

Representations of Ability in Digital Games

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This chapter focuses on representations of ability, disability and able bodies in digital games. The issues explored through game analysis include vulnerability and disability-as-threat in *Dead Space*, augmentation and control in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, and the relationship between zombies, leprosy and fatherhood in *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*. The work raises questions about the place of assessment within games, and the links between in-game epistemology and real-world practices. The chapter is based on a paper that was first presented at the Critical Evaluation of Game Studies seminar hosted by University of Tampere, Finland, in spring 2014. This version (prepared for *Gaming Disability*) has been edited for clarity but because it documents a work-in-progress at a particular point in time I have resisted the temptation to extensively rewrite, update or revise.

Games and education researchers have explored in-game pedagogy and the acquisition of skills, but there has been little critical or reflective exploration of the concept of ability itself. Likewise, while lots of digital games feature damaged bodies and various forms of augmentation, there is very little game studies literature on representations of disability [1]. The relationship between the status associated with ability, and the stigma and abjection associated with disability has rarely been addressed.

This work will address these omissions while drawing on disability studies literature. Disability theorists (including Thomson, Siebers, Linton and Davis) have argued that the naturalised status of able bodies is dependent on the stigmatised marginalisation of disabled bodies, just as discourses of racial otherness depend on the construction of whiteness as neutral (as argued by hooks, Young and Dyer, etc.). Here, representations of ability and disability in games are explored through the analysis of

four games: *Dead Space* (2008), *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011), *The Last of Us* (2013) and *The Walking Dead* (episodes 1-5, 2012).

In the survival horror game *Dead Space* deviant bodies function as a threat in a hostile environment where able-bodied, professional male agency is at stake. In the cyberpunk themed *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* the relationship between ability, role, able bodies and disability is relatively complex, but ability is measured and it counts. The relationship is more opaque in two zombie apocalypse games, *The Walking Dead* (based on the comic), and *The Last of Us*. Images of disability were present in these games, but its relationship to ability was less clear, and ability itself was less emphatically delineated. What helped, when accounting for these differences, was reflecting on the idea of ability in the context of the games' apocalyptic settings. What became apparent is that institutions closely associated with assessment (schools, clinics, law) are early casualties in a zombie apocalypse, and this has unexpected ramifications for the traumatised protagonists.

Considering the presence and the losses associated with forms of assessment in these games raised questions about pleasure, cultural salience and the social significance (and the social construction) of ability. Pondering these issues while engaging in game analysis led to reflections on the significance of clinical settings within games, including their contamination and destruction, and the relationships between epistemologies, status and bodies in games and beyond.

Background

Depictions of impairment and augmentation (physical, sensory, cognitive, magical, technological and viral) are common in games. Yet, if “games and disability” is discussed it is nearly always in terms of either healthcare or therapy, which is of limited relevance to this inquiry. While this analysis is made possible by accessibility features (specifically subtitling, or captions) the issue of game accessibility is not directly addressed. Instead, this work is informed by critical disability studies literature.

The analysis shared in this paper was generated during a 2013-14 project undertaken with the support of the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council ("Digital Games: Representations of disability"). The back-story to the project is as follows. For a 2009 game studies conference (DiGRA) I wrote a methodology paper demonstrating a particular approach to analysis using *Resident Evil 4*. Through analysis it emerged that the game depicted technology as either positive or as negative, depending on its proximity to a body positioned as either able or disabled (Carr 2009). I needed disability studies theory to make sense of this. During the same period, I was conducting a small-scale study about the introduction of an integrated voice feature to the virtual world *Second Life*, the associated shifts in social practice, and the ramifications for deaf SL residents (Carr 2010), and this entailed further engagement with disability studies literature.

Broadly speaking, humanities-based disability studies literature is informed by disability activism and by lived experience of disability. It is politicised, and it offers researchers an alternative to clinical, medical, charitable, educational or deficit models of disability. Disability theorists have studied, for instance, the historical emergence of norms and the simultaneous construction of deviance (Davis 1995), ability as ideology and complex embodiment (Siebers 2009), the conceptual co-dependence of ability and disability (Linton 1998), disability as spectacle and the construction of the "normate" in literary texts (Thomson 1996), intersectionality (Erevelles and Minear 2010), the frequent presence of disability as device in narrative (Mitchell and Snyder 2000), and representations of disabled bodies onscreen (Mogk 2013; Smith 2011). For this research, the concepts drawn from the disability studies literature (often in turn informed by feminist cultural studies, screen studies and critical race theory) were explored and then applied to science fiction and horror games that feature depictions of technology, social collapse, deviance and survival.

Analysis

The first game under analysis was *Dead Space*. This game features frequent and bloody confrontations in labs and clinical settings where gore is smeared alongside anatomy posters. There are indications that industrial accidents are common and

questionable medical practices are rife. Because *Dead Space* is a survival horror game that uses bodies onscreen to evoke embodied sensations in its players, the analysis (see Carr 2014) involved an engagement with Linda Williams' film studies essay on body genres (horror, porn, melodrama), used in combination with Snyder and Mitchell's extension of Williams' schema (Williams 1984, Snyder and Mitchell 2010). For more on "body genres" and horror games see Carr, Campbell and Ellwood, 2006 or Perron 2009.

Williams attributes the on-going popularity of body genres to their capacity to function as a form of cultural problem solving. The protagonist of *Dead Space* is an engineer, Isaac Clarke. His undead assailants – the Necromorphs – propel twisted bodies composed of recycled human flesh. The Necromorphs' bodies might be scrutinised using Freud's uncanny or Kristeva's theories of abjection, or Bakhtin's work on the grotesque, but following Williams' emphasis on bodies, affect and excess meant shifting the focus of the analysis away from the Necromorphs and back towards the fallible body of Isaac Clark and, more particularly, Isaac's messy deaths. Focusing on the many ways in which Isaac's body was excessively and spectacularly split, squashed, splashed, smeared and violated raised questions about the functions of his space suit.

The suit has a ludic function. It is a reward, and it works as a form of "levelling up" in that ~~Issae~~Isaac gradually acquires suits that are more protective and feature a larger inventory. It is a prosthetic skin. Obviously the suit is designed to keep things out (including blades, teeth and claws) but analysis suggested that the suit does more than just keep things out. The suit also makes apparent the need to hold things in. When Isaac's suit is compromised he goes to pieces. The significance of the suit suggests an anxious interest in the management of the body's surfaces. Control of the body's boundaries is culturally associated with agency, status, autonomy and adulthood – and hence with able bodies. For Snyder and Mitchell (2010) "the fantasy of bodily control [...is] deeply seated in the desire for an impossible dominion over our own capacities" because in Western, industrialised culture "individuals are produced as subjects responsible for policing their own bodily aesthetics, functions, and controls" (p. 187). Issues of responsibility and control are also evident in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, a game selected for analysis because of its focus on augmentation, technology and

damaged bodies. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* depicts augmentations from a variety of perspectives. Augmentations are portrayed as luxury consumer items, or as invasive and dehumanising technologies, or as an everyday, practical necessity (a longer version of this analysis was published in the proceedings of the Future and Reality of Gaming Conference, Vienna, 2013). The game depicts augmentations as having complex ramifications for identity, power, employment and role, violation and consent. At the same time, the game's rules, menus, spaces and missions construct augmentations as a strategic requirement or reward. These shifts in position and perspective are reflected in themes of bodily fragmentation and disassociation that run through the game. During the early missions, for instance, the protagonist Adam Jensen passes through rooms littered with abandoned hands, technical drawings of hands, robotic arms, model hands, and prosthetic arms. Corporate advertising features faceless eyes on promotional material (and a guard stationed under one of these banners reminds his colleague to "keep an eye out"). Later, a malevolent upgrade to Jensen's ocular implant renders him vulnerable to an assailant. This interest in violation and fragmentation connects to themes of conditional and compromised autonomy – rebel hackers are hacked in turn, and villains wave remote controls.

In *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* ability is represented as something to be acquired, demonstrated and measured. It is expressed as accuracy, the efficient management of resources, timing, informed strategising and effective navigation – and measured in damage, inventory contents, spatial progression and experience points (XP). With the avatar, the player acts within a game-world where obstacles, shields, armour, pick-ups, corporeal strength and cognitive capacities have a specified value and an effect that is displayed onscreen: this augmentation costs this many points and combines with this gun and this ammunition to inflict this amount of damage on this enemy who yields this drop and this much XP. In *Deus Ex*, the value of the stuff that matters (objects, actions, experience) is quantified. There are at least three interconnecting issues that I want to consider at this point: Firstly, that the game-world represents a wide range of phenomena as quantifiable. Secondly, that the game features depictions of clinics, clinical practices and medical technologies. Thirdly, that the game features constant assessment: the protagonist and the player are tested and scored. Which begs the question: If fantasies in popular media achieve salience in part because they offer reassurance and problem solving (Williams 1984; Bennett and Woollacott, 1987),

what “problem” does this voluntary assessment address? What are “we” being reassured about?

One way of exploring the links between assessment, play and reassurance would be to reference Freud’s account of the “fort da” game, during which a player used repetition, play and language to manage problems of power and agency. But in this chapter, I do not want to focus on play, repetition and the alleviation of anxiety. Instead, I want to ask about the attractions of voluntary assessment, and ask what quantification offers in relation to these attractions. I want to think about the allure of ~~a~~ manipulating a particular body through specific forms of assessment in an evidence-generating performance within a detailed fictional context. I propose that thinking this through involves asking questions about epistemology (i.e. ways of knowing) and contemporary culture.

Consider, for instance, the ways in which clinical discourse is represented and leveraged in non-clinical contexts. For example, in “Neuroscience in the Public Sphere”, by O’Connor, Rees and Joffe (2012), the authors (two psychologists and a cognitive neurologist) find that “the material nature of neuroscientific explanations offered considerable rhetorical power” and argue that neuroscience research is being used by journalists “to bring uncertain phenomena into material reality” (p 5). Psychologists have argued that appropriated and re-purposed neuroscientific findings are being used to pathologise social groups, excuse essentialist assertions, justify thinly veiled eugenics rhetoric, and sell technology, pedagogy and policy (Fine 2013). For background, see Gilman’s work on the histories of medicine and sexuality, spectacle and racism (Gilman 1985). It is useful to reflect on this power “to bring uncertain phenomena into material reality” and the questions raised so far by this analysis. [2]

In games like *Dead Space*, players enact assessment processes in a context where proximity to disabled bodies involves threats to the agency and integrity of an able body. This is suggestive, firstly, because playing the game involves assessment, and secondly, because of the ways in which narrative in general uses disability. For example, Patsavas (2013, pp. 131-143) has used Mitchell and Snyder’s work on disability, narrative and the materiality of metaphor (2000) to explore representations

of disability in the television series *Battlestar Galactica*. Patsavas describes how one of the characters, a thwarted mutineer named Felix Gaeta, is shot in the leg and survives an amputation only to find himself tormented by a painful prosthesis. Gaeta's prosthesis serves the narrative by embodying (materialising) traumatic aspects of the alliance between the human fleet and the robotic cylons. Patsavas' analysis shows how disability is used to render difference, loss and trauma tangible in narrative, even as disability-as-lived remains an "uncertain phenomen[on]" and an exceedingly "slippery" and shifting category (Mogk, 2013, p. 9). [3]

O'Connor, Rees and Joffe argue that the idea of neuroscience attracts and fascinates in part because it meshes neatly with the dominant contemporary model of health, and they point out that "Theorists have attributed the rise of the individualised model of health to the opportunities it offers for achieving and displaying self-control, which stands as a cardinal value in Western society" (p. 5). For O'Connor, Rees and Joffe, the findings of neuroscience are "subsumed into a cultural value system that represents self-control and individual responsibility as necessary conditions for [...] establishing oneself as a virtuous and disciplined citizen" (p. 5) or – in other words – an able citizen, like Isaac Clark.

For Isaac Clarke and Adam Jensen, ability is associated with agency and the capacity to act, with adulthood and autonomy, and with the need to control the body and police its borders. Through assessment, this ability is quantified and rendered tangible. By constructing ability as demonstrable and measurable, the games bring "uncertain phenomena into material reality" (O'Connor, Rees and Joffe 2012, p. 5). At the same time, these games incorporate scenarios that employ disability in conventional ways: disability's threatening cultural associations are leveraged for affect, and disabled bodies are used to embody loss and deviance.

The work on *Dead Space* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolutions* raised useful issues, but it was not obvious if these arguments were relevant to other games – even to games that shared themes of anguished loss and vulnerability while depicting apparently able male characters being threatened by spectacularly damaged bodies. Specifically, the arguments made through the analysis of *Dead Space* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* were not an obvious "fit" with *The Last of Us* or *The Walking Dead*.

The reasons for these difficulties were not easy to articulate, and went beyond questions of genre affiliation, although generic differences play a part. It might be argued, for instance, that science fiction tends to explore difference while horror tends to punish it. Likewise, RPG-styled games tend to attach a specific numeric value to damage, hit points, experience points, skills and capacities, while other game genres might be less devoted to quantification.

The Last of Us features zombie-styled antagonists and depictions of serious injury. There are representations of ability. The middle-aged protagonist Joel is remarkably agile, for instance. There is combat during which accuracy and resource management count. As this indicates, ability is depicted in the game, and assessed by the game, and progress is still conditional. Yet quantification is of less import – it gets less screen time and screen space. Confrontations cannot be reduced to a pattern of pass/fail. Not everything of significance is represented as measurable. Causal relationships are often less than direct. The ludic value of elements is not always evident, and knowledge of the game-world is not always applicable to either strategy or spatial progression. While disability has a material and a metaphoric presence, the game does not seem particularly interested in rendering ability tangible. The same was true of *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, episodes 1-5). In the context of this inquiry, this was the significant difference between these games and *Deus Ex: HR* and *Dead Space*. Despite their aesthetic, structural and ludic differences, *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead* have much in common. Both feature a seriously traumatised male protagonist (Joel in *The Last of Us*, Lee in *The Walking Dead*) who inadvertently becomes the adoptive father of a daughter (Ellie in *TLoU* and Clementine in *TWD*). Both games feature zombies or zombie-like foes. The settings are post-apocalyptic and in each of the games an orderly “before” is contrasted against a disordered, predatory present and zombies are the catalyst for this deterioration.

It was possible to further explore the role of the undead in these games through reference to an essay by Kim and Jarman titled “Modernity’s Rescue Mission: Postcolonial Transactions of Disability and Sexuality” which includes an analysis of Studio Ghibli’s *Princess Mononoke*. They write:

Disability studies scholarship has developed strong critiques of many oppressive strategies developed under the auspices of modernity to diagnose, exile, institutionalise, normalise, or rehabilitate people with non-normative bodies and minds. Characterised by a near-obsession with order and progress, people with impairments have been either actual targets or positioned as the symbolic focus of many modernisation projects (Kim and Jarman 2013 p. 89).

Kim and Jarmon reference Foucault to write about modernity as project, and leprosy. Leprosy has served in particular ways in discourses of development and international intervention. The authors argue that “the existence and rescue of lepers carries specific cross-cultural meanings” (p. 92), and in the process they cite Foucault’s account of the disappearance of leprosy from the Western imagination (via confinement and segregation), and its later re-emergence in imperialist discourse. By these means, they argue, leprosy became associated with a “logic of segregation and institutionalisation” and with “the rationale of modern institutionalisation, which promises protection to vulnerable populations, but actually serves a greater mission of protecting “normal” society from contact with its marked others” (Kim and Jarman, 2013, p. 92).

Following these points, what I want to consider is Foucault and the significance of containment in a zombie apocalypse. In *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*, zombies take on the role previously served by leprosy. In each case, it is not just about contagion. It is about the loss of institutions (medical, legal, educational or professional) that assess. The structures and technologies that previously supported assessment practices have decayed to the extent that they now function as obstacles and danger zones. Characters climb out of wrecked police cars, get trapped in school gyms, face death in university buildings and take shelter in a bloodstained pharmacy. Sites that previously supported forms of assessment have been corrupted, lost or destroyed.

In this way, both of these games suggest that without assessment (measures of classification and distinction) the idea of ability itself will lose traction, the social world will implode and “we” will be consumed by the reviled and abject. With the loss of the clinic, the assessment (and the meaning) of ability changes. To imagine the

zombie apocalypse as the setting for the death of the clinic, take the “eye that governs” described by Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1989 p. 108), wrap it in a lab coat and catapult it into the terrain that he describes at the start of *Madness and Civilization* (1965/2003). Alternatively, consider that *The Last of Us* repeatedly references notions of immunity, cure, demarcation and medical salvation, while the climax involves multiple homicides in what appears to be the last functioning surgical unit in the United States.

Yet both games suggest that this is not just about loss. It’s also a question of what this loss makes possible. The centrality of the developing relationships between Lee and Clementine, Joel and Ellie is the key: The arrival of zombies heralds the collapse of a social order and in each of these games, the “death of the clinic” clears a space for a redemptive or restorative shift in gendered subjectivity. In *The Last of Us* and in *The Walking Dead*, the death of one assessment paradigm makes space for the birth of another: the zombie apocalypse allows a male subject – a father – to shift into an alternative assessment framework built on criteria shaped by parenthood. [4]

Conclusion

Through close analysis it was possible to explore vulnerable able bodies and disability-as-threat in *Dead Space*, and representations of consent and control in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. The relationship between assessment, clinics, apocalypse and fatherhood in *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead* has been investigated. The analysis has raised questions about what might be described as game-world epistemologies – and considered the salience of these in relation to contemporary and historic practices surrounding, disciplining and evaluating bodies. Considering the role and allure of assessment in games has helped to make apparent the constructed and conditional nature of ability itself, and helped to highlight the links between measurable abilities and the naturalised status of able bodies. All of which should matter, because the “level of literacy about disability is so low as to be nonexistent, and the ideology of ability is so much a part of every action, thought, judgment, and intention that its hold on us is difficult to root out” (Siebers 2009, p. 9).

Notes

1. For recent scholarship on games and disability see Backe (2018), Ledder (2019), Champlin, A. (2014) and Gibbons (2015), and for an account of methodology and representation (using *Deus Ex: HR*) see Carr (2017).
2. As an alternative example of this kind of “making actual” consider the ways that gendered practices in gaming cultures have produced gendered patterns of participation, which are then taken as evidence of gender difference. For further evidence of the allure of quantification see the “gamification movement” or the rise of “self-tracking” (Lupton 2016). On the issue of epistemology and its relationship to disciplinarity and status, see this survey published in the Times Higher Education Supplement (Parr 2014), which focused on the perceived status of disciplines in UK universities. At the top of the status and satisfaction ladder sits engineering and technology, followed by physical and medical sciences, then law and business, descending further still to social science, then education, then humanities and the creative arts. Within game studies, creative arts practice connects with engineering and technology – so perhaps we need to think about wheels rather than ladders – but the point is that these differences have implications for an inter-disciplinary field, and for gender (Pearce, Kennedy and Sharp 2013).
3. The actor who played Gaeta in *Battlestar Gallactica* (Alessandro Juliani) was later cast as Sinclair, a mentor to a character called Raven in *The 100* (another television science fiction). Raven also gets shot and struggles with a difficult prosthetic.
4. For another version of this see the animated feature film *Despicable Me*. In flashbacks, professional evil genius Gru repeatedly attempts and fails to win his mother’s approval. After becoming an adoptive father of daughters he encounters a near-apocalyptic crisis involving the moon and, in a happy ending, is finally assessed a success (as a parent) by his mother (which makes me wonder about zombies and minions). See K.Wallace’s 2012 *Game Informer* article for an account of *The Walking Dead*’s development that makes repeated references to parenting

<https://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2012/12/26/creating-clementine.aspx>

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