How to Get Stuffed
Or
From Galton to Gamification via Dead Space
Or…
Normate reassurance and popular culture.

Welcome to Troubling Legacies/Fractured Futures, a seminar that we've convened as part of our work on the AHRC funded D4D project (2016-2020). The project made up of 8 different 'work streams' led by academics and artists who are collaborating with a range of communities across different sites - and most of the project team identify as disabled. I lead a work-stream called Playful Bodies, Technology and Community which aims to: “trouble, interrupt and problematize the relationship between disabled bodies, disabled subjectivity, and the clinical gaze (and the instantiating of that gaze, through ‘standardizing’ technologies and technology discourse”). We’re interested in the potential for popular science fictions to offer marginalized disabled subjects the chance to ‘talk back’ (hooks) to mainstream, able-identified and normate culture/s. Today’s event was convened in collaboration with D4D community CI (and project manager) Esther Fox. Esther is a visual artist and in her work-stream Institutionalised, Homogenised, Vaporised she has been exploring disability perspectives and public engagement on issues of genetic screening and eugenics. During 2019 we’re collaborating with game designers Splash and Ripple and academics Steve Poole (UWE) and Helen Kennedy (U of Brighton) in the design and public playing of a game about a Bristol-based Victorian institution called The Guild of the Brave Poor Things.
Today’s seminar grew out of our conversations during a previous collaboration, The Alternative Futures project (AHRC, 2014-15). It’s fueled by Esther’s interests in disability histories, screening and ‘new’ eugenics, and my interests in critiquing and resisting ableism through work on science fiction, horror, and the meanings and materializing of ability and disability as represented in (and performed during) games. From my perspective these are issues that draw a line between Victorian medical and popular culture, and contemporary games and gaming – which I’ll be speaking about. After me, Esther will be speaking about the absence of disabled people from specific histories and the erasure of disabled people from possible futures. This interest in the play between pasts, the present and possible futures is reflected in the title of today’s event, and it’s one of the themes for this afternoon: What does it mean to be working here?

By ‘here’ – I mean a particular point in time, as well as a place: London in the UK of Brexit, austerity, and the ‘hostile environment’ policy. ‘Here’ also means working in Higher Education, or specifically at UCL, which we all are - least for this afternoon. That’s relevant because UCL played a role in the history of eugenics. We will be exploring aspects of that history including devices, artefacts, photographs and documents thanks to our guest speaker Subhadra Das, curator of the Galton Collection here at UCL. Later Bruno de Paula (UCL) and Paulo Ruffino (U of Lincoln) will be leading a games workshop inspired (if that’s the right word) by The Galton Collection.

By ‘us’ – that’s us – everyone here and especially those of us here who identify as (and are identified as) non-normate for whatever reason. We’re using Rosemary Garland Thomson’s definition of the normate as: “the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (from Extraordinary Bodies, p. 8). We’re not a homogenous group, and we’re not denying the various forms and differing degrees of privilege and the cultural capital that we access.

I’m a Reader in Media and Cultural Studies at UCL. Most of my research is within digital game studies. For the past nine years or so I have been doing work on the status and meaning of ability in games, the disciplining of bodies within games, the construction of disability as threat, and the framing of normate subjectivity as delicate or vulnerable.

I use games studies literature in combination with disability studies literature on materiality and metaphor (e.g. Mitchell and Snyder), ableism, (Campbell), cultural studies accounts of ‘leaky bodies’ (Shildrick), acceptable and ‘professional bodies’ (controlled, white, austere – i.e. Iris Marion Young’s work). I’m interested in histories of pathology, deviance and difference (e.g. Sander L Gilman, Davis) and screen studies literature on the construction of the normate, and maleness/whiteness as absent center (e.g. Pajaczkowska and Young, Dyer and bell hooks), and Foucault (bodies, clinics, governance, knowledge). Applied to games, this has involved bringing together the game-as-structure, the game-as-played, and play as (assessed) performance, in order to explore representations of ability and disability in offline science fiction and horror games (action adventure games, survival horror, RPG hybrids). I am going to start off with a quick review – I’m just going to use extracts.
Here, for instance, are references to performance and quantification from a paper about games, representation and methodology.

The idea is that “quantification—which carries cultural associations of the factual, the clinical, and governance—takes on particular significance in figurative games that combine depictions of impairment with “an interest in the depiction and performance of skill and ability, and the construction and testing of measurable ability” (Carr, 2013). Representations of ability and disability in games have attracted limited critical attention despite the frequency with which impairment is depicted as a threat to agency that must be held at bay by a vulnerable protagonist who is doomed to compulsively reaffirm their status as able-bodied through assessed performance, and despite the extent to which these representations connect avatars with players through assessed performance and role, and despite the extent to which such patterns reflect mainstream discourses of ability and disability” Carr, D (2017, citing some earlier stuff) ‘Methodology, Representation, and Games’ for Games and Culture.

On playing as able and the construction of the other as threat – this is from a paper about the wonder that is Dead Space.

The player is invited to demonstrate the attributes associated with able bodies (control, responsiveness, accuracy, effectiveness and precision). The game offers its players the opportunity to perform ability within a fictional setting that is full of disturbing threats and losses that are culturally associated with disability.

[…]Snyder and Mitchell cite] Iris Marion Young’s work on the difficulties of reconciling professional identity with physical variability. Young explores bodily discipline and the performance of professional self while making reference to 19th century scientific racism, notions of decorum, and “behavioral norms of respectability” (Young, 1990, p. 136). As this suggests, discourses of disability and ability connect with other aspects of subjectivity including ethnicity and gender (From the Dead Space paper, Game Studies, Carr 2014)

The above connects up with today’s themes. There’s the notion of assessment, and materialization as part of assessment: the self-fulfilling/naturalizing of the idea that ability is measurable through its construction as something that can be measured. The ways in which performance is assessed and quantified in games, the way that
this reiterates notions of controlled, modern, adult subjects – and the way that anxieties swoosh around these ideas – that this adult, moderated subject is vulnerable or unstable… I’m interested in the idea of normate subjects as ‘Delicate Subjects’ -

A game protagonist’s capacity to wreak havoc is usually accompanied by a great deal of detailed and spectacular suffering. They are regularly shot at, chased by predators and hurled off cliffs, dumped, fired, and betrayed. […] these same protagonists are presented with constant opportunities to demonstrate skill. Furthermore, this skill is not merely described, it is quantified – measured out in achievements, points, progression and collectables (see Carr 2014). In other words, these protagonists offer us, as players, depictions of painful vulnerability alongside opportunities for validation. This validation is suggestive in relation to the construction of ability as quantifiable, the reification of able-bodied status, the associating of ability with agency, as well as the status associated with clinical epistemologies and quantification in general. Game protagonists occupy privileged spaces in game fictions, and this privilege is often expressed in conventional and normative terms (as regards race, age, class and gender, for example). Yet, at the same time that this privilege is being naturalized in various ways, it is also being problematized. It comes at a price in the sense that it is conditional on continual demonstration of ability. It is, apparently, an anxious and fragile privilege that is contingent on the possession of an able body (or, at least, a body that can ‘pass’ as able). From Carr, DiGRA 2016

I write about measurability and vulnerability and a play between the body as something that can be refined, tuned, honed – and the body as a problem that keeps messing up everything. This next quote is from a paper currently in press in which I argue that the bodies in Deux Ex: Mankind Divided recall Csicsery-Ronay Jr.’s description of the science-fictional grotesque as “the struggle to accommodate mutable, unstable objects and beings in the world” (182), which is particularly suggestive when considered alongside Mitchell and Snyder’s references to tangibility. Building on Bakhtin’s work, Csicsery-Ronay Jr. writes about corporeality as a problem for regulatory systems – including science. If the sublime involves the unfathomable, the grotesque “traps the sublime in the body” (182) making it unstable, distorted. […] suggesting a collision between empiricism and the unfathomable, the grotesque involves “liminal beings that defy classification because they somehow collapse natural boundaries” (187). In Mankind Divided Adam has the option to partially integrate at least (through his work) while other characters (including Victor) make tangible the limits and conditions of integration. As a grotesque, Victor Marchenko epitomizes all that can’t be accommodated by the regulatory systems present within the game’s fictional world. As such, Victor is a vivid reminder that playing Mankind Divided involves repeatedly testing the conditional ‘fit’ between a body (Adam, as the played protagonist) and a regulatory system (the game). (Carr in press)

When it comes to the play between messy bodies and regulatory systems (including ways of looking, materialization and classification – to go back to some of today’s themes) I’m intrigued by the death of the clinic (or the death of Foucault’s clinic) and the frequency with which post-apocalyptic games depict clinical settings as compromised.
I like the idea that mainstream popular culture recognizes that the price of escape from the culturally ingrained regimes of assessment that prop up normate centrality is a zombie apocalypse. This quote is from a paper presented at Tampere in 2014, now in press as a chapter in *Gaming Disability*.

Quote – [for these avatars] 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 […] disability’s threatening cultural associations are leveraged for affect, and disabled bodies are used to embody loss and deviance. […] In *The Last of Us* and *The Walking Dead*, zombies take on the role previously served by leprosy [Foucault]. 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 (Carr 2014/2019).

The interest in materialization, surveillance and spectacle referenced here is present in lots of games, especially science fiction and horror games. It’s echoed in various popular movements including self-tracking, self-measurement and gamification. It’s suggestive of a struggle between unruly, unpredictable or ambiguous flesh and regulatory structures (whether you prefer to think about that in terms of Bakhtin or Foucault). It’s also reminiscent of the Othering, corraling and categorization of difference documented in Sander Gilman’s work on Victorian medical practice and scientific racism. We will have a chance to explore these resemblances more this afternoon.

To get back to today’s theme: How does this relate to working *here*? ‘Here’ as in your field, or your university; ‘here’ as in London, in the UK, in 2019. Working here at UCL means working in proximity to a particular history (as Subhadra Das will be explaining). Academics work in classrooms, departments, and fields: part of the job is
applying and inventing assessment criteria and standards. We’re assessing, validating, reviewing and rejecting (and we’re assessed, in/validated, reviewed and rejected). So, if we’re going to talk about ‘working here’ perhaps we can talk about the affective (and disaffecting) aspects of this role. How does it feel, for instance, to be working in Higher Education now that the ladder has been pulled up behind us by fees, casualization and gentrification? How does it feels to be the non-standard (and yet privileged) ‘spanner in the works’? Maybe we should talk about spanners getting dented and mangled. Because even if you’re safe now - if you get pregnant, or ill, injured, or acquire caring responsibilities, if you age, or if for whatever reason you can no longer ‘do your difference’ in a way that your colleagues are comfortable with – you might get mangled too. We can talk about the ways that survivability and assessment (in games, in universities) involves the creation, categorization and discarding of an ‘unfit’ – because happens when the thing that doesn’t fit, is you?

What if the thing that needs to be discarded is your own experience?

I want to talk about the times that my everyday ‘lived experience’ occasionally upends my attempts to engage with theory. I’d offer this single (with apologies for an out of context and possibly misrepresentative) quote from Braidotti’s *Posthumanism* as one example:

> A posthuman theory of the subject emerges, therefore, as an empirical project that aims at experimenting with what contemporary, bio-technologically mediated bodies are capable of doing. These non-profit experiments with contemporary subjectivity actualize the virtual possibilities of an expanded, relational self that function in a nature-culture continuum and is technologically mediated (Braidotti p 61).

Because when I see the words ‘experimenting’ and ‘bodies’ and references to experiments about capability – I am checking the exits, avoiding sudden movements, and backing carefully out of the room. I’m not sure if I’m supposed to identify with the ‘experimenter’ or the ‘bodies’ in this scenario, and it’s possible I’ve missed the point because I’m too busy wondering who is operating the technology. This is not a critique of Braidotti’s work (I don’t know it well enough to critique it) - I just want to know if anyone else has that experience – when aspects of your everyday life crashes into theory and makes a loud, crunching noise.

What I’m perceived of being capable of doing, or not, fluctuates wildly, so I can’t think about “experimenting with what contemporary, bio-technologically mediated bodies are capable of doing” without thinking about the cataclysmic histories of technological experimentation on those classified as deviant, and the question of what it means to imagine that capabilities can be measured (as if it’s unproblematic or straightforward). I’m not saying they can’t be measured. More that capability and measurement are mutually constructing. For instance, I’m fairly sure that my ‘impairment’ is measurable because over time the tests generate consistent results. I’m less sure about how consistently these results-on-paper manifest as ‘capability’ because even if the results are (sort of) unambiguous, the experience of my deafness is not. Like I was saying earlier about bodies and games and the grotesque as that that messes up a regulatory system – experience would be the weird, bloppy, gooey stuff that gets shoved out of the way so that the measurement of my capabilities will mean something – to somebody else. Because once I have a score, there are expectations to meet. There’s a weird link between having had my capabilities measured and a social obligation to avoid peculiar forms of impropriety or varieties of fraud (you’re not proper deaf; you’re not really deaf; you don’t look deaf, you don’t sound deaf, etc. – hearing people really do say this stuff (see notes). On paper I’m ‘severely deaf’ which suggests a reasonable level of commitment – though,
of course, what I'm arguing here is that just because some capability or other can be quantified, it doesn't follow that it means 'one thing'. Anyway – my point is that this is the kind of the stuff that goes through my head when I reflect on the Braidotti quote, because perhaps I could make the theory work, conceptually, but then I'm left with a set of reflections on what 'doesn't fit' – what bits of me would I need to discard? That's something I've tried to incorporate into this style of presentation; I'm trying to foreground the negotiation between writing ourselves in and writing ourselves out of our engagements with these issues, by dipping into work that is more auto-ethnographic.

Fig 3: Prosthetic arm in a garbage bin with the title 'Non-Normate self-erasure'. The image is from the game Deus Ex: Mankind Divided.

Let's say, for instance, that it's summer 2018 and you are on your way from London to Turin to a game studies conference, and you're thinking ahead to your presentation, which is on 'agency, subjectivity and interpretation' as you ponder what it means to have freedom of movement in Europe in summer. You're with your family (we are migrants, we're legal, we have our passports, plus proof of address, and proof of relationship) and you're about to go through airport security and you'll notice that my pronouns get messed up when I try and talk about this. I look white but that doesn't mean I can cast a magic bubble over the members of my family who don't. The airport security staff look at us, and start talking at you. You tell them you are deaf. They give you that "Here we go", talk louder and make some flappy gestures. You guess. They want you to step aside, into a booth for a full body scan. You put on a compliant face. You smile at your 8 year old daughter so she is not frightened while you keep still so that they can scan you. When you're finished in the booth, they put your daughter in. So you keep eye contact with her, and you're smiling for her and talking only to her. This is the moment that that gets remembered, because I'm splitting into two minds and then I am in three minds thinking: "airport security is, on the whole, a good idea" while also having a fantasy that involves dropping a live volcano on them while also (I know this doesn't make sense) another part of me just wailing 'Wait - if you think that this beautiful child is at risk then what are you doing letting us go?' Obviously I shut up and we get through security and make it to the conference. Which brings me back to my theme: what if your work 'here' depends on shutting up and getting through? How long are you going to last? What is that going to cost you?
Asking what it means to work ‘here’ can also be a question about fields. Point being, if I don’t want to discard lived experience to work with theory there are precedents. See, for example, Banaji (2017) for an in-depth work on caste, class and media among children, her reflexive account of the need to understand and conceptualise agency in context, and her references to ‘felt theory’ (Banaji 2017, p 174 citing Million, 2009). I’ve used Ellis et al’s discussion of epistemology, subjectivity and knowledge in auto-ethnographic methods, and found it useful. Likewise, there’s Larsen and Zubernis’ work on the importance of combining auto-ethnographic (or confessional) perspectives and boundary work in Fandom at the Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/Producer Relationships. Or literature on trauma, history and postcolonialism, in which ‘trauma’ is associated with overwhelming experiences that defy understanding and experience (Craps 2014). There’s a wealth of literature in disability studies, feminist epistemology and critical race theory that we can draw on, learn from and feel supported by - much of which foregrounds the significance of lived experience to theory, research and teaching. But I do wonder about the experiences of colleagues in other fields and disciplines.

Fig 4 ‘Immigration Enforcement vans’ parked in my street, the picture taken when we’re on the way to school.

Finally, because today we are asking about what it means to work ‘here’ – at this point in time, and here as in the academy – we need to be asking about working ‘here’ as in the UK, so as the final point I want to connect all this up with the histories that Subhadra Das will be speaking about, including histories of colonialism, assessment and profiling, and contemporary discourses of migration because - with a look back to Foucault – in popular culture (Carr, in press) government policy and the popular press, we’re seeing disability framed as the taint within while the racially-othered migrant is being cast in the role of the taint at the gates. Both are being positioned relative to a national/notional normate who is holding the imaginary fort while inventing new or enforcing very old varieties of assessment. As when a government minister made headlines for suggesting that juvenile refugees’ ‘teeth should be checked to reveal their ‘true age’ - linking the idea of (fantastical) assessment with entitlement while framing a young person’s safety as a golden ticket, or as that particular child’s letter from Hogwarts. Like the notorious government assessments of work capability (look up ‘ATOS assessments’) that have proven to be so callous, unreliable and murderous. If we’re looking for continuities
between Galton and current policy, between his work, and where we work – this ‘here’ is where discourses of race, disability, Otherness, the assessing gaze of normative privilege and questions of entitlement are luridly entangled.

To go back to today’s topic – let’s talk about what it means to be the target of an assessing gaze as non-normate subjects; and ask how (or if) that experience might impact on our engagement with theory, literature and aspects of academic practice. Let’s talk about assessment as a practice that generates a discard pile. I’m wrapping up. Next, Esther will be talking about her work on selection, classification and screening. Subhadra Das will be talking us through the stories and sad, disturbing weirdness of the fascinating Galton Collection and explaining its place in UCL history, and the history of eugenics. Later, Paulo Ruffino and Bruno de Paula will be leading us in game-design workshop where we reflect further on The Galton Collection while discussing how we as educators, academics, students and researchers feel about being here, and being implicated in these practices.

Notes:
No replacement minister ‘for disability’ appointed until after Brexit is ‘resolved’

To find videos make by d/Deaf people about the questions they get asked by hearing people, go here. https://playhouse.wordpress.com/2018/04/01/deaf-education/

“Give child refugees dental tests to verify age, says David Davies” (Guardian, 19/10/2016).
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/19/child-refugees-dental-tests-verify-age-david-davies

References:


CarrRepresentationAbility


Carr, D (2017) ‘Methodology, Representation, and Games’ for *Games and Culture* http://journals.sagepub.com/toc/gaca/0/0 (or get the draft from the blog).


