Play/able Bodies

Augmentation, Ability and Order in
Deus Ex: Human Revolution

Diane Carr, Institute of Education, University of London
https://playhouse.wordpress.com/
Thanks to Björn Berg Marklund and Lars Kristensen
Background to this research

I wrote a paper on textual analysis and methodology, focusing on *Resident Evil 4.* I used procedures adapted from Barthes’ *S/Z,* and found that the game framed technology as positive or as negative, depending on its proximity to a body framed as either able or disabled. I needed disability theory to help make sense of this.

Presented at DiGRA 2009, republished since.

At around the same time -

I was doing cultural studies/ethnographic research in Second Life about the introduction of an integrated voice feature, the associated shifts in social practice, the impact on deaf SL residents, and the online construction of disability. I read more disability studies literature.

Published in the London Review of Education 2010, republished since.
This research

AHRC funded, 2013-14

Digital Games: Representation of disability

Games under analysis included -

*Deus Ex: Human Revolution*,

*Dead Space* (mostly DS 1 so far, but DS 2 and 3 deserve attention thanks to imagery of dementia, delusion, gruesome eye injuries, and monstrous conception)

*The Last of Us*

*The Walking Dead* (episodes 1-5).

Acknowledgements: this ongoing research was discussed at FROG 13 and the recent game seminar at the University of Tampere.
These are very different games, but they share an interest in:
Bodies (especially male bodies)
loss and trauma
Injury
Role and responsibility (professional or paternal)
Performance (assessed performance, the risk of failure – agency and the body ‘at stake’)
Physical alteration and/or augmentation
When ‘games and disability’ is discussed it is nearly always in terms of technology and tools, therapy and accessibility.

The problem is that such research tends to construct disability in particular ways (and thus replicate particular power relations).

It tends to use clinical or deficit models of disability (i.e. disability is an individual ‘deficit’ – something to be fixed or solved). Such approaches have been repeatedly critiqued by disability theorists.

Monstrous or damaged bodies in games are generally read as metaphors of ‘something else’ rather than approached as images of disability or impairment (as in other media, see Smith, Snyder and Mitchell).
Ability and disability in game studies literature, continued

Meanwhile, ability in games ‘hides in plain sight’ when it comes to critique or reflection.

When ability is discussed, it is taken at face value and approached in terms of learning or in-game pedagogy.

The conceptual relationships between ability and disability have been overlooked.

An interest in ability might seem to be ‘commonsense’ or natural but that is precisely why it is worth investigating.

“The real political task…is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them” (Chomsky, Foucault et al, 2006 p xx, cited in Ball 2013)
Representations of disability are particularly common in horror and science-fiction themed games (e.g. images of impairment, augmentation, injury, medical experimentation).

These same games are deeply interested in ability – as something that is represented (in characterization and narrative) and as something that is performed onscreen via the avatar, measured, and tested.

Thinking about how ‘disability’ as an idea works in culture, means thinking about ‘ability’ as well. The concept of ability \textit{depends} on the concept of disability as the marginalized, stigmatized ‘other’. There is lots of disability studies literature on this topic (see work by Garland-Thomson, Davis, Siebers, Mitchell and Snyder, Smith, Mogk, etc.)
And it is important 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, judgement, and intention that its hold on us is difficult to root out.”

(Siebers, 2009, p. 9).

The games I’m interested in offer a ‘way in’ to critique representations of able and disabled bodies, while using humanities-based disability theory. These theories offer an alternative to the clinical and medical models of disability. Through analysis, these games (especially DE:HR) present an opportunity to ‘talk back’ or ‘look back’ at the clinical gaze.

(‘talk back’ – from bell hooks)
Today – focusing on Deus Ex: Human Revolution
I played DE:HR on a PS3
The screenshots I’m using today are from mobygames.com

Adam Jensen is the drastically augmented protagonist of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. He has a long, sad history of uneasy encounters with scientists, clinicians and technologists. He is experimented on as an infant, horribly injured at work, and extensively modified on the orders of his employer. Jensen’s problems with consent, control and technology continue throughout *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. 
Jensen’s body is schooled in the sense that it must fit within given roles, spaces and situations. He is continually tested, classified and examined.
The game is interested in...
Places of work
Fitting in
Passing
Professional spaces
An interest in division and classification is also evident in the game’s cities and populations.
There is an interest in bodies and technology - Control, loss of control, remote control
The game depicts a damaged and yet perfectible body undergoing continual assessment…
A family resemblance? Education and *Deus Ex: HR*

Populations divided and classified

The exclusion of bodies that will not fit

Assessment

Ability as assessable

Capability as measurable and quantifiable

Progress as necessary and measurable

Bodies disciplined to fit within and be efficient within particular spheres and domains (See Gee’s work on games and education)

For schooled bodies, agency aligns with context (what they do, works).

Bodies are altered to fit where ‘necessary’

Bodies that will not fit are marginalized, defused, defunct (stigmatized, grotesque, abject, reviled and resisted).

Bodies that thwart classification, or that shift between categories, are a ‘problem’
School, bodies, the ‘logic of the clinic’

Playing DE:HR, reading Ball’s *Foucault, Power and Education* (2013).

Ball writes about educational policy using Foucault’s work on schools and asylums - both of which were considered as ‘bastions against chaos and social disorder’ (Ball p 41) that perform a ‘socializing and civilizing’ role (p 43).

Which reminds me of *Deux Ex* – thanks to its interest in bodies and classification, measurement and ability, self control and consent, discipline and self-management. Based on this, I’m arguing that the ‘logic of the clinic’ runs through the game – and connects with other discourses including –

- The ‘ideology of ability’ which contributes to widespread notions of agency, capacity, value, worthiness, citizenship and entitlement (Siebers, 2009, p 9) and
- Dominant models of health, which conceptualise ‘health’ in terms of personal responsibility and management and control of the body.
- Discourses of professionalism and adulthood (Iris Marion Young)
Deus Ex: Human Revolutions

• the game-world represents knowledge and its applicability in a particular way
• the game features assessment.
• this is not just about the attractions of voluntary assessment.
• It is also about the allure of a particular kind of assessment through an evidence generating performance in a particular context.

So I’ve been thinking about the ways in which clinical discourse is represented and utilized in non-clinical contexts (including games)

Example: In ‘Neuroscience in the Public Sphere’, by O’Connor, Rees and Joffe (2012) the authors found that “the material nature of neuroscientific explanations offered considerable rhetorical power” and they argue that neuroscience research is being used by journalists “to bring uncertain phenomena into material reality”
Disability is used to render difference, loss and trauma material and tangible in narrative, even as disability-as-lived remains an “uncertain phenomena” and an exceedingly “slippery” and shifting category (Mogk, 2013, p 9).

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.

For Adam Jensen, ability is associated with agency and the capacity to act, with adulthood and autonomy, and with the need to control and police the body. Through assessment in these games ability is rendered tangible.

By representing ability as demonstrable and measurable, games bring “uncertain phenomena into material reality” (O’Connor, Rees and Joffe 2012, p. 5).

At the same time, the game employs disability in conventional ways: disability’s threatening cultural associations are leveraged for affect, and disabled bodies are used to embody loss and deviance.
Brief aside...

*The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*

• My work on *Deus Ex: Human Revolutions* proved difficult to apply to *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*.

• The reasons for these difficulties were hard to articulate, and went beyond questions of genre affiliation, although generic differences play a part.

• While disability has a literal and a metaphoric presence in *The Last of Us*, the game does not seem very interested in rendering ability tangible.

• This is more evident still in *The Walking Dead*.

• Despite their structural and ludic differences, the games have much in common (zombies, trauma, inadvertent adoptive fathers of daughters)
Thinking more about the zombie apocalypse...

- In a paper about disability in *Princess Mononoke*, Kim and Jarmon write about modernity as project, and leprosy.
- “the existence and rescue of lepers carries specific cross-cultural meanings” (p 92)
- they reference Foucault’s account of the disappearance of leprosy from the Western imagination (via confinement and segregation), and its later re-emergence in imperialist discourse

...Something threatening that is controlled via confinement and segregation – which makes me think about zombies – deteriorating flesh, thwarting control and attempts at segregation, contaminating (rather than confined).
In *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*, zombies take the role previously served by leprosy. They herald the breakdown of segregation, measurement and institutionalization (the ‘death of the clinic’). The technologies that previously supported these practices have stalled and decayed to the extent that they now function as obstacles. As a fantasy it suggests that without empiricism, assessment, systems of classification, distinction and segregation, the social world will implode and “we” will be consumed by the reviled and abject. Yet the relationships between Lee and Clementine, Joel and Ellie suggest that zombies perform an additional function. The arrival of zombies marks the collapse of social order, which rested on practices of categorization that are depend on positivist assessment. The zombie apocalypse marks the destruction of one assessment paradigm, and the birth of another. In other words, the zombie apocalypse allows a male subject (a recent father) to shift into an alternative assessment framework built on less tangible criteria.
The logic of the clinic is disseminated and ‘naturalized‘ through forms of education policy and practice - “the exercise of power only remains tolerable by hiding itself within the everyday, the mundane and the intimate” (Ball 2013 p 145).

The ‘logic of the clinic’ shapes discourses of status, value, worthiness, entitlement, capacity to contribute, adulthood and autonomy - and this all ties in to the 'ideology of ability' (Siebers, 2009).

It is naturalized, yet it can be rendered visible – hopefully that’s what this analysis has demonstrated.

Research practice can involve a “certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same thing in a different way” (Foucault, cited in Ball 2013 p 145).

This research has entailed looking at ability in a different way, considering its conceptual dependence on disability (as its marginalized, stigmatized ‘other’) and thinking about the implications.
Diane Carr
Institute of Education, University of London

(Now UCL IOE)