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Sightless Scribbles

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The "Disability Dongle": Why Silicon Valley Hates Me and you.

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Mood: Wanting to throw a \$30,000 prototype into a lake.

There is a feel-good genre of viral video that I call "The Inspiration Porn Industrial Complex." You know the one. It usually features a college engineering team, a dramatic piano soundtrack, and a disabled person strapped into a machine that looks like a Transformer having a panic attack.

The caption usually reads: *"Students invent stair-climbing wheelchair! The future is here!"*

I can't roll my eyes hard enough every time I see one of these vapid videos.

The machine—let's call it the iClimb 3000—usually costs as much as a Honda Civic. It weighs three hundred pounds. It makes a sound like a blender digesting a brick. And watching the video, all I can feel is the phantom sensation of being strapped into that thing, suspended five feet in the air at a forty-five-degree angle, praying the gyroscope doesn't glitch and toss me down a flight of concrete steps like a sack of potatoes.

This is what we call a "Disability Dongle."

A Disability Dongle is a piece of technology that is flashy, expensive, and technically impressive, but utterly fails to solve the actual problem it claims to address. It is engineering designed for the abled gaze, not the disabled

body. It is designed to win design awards, not to be used.

Silicon Valley loves these things. They love the idea of "solving" disability with hardware. It fits their narrative. If disability is just a bug in the human code, then surely they can patch it with enough servos and lithium-ion batteries.

But here is the reality they refuse to accept: My disability is not a tragedy of biology. It is a failure of infrastructure.

I don't need a stair-climbing wheelchair that costs \$30,000 and requires a maintenance crew. I need [better doorknobs](#) and or a ramp.

But a ramp is boring. You can't make investors have a hard on for a ramp that doesn't connect to the cloud. You can't give a TED Talk about a ramp. You can't get venture

capital funding for a slightly wider doorframe. Concrete is not "disruptive." But a ramp works. It doesn't run out of battery. It doesn't require a software update. And crucially, it works for the parent with a stroller, the delivery guy with a hand truck, and the old man with bad knees. It is a universal solution.

The iClimb 3000 is an individualist fantasy. It says, "We don't need to change the world to fit you; we will turn you into a tank so you can conquer the hostile world."

Maybe, though, just maybe, I don't want to be a tank. I just want to go to the library.

I feel this disconnect every time a "Tech Bro" tries to sell me on the latest smart-glasses or haptic-feedback belts. I pick these things up, and they always feel the same. Cheap, clammy plastic. zero buttons except for the power button. They get hot against the skin

after ten minutes. They hum with that constant electronic whine that gives you a migraine by noon.

These solutions are nothing other than costumes, the height of "performative engineering"

And while they are building these exoskeletons, the actual digital world—the one I live in—is rotting by the minute.

I use a screen reader. It is a vital tool. It is my literacy. But half the websites I visit are built with such bloated, sloppy code that my screen reader chokes on them. I try to order groceries, and the "Checkout" button is labeled "Button_Graphic_v2_Final." I try to read a news article, and an unlabelled pop-up ad traps my cursor in a loop.

Silicon Valley will spend millions developing a glove that translates sign language into speech (badly), but they won't spend ten minutes adding Alt-Text to their images. They will build a headset that describes the room to me (poorly), but they won't use semantic HTML headings so I can actually navigate a webpage.

Why? Because semantic HTML isn't sexy. You can't put "Used H1 Tags Correctly" on a pitch deck.

There is a profound arrogance in this. It assumes that the only reason I am excluded from society is because I am blind, rather than because society has made a choice to exclude me. The Disability Dongle promises that if I just buy enough gear, if I just encase myself in enough sensors and plastic, I can finally "pass." I can finally participate.

It's a lie.

The most advanced piece of accessibility technology I own is my white cane. It costs, at the time of this writing anyway, before inflation, forty dollars. It has no batteries. It never crashes. It is a stick that extends my sensory range. It is elegant, simple, and honest.

The second most advanced piece of technology I want is [a society that gives a damn.](#)

Keep your exosuits. Keep your ultrasonic echolocation visors. Keep your prototypes that feel like wearing a toaster oven on my face.

Just fix your fucking code. Pour some concrete. And stop trying to upgrade my body when the problem is your design.

If you liked this rant, you might enjoy [Against Technoableism: Rethinking Who Needs Improvement by Ashley Shew](#)

About the author.

Robert Kingett is a Blind, and gay, obscure writer. [He writes fiction where Disabled heroes get their happy endings and nonfiction where life can, sometimes, be educational. You can financially support his writing on his website or follow Robert Kingett to keep up with future writing.](#)

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