Representations of Ability in Digital Games

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ABSTRACT
This working paper outlines ongoing research into representations of ability and disability in digital games. After a brief literature review, the topic is explored through samples of game analysis. The issues discussed include affect and disability-as-threat in Dead Space, embodiment, 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 paper concludes by linking the issues raised through analysis to considerations of game-world epistemologies, disciplinary status, and game interpretation.

KEYWORDS
Representation, ability, disability, augmentation, affect, embodiment, zombies, assessment, leprosy, fatherhood, epistemology.

INTRODUCTION
Games and education researchers have explored in-game pedagogy and the acquisition of skills, but there has been little critical exploration of the concept of ability itself. Likewise, while numerous digital games feature damaged bodies and various forms of augmentation, there is very little game studies literature on representations of disability. The conceptual relationship between ability and disability has also been overlooked. This working paper will address these omissions while drawing on disability studies literature. Disability theorists (including Thomson, Siebers, Linton and Davis) have argued that the naturalized status of able bodies depends on the stigmatized marginalization of disabled bodies, just as discourses of racial difference rely on the construction of whiteness as neutral (as argued by hooks, Young, Dyer, etc.). Here, representations of ability and disability in games will be explored through reference to Dead Space, Deus Ex: Human Revolution, The Last of Us and The Walking Dead.

In Dead Space, deviant bodies function as threat and able-bodied male agency is at stake. Deus Ex: Human Revolution presents its protagonist as professional, yet deficient. He must be continually upgraded in order to succeed, and the relationship between ability and disability is relatively complex. The relationship is more opaque still in The Walking Dead and The Last of Us.

To better understand the conceptual relationships between ability and disability in these latter games, it was helpful to first ask how ability is represented in each case. Focusing
on assessment made this possible. Considering assessment raised questions about pleasure, cultural salience and the social significance of ability. Games construct ability as measurable, and then measure it. If the allure of this voluntary and quantified assessment lies in its capacity to reassure, then it is worth considering the connection between this reassurance, and the power of positivist, clinical epistemologies more generally - in popular discourse, in academic practice, and within game studies as a field. Furthermore, questions about the ways in which knowledge is represented in game worlds have implications for ongoing debates within game studies about meaning making and interpretation.

BACKGROUND

Depictions of impairment and augmentation (physical, sensory, cognitive, magical, technological and viral) are common in games. Yet when ‘games and disability’ is discussed it is nearly always in terms of therapy or accessibility. Such research is generally situated within a clinical or applied conceptual framework, and for this reason it is of limited relevance to this inquiry. The ongoing research outlined in this paper was undertaken during 2013-14 with the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK). The project back-story is as follows. For DiGRA 2009 I wrote a paper demonstrating a form of textual, structural and inter-textual analysis using Resident Evil 4. Through analysis it emerged that this game framed technology as either positive or as negative, depending on its proximity to a body positioned as able or disabled (Carr 2009). I needed disability theory to make sense of this. At around the same time I conducted a small-scale study about the introduction of an integrated voice feature to the virtual world Second Life, the associated shifts in social practices, and the ramifications for deaf SL residents (Carr 2010). 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 politicized literature that offers an alternative to clinical, medical, charitable, educational or deficit models of disability. Disability theorists have studied 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 (Thomson 1996), the frequent presence of disability as device in narrative (Mitchell and Snyder 2000), and representations of disabled bodies onscreen (Mogk 2013; Smith 2011).

GAME 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 was informed by Linda Williams’ essay on body genres (horror, porn, melodrama), and Snyder and Mitchell’s extension of Williams’ schema (Williams 1984, Snyder and Mitchell 2010)[1]. Williams attributes the ongoing popularity of body genres to their capacity to function as a form of cultural problem solving. An early version of the analysis of Dead Space outlined here was presented at FROG 2013, and a journal length version is currently under review (update – now published, Game Studies vol 14, issue 2, Dec 2014).

Dead Space’s protagonist is an engineer, Isaac Clarke. His undead assailants (the Necromorphs) propel twisted bodies composed of recycled human flesh. Freud’s
uncanny and Kristeva’s theories of abjection would apply, as would Bakhtin’s work on
the grotesque, but following Williams’ emphasis on bodies, affect and excess shifted the
analysis away from the Necromorphs towards the fallible body of Isaac Clark, and Isaac’s
messy deaths. Focusing on the ways in which Isaac’s body was excessively and
spectacularly split, squashed, splashed, smeared and violated raised questions about the
functions of his suit.

The suit has a ludic function. It is a reward, and it works as a form of leveling up – the
advanced suits 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
the suit does more than just address the need to keep things out. It also makes apparent
the need to hold things in. When Isaac’s suit is compromised, his body disassembles. 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, 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, industrialized culture “individuals are produced as
subjects responsible for policing their own bodily aesthetics, functions, and controls” (p
187).

Issues of responsibility and control also feature in Deus Ex: Human Revolution, a game
selected for analysis because of its representations of augmentation, technology and the
body. Deus Ex: Human Revolution depicts augmentations from a variety of perspectives.
Augmentations are portrayed as luxury consumer items, or as invasive and dehumanizing
technologies, or as an everyday, practical necessity (a longer version of this analysis was
presented at FROG 2013). The narrative describes augmentations as a choice with
complex ramifications for identity, and yet the game structures augmentations as a
strategic requirement. 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, Jensen passes through rooms littered with abandoned hands,
technical drawings of hands, robotic arms, model hands, and prosthetic arms. The lobby
of Sarif Industries features faceless eyes on promotional material (a guard stationed under
one of these banners reminded his colleague to “keep an eye out”). Later in the game a
malevolent upgrade to Jensen’s ocular implant renders him vulnerable to an assailant.
This bodily fragmentation connects to themes of conditional autonomy – rebel hackers
are hacked in turn, and villains wave remote controls.

In Deus Ex: Human Revolution ability is represented as something that can be acquired,
measured and demonstrated. It is marked by accuracy, efficient management of resources,
timing and effective navigation – and measured in damage, inventory, spatial progress
and experience points. With the avatar, the player acts within a game-world where
obstacles, shields, armor, pick-ups, corporeal strength and cognitive capacity have a
specific value and an effect that is displayed onscreen: this gun with this ammunition
inflicts this damage on this enemy which yields this drop and this much XP. In Deus Ex,
the value of the stuff that matters (objects, actions, experience) is generally quantified,
and for this reason the game could be described as a positivist fantasy of a measurable
world. There are two inter-relating issues here: firstly, that the game-world represents
knowledge and its applicability in a particular way, and secondly, that the game features
assessment. If fantasies in popular media operate as a form of problem solving (Williams
1984; Bennett and Woollacott, 1987), what ‘problem’ does voluntary assessment
address?
Obviously, contemporary experience incorporates regular processes of assessment. These might be formal/informal, explicit/implicit, self-initiated/imposed, trivial/significant, personal/institutional, reassuring or humiliating. Whatever the context, outcomes can have profound ramifications. Perhaps games and fantasy offer a site for processing related, residual anxiety (in the same way that Freud’s grandson’s ‘fort da’ game is a response to anxieties of separation, during which the player combines actions with language, and through which repositions himself relative to power and agency). But I think it is possible to be more specific than this, because 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. Thinking this through involves asking questions about epistemology (i.e. ways of knowing) and authoritative ‘voice’.

Consider, for instance, the ways in which clinical discourse is represented and utilized in non-clinical contexts. For example, in mainstream journalism, re-purposed neuroscientific findings are used to pathologize social groups, excuse essentialist assertions, justify thinly veiled eugenics rhetoric, and sell technology, pedagogy and policy (Fine, 2013). In ‘Neuroscience in the Public Sphere’, by O’Connor, Rees and Joffe (2012) the authors argue that “the material nature of neuroscientific explanations offered considerable rhetorical power” and they find that neuroscience research is being used by journalists “to bring uncertain phenomena into material reality” (p 5).

I want to think about this power (to ‘bring uncertain phenomena into material reality’) in light of some of the issues discussed thus far. In games like Dead Space, players enact assessment processes in the context of a fantasy where disabled bodies undermine the agentic integrity of an able body. This is suggestive, because of the ways in which narrative in general tends to use disability and disabled bodies. For instance, Patsavas (2013, pp 131-143) has used Mitchell and Snyder’s work on disability, narrative and the materiality of metaphor (2000) to analyze representations of disability in the final season of the television series Battlestar Galactica. Patsavas describes the ways that the thwarted mutineer Felix Gaeta’s amputation and his awkward prosthesis serve to embody trauma and traumatic alliance between the human fleet and the cylons. In this way, 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).

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 individualized 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 and police the body. Through assessment in these games ability is rendered tangible [3]. 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, 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 issues raised thus far emerged through analysis of *Dead Space* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. It was initially difficult to extend this work to other games that shared themes of anguished loss, and depictions of threatening, damaged bodies. The issues that were raised through analysis of *Dead Space* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* disintegrated when applied to *The Last of Us* and *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. Science fiction often explores difference, while horror tends to punish it. RPGs tend to attach a specific numeric value to damage, HP, XP, skills and capacities, while other game genres are less explicit. Thinking about the representations of ability in these games was the first step in addressing this impasse. Considering the representation of assessment made this possible.

*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 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 within the game-world. While disability has a literal and a metaphoric presence, the game does not seem interested in rendering ability tangible. This diffusion is more evident still in *The Walking Dead*. Despite their structural and ludic differences, the games have much in common.

Both feature a seriously traumatized 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 feature zombies or zombie-like foes. In each of these games an orderly ‘before’ is contrasted against a disordered, predatory present, and zombies are the catalyst for this deterioration. The zombies perform and display catastrophic physical deterioration, diminished sentience, and forms of parasitic possession. It is 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, institutionalize, normalize, or rehabilitate people with non-normative bodies and minds. Characterized by a near-obsession with order and progress, people with impairments have been either actual targets or positioned as the symbolic focus of many modernization projects. (Kim and Jarman 2013 p. 89).

Kim and Jarmon write about modernity as project, and leprosy. Leprosy has served in particular ways in discourses of development and international intervention. They point out that “the existence and rescue of lepers carries specific cross-cultural meanings” (p 92), and 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. By these means, they argue, leprosy became associated with a “logic of segregation and institutionalization” and with “the rationale of modern institutionalization, 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). [4]

In *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*, zombies take the role previously served by leprosy. In each case, it is not just about contagion. It is about contamination, and about the breaking down of segregation, measurement and institutionalization. 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 heralds the collapse of social order, which rested on practices of categorization that are dependent on positivist assessment. In each of these games, 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. [5].

**CONCLUSION**

Through textual analysis it has been possible to explore affect and disability-as-threat in *Dead Space*, embodiment, augmentation and control in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, and to consider the relationship between assessment and zombies, leprosy and fatherhood in *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*. The analysis raised questions about what might be described as game-world epistemologies, which can be linked to debates about game interpretation. Considering the role and allure of assessment in games has helped to make apparent the constructed, conditional nature of ability itself. This matters, 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)

**Final slide -**

This was a work-in-progress so the presentation was a bit different from this paper. The presentation ended with lepers and zombies and ‘the death of the clinic’ in *The Last of Us*. From the presentation:

For me, this work has raised questions about clinical voice - or the ideology of the clinic - as something that is ‘naturalized’ in some cultures through education policy and practice (see Ball’s *Foucault, Power and Education*).

It is ‘naturalized’ in the sense that it is only through the development of particular critical perspective that the logic of the clinic is rendered visible (there is lots of disability studies literature on the epistemological perspective of marginalized subjects - Garland-Thomson, Siebers, see also black feminist writing, eg. hooks).

This ‘logic’ runs through popular discourses about status, value, worthiness, entitlement,
capacity to contribute, adulthood and autonomy - and this all ties in to the 'ideology of ability' (Siebers).

Thinking about games and the ideology of the clinic - or games and the logic of the clinic – could mean thinking about a particular form of subjectivity that invests in measurability, where this investment is reflected in anxieties that manifest as a desire to repeatedly perform assessed acts (i.e. ability is constructed as quantifiable and demonstrable).

It’s most interesting in games where there are representations of physical damage, loss, risk and augmentation (i.e. where able-bodied identity is clearly being ‘worried about’).

It would thinking about -

(i) measurable aspects of avatars, at the same time as the (ii) characterization of avatars and (iii) considering this in context of the game-world (representations of knowledge, gender, technology, status, professionalism, etc.)

And thinking about this in relation to agency, (i) agency as represented in the narrative, and (ii) agency as constructed through design/game structure, and (iii) the points where agency is reduced, threatened, foregrounded or problematized within the game (and the depiction of the avatar's body at those moments).

1. For more on body genres, Williams’ essay and horror games see Carr, Campbell and Ellwood, 2006, and Perron 2009.
2. While online games might be considered as relatively safe places to combine ludic assessment with social assessment – See Carr and Oliver 2009, and Carr 2012.
3. As a further example of this kind of ‘making actual’ consider the ways that gendered practices in gaming cultures produce gendered patterns of participation, which are then taken as evidence of gender difference.
4. This consideration of zombies and leprosy was previously blogged at the project website as ‘Fantasy, salience, assessment…and school?’ dated 7/1/2014, online at http://playhouse.wordpress.com/2014/01/07/fantasy-and-salience/#comments
5. See also Despicable Me in which professional evil genius Gru repeatedly attempts to win his mother’s approbation. He inadvertently becomes an adoptive father of daughters, and is finally assessed a success by his mother. See K.Wallace’s 2012 Game Informer article for an account of The Walking Dead’s development that makes repeated references to parenting http://www.gameinformer.com/b/features/archive/2012/12/26/creating-clementine.aspx.

OFFCUTS
This is a work in progress. Here are some points that may or might not belong in a final version. As the above references to representations of neuroscience in the popular press suggest, clinical, positivist voice has authoritative power. This is reflected in Higher Education: disciplines associated with clinical and material perspectives enjoy higher status than disciplines that are associated with interpretive, critical and creative
approaches. A recent survey published in the Times Higher Education Supplement (Parr 2014) focused on the perceived, relative 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 potentially overlaps with engineering and technology - so perhaps it would be more pertinent to think about carousels rather than ladders - but the point is that these dynamics indicate the need for contributing members of an inter-disciplinary field to reflect on the ways in which particular disciplinary perspectives and epistemologies become devalued at particular historical moments, and why (see Pearce, Kennedy and Sharp 2013). A second point is that I suspect that it could be useful to more closely examine the relationships between the representation of knowledge and the representation of its applicability within particular game-worlds. I do think that it has implication for meaning making, although I’m still working out what these might be. I do not know that would be particularly helpful to construct a typology of game-world epistemologies, yet perhaps there are patterns that could be identified, and distinctions that might be drawn.

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**GAMES**


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