of real-world environments, as opposed to merely providing a game experience. Compare these kinds of games with classic side-scrolling games such as Sonic the Hedgehog, which features completely surreal worlds, for instance.

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The 2000s brought a new spin, in the idea of games for non-gamers. Players who refer to themselves as gamers (the "hardcore") generally require a certain degree of challenge, as they are adept at certain game forms -- they are game literate and pick up new games very rapidly. New players -- those who never played a Mario or a Sonic -- aren't necessarily seeking challenge.

Although it is natural to design games of a different style for new audiences, it also makes sense to maximize audience potential for existing game genres by the inclusion of player assistance. It should be noted that, although play-aids may allow players to enjoy games of a given form, they do actually alter the nature of the gameplay -- using aids actually changes the game. But as I pointed out in Mary's scenario -- she doesn't care, she just wants to play and enjoy the game even if she doesn't play it in the exact same way others do. Should she be prevented from doing so because a small number of gamers are offended by providing the option to "cheat"?

The trend is fortunately in favor of more support for players, as it is becoming undeniable that reaching into the mass market requires these kinds of changes. Driving games, for instance, began to feature breaking aids and steering assistance, a trend that led to the active racing line representation of Forza Motorsport. This aid can be turned off, but does generate gameplay (playing with the line is effectively a different game experience than playing without the line).

Halo: Combat Evolved demonstrates a similar principle. It's a console-based FPS game that employs an auto-aim system to make up for a lack of accuracy in a console twin-stick controller when compared to using a mouse to aim (as with PC-based FPS games, the standard of the form precisely for this reason). The aid works by snapping the player's aiming reticule to a live target when the reticule nears that target; this stops the players from getting into a feedback loop in fine aiming. This aid is not optional, and seriously informs Halo's play design: its core play becomes biased against fine aiming, and instead becomes more positional in nature (the relative positions of the players and enemies become more important than the speed of aim).

The trend continues in this direction with each passing year. Alone in the Dark, although suffering from some flaws in its gameplay design, features an innovative system that allows players to skip any challenge and move onto the next one. The developers were motivated by a desire to make the game more like a DVD experience, with an eye to reaching a wider audience. Although many gamers confessed that it "felt like cheating," this kind of mechanism is a boon to the many millions of players who struggle with some of the tougher challenges in videogames, effectively allowing them to get past any obstacle.

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But the industry can be extremely resistant to these kinds of changes, because of objections like "it's cheating" or "why would anyone want to play like that?" Some designers have talked about that just a few years ago publishers stopped them from including a feature that would allow players to continue to the next challenge after failing because of the objection that, with such a feature, "it wouldn't even be a game anymore".

Player aids such as Forza's racing line and Halo's auto-aim naturally allow less skilled players to participate in play, as well as allowing gamers who are using assistive technologies/accessible controllers to play. Alone in the Dark's "skip" feature allows anyone to see the whole of the game, without any risk of being stuck. But features such as these also change the nature of play: the game might be realized in different ways than those the designers idealized. It takes a certain amount of courage to accept this kind of transformation, especially because the people who make games sometimes feel that the game is theirs. But designers are being paid to make the game, while others are paying to play it. Don't the people who buy games deserve some influence over what they are buying?

In theory, there is no limit to the amount of aid a player can be given without diminishing the sensation of play, and it is necessary for games designers to continue to develop such mechanisms in order to expand the accessibility of games in general to the widest possible audience (everyone). Problems only emerge in the space of competition. Simulating the same level of competition using different degrees of aid is impossible -- as noted -- and the use of aids fundamentally alters gameplay. So players in direct competition using different levels of play aid are in fact playing different games against each other. Naturally, this is a problem only if the players have extremely "hardcore" sensibilities, and not for the many gamers who are just enjoying the game experience in their own way.