Slides for 2 talks at DiGRA 2016

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Presentations:

1. Delicate Subjects: Vulnerability and validation in action adventure games
2. Players, Diverse Bodies and Embodied Interpretation
Delicate Subjects
Vulnerability and validation in action adventure games

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Talk 1, Talk 2

I’m scheduled to speak twice today. Both presentations are about discourses of ability and disability in games.

In this talk I’m going to focus on representation. Later this afternoon I will be talking about how this work is being extended into player studies.

This research is supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.
Outline of this talk

**Introduction** – what I’ve been doing

3 **problems** - 3 **solutions**

1. methodology and textual analysis and
2. embodied interpretation and the diversity of bodies
3. culturally situating embodied interpretation: discourse as a bridge between games as texts and the cultural contexts of play.

**Examples from analysis:** Isaac in Dead Space, Adam in Deus Ex HR, Joel in The Last of Us.
Introduction

I’m interested in representations of dis/ability in figurative games
(see DiGRA 2009, FROG 2013, Tampere Game Seminar 2014, and the Dead Space paper in Game Studies, Dec 2014, copies at https://playhouse.wordpress.com/publications/)

This work involves looking at ability in games, and as constructed during play.
It involves thinking about the conceptual relationship between disability and ability in games.
I have focused on Dead Space, Deus Ex HR, The Last of Us.
The issues that have come up through play and analysis have included:
• Depictions of painful vulnerability and opportunities for validation.
• The construction of ability as measurable and quantifiable.
• The associating of ability, with agency.
• The status accorded to clinical epistemologies in games (quantification and the body) – and the actual depictions of clinics in these games.
• The privileging of particular bodies within games – and the apparently fragility/instability of that privilege.
Problem 1

Methodology, textual analysis and representation.

Which bit of the game is the text-y bit?

Aim: to clarify aspects of the 3 lens framework (structure/text/inter-textuality) described in the DiGRA 2009 paper.

Note: DiGRA 2009 - I argued that these are 3 lenses and that a single element of the game (i.e. a gate) could be viewed through all 3 of the lenses (structurally, textually, inter-textually). Never mind. Moving on.
The problem is the expectation that a particular part of the game (such as the setting or narrative) falls under the category of ‘textual’, while other parts (e.g. the rules or spatial design) lie beyond it.

However, according to Bellour (in that particular essay at least) – the text becomes a text **because the analyst is approaching it as a text**.

Aha.

I have previously argued that textual, structural and inter-textual perspectives need to be considered as a set of analytical lenses, not as a set of categories into which various elements from the game might be classified (DiGRA 2009).

Yet I have still, subsequently, found myself tilting and sliding towards ontological statements when grappling with related methodological problems.

Bellour’s essay suggests that approaching something as a text involves the taking up of a particular epistemological stance. It is an epistemological stance that produces an ontological statement (not the other way around).

**I’m looking at this game as a text in order to do textual analysis – so the game is a text.**

So the answer is: From this angle, there is no text-y bit. It’s all text….but it is also all contingent.
**Problem 2.** How to conceptualize embodiment, and the relationship between embodiment and representation, while acknowledging that interpretation is embodied - and bodies differ (including the bodies of player-analysts).

Games and embodiment literature

Broadly speaking -

2 main conceptual camps

- **Cognition**
  - e.g. Gee, Gregersen and Grodal...

- **Philosophy and phenomenology**
  - e.g. papers from the Philosophy of Games conference series

Difficult to reconcile conceptually with critical disability studies.

Yes - but I need an approach to embodiment that acknowledges / validates corporeal diversity.

Image credit http://www.sierratoysoldier.com
Solution: Embodied interpretation via complex embodiment (Siebers)

Eg. complex embodiment (Siebers) and Snyder and Mitchell’s cultural model of disability (2010) = lived experience + situated knowledge.

These approaches emphasize the situated knowledge generated through lived experience (of disability, in this instance).

This fits with the ‘reading formations’ framework that I used (Bennett and Woollacott) and it adds a material/corporeal emphasis.

This approach to embodiment acknowledges corporeal diversity and it does not construct an abstract, standardized or ideal body.

It became the basis for the model of embodied interpretation used in this work.

This work on lived experience and situated knowledge production in critical disability studies is informed by feminist theory on lived experience, situated knowledge production and the body (incl Iris Marion Young, Donna Haraway, bell hooks).
Problem 3 – representation, and connecting games to cultural contexts

• Take the Foucault route into representation (via Stuart Hall’s *Representation* 1997)

• Reading Foucault while playing these games -

• classification and status, disciplining the body, social order and the clinic – all present in these games, all resonating with discourses of ability/disability. Thinking about

• Discourse (positioning, act, and ‘discourses of’) as a bridge between a game and the cultural contexts of play

• Knowledge (status of knowledge, forms of knowing, professionalism, expertise) represented within the game, validated by the game.

Isaac – Dead Space.
Where would you be without science?

Adam – Deus Ex HR

Body on a slab/on menu screens, fragmentation (of Adam’s body, of the game, of the narrative, of hands, eyes) role, competence, professionalism, ‘narrative prosthesis’ (Mitchell and Snyder), urban order/urban abject, consent and lack of consent, ‘passing’ as able bodied in professional role and professional contexts, control and loss of control, (being hacked), your value (of your parts), status, erasure.

a visit to the clinic in The Last of Us

The death of the clinic / the demise of social categories / contamination that allows for a resurgence of the ‘natural’ – landscape, cityscapes...Joel. The boundaries that are present are fraught, obstructed, pathological, contested. Civil and social restoration explicitly linked with the clinic. Foucault’s lepers and Joel’s undead.

Fantasising the destruction of one genre of assessment (the clinic/the civic) as a precondition for the adoption of an alternative genre of assessment (fatherhood).

See also The Walking Dead.

Carr, D (2014) Representations of Ability in Digital Games, for the Critical Evaluation of Game Studies Seminar. 28-29 April 2014, University of Tampere
Conclusion of Talk no. 1

Representations of ability/disability

Textual analysis and the game-as-text

Embodied interpretation; incorporating diversity; the player-analyst’s embodiment

Representations of ability/disability.

Examples from 3 games: discourses of the body, status and ability, ability as measureable, ability as performance, agency, health, medicine, professionalism, gender, family and species, representations of the clinic and the status of positivist assessment.

In Talk no. 2

Diversity and player embodiment, player studies, games and the (actual) clinic.
Players, Diverse Bodies and Embodied Interpretation

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Outline of this talk

Research context: 2016–20, the D4D project

Key concepts: Embodied interpretation and diverse bodies, critical disability studies perspectives, science fiction, the body and the clinic.

Illustrative example: The clinic in games, game tropes at the clinic

Research design issues: Research practices, critical disability studies and game studies
Research context: the D4D project

D4D is a large consortia project supported by the AHRC connected communities programme (2016-20)

Title: Disability and Community: Dis/engagement, Dis/enfranchisement, Dis/parity and Dissent

I’m leading ‘work stream 6’ which is titled Playable Bodies, Technology and Community (there are 8 different work streams)

https://playhouse.wordpress.com/project-d4d-2016-2020/

There’s a brief project blurb here.

The project website is under construction.
In this work stream we investigate ‘science fictions’ and the relationships between technology, popular culture and the body. We will be working with players, artists, activists and online communities, drawing on digital game studies and critical disability studies literature, and building on the D4D project themes of embodiment, play, performance and agency.

The continuing influence of clinical perspectives on disability, the links between medical models of disability and technology – and the implications for disability/community will be investigated. The methods to be employed include audience and player studies, online research, collaborative game design, workshops and public play.
Summary of research activities in WS6

• 1: We’re Watching You. Player studies. This work picks up on the idea of embodied knowledge production that is central to the cultural model of disability (e.g. Snyder and Mitchell), and hooks’ work on talking back from the margins, as well as Siebers’ work on complex embodiment and the ideology of ability - we’ll be working with players who identify as disabled to explore mainstream depictions of technology, impairment and ability in science fiction-themed digital games.

• 2: Public workshop: Hacked Off (2018) an event to debate the extent to which the widespread influence of clinical and deficit models of disability continue to shape the social experiences, opportunities, affiliations and well-being of people who experience disability.

• 3: Online communities (2018) community led research/event - In partnership with Disability Arts Online


• 5: Ludic methodologies and community research (2019) Partnering with artist Fox, Accentuate, game designers Splash and Ripple, historian Steven Poole (Bristol U) and Helen Kennedy (U of Brighton) and local volunteers the team will co-create and play an ARG about a former Bristol-based institution, The Guild of the Brave Poor Things. We’ll be looking at the ways that this particular institution constructed its subjects (through, for instance, both faked testimonies and suppressed letters in which children were represented as grateful, ‘brave poor things’), and connecting with CI Porter’s performance work on ‘Being Human’ as well as Accentuate’s work on disability histories & institutions.
Key concepts in the first unit of work:

Players’ embodied interpretations of science fiction themed games. This involves:

- Embodied interpretation
- Critical disability studies
- Science fiction (social change, technology and the body – Sobchack)
- Games in relation to ability, status and assessment
- Games and depictions of vulnerable bodies; as sites where agency is at stake.
Embodied interpretation / embodied research:

I spoke about this earlier today ability and disability in games – eg Dead Space, Last of Us, Deus Ex...and representations of the clinic in these games.

That analysis involved embodied interpretation (the player-analyst’s)

My talk earlier this afternoon showed how my experience of disability and the clinic has shaped my work with games.

In this talk I look at how my experience with games and game studies has shaped my encounters with the clinic.
Game tropes at the clinic

1. Navigation
2. Anatomy posters as décor
3. I get a controller

4...and I play a game

The game is a series of noises (eeep, eeeep, eeeeeeep) that get louder till you hear them. Then you hit the button....
5. I get a score...

(online edit – actual test results used in presentation but removed for blog, replaced by this nice squiggle)
6...I am awarded some pick-ups

It’s 2 augmentations + a power pack!
Playing Deus Ex HR
Likewise, my experiences at the clinic ‘come with me’ when I play games.


In Deus Ex: HR augmentations offer social and economic advantage and yet render the recipient subject to manipulation. There are several climactic instances where augmented bodies are remotely controlled, or lose self-control, due to malevolent interference, including a hacker terrorist who is hacked in turn, and forced to shoot himself. When non-player characters comment on Jensen’s augmentations, many refer to augmentation as a personal choice with ethical implications and risks attached (see conversations with the William Taggart character, for example). In other words, Jensen is regularly confronted by assumptions that nullify or contradict his experience.

Explored using - Paterson and Hughes paper ‘Disability Studies and Phenomenology: The carnal politics of everyday life’ (1999, Disability and Society) – which uses Leder’s work - Leder contrasts the ‘absent’ body against the ‘dys-appearing body’, that is, a body that is consciously experienced, exposed or rendered a problem in certain contexts - social experiences which bring your body to mind, as it were...
Conclusion: Embodied interpretation and diverse bodies

Critical disability studies and game studies – key issues and concerns in this research

Theorising disability as a political identity that combines social model of disability (disability as a social and environmental construction) with epistemological factors, i.e. acknowledgement that experience of disability generates knowledge about disability – and about ‘able’ and mainstream culture (Siebers, Snyder and Mitchell, Thomson)

Critical perspectives on oppressive models of disability (deficit models of disability, medical or benevolent/charity models of disability).

Critical perspectives on the disciplinary role of technology (control, compliance and obedience).

Critical responses to the persistent expectation that ‘games and disability’ means medical, pedagogic or therapeutic framing of disability.

Responding critically to representations of disability AND representations of ability (and the ways in which ability as an idea is dependant on the notion of disability).

This work involves -

• Validating situated, embodied knowledge and disability
• Interpreting science fiction from/through disability.
• Exploring mainstream depictions of disability, ability and impairment
• Fostering opportunities for critique and dissent
Diane Carr, UCL IOE Players, Diverse Bodies and Embodied Interpretation

Project blurb
https://playhouse.wordpress.com/project-d4d-2016-2020/

Background publications

