

Deaf Clan. A microhistory of the accessibility of digital games and forms of community among deaf gamers in Germany.

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„Computer- and video games have long conquered the deaf world. Websites such as www.deaf-clan.de are the evidence. Hearing-impaired people play computer games like hearing people, be it alone, in a network, or online,” declared a post on *Taubenschlag*, an online platform for deaf people. This is even more so the case since the deaf US-American streamer Ewok (Soleil Wheeler) has gained attention on social media with their success in eSports and *Fortnite*-Streams.

Yet only in recent years, has the video game industry begun to see those people as potential customers who do not conform to the idea of an ideal player (i.e., a person with two working hands and thumbs and fully functioning eyes and ears). Since then, the needs and requests of deaf and / or signing players are increasingly taken into consideration. Assistive technologies, assistive devices, and accessible software are growing in importance.

The gaming industry has not always been so open to accessibility for deaf people. Given the lack of support in the video game industry, journalism, politics and academia, between 1971 and the 2000s, that is, ever since video games were introduced to game arcades, digital access technologies and methods were mainly developed by individuals and small communities of gamers.

Online forums played an important role in this process. Although the gaming communities typically operated either within national or even local boundaries, they were part of developing global gaming phenomena and technological innovation. With increasing internet use and the development of social networks and message boards from the 1990s

onwards, the last 25 years saw the development of disabled gaming communities and charities on the international and global level, which continue to be active as networks of information and publicity.

The creation of the German Deaf Clan is an example of the local and national ties between deafness and popular digital games. It was founded in Bremen in 2001 as an eSports network by pioneers of the deaf gaming community and attained national reach and success. Interviews with two clan members show challenges and possible solutions for non-verbal digital play and for the clan's success. The Deaf Clan emerged when deaf gamers gathered to play the shooter game *Call of Duty* in Bremen's deaf café. It became the first gamer clan in Germany with only deaf gamers. They played at different competitive LAN Parties—at first quite successfully, because the game communication mainly was typing written commands. This made possible exchange and friendships with other (hearing) clans, so that the clan built a large social information network. Yet when oral commands and oral communication became standard in multiplayer gaming, deaf players were at a disadvantage. To meet this challenge, they developed different strategies, such as short commands using the signed alphabet and signing via video chat. Communal gaming, the clan members explain, is not only connecting them socially and for leisure or eSports. It also serves as a means of inclusion and education about deaf people. For instance, competing with the Deaf Clan, some of the clan's hearing gaming friends have become interested in sign language. According to the Deaf Clan, communal gaming thus can help spread awareness of deaf culture, community, and communication.