Combating Social Isolation Through Play
It goes without saying that the global pandemic has changed so many things. Still, the truth is, the social isolation that the masses discovered was nothing new for so many people with disabilities.

What is new is how AbleGamers must go about accomplishing its mission. The old way of helping combat that social isolation is no longer available to us, and it couldn’t keep up with the demand.

If there is a silver lining in the pandemic, many people have discovered the importance of our mission, having dealt with their social isolation. Generous donors have given us the resources to begin to build the capacity we need and 2021 has been all about rebuilding AbleGamers into a world-class organization that can help so many more people than we ever imagined.

My challenge in 2021 was finding the right people with the skills and passion for taking on the work ahead to ensure the individuals tasked with expanding AbleGamers’ reach aligned with our mission and vision. This allowed me to position our new staff with the vision of the future while incorporating their unique perspective, to get the tools and build the infrastructure to support the growingly complex mission, and ensuring the culture that has driven AbleGamers from the start stays intact and evolves with each new hire. We found the right people; we doubled in staff. We went from a seven-member team to 14 members. We had the resources to hire some top talent and set them on a path to create programs that will endure.

We realize that everyone’s journey is unique and should not be addressed through a one-size-fits-all model. The conceptualization and implementation of a non-prescriptive and holistic continuum of support will allow AbleGamers to engage and meet individuals where their needs are. Dr. Andy Wu joined us from the University of Saint Mary, where he educated a new generation of Occupational Therapists. As our Sr. Director of Peer Counseling, he has taken on the herculean task of revamping the entire Peer Counseling program to support empowering more players with disabilities in a timelier, more comprehensive manner and hopefully closer to their home. Roger Brooks has joined the AbleGamers family. He is an expert in mental health and is developing innovative programs to address the emotional consequences of social isolation and increase the resiliency of the people we support. Working alongside our Community and Inclusion team to empower and guide those who need it into a safe place to start or continue their journey into rich social experiences, is at the heart of our mission. We have also hired support staff, allowing those on the front line of our mission to stay focused, to change the world.

When I started AbleGamers 18 years ago, I never imagined that we would be on the road we are on. I just wanted to make sure that my best friend with MS could keep playing EverQuest, and by extension, the rest of my disabled friends. Fast forward to today, and on one side of our mission, we have a team of people working directly with players to give them the tools they need to use games as an avenue to a rich social life. We have invested in a team of user researchers and educators working with game companies to create accessibility for our players. All the pieces fell into place in 2021, and 2022 is all about building that capacity to support and grow our impact.

Mark Barlet
Founder and Executive Director
SOCIAL ISOLATION IS AN EPIDEMIC AMONG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Maintaining social networks is crucial in preventing loneliness and social isolation.

Combating social isolation through play, we’re using the power of video games to bring people together, improving quality of life with recreation and rehabilitation.
OUR MISSION

AbleGamers is a nonprofit organization creating opportunities that enable play in order to combat social isolation, foster inclusive communities, and improve the quality of life for people with disabilities.
## OUR PROGRAMMATIC PILLARS

We use the power of video games to bring people together, improving quality of life with recreation and rehabilitation, delivering our mission through our five pillars.

### PEER COUNSELING
Providing one-on-one guidance to assess player needs in order to enable play.

### ENGINEERING RESEARCH
Creating assistive technologies that provide solutions to barriers to play.

### COMMUNITY AND INCLUSION
Fostering opportunities for camaraderie to forge lifelong relationships.

### USER RESEARCH
Discovering barriers and solutions to facilitate accessible player experiences.

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Guiding industry philosophies to promote an inclusive and accessible future.
OUR HISTORY
SINCE 2004

IT WAS ALWAYS ABOUT SOCIAL ISOLATION

Long before AbleGamers was an organization with a mission to combat social isolation, it was a thought. A passionate belief and drive for equality through the access of resources, by our founder, Mark Barlet. As a Service-Disabled Veteran, Mark has a deep and personal understanding of barriers to care and the potential emotional and physiological pitfalls of social isolation.

In an attempt to stay linked with close real-life friends across the country, Mark and his friends would virtually connect by playing EverQuest weekly. This was a routine that they shared to stay actively engaged in each other's lives. However, one Friday evening in the fall of 2004. His friends failed to join.

As Mark soon discovered, his friend's disability and symptoms of Multiple Sclerosis had exacerbated to the point that it had rendered her unable to join. The activity that they all looked forward to every week was not going to happen. In an endeavor to help his friend, he began searching for resources to assist her. At the time, he was sure that he would discover numerous resources that he would be able to identify for her; instead, he found an ocean of needs with few if any resources. What Mark was truly doing was searching for resources and ways to lessen social isolation for his friend. In essence, living what would become AbleGamers mission. This was the revelation. This revelation would eventually lead to the creation of AbleGamers.

On 8/23/2004, the AbleGamers website was registered. The original intent was to provide a platform where disabled players could connect with each other and share essentially needed resources. At the time it was our belief that connecting players was the catalyst needed so that individuals could share resources with one another. Over the years, AbleGamers continually reviewed the landscape and found that the central issue was not that resources were hard to find, but rather that they simply did not exist. So, in 2009, with a $5000 donation, from Alex Rigopulos, AbleGamers Foundation was created.

Over the years AbleGamers has sought to fight social isolation through facilitating gaming. Over those years we found that what we had conceptualized as an ice cube of needs in an ocean of resources and opportunity has turned out to be an iceberg in breadth and depth of complexity. What we once saw as a two-prong approach; removing physical barriers to play and engaging with programmers to provide more accessibility options in games (i.e., peer counseling and APX training). It has now developed into a complex web of correlated needs.
WHERE WE WERE

The AbleGamers Peer Counseling program was designed to explore if equipment accessibility hurdles stop the player from exploring the amazing worlds, stories, and experiences created in video games. The end goal was to provide custom equipment and hardware to people with disabilities to assist in the critical first step to including them as players and connecting them to people in video gaming communities around the world. Since its inception, the peer-counseling program has been overwhelmed. While we knew that there was a need for such a program, we did not anticipate that the need would run as deep as it has or that individuals would be as eager to reach out for this resource as they have. While we knew that there was a need, we couldn’t comprehend the depth of that need (at least not then). It was as if we were trying to dig a hole in the sand. Any progress was lost because the sand kept refilling that hole. With every one person we helped, 10 more would reach out for assistance.

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic brought with it massive shutdowns and forced social isolation to a population who had never experienced isolation of the psychological consequences to that isolation. As horrendous as the pandemic and its impact has been for the world, it has also provided a small insight into what the population we serve has experienced. However, unlike those who eagerly await “returning to normal” and re-engaging with others, the individuals we serve will continue to have barriers to overcoming social isolation even after the pandemic subsides. This is a critical point that should elicit not only compassion, but also a drive to help individuals who have been “locked-in” by barriers to care, and barriers to social engagement. Barriers created and endorsed by a biased view of disabled individuals. As a society, we seem to be ok if individuals are marginalized as long as they are out of sight with no end in sight. We must address these barriers in a national discussion, which we intend to lead.

WHERE WE ARE GOING

The original driver that led Mark to seek to empower his friend through finding and allocating resources remains central to AbleGamers now. However, the challenge that we face as we engage individuals globally is infrastructural development, growth and the modification of our programmatic engagement model to address needs in a more holistic and research-validated manner.

The realization that our work is not only life-changing but life-saving as well, led to a reconceptualization of how we pursue our mission. For several months we have been finalizing our plans to develop and expand the infrastructure to meet our members’ needs in a continual and holistic manner. We are now beginning the application component to test our new empowerment model. Through connecting, engaging, and empowerment we hope to foster a more resilient generation of disabled players.
WHAT WE DO

The world of games and gaming provides people with disabilities an opportunity to build rich social engagements, lifelong friendships, and the opportunity to connect with friends, family and players who share similar experiences. We’re using the power of video games and play to bring people together, improving quality of life with recreation and rehabilitation.

Peer Counseling

Our Peer Counselors are trained individuals, many of whom are players with disabilities themselves, who provide one-on-one guidance to assess player needs to enable play. Our goal is for the Peer Counseling program to support our players with disabilities in how to play and how to use technology to increase independence and have a better quality of life.

Engineering Research

Engineering Research creates assistive technologies where none exist providing solutions to barriers to play.

One of our proudest moments was the development of the Xbox Adaptive Controller alongside the passionate developers at Xbox and Microsoft.

Community & Inclusion

The Community and Inclusion team’s focus is supporting, improving and cultivating opportunities that amplify the voices of players with disabilities and forge lifelong relationships. Our Community and Inclusion Specialists work directly with the industry and support community initiatives resulting in a more inclusive gaming community.

User Research

Our User Research team and their player panels make gaming better for everyone, by discovering barriers due to equipment compatibility or physical limitations and then working to create solutions to facilitate accessible player experiences.

Our Player Panels is one of the world’s largest groups of people with disabilities dedicated to lending their unique perspective and expertise to create a more accessible world. With over 400 currently in the group, these players are working with game studios and developers to create rich, accessible player experiences.

Professional Development

Professional Development guides industry philosophies, develops learning materials and provides education to the gaming industry on assistive technology and equipment for players with disabilities.
WHERE WE ARE

AbleGamers started as an online forum to create a safe place for players with disabilities to share their thoughts, solutions and ideas but AbleGamers founder, Mark Barlet quickly realized the gaming industry's accessibility problems ran deep. There wasn't enough modified equipment for people with physical disabilities, and the games themselves didn't cater to people with cognitive and visual impairments.

Today we are a West Virginia based international nonprofit.

In July 2021, the official founding meeting of AbleGamers Brazil took place. AbleGamers Brazil is the first charity in Brazil with a focus on gaming for people with disabilities and the first AbleGamers outside the USA. This was an important step in the evolution of AbleGamers Charity because we know the challenges people with disabilities face are universal, and the world is a better place when we play together.

And in September 2021 the AbleGamers Canada became a federally registered nonprofit in Prince Edward Island, Canada. In 2022 we will begin the process of becoming a fully registered Canadian charity!
Our team is comprised of 18 hard-working, intelligent, generous, people who are committed to making the world more accessible.

This diverse team of experts draws their knowledge from a variety of industries and backgrounds in an effort to combat social isolation and improve the quality of life for people with disabilities.

In 2021, we were thrilled to add 7 new full-time staff members to our team, doubling the size of our organization to meet the growing demand for our programs and services.
Part of what we do at AbleGamers Charity involves getting equipment to the people who need it. 2021 was a busy year. In an effort to advance our mission and enhance program impact AbleGamers Senior Director of Peer Counseling, Andy Wu, who joined the team in 2021, worked to form even more partnerships with organizations like Emerging Tech Lab at Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center, Craig Hospital and Ability KC to name a few.

Partnersing with Craig Hospital to provide equipment to their Arcade Fund, Craig Hospital’s Adaptive Gaming Program.

The partnership with Emerging Tech Lab at Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center, will bring forth more resources, education, and development of highly individualized solutions for adapted gaming. The donated adapted gaming equipment, including switches, joysticks, controllers, and mounts will better equip their staff and the individuals they see.

**$154,000** IN ADAPTIVE GAMING EQUIPMENT GRANTS AWARDED TO ORGANIZATIONS IN 2021
2021

PEER COUNSELING

400
PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES HELPED THROUGH ONE-ON-ONE PEER COUNSELING SERVICES

90
ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY AND EQUIPMENT GRANTS PROVIDED TO INDIVIDUALS IN NEED

1000+
HOURS OF DIRECT SERVICES PROVIDED BY OUR PEER COUNSELORS

“I am interested in gaming because I want to be able to interact with my children because it’s one of the only ways I have to play with them now. I have the desire to live happy and to be with my children. They’re my biggest reason to live.” - Craig Hospital patient

*ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY AND EQUIPMENT COST AN AVERAGE OF $350 TO $2000 PER PERSON
Game developers trained and certified in APX (Accessible Player Experiences) last year join the 112 already trained and certified developers working in the industry representing studios around the world.

Hours of accessible player experiences (APX) training

Our work with 400+ players with disabilities and years of research have led AbleGamers to create Accessible Player Experience (APX), a comprehensive set of 22 Design Patterns that help developers craft optimal experiences for players with disabilities.

in scholarships awarded through our DPAD Initiative since 2020

In August 2020 we launched our Developers Promoting Accessibility & Diversity (DPAD) Initiative to assist in cultivating a more inclusive gaming industry. The DPAD Initiative focuses on granting marginalized developers (including developers who are disabled, people of color, women, and/or members of the LGBTQIA+ community), free access to the Accessible Player Experience Practitioner (APXP) Course developed and delivered by the AbleGamers Charity.
USER RESEARCH
PLAYER PANELS

226 players connected with 15 organizations

Player Panels is one of the world’s largest groups of people with disabilities dedicated to lending their unique life experiences to create a more accessible world. With over 400 players currently in the group, these players are working with triple-A game studios, our indie friends, and more to add value in the creation of rich, accessible player experiences.

ENGINEERING RESEARCH
2021 PATENT

The Bury Controller, patented in January 2021, was the thought child for a player in our community who could no longer hold the controller and use the triggers and bumpers. They expressed interest in a way for the controller to be buried into their lap, which gave our engineering team the idea of designing a holster to be cemented into a medical table, with the triggers and bumpers accessible via elongated prongs.

AbleGamers has helped bring five products to market. One example is the Xbox Adaptive Controller launched in 2018.
SUPPORTERS  Our community kept showing up when we needed them the most and we couldn’t be more grateful.

Heirloom Supporters
This is an elite group of sponsors who have committed to our mission by giving over $250,000, either as a company or by a community group.

Champions of Play
This is an incredible group of sponsors who have committed to our mission by giving over $100,000, either as a company, or by a community group.

Hero of Play
This is an amazing group of sponsors who have committed to our mission by giving over $50,000, either as a company, or by a community group.

Supporters of Play
This is an amazing group of sponsors who have committed to our mission by giving over $25,000, either as a company, or by a community group.
**Givers of Play**
This is an amazing group of sponsors who have committed to our mission by giving over $10,000, either as a company, or by a community group.

**Level Up**
Level Up, our sustaining donor community, is a passionate and dedicated group of people on a mission to combat social isolation and improve the quality of life for people with disabilities.

**Fundraisers**
Gamers and content creators around the world have done some pretty amazing things to raise money to help AbleGamers combat social isolation. Over 2000 fundraising streams last year helped raise more than 1M for people with disabilities.

**Our Donors**
AbleGamers relies on the kindness and generosity of all our donors. They help us fund services and programs for people with disabilities and create change in the gaming community. Every contribution counts, thank you all for supporting our mission.