

# Introductory Remarks for the Designing Inclusive Retail Experiences Design Challenge

*Delivered January 26, 2018 at the "Designing Inclusive Retail Experiences" BIG IDeA Challenge*

Hello! I'm Alan Harnum, one of the software developers at the Inclusive Design Research Centre, a research and development centre here at OCAD University; our focus is on ensuring that emerging information technology and practices are designed inclusively, and we do this through a wide variety of means: researching design and development practices, building open-source software, teaching principles and techniques of inclusive design, and participating in standards and policy development. We do this as part of an open international community of designers, developers, researchers, advocates and volunteers.

I was asked to give a quick introduction to inclusive design as we think about it at the IDRC today. I'll prefix this introduction by saying that our understanding of inclusive design is continuously evolving! So what I say now is my attempt to sum up my own understanding at this point in time based on my practice and the practice of others around me.

Our short definition is currently this one: "Inclusive design is design that considers the full range of human diversity with respect to ability, language, culture, gender, age and other forms of human difference. Designing inclusively results in better experiences for everyone."

I think this statement should be understood as an aspirational one. We don't think we've got inclusive design perfected (far from it!), but we know the goal we're working towards: design practice in terms of philosophy, method, tools and culture that considers, respects and involves the full range of human difference. We aspire to this both because we believe in it as a core value of design practice, but also because we believe it leads to better outcomes for everyone.

We stress three dimensions of inclusive design in more detail:

**Firstly**, inclusive design recognizes diversity and uniqueness. As individuals spread out from the hypothetical average, the needs of individuals that are outliers, or at the margins, become ever more diverse. Most individuals stray from the average in some facet of their needs or goals. This means that a mass solution does not work well. Optimal inclusive design is best achieved through one-size-fit-one configurations. Flexible or adaptable systems such as digital systems are most amenable to this but the emergence of 3D printers and other mechanisms of bespoke manufacturing and component-based architectures can also achieve diversity-supportive physical design.

It's important to emphasize this does not imply a separate, specialized or segregated solution. We do not consider segregated solutions sustainable economically or technically. We emphasize and direct our efforts towards personalization and flexibility in our designs, valuing user choice and self-determination.

**Secondly**, we work hard to use inclusive processes and tools. We believe diverse perspectives lead to better outcomes, especially perspectives from the margins. We value lived experiences, especially of "extreme users", and the edict "nothing about us without us" that originates in the activism of people with disabilities to be involved decision-makers rather than research subjects or token participants, but is broadly applicable to other people who tend to have designs imposed upon them. To that end, we value participatory design processes, co-design, and environments of close collaboration between specialized "professionals" and others.

We also advocate and work towards the greater availability of design and development skills in the tools and processes we develop and use - all software we develop is released under open source licenses, and we strive to work in the open as much as possible, messy as that may be.

**Thirdly**, we strive for broader beneficial impact. It is the responsibility of inclusive designers to be aware of the context and broader impact of any design and strive to effect a beneficial impact beyond the intended beneficiary of the design. Inclusive design should trigger a virtuous cycle of inclusion, leverage the "curb-cut effect", and recognize the interconnectedness of users and systems.

To that end, we are proponents of what I would call intersectional systems thinking. In the spirit of Ursula Franklin, we want to assess technology and design through a critical lens that considers its place within society, how it operates socially, how it encodes power relationships.

**Finally**, in addition to those three dimensions, much of the IDRC's work originates in critical theories of disability, technology and society that reject binary categories of "disabled" and "non-disabled".

To that purpose, we reframe disability within a design context as a mismatch between the needs of the individual and the design of the product, system or service. With this framing, disability can be experience by anyone excluded by the design. For example, when listening to an audio-only lecture the student who is blind is less disabled than the student who has not read the background material, the student who is less fluent with the language, or the student who has been up all night. An audio lecture is designed for a student who has the contextual knowledge, understands the language well, and can fully attend. With this framing anyone can potentially benefit from inclusive design.

As a personal example, I have a color deficiency in my eyes that makes it hard to distinguish certain shades of red and green. Systems that rely solely on subtle shades of red and green as an indicator of state are often very difficult for me to use effectively because of this.

Accessibility is therefore the ability of the design or system to match the requirements of the individual. It is not possible to determine whether something is accessible unless you know the user, the context and the goal.

I'll conclude by returning to something I said earlier - we are far from perfecting inclusive design. In fact, I would argue that by its very nature any perfection is forever out of reach. Rather, we are on a continuous journey to learn more, achieve more, do a little better over time; succeed sometimes and learn from that the limits of our successes, and fail sometimes and learn that our failures have lessons to teach us. Events like this one are a vital part of that ever-moving process, so thank you very much for participating.