

Leveling the gaming field

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A screenshot from AudiOdyssey, an experimental computer game designed by MIT and Singaporean students to be accessible to both the visually impaired community and mainstream gamers. Image courtesy / Singapore-MIT Gambit Game Lab

A new computer game developed by MIT and Singaporean students makes it possible for visually impaired people to play the game on a level field with their sighted friends.

The game, called AudiOdyssey, simulates a deejay trying to build up a catchy tune and get people dancing. By swinging the remote-control device used by the Nintendo Wii, which senses motion, the player can set the rhythm and lay down one musical track after another, gradually building up a richer musical track.

Eitan Glinert, a graduate student in computer science at the Singapore-MIT Gambit Game Lab, says that the introduction of the Wii controller attracted many women and older players for the first time to the world of videogames. "Lots of people who had never played video games were now playing them all the time," he says. "I started to think, who's been left out? What groups are left behind even with all the new technology, these new systems?"

Then it hit him. "People with disabilities had been left behind. I began to speculate, how could you bring these people into the fold and have them be able to play these games?" He started by looking up everything that was available in terms of computer games for the visually impaired, and found there were already about 200 titles.

"I thought, oh well, it was a good idea. But then I noticed something: As a sighted player, I was unable to play any of these." The games had been so specifically adapted for sound and tactile play that they gave the visually impaired too much of an advantage, making it impractical for them to play with sighted friends. "There were games for sighted people, games for blind people, and never the twain shall meet," he says. "I thought, maybe I could build a game that could be played by both, equally well."

Working as the first student in Gambit, the Singapore-MIT game lab, with a team of seven other students he developed the prototype for AudiOdyssey in the summer of 2007, and has since been testing it with various groups of players. Since not everyone has access to the Wii controller, the game is also designed to be playable using a regular keyboard.

The game "is an early prototype, it's limited in the things people can do," Glinert says. "But people seem to really enjoy it."

Count Alicia Verlager among them. A recent graduate of MIT's Comparative Media Studies program, Verlager, who is blind, helped with the development of the game.

"As a media studies scholar and a blind consumer, I am very excited to see that Eitan and other game developers are working to make games more available to gamers with disabilities, especially when those games can be shared between players with and without disabilities," Verlager said.

"The element I probably most envy about gamers is just the way they hang out together and share doing something fun," she says. "It's the social aspects of Guitar Hero and World of Warcraft that I really want to try myself and so hanging out with other gamers playing AudiOdyssey was really fun."

Meanwhile, Glinert has been working on a more advanced version of the audio game that will allow for playing against others online, and will be released late this summer. AudiOdyssey is available for free download (Windows only) at gambit.mit.edu/loadgame/audiodysey.php . The new game will also be available on the Gambit site as soon as it becomes available.

Source: MIT

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