

Personas at Play: Understanding Disabled Player Experience to Expand Accessible Controller Design

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Abstract

Through usability testing of a wearable video game controller adaptive switch, we developed four personas to represent the lived experiences of video game players with disabilities through different video game player archetypes. The personas follow the UX Hero's Journey framework, using stories of lived experiences collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using narrative inquiry dialogic/performance analysis. We present these personas in this poster as a tool for the accessible video game controller research community.

Keywords

Personas, dialogic performance analysis, narrative inquiry, accessibility, video games

1 Introduction

Designing accessible video game controllers requires accounting for diverse and embodied player experiences, which are often difficult to represent in early-stage design decisions. This is further compounded by challenges in recruiting players with upper limb motor disabilities for iterative design and evaluation. In this context, personas can serve as a preliminary sensitization tool, helping designers engage more meaningfully with participants by developing awareness of potential lived experiences, play styles, and interaction challenges prior to direct engagement. Rather than replacing participant involvement, they support more focused and productive user engagement. While personas are widely used in game and accessibility research [2, 6, 9–11, 16, 18], they are rarely tailored to controller design or grounded in lived disability experiences.

In this poster, we present four personas developed from usability testing and semi-structured interviews with players with upper limb motor disabilities. Using a narrative inquiry approach and dialogic/performance analysis [1, 3, 12, 15], these personas preserve participants' narrative accounts of barriers, adaptations, and design needs. While not representative of all players, they reflect a range of lived experiences and interaction patterns. We position these personas as a tool for accessible controller design, supporting more informed and reflective decisions prior to and alongside participant engagement.

2 Methods

We conducted usability testing comparing a standard Xbox controller with an accessible gaming setup using the Xbox Adaptive Controller and custom adaptive switches, implemented as a wearable video game controller accessory [12], with players with upper limb motor disabilities. Adaptive switches are customizable input devices that translate physical movements (e.g., pressing, tilting, gesturing) into control signals, enabling interaction for individuals with diverse motor abilities. Using a narrative inquiry approach, we gathered feedback on the wearable accessory through participants' lived experience stories [4]. We analyzed this data using dialogic/performance analysis, which examines how experiences are constructed through storytelling while preserving narrative structure and meaning [15]. This approach enabled us to translate participant narratives into personas by capturing variations in gaming preferences, challenges, design suggestions, and disability-related interaction experiences.

We followed Riessman's dialogic/performance analysis approach [15], alongside Garland-Thomson's Fit/Misfit and Dependence/Vulnerability framework [7], previously applied in assistive technology research [12]. Dialogic/performance analysis examines how experiences are constructed through storytelling, preserving narrative structure and meaning, while the Fit/Misfit and Dependence/Vulnerability framework foregrounds moments of alignment, breakdown, and adaptation in human–technology interaction. Together, these approaches enable analysis of how disability is experienced in relation to gaming controllers in ways relevant for design.

We identified and restored participants' narratives to foreground these elements, then compared segments describing gaming preferences, controller interactions, and design suggestions across participants. Recurring patterns in play style, challenges, and adaptation strategies informed the development of personas representing distinct configurations of gaming preferences and disability experiences.

3 Results

Following the UX Hero's Journey [20] story framework, we created four unique personas with different gaming archetypes from the data we collected and analyzed with dialogic/performance analysis. These archetypes were directly informed by the types of games

participants identified as they liked playing, as well as the types of gaming sessions they enjoyed. These archetypes are:

- **The Versatile Gamer:** A gamer who likes a variety of different types of games, from action RPGs, to VR rhythm games, to simulation games. This gamer sometimes wants to play for a long time, but sometimes for a shorter time.
- **The Marathon Gamer:** A gamer who likes to play story-driven RPGs and who likes to sit down and play for hours at a time so they can make significant progress in their games.
- **The Competitive Gamer:** A gamer who likes competitive and challenging games, whose ideal controller is one that will not hold them back in their matches.
- **The Cozy Gamer:** A gamer who plays games to relax and enjoys adventure, simulation, or open-world games that they can easily pick up and put down.

What is valuable to note is that the archetypes chosen to describe the gamers are not specific to disabled gamers (e.g., a gamer with or without a disability can identify with the preferences of these archetypes), but the details of the Hero's Journey that we chose to include are specific to the disability experience. We did this intentionally to highlight that our participants showed a variety of gaming preferences and interests, and there was no singular game genre or gaming session type that disabled gamers stuck to.

The Hero's Journey elements that we chose to include were the introduction to the character (a short bio of the persona), their call to action (how they were introduced to video games), their challenges (the barriers they experience in gaming), their transformation (how they currently solve these barriers), and finally, their future return (what they are looking for in their ideal controller). We specifically took elements of the Hero's Journey that were most relevant to the data we collected. Moreover, we changed the "Return" aspect of the Hero's Journey to the "Future Return" alluding to the fact that the barriers that participants experienced expressed in the personas were not fully solved and that future research using these personas to assist in accessible controller design could benefit from a statement about what attributes the ideal controller for each persona would have. Lastly, we chose to represent the image of each persona through a character avatar created in one of the different preferred video games identified for each persona. We made this creative choice to build on the gaming preferences voiced by the participants, and because how a person chooses to represent themselves in video games is very personal and a way for gamers to express themselves creatively [5, 21].

4 Discussion

We found that analyzing the restoried data naturally lent itself to generating authentic personas that accurately reflect the experiences of gamers with upper limb motor disabilities. However, there are valid criticisms in the HCI research community around personas. Firstly, there is concern about personas inadvertently enforcing stereotypes when used with underrepresented communities [8, 14, 19]. In previous research [12] we attempted to reduce this risk by directly involving participants in persona creation. We similarly incorporated direct participant influence into our personas, using stories from usability testing interviews. Marsden and Haag

[14] identify that stereotypes are sometimes used in personas to create 'real' feeling personas; however, we intentionally went against stereotype expectations (e.g., with gender stereotypes in gaming competitive gamers are expected to be male while cozy gamers are expected to be female), trusting that participants' expressed experiences would carry the personas' authenticity. Persona image representations are an additional area where gender-based stereotyping can occur [8]. To combat this risk, we represent personas through game-based avatars from games they enjoyed. Through video game avatar representation, persona visuals are separated from gender-based human stereotypes while still representing authentic gamers, since video game avatars are a legitimate mode of self-representation for players [5, 21].

Secondly, there are concerns about how personas are actually put to use after their creation [8, 17]. Although not used directly in this paper, the personas we developed are intended to inform future iterations of the adaptive switches we created and tested. Recruiting participants with disabilities can be challenging, particularly for repeated usability testing [13]. In this context, we position these personas not as a substitute for participant involvement, but as a complementary design tool that supports ongoing reflection between user engagements. Specifically, they can help designers anticipate variation in lived experiences, play styles, and interaction challenges, and assess whether emerging design decisions align with the needs and goals identified through participant narratives. This aligns with prior work highlighting the value of personas in supporting participatory and reflective design processes [14].

5 Conclusion

Through this poster, we explore the lived experiences of video game players with upper limb motor disabilities, focusing on their gaming preferences, controller interactions, and the ways gaming shapes their disability experience. We represent these insights through four personas reflecting different player archetypes, constructed using participant data analyzed through dialogic/performance analysis and structured using the UX Hero's Journey. These personas capture variations in preferences, challenges, and design needs while remaining grounded in lived experience. In future work, we will use these personas to inform the iterative design of adaptive switches for accessible gaming.

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Introduction

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The Hero's Journey elements that we chose to include were the introduction to the character, their call to action, their challenges, their transformation, and finally, their future return. We changed the "Return" aspect of the Hero's Journey to the "Future Return" alluding to the fact that the barriers that participants experienced expressed in the personas were not fully solved and that future research using these personas to assist in accessible controller design could benefit from a statement about what attributes the ideal controller for each persona would have. Lastly, we chose to represent the image of each persona through a character avatar created in one of the different preferred video games identified for each persona.

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THE COZY GAMER

Biography

I'm Gerald and I like the relaxing and cozy games. The types of games you want to sit down and enjoy after a stressful day at work that can just make you forget the world around you. The switch is a personal favourite console of mine cause the game selection for my favourite cozy games is really good, and I can pick it up and start a game really easily. I can also put it down and step away from gaming just as easily. I don't want to commit to a game for a long time, maybe a couple of hours at a time. And I don't want the process to actually start playing to be that complicated either.

What is difficult?

I spend a lot of my energy when I'm gaming just holding my controller. The JoyCons aren't so bad since they are pretty small, but with the Xbox controller it is pretty big and heavy. With my tremor, the more fatigued I get the more my hands will shake, then I feel like I have to grip the controller harder to reduce the tremors but then that lands me right back at feeling more fatigued. It's a whole cycle.

I feel like sometimes the games I can play are limited- like if my kids want to play games with intense motion controls where I have to hold my hand up I can't really do that for long periods.

mashing buttons or holding multiple buttons go away cause those are too tiring for me. I play a lot of games on the Switch because I do just prefer the JoyCon controllers- they are small, they are very light, and the controls just feel more naturally placed for me. I also like that some Switch games have options for combine button and motion control input. That way if my tremor gets really bad in my hands I can add a bit of large muscle movement and relocate the interaction elsewhere from my hands.

What is my ideal controller to help with barriers?

More than anything I'm looking for a controller that is really lightweight, and even better if it's something I don't even have to hold in my hands. If I could involve more body movement outside of my hands and fingers that would be great too.

I think I would want to look for a controller that could replace what I currently use- especially the Xbox controller. If it's something that I could use with both my Switch and my PC games that would also be a huge bonus.

Why start gaming?

I actually started gaming because of my kids. They got really into video games like Minecraft, so I started playing those games too and found I really like them. Playing video games has been a great bonding experience for me and my kids- but some of the games they like to play I can't- mostly VR games. But we still find games we can play together.

How did I overcome these?

I opted to use an Xbox when I'm playing PC games even though that's not the most popular choice because there's a lower amount of input on a controller than a keyboard and that's a bit easier for me. That being said, I do still find it is a LOT of input to handle. So sometimes I will use mods to help assist my gaming- making stuff like

Gerald

Pronouns: He/him
Age: 38

- Experience hand tremors that make certain controllers difficult to use.



- Stardew Valley
- Animal Crossing
- The Sims 4
- Minecraft



- Switch with Joycons
- PC with Xbox controller

THE MARATHON GAMER

BIOGRAPHY

Hey! I'm Alex. I love any video game with a compelling storyline. When I'm gaming I want to be able to sit down for hours at a time and really immerse myself in the story of these games. The longer the games the better for me. Because I'm gaming for so long I want to be comfy, and I don't want to be distracted by pain, strain, or fatigue.

WHY START GAMING?

I used to game with friends when I was a kid- but only at friends' houses who had Xbox or PlayStation consoles. It wasn't until I got a really bad shoulder injury that I started getting more into gaming- especially games with really compelling storylines. My shoulder hurt so bad after the surgery I got on it- nothing would work to help me not feel the pain. That was until I picked up a Zelda game and it was so immersive I forgot all about my shoulder. Gaming really helped me through that, and ever since I've been addicted to games with really great stories.

WHAT IS DIFFICULT?

One thing that really bugs me about gaming is that I feel like I have such a long recovery time after I'm gaming- my hands and wrists can hurt for hours and even days afterwards. The thing about these immersive story games is that my mind is so focused on the game that I forget about my hands and won't feel any pain until after I'm done gaming and it all hits me at once. That ability to just forget pain was great when I had that shoulder injury and needed something other than painkillers to make me forget about my pain, but it's not as great outside of that situation.

When the pain does creep in during a gaming session though, I feel like I need to take a break. If I'm playing alone that's fine to do, but when I'm playing a game with friends I feel left behind cause they go on and progress in the game without me.

HOW DID I OVERCOME THESE?

I try to use a couple of different accessories to help reduce the strain and fatigue I feel, or at the very least help reduce the recovery time I feel after gaming for so long.

Sometimes I use a mousepad with a soft wrist support to reduce wrist fatigue, sometimes I even wear a brace to reduce the strain I feel. A lot of controllers and keyboards are really finger heavy- I am still looking for ways to work around the fatigue I feel around my fingers when I'm gaming.

WHAT IS MY IDEAL CONTROLLER TO HELP WITH BARRIERS?

My ideal controller would move interaction away from my fingers, but also hopefully away from my wrists as well. Could I use my legs, or maybe my head instead? I'd be curious to see I think using other parts of my body could also help me feel more immersed in the games- like if my actions to move my character mimicked what my character was actually doing. I love feeling immersed in games, so anything to help me feel more connected with my character I would be really interested in.

Above all else I want to be able to keep my gaming marathon sessions going, all while taking less breaks and having a faster recovery time after a session so I can game some more the next day!

The Versatile Gamer

Biography

Hey! I'm Sam. I consider myself a really versatile gamer- I like to play lots of different types of games, and I like to use a lot of different controllers and gaming systems. The type of game I'm playing typically dictates the type of controller I use- for racing games I like controllers, but for more combat heavy games I find a keyboard and mouse much more effective.

Why start gaming?

The first game I remember playing was Mario Kart on the Nintendo Wii- and it's held a special place in my heart ever since! I really liked the motion control options- my friends thought I was crazy cause they all found the button controls easier but I personally did not. I still opt for motion controls with that game, even though I'm better at using controllers now- it just feels more natural!

That was my gateway game into video games, and now I like to play a lot of different types of games.

What is difficult?

My disability can change from one day to the next, sometimes it can even change over the course of a couple of hours.

How did I overcome these?

My main solution right now is playing different games based on how I'm feeling that day, and those games typically dictate what kind of controller I use based on what feels the most natural to that game. This is great when what I'm feeling like playing that day aligns with what my body is able to handle playing, but sometimes those don't always match.

When I feel like I need to move my body, or change how I'm sitting cause of my ADHD

What is my ideal controller to help with barriers?

My ideal controller is one that can change and adapt to my needs as they change day to day and over time. I need a high degree of modularity and customization- and ideally incorporated in ways that I can easily do myself! I would want a controller that adds to the options I have available to me, that I can combine with those I already use.

Some finger and wrist involvement works for me- wrist movements are actually something I have to do for physical therapy anyway so I might as well involve them in gaming! But ideally I would want to have different options for what body parts I can interact with.

THE COMPETITIVE GAMER

BIOGRAPHY

I'm Cammy! I'm really competitive when it comes to gaming- I love winning and I hate losing. I'm very particular about the kinds of controllers, keyboards, and mice I use for gaming cause a bit of latency or a missclick can totally cost me the game. But I find a lot of commercial controllers don't work for me so I'm on the lookout for some different options that do work better for me.

WHY START GAMING?

I have been gaming since I was a kid- in fact I used to want to be a professional competitive gamer (but I realize now that is a really hard profession to get into).

I started gaming on the Xbox 360, but didn't love the controllers so I tried other systems like the Wii and PlayStation until I kinda found what works for me.

WHAT IS DIFFICULT?

With my disability I find it really easy to accidentally click the wrong button- and that has really negative outcomes when I'm playing competitively. Having a lot of buttons to handle all at once puts a heavy cognitive load on me which kinda contributes to the missclicks.

HOW DID I OVERVIEW THESE?

I'm still looking for a solution to my issue with missclicks- what would theoretically work is a controller with less buttons to handle but still be able to handle all the input I need for my competitive games- which can be a lot of input sometimes. The easiest controller I've used was the Wii remote, cause there were less buttons. But that type of controller definitely wouldn't work if I'm playing Dota or something. Right now I kinda just try to brute force through the missclick issue instead of finding a long term solution.

WHAT IS MY IDEAL CONTROLLER TO HELP WITH BARRIERS?

Whatever controller I use, I need to make sure it has the capability of handling high degrees and high speeds of input for when I'm playing competitively. It also needs to feel natural- it can take me a long time to get used to a new controller so my ideal controller would either have to not have that different controls to the keyboard or controller I already use, or be really intuitive so I don't have to think about it. Cause the longer I have to think the slower I'll be in competitive gaming.

If the controller could help reduce my missclicks that would also be great, as that's the biggest barrier I experience right now that I haven't found a lasting solution for.

Sam

Pronouns: They/them
Age: 24

- Disability characteristics change daily, sometimes hourly
- Chronic pain (EDS)
- ADHD



- Mario Kart
- Skyrim
- Beat Saber
- The Sims 4



- PC - Keyboard and Mouse
- VR
- Wii

Cammy

Pronouns: She/her
Age: 29

- Difficult with fine motor movement, often resulting in accidentally clicking wrong button
- Abilities get worse the more fatigued they feel



- Guild Wars 2
- DOTA 2
- League of Legends



- PC - Keyboard and Mouse
- PC - Playstation Controller