Delicate Subjects: Vulnerability and validation in action adventure games

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Keywords
Ability, status, disability, assessment, subjectivity, representation

This presentation focuses on game protagonists and the hostile worlds they inhabit. The aim is to explore the pleasures of propelling imperiled figures through a fictional world where their worthiness is perpetually tested - both in the sense that it is challenged, and in the sense that it is quantified. This play between vulnerability and validation is explored with reference to theories of ability (Siebers 2009) and depictions of able bodies.

Game scholars have analyzed representations of race, gender and disability in games, as well as the unpredictable ways in which the gender, physicality and sexuality of game characters are reworked by fans (e.g. Kirkland 2009; Leonard 2003; Kennedy 2002). Theorists have explored related issues of embodiment (e.g. Klevjer 2012). As researchers have noted, digital games combine ludic structures (rules, economies) with performance (enacted off-screen, manifest on-screen) and fiction: the detailed worlds in which these structures are articulated, and within which onscreen performance is contextualized and rendered meaningful. As this suggests, the bodies that act on screen during play have a composite identity, and accounts of in-game representations need to reflect this multiplicity.

In *Representations*, Stuart Hall (1997) discusses two approaches to representation. The first is based on semiotics. The second is informed by Foucault's work on subjectivity. In this presentation it is argued that by focusing on issues of subjectivity, it becomes possible to bridge the spaces between games as fantasies, games as systems of assessment, and the cultural contexts within which they are produced and played. This will be explored with reference to specific action adventure games. These games lend themselves to questions of representation because they are figurative, and feature detailed worlds, characterization and narrative elements alongside their more specifically ludic aspects (rules, goals, points, resources). When questions of representation are considered through a subjectivity framework, it becomes possible to trace resonances between representations in games, and broader questions of power, cultural context and social practices. This work draws on critical disability theory, as well as relevant analysis within game studies (e.g. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter 2009; Kücklich 2009; Silverman and Simon 2009). When connecting representations and subjectivity to cultural contexts, literature on power within familiar institutions (Ball 2013) and the disciplining of the

contemporary self (Rose 1990) becomes relevant, as does feminist and critical disabilities work on bodies, status and privilege, including Thomson's work on 'the normate' (Thomson 1997). One of the things that this literature shares is an interest in the ways in which the unmarked neutrality associated with privileged bodies is supported by everyday institutions and mundane social practices, and recognition that this status is dependent on the ongoing construction of 'other' bodies as marginal, abject or deviant.

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. Alongside such punishment, these same protagonists are presented with constant opportunities to demonstrate ability. Furthermore, ability 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). The presentation concludes with a consideration of ability, status, vulnerability and validation within player cultures more generally.

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