

Reflection on GAConf - Apurva Raman

I attended GAConf to both expand my knowledge of design for accessibility and to get to know people working in game accessibility to develop a network of useful connections that I can leverage both in the long and short term. While I did not present my work formally (it was a small, highly curated and accessible conference with about 10 talks that all happened in sequence), the product I contributed to was discussed briefly, and I was able to discuss what I was working on with other people there.

I learned from gamers with disabilities about their accessibility concerns, from game developers with and without disabilities (and inside and outside the AAA industry), and from nonprofits doing research. The AbleGamers charity in particular was a source of a lot of learning for me- and I think for many people in the room- in terms of strategies to make change in the way design is approached when it comes to accessibility. Much of design for accessibility is checklist-oriented, they say, and updating to design thinking methodologies is the only way to really innovate.

This was evidenced by the stories of substantive innovations in the accessibility space often stemming from other goals and the accessibility coming as a consequence. Nevertheless, there was evidence too for the success and usefulness of checklists and requirements as a minimum for a studio to be held to.

This knowledge, as well as the dialogue and practices around accessibility are things I hope to bring to TAD as a ninja, and I have shared some of the design tools with the class already.

I also got to meet some people I had met before (and some I had worked with before) as well as people I'll be working with at Microsoft when I join after graduation. I also met a lot of new people who I was able to connect with. Many of the people who were new to me at this conference were game developers at studios, often working on AAA titles (this was many of the attendees). I also got to learn about smaller studios and their practices. Overall, it seems like there is a lot of work left to be done in making workplaces actually accessible, beyond the games.

Furthermore, there's a huge lack of diversity on many axes in game development. GAConf had a lot of women in attendance and some women speakers, but very very few people of color. GAConf also seemed to have much more diversity on the whole than GDC (game developers' conference).

I'd also like to note how nice it was to go to a conference that was so accessible. We were given instructions on the easiest ways to access the building from the street level with elevators despite the construction, they had medical badges and asked about dietary needs and had an accessible venue. There was live captioning and ASL interpretation. They also maintained a quiet room and the staff were very knowledgeable. It made the conference experience doable.