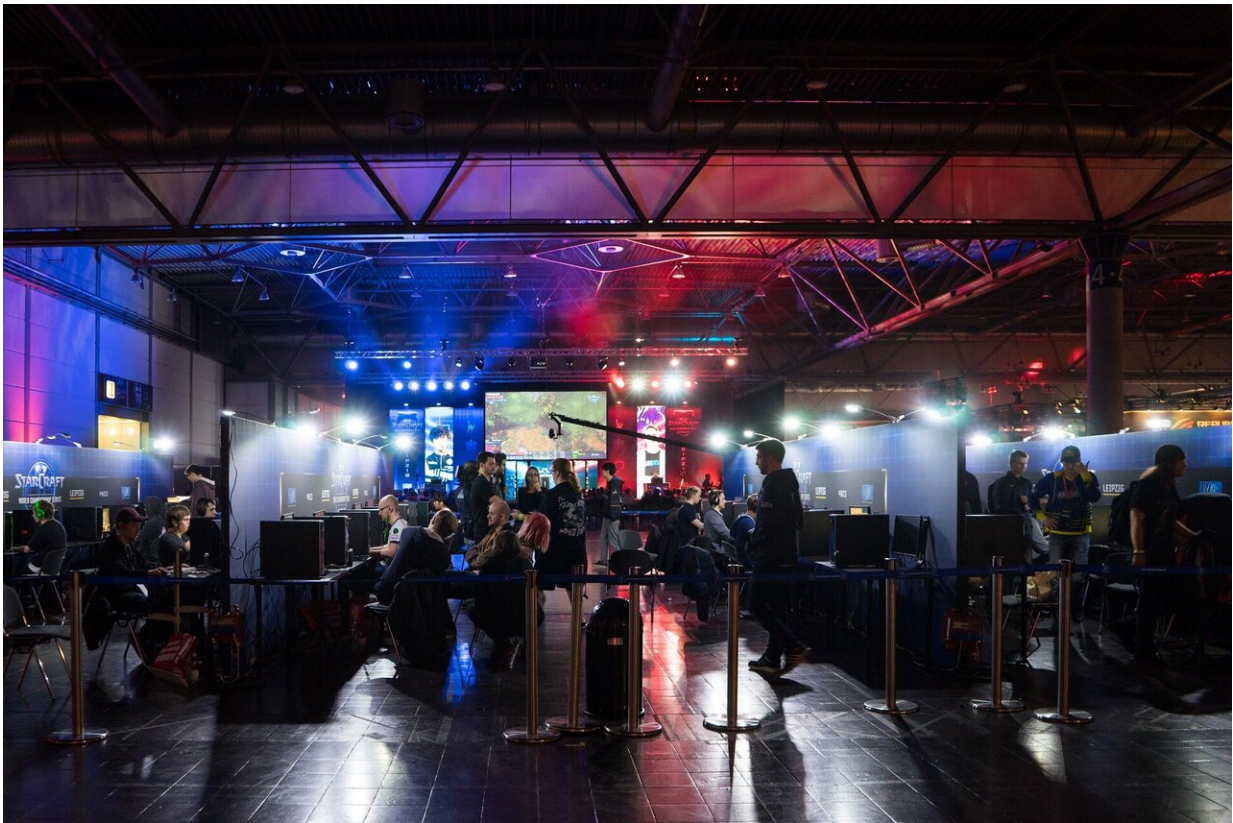


Players with disabilities score in video game world

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Carlos Vasquez is a master of video fighting game "Mortal Kombat" despite being unable to see the action on screen because he is blind.

The Texas resident—who relies on sound to time punches, kicks and dodges—is among a chorus of voices calling for better access to gaming for people with disabilities.

"You have two characters across the screen fighting each other, left and right, and you just have to memorize the buttons," said Vasquez, explaining what drew him to "Mortal Kombat".

Long neglected by the industry, the issue of accessibility is increasingly front of mind for [game makers](#).

There are financial as well as ethical reasons for opening doors to even more players in the multi-billion dollar industry.

According to the World Health Organization, more than a billion people live with some form of disability.

Microsoft, the tech powerhouse behind Xbox and its cloud [game](#) streaming service, estimates that there are some 400 million players with disabilities.

Vasquez's prowess caught the attention of "Mortal Kombat" maker NetherRealm Studios owned by Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment.

At his suggestion, the studio added audio cues to help blind gamers identify objects that they can interact with in the game.

Getting better

Game makers are keeping accessibility in mind when designing software, adding settings intended to level the field for players with disabilities.

Games can be tweaked to let artificial intelligence or other human players lend assistance when needed.

Options can be built in to bypass obstacles insurmountable due to a disability.

"The approach we have is to try to make accessibility part of the DNA of everyone in the company," said David Tisserand, head of the initiative at French video game giant Ubisoft.

"We really want to make sure that everyone understands that accessibility is part of their mandate."

In March, the second annual Video Game Accessibility Awards were handed out to titles best adapted to people with disabilities.

Games that won honors included car racing title "Forza Horizon 5," which was the first to ever support American and British sign language.

"Things are a lot better than they were decades ago because games can somewhat be fixed with update patches," noted Chris Robinson, a Chicago-based gamer who was born deaf and hosts DeafGamersTV channel on [video game](#) streaming site Twitch.

Helpful visual or audio features in recent releases such as "Last of Us Part II", Marvel's "Guardians of the Galaxy", and "Far Cry 6" have gotten kudos from players with disabilities.

Despite the progress, players interviewed by AFP were adamant that more needs to be done and wanted to be heard in the process.

For example, larger type in subtitles and [visual cues](#) on screen make a world of difference to deaf players, said Robinson.

Haters and trolls

"The other challenge is communication with other players who can hear," said Soleil Wheeler, a 16-year-old deaf gamer who uses the handle "Ewok".

Thousands of people tune into to watch Wheeler playing battle-royale games "Fortnite" and "Apex Legends" online.

The teenager eagerly awaits a time when conversations in online multiplayer games are displayed as captions in [real-time](#) during play.

Hardware accessories are rare for players with limited use of their hands, said David Combarieu, chief of Hitclik, a French startup that designs gear enabling people with motor disabilities to game at a competitive level.

Microsoft makes a special adaptive controller for Xbox games, at a price of \$100, before adding in costs for customization.

Yet, there is no controller equivalent offered by Xbox's console market rivals Sony and Nintendo, said Combarieu.

Online platforms have a diverse range of players, but they can still be badgered with insulting or abusive comments by "trolls" and "haters," said teen gamer Wheeler.

"I am not letting them waste my time," Wheeler said. "I pick my battles wisely as I navigate through life."

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