“Agh! It’s Alive!” Science Fiction, Disability and Discipline

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Introduction

My name is Diane Carr and I’m a Reader in Media and Cultural studies. My specialism is digital game studies. Currently I’m a Co-Investigator on a large, multi-disciplinary consortia project for the AHRC - the D4D project (2016-2020)

D4D - Disability and Community: Dis/engagement, Dis/enfranchisement, Dis/parity and Dissent.

The D4D team includes artists, academics (e.g. media studies, anthropology, robotics) and theatre groups. There are some able-identified members of the team. The rest of us identify as disabled.

To prepare for today’s talk I have been reflecting on what it means to work with and commit to a specific model of disability, while engaging productively with alternative and emergent perspectives (including those of the team and the project participants). I’ve been thinking about the need for an approach that stays ‘live’ – responsive, adaptive and yet coherent.
The structure of this presentation

• Introduce the D4D project and share the key terms, themes and project methodology
• Focus on a specific ‘work-stream’ from D4D called ‘Playable Bodies’
• Talk about Unit 1 from Playable Bodies, a piece of audience research that has the working title of ‘We’re Watching You’
• Provide some background to this research by reviewing some of my previous work on games, bodies and science fiction.
• Reflect on the relevance of the cultural model of disability (Snyder and Mitchell, 2006) to D4D as a whole, and to this particular unit of work.
D4D project design: On ‘disability’ and ‘community’

• D4D’s design was collaboratively work-shopped over several months. Community Partners and academics from a range of disciplines were active in the design from the start. The team came to agree that:
• Community needs to be understood in context, as co-constructed and performed
• Existing structures, discourses and practices (schools, workplaces, epistemologies, media texts) reify, position and perpetuate social groups in particular and sometimes problematic ways…
• Yet these can (at least potentially) become sites of critique, resistance, solidarity and dissent
• There is diversity within communities and within disability
• D4D’s design was very much influenced by Sue Porter’s work on disability, creative methodologies and social change at the University of Bristol, as well as Mary Brydon-Miller’s work on ethics and participatory research.
D4D project design: Themes and methodology

- Working from this framing of ‘community’ and ‘disability’ we identified key themes: agency and voice, power, allegiance and change, and the body.

- We discussed these in relation to: performance, play, cultural production, embodiment and experience, technology, representations and institutions.

- These shared concerns fed into the development of our research strategy.

- Our methodologies: Collaborative, co-constructed, reflexive, playful, creative, ethical, embodied and experiential

- Play, creativity and performance are central to the project design - connecting to our interest in voice, body, agency, and manifesting as playful and creative interventions (public events, installations, games, drama – developed with community participants).

- D4D is structured as 8 inter-connecting and mutually informing ‘streams of work’
One of the work-streams in D4D ‘Playful Bodies’
This work-stream is made up of 5 units

• Unit 1. ‘We’re watching you’ – Audience research exploring Disability perspectives on mainstream culture through science fictions – this is the bit that I will speaking about this afternoon.

• Unit 2. Event: ‘Hacked Off’ – to critique the dominant tropes within game studies research on disability (e.g. the persistence of deficit and ‘we-fix-u’ models)

• Unit 3. Event with Disability Arts Online, looking at different perspectives on DA practice, and the implications for community and affiliation.

• Unit 4. Event: ‘Troubling legacies and fractured futures’ – exploring the links between disability and eugenics discourse and disability histories (and futures). In collaboration with Esther Fox (artist, CI and community partner)

Playful Bodies, unit 1 ‘We’re watching you’
Highlighting the links between lived experience and insight:

The Cultural Model of Disability

• See Chapter 1, Snyder and Mitchell (2006) – *Cultural Locations of Disability*
• The cultural model is informed by disability activism and cultural studies.
• Snyder and Mitchell’s account of the cultural model recognises the value of the social model of disability, but approaches ‘impairment’ in a distinct way: as a lived experience that generates insight and knowledge (an ‘embodied’ disability).

I see the cultural model as being relevant across D4D – in the emphasis on lived experience and ‘voice’, the validation of disability expertise, in the use of participatory methods and in the emphasis on situated knowledge production, co-production and agency.

In this particular unit of work, the cultural model is informing work on media texts and interpretation.
Unit 1: We’re Watching You

Disability perspectives on mainstream, able-identified culture
Audience research and ‘disability readings’ of science fiction.
To what extent might science fictions offer us scope for critique; for de-neutralizing and de-naturalizing aspects of able-identified culture?
The relevance of the cultural model: Our experience of disability becomes a source of insight (on disability, and on mainstream able-identified culture). Our knowledge is an interpretive resource. Interpretation is embodied, and bodies vary.

Background:
This draws on my previous work on affect, bodies and experience, and science fiction games (e.g. Carr 2013) which raised questions about how experience of disability might influence aspects of our experiences with popular media texts.
Example One: The feeling of being ‘jolted out’ of Deus Ex: Human Revolution – a game about a heavily augmented man named Adam Jenson.
Augmentations in *Deux Ex* – this is from Carr (2013)

- In this game augmentations offer social and economic advantage to characters. When other characters comment on the protagonist’s augmentations (which they do) most refer to augmentation as a personal choice. Some even insult him about it. But Jenson did not volunteer to be augmented! His boss stuffed him with implants when he was unconscious. In other words, Jensen is regularly confronted by assumptions that contradict or invalidate his experience.

- When Jensen did not challenge or contest the misrepresenting of his experience by other characters, I felt ‘jolted’ out of the game. I have a history of being ‘persuaded’ to wear augmentations - hearing aids, etc. – and Jenson had been forced to. Then people insulted him about his ‘choice’.

- The game raised questions about the links between lived experience, affect and interpretation. I explored these links using an essay by Paterson and Hughes (1999). In Paterson and Hughes (1999) the authors use Leder’s work on ‘the absent body’ and autobiographical material to describe the experience of a non-standard body encountering normative social practices. The short version: ‘the absent body’ is the body we’re not thinking about. We ‘re-become’ aware of our bodies at particular moments – especially when that body is consciously experienced, exposed or rendered a problem. It’s an idea that resonates with a number of other concepts including ‘distanciation’...

The hostility directed at Jensen’s body hit a sore spot. It gave me a pang. His experience tangled with my experience. *My experiences of augmentation and my experiences in clinics shaped aspects of my experience of playing Deus Ex.*
The clinic in games.

These reflections on disability, feelings, interpretation and lived experience

• made me think more about all the clinical and medical imagery I was finding in games.
• and it also made me think about games while I was at the clinic (as a deaf person and as a parent)

There are various points of connection

1. Science fictions are interested in technology, bodies and social change (Sobchack 1993)
2. Many science fiction games feature medical clinics as a location in the game’s fictional world.
3. Games assess players. Games invite performance then materialise and quantify ‘ability’ as scores, while depicting disability as loss, as liability, as threatening, alien or abject ‘other’
4. Meanwhile, real world clinics accommodate games and game-like procedures.

Here are some examples...
Clinics, science, monstrosity and medical technology in games – *Dead Space*

*Dead Space* asks – Where would you be without Science? And then it tells you.

Gore smeared clinics and waiting rooms
Medical technologies, cloning vats
Gurneys, wards and lab coats
‘Mad’ doctors and scientists
Anatomy posters, anatomy models
X-rays

Augmentation and prosthetics - *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*

Clinics  
Surgery  
Augmentation  
Research labs  
White coats  
Tracking implants  
Visits to the morgue  
Addiction, dependence and medication  
‘Corrupted science’

A visit to the last clinic in *The Last of Us*

The ‘death of the clinic’ =
The demise of social categories =
a resurgence of the ‘natural’
Civil and social restoration are explicitly linked with the clinic.
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* (Telltale Games version, Ep 1-5)

Carr, D (2014) Representations of Ability in Digital Games, for the Critical Evaluation of Game Studies Seminar. 28-29 April 2014, University of Tampere
Games at the clinic

Thinking about clinics as game settings

1. Sometimes it looks like a game...
2. Similar tastes in décor
3. I get a controller

4...and I play a game
5. I get a score...

6. I get a prize!
• My experience of games shaped my experience of the clinic.
• My experiences of the clinic, shaped aspects of my experiences with games.

Is it just me?

• Moving from here, to ‘audience studies’ …
• “We’re Watching You”
Some relevant literature

Literature on disability and science fiction that uses humanities/close analysis - E.g.


Literature that combines audience studies with disability theory – Eg.


A mini-genre - scientists who are annoyed that journalists write about their work using science fiction references and metaphors

Still collecting...

Audience studies research on science fictions that is informed by disability studies literature (where the audience do not identify as able)
We’re Watching You

The Plan

Step 1: Further work on methodology and theorising ‘embodied interpretation’ of science fictions – connecting ‘reading formations’ with the knowledge and feelings associated with lived experience of disability via the cultural model (see Carr 2017)

Step 2: Share the above – various venues, including with the audience members at a ‘disability panel’ at a science fiction fan conference (complete)

Step 3: Slowly moving towards the recruitment of participants via a ‘rolling snowball chorus’ – by which I mean that it starts small (auto-ethnographic) then it rolls forward to collect more participants at stage 2, then more again at stage 3 and 4, with participants invited to critique the analysis at each prior stage.
Conclusion

The D4D project – a large multi-partner, interdisciplinary project (2016-20, AHRC)
The cultural model of disability (Snyder and Mitchell 2006) with an emphasis on lived experience and insight
One work stream in D4D is ‘Playable Bodies’ and the first unit of work is ‘We’re Watching You’
• Disability and science fictions
• Looking at resistant and critical perspectives on mainstream able-identified culture
The cultural model has proven its value to me.
It is central to my research design; my conceptual framework
I have been thinking about this conceptual framework in the context of inter-disciplinary dialogue, and reflecting on what it might mean (if anything!) to the project’s contributors, including audiences who have experience of disability.
Because we are diverse.
Our experiences of disability might generate insight.
It doesn’t mean that we’re all going to agree with each other.
Acknowledgements and bibliography

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More information about my research and publications is at https://playhouse.wordpress.com/