

Amazon Accessibility Coming Along

BY ROBERT KINGETT

If one were to look at Amazon and their accessibility history, they wouldn't find a whole lot of accessibility tenderness before Wednesday, March 2, 2016.

It seemed as though Amazon didn't quite care about accessibility before the National Federation of the Blind, NFB, forged a partnership with the company to, at first, improve reading for blind and visually impaired students by making their Kindle line of products accessible to the visually impaired. It is, in fact, getting better however.

The partnership is still in place between the two organizations but Amazon appears to be making accessibility improvements on their own. One such update is to their Voice View screen reader on their official Amazon media devices.

VoiceView on Fire tablets and VoiceView on Fire TV are going to have continuous updates throughout this year and the coming years but Amazon detailed some updates they released at the beginning of 2017, in late January. The updates seem to focus on making VoiceView a screen reader that users can control, with an update that focuses on, what they call, the VoiceView menu for easy access to settings, including reading speed (with rates from 0.66x to 4x), speech and sounds volume, punctuation level, and ability to relaunch the tutorial.

Another update is the Navigation of all content on the Fire TV screen by holding the Menu button to enter "Review Mode." This also allows customers to navigate by word and character so it's easier to find out how actors' names are spelled as well as Context-sensitive help available by pressing the remote's Menu button, and automatic reading of program information, such as the rating and duration, by pressing the Fast Forward and Rewind buttons.

VoiceView isn't the only accessibility focus though. Amazon rolled out a high contrast update that they stress, is experimental at this point. They also say that they have added an option to enable closed captions as well. One question that's sure to pop up is the question regarding third party apps and development. Amazon said this update will bring access to Hulu and Netflix but it's not clear how accessible the apps are.

Amazon just says that this update will allow people who are blind and visually impaired to use third party apps. Amazon always had a FireOS accessibility API but now developers can take advantage of many things within the API. Just a few of these center around the screen reader, such as providing "Orientation Text," "Usage Hints," and "Described by" additions.

Their Amazon Video application has received some accessibility love as well. The accessibility team has been working hard to make the Amazon Video application screen reader friendly. This means that blind and low vision customers can use Amazon Video on devices such as the Microsoft Xbox One and One S, Sony PS4 game consoles, certain Roku streaming devices, as well as many smart TVs and BluRay players, including certain TVs and BluRay players from Hisense, LG, Samsung, and Sony.

Peter Korn, an Accessibility Architect, says that the team will continue to improve on these devices and more this year. Their department told me that what really helps them out is feedback. Upon asking if they had an email to collect such feedback, they said people could send an email to device-accessibility@amazon.com.

