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Inclusive gaming through AI: a perspective for identifying opportunities and obstacles through co-design with people living with MND

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This interdisciplinary research initiative seeks to enhance the accessibility of video gaming for individuals living with Motor Neurone Disease (MND), a condition characterized by progressive muscle weakness. Gaming serves as a social and recreational outlet for many, connecting friends, family, and even strangers through collaboration and competition. However, MND's disease progression, including muscle weakness and paralysis, severely limit the ability to engage in gaming. In this paper, we describe our exploration of AI solutions to improve accessibility to gaming. We argue that any application of accessible AI must be led by lived experience. Notably, we found in our previous scoping review, existing academic research into video games for those living with MND largely neglects the experiences of MND patients in the context of video games and AI, which was a prompt for us to address this critical gap.

1 Introduction

For many people, playing video games is a social experience that connects friends, family and strangers through collaboration and competition, but research finds that not everyone finds them easy to play (O'Mara et al., 2021; Kremsner et al., 2022). Our interdisciplinary research collective is seeking to make gaming more accessible for people living with motor neurone disease (MND), a condition that causes progressive muscle weakness and disability (Lau et al., 2018). Muscle weakness and paralysis can severely limit the ability to engage in recreational activities such as

gaming. There is also a lack of opportunities in the broader community and games development that are inclusive of people living with MND, which risks further excluding them from daily life (O'Mara et al., 2024). The lack of opportunities is despite the fact that people with MND have expressed interest in gaming (Nuyujukian et al., 2018; McEvoy et al., 2020).

We aim to improve access to gaming from several perspectives, all led by the voice of lived experience of those affected by MND, including advocating with policy makers and researchers to help make gaming accessible, influencing the games industry to take accessibility more seriously, and working with the games industry to help them understand specific barriers to successful game play. A critical step is to better understand what helps make gaming more inclusive with players with MND. Therefore, our research has explored past and current work involving a range of software and hardware technologies that may help play games with MND, from customised software for adjusting game speeds, to eye-tracking sensors and hands-free input devices.

Evidence suggests that people living with Motor Neurone Disease (MND), a terminal illness with no cure, enjoy playing video games purely for enjoyment, alone and as a social experience (Nuyujukian et al., 2018; McEvoy et al., 2020; MND Australia, 2021). However, significant barriers associated with MND can make playing video games much harder and risk worsening feelings of boredom, stress, isolation and a lack of choice and control in daily life. More fun games that are easier play could help players with MND spend time doing something they enjoy during a difficult time, and feel more connected to daily life and their friends and family.

One pertinent form of technology we are exploring is artificial intelligence (AI). AI is a contested term, but it generally refers to computer systems capable of learning that perform tasks requiring intelligence and emulating human behavior and decision making with usually little or no human participation (Tambe and Rice, 2018). Examples of application of AI include systems that detect and collect information from the environment and process it to solve calculations or complex problems (Aler Tubella et al., 2023). The recent and rapid increase in use of various forms of AI in the games industry (Carpenter, 2024) suggests important opportunities and challenges for helping make games easier to play with people living with MND. As our perspective is based in the needs of users, the aim of our research is not to recommend forms of AI but, led by those with lived experience, co-design methodologies to determine what emerging types of technology, including forms of AI already being used, might be of assistance and how. When focused on users, the research is not about the cutting edge of AI in a purely technical sense, but cutting edge in terms of its practical application and use and learning for future development. Our innovation is to develop means to ensure the AI development is fit for purpose to support more inclusive videogames for people living with MND.

2 Related work

People Living with MND and Gaming

To explore the barriers to gaming with MND, we conducted a review in which we scoped the evidence to describe what may help reduce barriers to playing games with the MND community (O'Mara et al., 2024). Past research and practice in gaming and MND is very limited in its depth and quality, but it does suggest important areas of focus for future work. There is little or no in-depth study of AI, games and MND. We have identified ways, however, to apply the lessons from past

work involving people living with MND to the new contexts rapidly emerging from AI and game developments.

Peer-reviewed studies exploring the experiences of people with MND with brain computer interfaces (BCI) have found that neural activity was used to control software for the use recreational applications, including games, and for communicating with others (Liberati et al., 2015; Nuyujukian et al., 2018; Versalovic et al., 2022). Grey literature, including nonprofit reporting, information resources, blogs and guidelines, indicate that eye tracking devices, wearables, tablets, smartphones, computers, hand controllers, customized rooms and seating and modifications to game settings (e.g. speed and level of difficulty) and software could make gaming easier with MND (Game Accessibility Guidelines, 2012; McEvoy et al., 2020; Ablegamers, 2021; Microsoft, 2021; MND Australia, 2021).

Furthermore, peer-reviewed studies and grey literature exploring the experiences of people with various forms of disability and movement and motor impairment, such as those with cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy and paralysis, suggest similarities in their gaming experiences to those of people with MND (Holz et al. 2013; Scherer et al 2016; Hernández et al. 2018). Customised videogame software (including accessibility features in games and gameplay) and hardware (including modified controllers and equipment) can reduce issues with hand, arm and other physical control of interfaces for gameplay. Enhanced leisure programs and support may also help to better include people with MND in gameplay and gaming communities through more affordable access to interface technology, games and computers and consoles, as well as opportunities to play with others (Lancioni et al., 2017). For many people, playing video games is a social experience that connects friends, family and strangers through collaboration and competition.

While there is much promise for more inclusive games with MND, the existing evidence base also shows significant challenges. Game playability and limitations with holding and controlling devices and use accessibility tools were problems, including the weight of some technology and latency issues (Holz et al., 2013; Scherer et al, 2016; Hernández et al., 2018; Nuyujukian et al., 2018; MND Australia, 2021). There are gaps in the games industry processes for developing more inclusive games with people with disability (Gaddes, 2018). Gaps in practice and research also suggest little information and awareness of what helps is available to support people with MND who play games. The affordability and availability of technology that suits the changing abilities from progression of the disease (Mackenzie et al., 2016; Ablegamers, 2021) continues to be a major challenge, including, BCIs, robotics, VR and eye tracking devices. Very few people with MND have been involved in game development processes and they tend to have varying levels of understanding, confidence and skills in the use of technology, and sometimes limited support for carers (O'Mara et al., 2021). Games and gameplay, and what makes them enjoyable and fun as entertainment activities, are also not the focus of many interface technology studies. Studies tend to focus on the feasibility of interfaces (Holz et al., 2013; Scherer et al., 2016; Hernández et al., 2018; Nuyujukian et al., 2018).

Trends in AI and Inclusive Gaming

Recent AI developments, highlighted by progress in predictive and generative AI technologies, mark a break from previous innovation trajectories and is a 'gamechanger' (Chakraborty et al., 2023). Castrodale (2022) argues AI can 'enable innovative engagements and entanglements in our world, transforming our social relations'. AI could be impactful because the technology has 'sensory-spatiotemporal implications' and connects to our embodied human form(s) (Castrodale, 2022). Through greater entanglement and innovation with AI there is potential for research and practice to

119 help better support participation in games by people living with MND through processes of
120 automation. Innovation through automation, with appropriate permissions and input from people
121 living with MND (Versalovic et al., 2022), can work to reduce the burden associated with physical
122 movement when controlling interfaces, difficult gameplay and game speeds, searching for and
123 making sense of game information. Critically, automation may also be important for making it easier
124 when communicating with friends and family.

125 From a global social justice perspective, the use of AI tools may also prove to be an important
126 leveller, and we see an immense opportunity. Although 15% of the world's population lives with a
127 form of disability, only one out of ten can obtain accessible technology solutions (Chakraborty et al.,
128 2023). AI and other technology developments can offer more powerful solutions that are less
129 expensive to access. For instance, high fidelity eye-tracking solutions were traditionally possible only
130 through custom and expensive set-ups such as the Tobii Pro range. Recent advances have produced
131 eye-tracking solutions that are now possible through a user's domestic web browser, such as Chrome.
132 The response may not be as impressive as more expensive technology but the more affordable entry
133 point could allow a range of users access to content that was not previously possible (Kremsner et al.,
134 2022). Many people with MND and others with disability may also not be aware of these affordable
135 technology options (Mackenzie et al., 2016).

136 Despite the innovative potential, previous work, in both academic and grey literature, demonstrates
137 that AI has limitations and can be problematic. For example, in game-based environments, what is
138 often termed as Reactive AI models are often self-contained or siloed algorithms, with the
139 computercontrolled opponents in the real time strategy game *Starcraft 2* treating each match as an
140 individual event and reacting in a predetermined way based on the actions of the human player.
141 Alternatively, Limited Memory AI models, such as the natural language models made famous by
142 ChatGPT, draw and build on the subsequent analysis of external data. As the technology relies on a
143 massive dataset from previous relations, historical biases can be baked into reasoning and outputs of
144 the technology, practitioners now are working to argue for fairer systems (Buolamwini et al., 2023).
145 Alternatively, data from people living with a disability and their communities might not be included
146 in automation models, meaning that people with disabilities will be excluded by benefits. For
147 instance, journalist Tony Polanco (in Brandt et al., 2022) provides an example of a problem of AI
148 gaming in reference to VR technology. Two Sony PlayStation VR titles, *Batman Arkham VR* and
149 *Dying Reborn* assumed the player was standing and not in a wheelchair, as the writer was at the time
150 of play. The game's camera did not accurately track their movements.

151 People with MND and other forms of disability who use AI may also experience risks associated with
152 privacy and informed consent (Wald, 2021). The risks may lead some users to distrust the
153 technology. As we have argued, conceptualising new technologies using a collaborative process
154 between industry and the MND community develops is key to the mitigation of risks, and more likely
155 to produce a prototype product that is fit for purpose and reduces the likelihood of retrospective fixes
156 later in the development cycle.

157 Following important advances in AI and games development for players with disability, we believe
158 that there is significant potential for AI to support players in direct gameplay, serving as a co-pilot to
159 reduce the frustration of macro level control whilst still empowering the player to be making the
160 critical decisions. This is not a revolutionary idea, as there have been numerous examples of games
161 allowing the player to enable AI to automate micromanagement of actions and allowing them to
162 instead focus on the macro level decision making. Classic 1990s real-time strategy games such as

163 *Warzone 2100* and *Dark Reign* featured the option of using AI assistants for controlling individual
164 units to complete tasks such as scouting or automatically retreating when units had received a certain
165 amount of damage. This genre of game is usually played with a mouse, requiring a high level of fine
166 motor skills and dexterity. Obviously, this would prevent many people living with MND from
167 playing a game, but the use of more comprehensive AI assistants can allow them to strategise and
168 give directions without the need to complete repetitive tasks with a mouse. In more recent times, the
169 SpringRTS engine allows for a high degree of customisation including the use of AI to take on
170 micromanagement tasks, such as base building, traditionally performed by players.

171 Shifting genres from real time strategy games to sports titles, in many soccer/football games such as
172 *FIFA23* AI players can take control of individual players. Rather than directly controlling Messi or
173 Ronaldo, the player can serve as a coach shifting strategies and formations in response to what they
174 see during play. For both real time strategy games and sports titles, the speed at which a game
175 unfolds is an issue, so rather than slowing down the play for everyone and fundamentally changing
176 the game, predictive co-piloting AI could be used to look for patterns in play over a longer period of
177 time and assist by predicting a user's intention or next move. What we don't know is how this
178 transfer of control from the player to AI would be received by the community, and whether they
179 would still enjoy playing these games with a reduced level of agency.

180 *Involving people living with MND in co-design of more inclusive AI and gaming*

181 Due to the significant gaps in knowledge about MND and supporting play on existing gaming
182 platforms with AI in a range of technical and social requirements, involving people living with MND
183 in designing the approach to learning and development is important. Evidence suggests that
184 developing participatory processes for involving people with MND is a viable way to learn what may
185 work best for developing games more inclusive and easier to play with MND (Gunton et al., 2021). A
186 viable approach to supporting participation is Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR),
187 which has been used with people with MND in technology development settings to ensure they were
188 central to decision making and design, including creation of more effective devices (Reed et al. 2014;
189 Gunton et al. 2021).

190 CPAR is a novel and collaborative process for bringing together socially marginalised communities,
191 organisations and other stakeholders to find ways of improving an issue through social change and
192 action (Reed et al., 2014; Gunton et al., 2021). CPAR can be used for participant-researchers with
193 lived experiences, as well as game and technology developers, and as a way of employing co-design
194 for allowing researchers to better understand the condition in which micromanagement can be
195 automated while still maintaining a sense of participation and joy.

196 **3. Co-design as an essential component to harness the affordances of AI for inclusive gaming** 197 **interfaces**

198 Our review found that academic literature about MND and gaming overlooked the importance of
199 community participation in research and co-design (O'Mara et al., 2024). The finding was surprising
200 because guidelines in Australia and across the world stress the importance of engaging with lived
201 experience for research and development, including technology related work (United Nations, 2008;
202 Consumers Health Forum, 2016). As such, finding ways to learn from voices of the MND
203 community is crucial to any AI development to mitigate barriers to gaming. Co-design is a valuable
204 technique for learning and its practical application with the MND community.

205 The disability rights movement has emphasised the importance of amplifying the voices of
206 individuals who have firsthand experience, highlighting the central message that empowered
207 decision-making should always involve those directly affected, encapsulated by the principle
208 'Nothing should be decided about us without us' (United Nations, 2008). However, given there is no
209 comprehensive research into AI, interaction, videogames and MND, the gap highlights an urgent
210 need for the involvement of people with MND in future work. The gap in academic study that
211 supports the participation of those with lived experience is despite the fact that, in Australia, research
212 finds that 81% of all Australians play video games. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence (MND
213 Australia, 2021), non-profit reporting (McEvoy et al., 2020) and other evidence from grey literature
214 suggests many people with MND are interested in playing videogames, including for their pleasures
215 and the possibilities of social connection.

216 We argue that this is a massive oversight in the academic research of inclusive technologies, as
217 positioning end users as co-researchers will help to ensure that the use of AI is not only technically
218 functional but is an enjoyable experience. In our minds, joyful experience or the lack of joy is the
219 single most central consideration in determining the widespread adaptation of assistive technologies.
220 We believe that design *for* the community has hindered the widespread adaptation of brain-computer
221 interfaces while those who have engaged design *with* the community, such as Microsoft's adaptive
222 controller have been incredibly well received by the intended end users and the game industry as a
223 whole. For AI technologies to be successful, it is important to ensure that co-design is adopted
224 through participatory methods of software development and research that include people living with
225 MND (Reed et al., 2014; Gunton et al., 2021).

226 Building on past work involving people with MND and technology, the technique of co-design can
227 be used as part of a broader CPAR process in order to develop more enjoyable and inclusive games
228 with MND. Generally, co-design involves a team of experts, including people with lived experience
229 of a health issue like MND, working collaboratively to co-design workshops and other aspects of a
230 project (Anderson et al., 2024). Team members are actively engaged in the conceptualisation and
231 design process itself to share their experiences and insights for application. The process is iterative
232 and allows multiple revisions, ongoing feedback and refinements, in a collaborative way, to help
233 work towards project goals and ensure participant satisfaction, ease-of-use and enjoyment. Co-design
234 suggests promise for the practical application of learning from people with MND to develop more
235 inclusive gaming with AI.

236 Including people living with MND in making decisions around which forms of AI to explore for
237 gaming also helps to keep the focus on a capabilities-based approach to inclusive play. By adopting a
238 model that is affirmative and encourages recognition of a person's abilities and strengths (MND
239 Association, 2024) (Raley et al., 2021), it starts with the assumption that everyone can play and
240 builds from what individuals can do, including their specific capabilities when using technology. This
241 approach identifies problems lying in the social fabric that builds in barriers for those who do not fit
242 physio-normative assumptions (Kremsner et al., 2022; Mackenzie et al., 2016). Technology can be an
243 excellent means to improve lives of people living with a disability (Chakraborty et al., 2023), and
244 there is a long practice of doing so (Castrodale, 2022) when the barriers they experience are fully
245 understood. Most importantly, people living with MND have reported a willingness to use
246 technology for everyday activities and for communication to develop and maintain social
247 relationships (Mackenzie et al., 2016).

248 4. Future Work

249 Our research group was recently funded to research and develop more inclusive games for improved
250 quality of life through the “Game On for MND” project. In the project, we aim to improve access to
251 gaming from several perspectives, all led by the voice of lived experience of those affected by MND,
252 in collaboration with game and technology developers, including advocating with policy makers and
253 researchers to help make gaming accessible, influencing the games industry to take accessibility
254 more seriously, and working with the games industry to help them understand specific barriers to
255 successful game play. Building on past research and practice (O’Mara et. al., 2024), we are currently
256 exploring a range of software and hardware technologies for games, from customised software for
257 adjusting game speeds, eye-tracking sensor and hands-free input devices. AI is a significant part of
258 the research. We are also working closely with people living with MND and others from the MND
259 community to develop and implement an enhanced form of co-design and CPAR for better
260 understanding what may or may not help games more fun and easier to play with MND, including the
261 role of AI.

262 While there is little or no comprehensive study of co-design, games and artificial intelligence, use of
263 this approach still shows viability for better understanding the challenges and opportunities of AI.
264 Through dedicated workshops and other opportunities for feedback, co-design offers an opportunity
265 for people with MND to share their views and preferences on how AI, along with a range of other
266 forms of technology for playing games, can reduce barriers they experience to gameplay, and support
267 more fun and inclusive games. Such insights can then be practically applied to changes for software
268 and hardware, and evaluated through ongoing feedback provided by people with MND as part of a
269 cycle of review. Lessons learned from refinements to co-design and CPAR more broadly, including
270 the sharing of participant views and information supported by AI in a practical sense, may also help
271 to guide future research and development that better integrates AI into methodological processes,
272 with the consent and input of community members. For example, building prototypes, referred to by
273 the field as ‘technology probes’ (Graham et al. 2007), which work as props for discussion, which
274 itself is also supported by AI, can help to focus co-design and participatory processes. Co-designing
275 prototypes, and in turn workshopping, revising and refining them with a collaborative team, may help
276 create much more fun and inclusive games that use AI with people with MND.

277 Conclusions

278 Our approach to AI is opportunistic, building on our broader analysis of the literature around digital
279 technologies and their potential for removing barriers to play for people with physical disability. In
280 exploring the affordances and the possibilities of AI as part of a larger body of research, we are
281 cautiously optimistic that AI can be positioned to reduce the barriers while managing the risks under
282 the right conditions. But most importantly, is an AI solution that individuals in the MND community
283 want for themselves? If it is useful, how can we fine-tune the prototype to improve it? What
284 problems do they foresee and what can be done to mitigate these issues? Drawing on our suggestions
285 and approaches suggested here, we will report our findings in our future research, and to help players
286 “Game on with MND”.

287 We hope that the participatory research and its use of co-design described here identifies numerous
288 potential benefits in developing AI-augmented solutions for inclusive play. The needs, interests and
289 the everyday context of users must remain present in the foreground of a design exploration. To do
290 this, research teams must include researcher-participants making critical decisions to ensure there is

an emphasis on the sense making by end users. This includes understanding how a user operates an interface in ‘real life’ as part of their daily routines (Ward, 2023). When addressing an accessibility barrier, no design decisions can be made without the central participation of those with lived experience. As Hassan (2024) points out, researchers can have ‘blind spots’ when considering the capacities users might have. Currently, game researchers are paying less attention towards motor and auditory accessibility. Based on insights from research and practice, we feel that development, including that for games and AI, must empower individuals with a disability, and not to normalise based on an outsider’s view (Kiryakoza et al., 2022).

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author Contributions

All authors (N.D, M.H, BOM, K.H) were involved in conceptualisation, methodology development, writing, funding acquisition, writing and editing.

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