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June 2018: Report reveals chronic shortages of accessible British homes; Passenger assist app aims to improve train journey experiences for disabled people; The ACT Foundation donates to Friends of the Elderly grants scheme

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Public policy, legislation and campaigns

New tech fund abolishes assistive technology payments for employers

The government has announced that it will no longer require medium and large employers to pay a contribution towards the costs of assistive technology acquired through the Access to Work programme. [A new tech fund](#) will in future cover the costs of equipment used by disabled people in the workplace.

Report reveals chronic shortage of accessible British homes

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has published the results of its [inquiry into accessible and adaptable housing](#) for disabled people which reveals a chronic shortage of accessible homes in Britain. The report concludes that disabled people are often demoralised and frustrated by the housing system, encountering excessive red tape and delays for home adaptations and inadequate support to live independently.

Government hints at new proposals to protect wheelchair users' rights on buses

The government has promised a package of new measures later this year to [improve wheelchair access to buses](#). In response to a question in the House of Lords, the Department for Transport minister Baroness Liz Sugg said that the government would be announcing proposals to change the law, issue fresh guidance and initiatives to influence passenger behaviour..

MPs call for reforms to 'mismanaged' Motability scheme

A joint report by the House of Commons Select Committees for the Treasury and Work and Pensions has called for [an overhaul of the Motability scheme](#), which leases adapted vehicles to disabled people. The report criticises Motability for paying its chief executive too much and accuses the charity of maintaining unnecessarily large financial reserves.

Technological developments and innovations

Microsoft launches adaptive controller for the Xbox and Windows 10

Microsoft is launching a new adaptive controller for the Xbox and computers running Windows 10 which promises to provide easier access for disabled users. The [Xbox adaptive controller](#) features two large buttons designed to be operated with hands, elbows or feet as well as 19 connection points for extra assistive devices.

Passenger assist app aims to improve train journey experiences for disabled people

UK based smart app developer Transreport is developing a [Passenger Assist app](#) that will enable disabled train passengers to engage with staff and request assistance throughout their journey. Designed with input from disabled people with a range of impairments and health conditions, the app will seek to improve the quality, detail and timeliness of information available to passengers.

Mobile booth supports people with learning impairments to overcome the stresses of busy environments

A mobile sensory support booth has been launched to provide a refuge in busy environments for people with disabilities such as autism and dyslexia. [The Sensory Nook](#) aims to help people who may feel anxious or distracted in socially intrusive surroundings to continue to participate by offering a calming space that employs lighting, air circulation, scent and tactile technologies to positively influence their mood.

Headset translates subtle facial movements into words and actions

Researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have developed a computer interface that can detect and act on words that the user verbalizes internally. [The Alter Ego](#) consists of a wearable headset that uses electrodes to detect neuromuscular signals in the user's jaw and face and feeds the resulting information to a machine learning powered computer, allowing them to perform a range of activities including using a communication aid and searching the web.

Funding news

The ACT Foundation donates to Friends of the Elderly grants scheme

The [ACT Foundation has selected Friends of the Elderly](#) to receive a £500,000 donation towards the charity's grant service for older people who are living in financial difficulty. Friends of the Elderly provide one-off grants to help with the cost of home appliances, repairs and adaptations, computing and broadband expenses and other financial support.



Training & events

[Voice: When technology speaks](#)



Imperial College London

Wednesday 20th June

A session exploring the use of voice-activated technology with delegates from Amazon, Google, BBC, academia and start-ups.

[Disability Awareness Day 2018](#)



Walton Hall Gardens,
Warrington

Sunday 15th July

A disability independent living exhibition covering a range of services and products for disabled people.

[PMG Conference 2018](#)



Manchester Central

Monday 23rd - Wednesday
25th July

An industry exhibition and networking event for professionals working in the field of posture and wheeled mobility.

[Subscribe](#)[Past Issues](#)[Translate](#) ▾[RSS](#)**Comment from Clive, author of dispATches****The adaptive Xbox controller reflects the video games industry's belated attempts to accommodate disabled people's access needs**

I was a rebellious child. Or that's how it might have seemed if you had the misfortune of being my physiotherapist at the time. Every day after school and first thing at weekends, I dived onto my bedroom floor to crawl on my hands and knees in the W sitting position – a stance named after the shape formed when a child sits on their bottom with their knees bent and feet positioned outside of their hips that is associated with various joint and muscle problems.

My enthusiasm for breaking the rules was driven by the motivation that continues to fuel many bedtime arguments and spur thirty and forty somethings to devote an entire room of their homes to a life-long passion: the notorious posture was the only position in which I could control my involuntary movements enough to indulge my obsession with video games.

I was not alone. A 2008 survey revealed that a fifth of casual video gamers have some kind of disability, with 92% of people with impairments taking regular excursions into another reality. More recently, the Accessibility Foundation based in the Netherlands found that disabled people are among the most fervent players in the world, averaging over 10 hours of game time per week. These figures are all the more remarkable given the video games industry's patchy record on accessibility.

Modding Mario's world

Microsoft's new [Xbox adaptive](#) controller is the latest sign of the \$137.9 billion industry's overdue course correction to recognise disabled people's voracious appetite for everything from the latest edition of Fifa to Candy Crush. First dreamed up for a company Hackathon event in 2015, the device is designed to be completely customisable while retaining the look and feel of a standard [Xbox](#) controller. In addition to the two large buttons on the face of the pad, the controller boasts 19 connection points where players can personalise their control configurations by linking different kinds of switches, paddles and pedals. Although the adaptive controller is no more cross-compatible with other games consoles than traditional Xbox controllers, the fact that it can be used with any Windows 10 PC means that its significance may well transcend the world of gaming.

Microsoft's achievement should not distract us from the determination and ingenuity with which disabled gamers, charities and developers have fought for equal access over the decades, often without the support of original manufacturers. Since the early 1970s when the first Pong consoles appeared, gaming systems have been subjected to DIY retro-fittings and recoding to make them more accessible by modifying control interfaces or slowing down frenetic gameplay. Some third-party suppliers still manufacture custom controls. Whether wittingly or by happy coincidence, developers have occasionally helped to advance the cause of disabled gamers. In 1988 Nintendo released a hands-free sip and puff controller – arguably the precursor to Microsoft's latest effort. During the 1990s Sega agreed to dispatch free copies of the audio adventure title Real Sound: Kaze no Regret to 1,000 blind people after brokering an exclusivity deal with the game's developers. Games have also evolved to offer a number of difficulty settings so that people can play them at their own pace. However, many have typically had to rely on either expensive adaptations or make do with conventional set-ups in the hope that some games would be at least partially playable, albeit sometimes by accident.

As with any computer-based technology, accessible gaming relies upon a fortuitous alignment of hardware design and software features that matches the user's access needs. The precise arrangement of this goldilocks constellation of gadgetry and in-game functions vary from one person to the next but disabled gamers often face the common challenge of figuring out what works for them and then trying to adapt their controls to new games and platforms.

Levelling up?

On one hand, this search has been made easier in recent years by the explosion of mobile and PC based games which has provided more choice. And developers are increasingly designing games and gaming environments with accessibility features such as closed captioning, magnifiers, button remapping and text-to-speech options. But the convergence of high-end game consoles such as the Xbox, Sony PlayStation and Nintendo Wii on controller designs that encourage players to play with both hands in a specific position at the same time as allowing developers to freeze out non-conventional devices underlines the need for console makers to take more responsibility for inaccessible platforms.

Game developers are now increasingly better equipped to address accessibility issues. Programming applications used by designers to create games now have built-in accessibility tools that make it easier to design and test their products for different audiences. There are also industry guidelines that promote best practice.

After decades of exclusion, disabled people are finally being recognised by developers as a customer group worth accommodating. Most of the key developments in the field of video game accessibility are very recent and, in a sector known for its monocultural workforce, they may some time to bed down. Until then, disabled gamers will doubtless continue pushing their consoles, computers, and smart devices, as well as their own capabilities, to the limit in pursuit of their desire to explore virtual worlds and explode chains of similarly coloured confectionary, even if that means breaking some of the rules.

If you have news or information that you would like included in the next issue, or if you have any comments about dispATches, please [email Clive](#).

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