05-05 – Game Difficulty

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Hello! In this part, I do want to be able to touch on something that is a bit more of a broader topic that does affect a lot of areas of disability, and that is in regard to game difficulty. Now, generally when we talk about game difficulty, we usually think of games that have like an easy, normal, or hard mode when it comes to being able to play a game, and that sort of sets a static difficulty that, okay, if you want a little bit more of a challenge, you're going to be able to go to the hardest difficulty and it makes the enemies a little bit harder to hit, you have to be able to hit precise timings for... to be able to hit specific controls or attacks, and then also your health may be less reduced if you're playing at that kind of hardest difficulty, whereas if you go to the other end of the spectrum for easy gaming difficulty, generally the enemy itself is a little bit lessened, your health is a little bit beefier, and the timing to be able to hit specific attacks or dodges or anything like that, the timing is a little bit more forgiving. Now, this kind of set of static difficulties is what we've had in the industry for... in the video game sort of hobby for decades. Basically, around the time of the '80s and '90s, we've had this sort of ability to be

able to set the difficulty in pretty much most games. There are games that do

have a pre-set difficulty that sort of... kind of sets a difficulty level for you without

you having to be able to adjust it to make it a little bit more comfortable for you.

So generally, there are games that do that, are a little bit more forgiving, so it's

not like only games that have a pre-set difficulty are all completely really

challenging, but there are games that actually do go to that side of the spectrum,

and generally whenever there is a discussion about accessibility and a pre-set

difficulty, it usually kind of caters to the one end where you have a game that has

a really difficult challenge and a really kind of high pre-set difficulty, and most

games that actually... at least most games used as examples that are usually

touched on when we're having this conversation is from one particular developer

called FromSoftware, and they make games such as Dark Souls, Demon Souls,

Bloodborne, Securo Shadows Die Twice, and they have a very set... They have a

very high challenge for a player to be able to try to be able to complete that

game. It is a challenge, it is a frustrating challenge at times, and it sort of... the

only way to be able to learn how to be able to play this game, essentially, is you

have to be able to try it, die, learn from that mistake and then learn how to be

able to kind of attack that particular enemy or attack that particular challenge in a

different way. The problem with having a pre-set difficulty is that because it sort

of sets a difficulty, only certain specific types of players will be able to play, will be able to complete that challenge, and that generally goes against kind of what accessibility is about, being able to provide options for as many players as possible. But if you have a set sort of... if you're designing for a set player in mind or set challenge in mind, it narrows the focus of, okay, not everybody will be able to play these games, and that is kind of added to the argument that sort of gamers have been making is that, "Well, this game is not designed for you or this game is not for you," and we within the accessibility community would kind of argue against that because developers, while they're making games, they want to be able to make games that are available to as many people as possible. They want to make money as much as possible. So having... They want to have everyone to be able to buy their game, so it doesn't necessarily... If the game is not designed for them, for multiple different types of people, then it basically lessens the amount of success that that game can possibly have because it sort of sets it to that particular sort of gamer or player type. And that's something that we kind of generally would want to be able to avoid when designing a game because you want to be able to... When you're creating a particular set of controls that you have to be able to do this sort of one thing at a precise time, if you think about from other players that are going to want to be able to try to tackle this

challenge, having stuff like accessibility options can sort of expand that player

base even further, and that's generally where you want to be able to... that's

where accessibility does its best work, is when it's able to sort of expand beyond

just a particular player with a particular set skill level. Now, there's been sort of an

argument for pre-set difficulty and we've kind of seen a few examples of games

that actually do this... kind of tackle this pretty well. One example that I want to

be able to give actually does kind of utilize a pre-set kind of... a set difficulty

similar to like in a FromSoftware game, is Star Wars Jedi Fallen Order made by

Respawn. Around the time of Securo and this kind of conversation would come up

in regards to accessibility and what we would generally... like we've heard in

regards to easy mode and whether Securo or games that have a pre-set difficulty

need an easy mode, Star Wars Jedi Fallen Order actually added options and added

pre-set difficulty that didn't necessarily lessen the amount of damage or lessen

the amount of health that an enemy had, but it sort of was a little bit more

forgiving when it comes to (indiscernible) timing and just your own health and

just several things that normally would plague a player when it comes to pre-set

difficulty, but still keeping the challenge there for those players to be able to...

that need it or that want to be able to have a harder challenge or an easier sort of

story mode-based challenge. I encourage people to be able to take a look at sort

of what Star Wars actually has because there's a very amazing way to kind of go about it. There's also the ability to be able to adjust the difficulty however you see fit. I can actually even show you using The Last of Us here. If I go into the Options here and I go into Difficulty, you can actually be able to manually set the difficulty for multiple scenarios in this game. You can actually set the difficulty from very light, to light, to moderate, to hard, to survivor. There's actually even one for a permadeath if you prefer that kind of a challenge, where essentially if you go through the game and if you die once, it takes you all the way back to the beginning again, but essentially you can actually be able to... you can set it to whatever you like, but also you can customize each individual sort of scenario in the game. You can either be able to set the player's health to be a little bit more resilient or a little bit more vulnerable, you can set the enemies to be a little bit more passive or aggressive, you can set the allies to be aggressive or passive, you can be able to set the stealth to be unsuspecting or vigilant, you can be able to set the resources to be common or scarce, so there are certain scenarios in this game that you can be able to actually manually set on all difficulty levels. So if I wanted to be able to, say, set the resources to more common, then resources that you need, whether it's ammo or health or resources on how to be able to build health kits or crafting will be a little bit more common as you go throughout the game,

but if you want a little bit more of a challenge, you can be able to set that to a

grounded sort of level, which is actually kind of the highest difficulty, then it

actually will become a little bit more scarce, so you have to be a little bit more

vigilant of how much ammo and health you actually have, and you actually have

to be a little bit more frugal when it comes to being able to use that, so you can

be able to customize the difficulty as you see fit for each individual scenario. So if

you want to be able to have a character be a little bit... you find stealth is a little

bit too hard for you to be able to play a game, you can adjust it so that essentially

the enemies don't really see you as well when you're trying to be able to go

stealth, or they could basically be like, "No, you know what? We see..." Any sort

of... if they see a little bit of your character, they know that you're there and you

can be able to actually set that challenge that is sort of right for you. So that is

how The Last of Us actually... you can be able to set it so that you customize your

own difficulty that works best for you, and that is something that we generally

would love to be able to applaud studios when they are able to do that because

when you can give the player options, you can give the player a custom way to be

able to set a difficulty that's right for them because there are times that even

people without disabilities, they just want a very cool story, they want basically

kind of a chill time, they don't necessarily want the game to be frustrating

because you die a lot and it's like, "You know what? I just want to like... I don't have a lot of sort of mental or physical capacity to be able to play a game. I just want to play a game for fun right now." Having the ability to be able to adjust the difficulty in this particular way is really, really great. And then there's another option which game developers, I would encourage you to look into, is in regard to assist mode. Assist mode... essentially what that does is that even with the game with a pre-set difficulty, the developer will actually allow players to be able to adjust specific aspects of the game that actually will sort of showcase... sort of allow the player to expand sort of that difficulty a little bit better and it actually can be able to make the game a little bit more comfortable to be able to play. A great example, kind of the first real amazing example for this, is called is a game called Celeste. They actually have a pre-set difficulty. It's sort of a 2D platformer kind of game, but they do have an assist mode, the ability to be able to have your character be invincible, you can actually slow down the time of the game, whether it's... say it's 100 per cent, you can actually be able to set it to 50 per cent. That actually will make the game a little bit slower and allow you to be able to react a little bit easier and it's not so fast, you can be able to set a certain amount of jumps you can be able to have in the game because there are certain times you have to dash and jump into different areas of the screen, but you only

have a certain amount based on your stamina, so you can actually be able to adjust that. It's a really, really cool way to be able to go about it, and they actually even say before you turn on assist mode that this is not generally how we intend the game to be played, but we understand that there are players that need these kind of options, so we encourage you to try to play the game as is and if you find that it's a little bit too difficult, you can be able to turn on these assist mode options and you can customize it however you play and that makes it a little bit more comfortable. Another game that does this really well is a game called Control by a studio called Remedy. It's a really cool sort of sci-fi, X-Files type kind of game, but there is actually an assist mode that was added in after the game came out that essentially will allow you to be able to adjust how much health you'll be able to pick up in the game, how much ammo you'll be able to pick up in the game, or at least the modifiers to be able to say how much health and ammo you'll be able to pick up. You can turn on invincibility so that you never die, you can be able to turn on hard aim assist. There's stuff like that you'll actually be able to customize the gameplay so that even though there is like a pre-set difficulty, being able to allow the player to customize those options makes the game a little bit more comfortable and more playable for them and more enjoyable, and hopefully they can actually be able to find their next favourite game because of

these options. I generally would recommend when it comes to sort of pre-set difficulty either having something like an assist mode or something that actually has like a dynamic or adaptive difficulty. If the game sort of sense is that actually the player is having a tough time trying to be able to get past this one particular area, being able to dynamically, in the background and behind the scenes, being able to lower the game's difficulty to be able to help the player get past this one particular point, but then if it becomes... If the game detects it's becoming a little bit too easy for them, they can be able to ramp up the difficulty a little bit and actually will adapt as the player moves forward, which in a way is actually a really cool way to be able to go through difficulty because then it will adapt to a player's needs or a player's comfortability throughout the game. Granted, all of those would be best suited with options to be able to provide more options for the player to be able to adjust difficulty is always better, but having that built into the gameplay is something that is also encouraged as well. I'm going to actually leave a few resources or at least a few conversations about difficulty that I have actually had within this particular topic that I'll actually leave and the resources for this particular module. That will include also sort of a showcase of what Celeste is like, the talk about assist mode in games, as well as a conversation around the game Returnal, which was a recent game that came out for the PlayStation 5 that I had

on a podcast called PS I Love You XOXO, which is from the Kinda Funny podcast

network where we went into a really cool discussion about difficulty and how

easy mode works and stuff like that. So I'll leave links to those resources in the

learning resources of this particular module. So that's kind of it in regard to sort of

accessibility when it comes to pre-set difficulties or game difficulties in a game.