(Dis)Abled Gaming: An Autoethnographic Analysis of Decreasing Accessibility For

Disabled Gamers

by

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Abstract

Within the context of culture, disability has long existed as a stigmatizing quality (Goffman, 1963). As a result, people with disabilities are often overlooked or completely omitted from various, cultural artifacts. This exclusion of people with disabilities is largely recognized as unproblematic because their disabilities imply an inevitable failing. Through my own experiences as a disabled gamer, I have recognized that video games have also framed gamers with disabilities as problematic. Video games are largely constructed in a one-size-fits-all mentality (Grammenos, 2014), where very specific people, with very specific kinds of bodies, are granted access to play them. Since disabled gamers are not necessarily capable of playing video games in similar ways that able-bodied gamers can, it is assumed that we can't play video games and that we shouldn't want to. By using autoethnography as theory, I venture through a few stories from my life in which my own disability has rendered gaming either difficult or impossible. I seek to use these autoethnographic pieces as living examples of the problems involved with a traditional discussion of accessibility for people with disabilities. This thesis is a call for a renegotiation of "accessibility," and how generalized formulations of this concept are still capable of excluding people who are disabled in very particular ways. In accordance with Shakespeare's (2006) interactive model, I use my stories to show how my disability is a culmination of both the material and social qualities of my body. It is from this model that I seek transcendence from thinking of disabled bodies in either a medical or social model (Oliver, 1990) approach. Accessibility should be regarded as an interactive and cyclical process, which takes place

between the individual, her body, the environment, and back again. An assessment of video game accessibility should be referred to in a similar way, where developers may attempt to be inclusive to people of varying kinds and levels of disability, rather than focusing solely on able-bodied modes of gaming.

Introduction

In my lived experiences as a physically disabled individual, I am hard-pressed to find ways of engaging with an increasingly able-bodied world. In my academic endeavors, I struggle to convey disabled hardships to an audience dominated by able- bodied scholars. Through Critical Communication Theory and Critical Disability Theory, I present this project as an autoethnographic endeavor to bridge the gap between these theoretical frameworks and my lived experiences as a disabled gamer. According to Adams and Holman Jones (2008): "Autoethnography, whether a practice, a writing form, or a particular perspective on knowledge and scholarship, hinges on the push and pull between and among analysis and evocation, personal experience and larger social, cultural, and political concerns" (p. 374).

My own identity as a person with a physical disability has been greatly impacted by an ability to engage with video games. Growing up, my able-bodied friends helped figure out ways that I could play sports with them. Though this gave me access to participate in physical activity with other children who weren't disabled, it became blatantly apparent that I wouldn't excel at an able-bodied form of football, basketball, or street hockey. Video games always served as a leveling ground between my friends and myself.

Because it was such an easy transition from the joystick that I used to maneuver my power wheel chair, my life as a gamer began through the medium of an arcade stick-styled controller for the original Nintendo Entertainment System. Since this time, technology has advanced in ways that I never thought possible. While modern technology has granted disabled people the ability to increase our

independence through engaging in activities such as driving, it has done the opposite for those of us who identify ourselves as disabled gamers. By implementing technologies such as motion control into gaming, gamers with mobility disabilities such as myself find it difficult if not impossible to connect with video games. Coupled with a frequent unwillingness by developers to allow for gamers to customize the actions designated to specific buttons on controllers, referred to as "button remapping," the gamer is required to have a very precise definition of dexterity and mobility. In this fashion, the disabled gamer is either forced to experience gaming through a very specific kind of medium, or to forego gaming altogether. Modern video game developers are pushing their consumers to experience gaming in a rigid space that disabled individuals are losing access to.

I will give a few accounts of my own experiences as a disabled gamer to show how an ableist ideology has influenced the way that video games are constructed. My stories serve as examples of a privilege afforded to able-bodied gamers, which disabled gamers do not have access to. Through experiencing limitations in interacting with modern video games, it has become apparent to me that the voices of disabled gamers often go unheard. By telling of my own interaction with video games, I hope to show how a pervasive, able-body ideology has begun to push disabled gamers away from engaging with video games, an activity that was more accessible in the past than it is now.

Literature Review

A. Critically Defining Disability

  With the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) on July 26, 1990, the United States sought to offer its disabled citizens equal opportunity and accessibility in the work place and other public arenas. Following many civil rights movements for the rights of disabled people in the U.S. and overseas, the era hailed disabled people to the public sphere. What we have learned from events leading up to the movement, the movement itself, and the aftermath of this struggle, is that a stigma still exists that inextricably binds debilitating impairment to disabled people, where the impairment becomes a totalizing quality of the disabled person's identity. According to Erving Goffman (1963), the stigmatization of a person occurs as an indication of his or her inability to conform to societal expectations and rules. Goffman notes: "He [or she] is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap" (p. 3). For the individual living with a stigma placed upon her by society, engaging with non-stigmatized members of society becomes taxing, as it often both draws attention toward the stigmatized individual's stigmatizing quality, and as a justification for treating a stigmatized individual differently (Ellis, 1998).

  In an attempt to push back against a medicalized stigmatization of disabled people, sociologist Michael Oliver (1990) created a social model of disability. Oliver posits that disability is not simply defined on an individual or medical level. He

claims that disability should not be defined by individual and biological limitations and instead should function as an entity created through societal interaction. He states: "A social theory of disability, however, must be located within the experience of disabled people themselves and their attempts, not only to redefine disability but also to construct a political movement amongst themselves and to develop services commensurate with their own, self-defined needs" (p. 11). This social model of disability offered law makers a rationale for recognizing the disabled as a group of people who were politically and socially disenfranchised by their government.

Since Oliver posited his social model, scholars have begun to unearth the implications behind assessing the disabled experience from an exclusively societal perspective. Currently, important work conducted in disability studies is engaged with expounding upon the social model of disability, where the social, medical, and individual qualities of disabled people's lives are regarded as inextricably interconnected (Barnes, 2012; Davis, 2006; Linton, 2006; McMahan, 2005; Priestly, 2003; Shakespeare, 2006; Siebers, 2006). Shakespeare (2006) explains that a proper model of disability places these three aspects of the disabled person's identity in interaction with each other. This interactive model of disability is instructive to critiquing the accessibility of gaming because it allows for us to look at accessibility as a complicated process that takes place between the gamer, her physical limitations, and how her experience with gaming has an impact on society as whole.

B. What is Accessibility?

Before I can discuss the resources that developers have at their disposal toward creating a more accessible environment for disabled and able-bodied gamers alike, I must first address the problems involved in creating such a space. What exactly is accessibility? If we were to ask a scholar such as Oliver (1990), it would be very easy to assume that he would take up an argument stating how accessibility for disabled individuals entails a type of universal access in which *all* structures should be simultaneously accessible to people who have varying levels of physical, cognitive, and/or developmental disabilities. Wendell (1996) would be quick to defend this sentiment, echoing that the environment is responsible for disabling individuals: "Thus, disability is socially constructed through the failure or unwillingness to create ability among people who do not fit the physical and mental profile of 'paradigm' citizens" (p. 41). Is it access to a particular environment that creates disability, is the issue of accessibility tied to a very individual interpretation of what it means to be disabled, or are these inquiries connected?

As I have shown, disability is best described as only a part of a person's identity, interconnected with many other qualities that define who she is. If disability is such a complicated piece of a person's identity, then what are we to make of the disabled body and its relation to accessibility? The disabled body is what Ian Hacking (1999) would describe as an "interactive kind." For instance, because a particular building may only have stairs leading to its entrance, it may be impossible for a quadriplegic man, who utilizes a power wheel chair to compensate for lack of mobility, to gain entrance to the building. A blind woman might have a different experience, as her definition of accessibility would have less to do with the

ability to traverse the steps to the building's entrance, and more to do with finding the location of the building without the assistance of others. Accessibility is messy because it means something different for each disabled person. Even though two people might have the same kind of disability, their individual experiences may cause them to react to accessibility in very different ways. The definition of access can have very divergent meanings amongst people with varying kinds and levels of disability.

How does this idea of disability and accessibility translate to disabled gamers, their bodies, and the differing ways in which they use their bodies to engage with video games? In terms of access, gaming has grown less accessible as technology has progressed. This is disconcerting, as these advancements are credited with giving disabled people autonomy over everyday activities, such as transportation and employment (Blackmore & Hodgkins, 2012), while restricting access to previously accessible activities such as engaging with video games. With the implementation of technologies such as motion control, disabled gamers with mobility issues are restricted from engaging in an activity that was more accessible to us in the past.

Motion-sensing technology is becoming an increasingly prevalent function in modern video games. While this technology has its applications in physical therapy, it is also limiting to gamers with disabilities that affect either their mobility or dexterity. Through my own experiences with gaming, I have witnessed a rise of an ideology constructed around the able-bodied gamer, one that can be explained by feminist disability theory.

The informing premise of feminist disability theory is that disability, like femaleness, is not a natural state of corporeal inferiority, inadequacy, excess, or a stroke or misfortune. Rather, disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender. The ability/disability system produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies. Although this comparison of bodies is ideological rather than biological, it nevertheless penetrates into the formation of culture, legitimating an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 17).

The able-bodied ideology requires us to take a critical look into the taken-for-granted assumptions about the ability of all gamers, disabled or able-bodied, and their ability to participate equally in playing video games. Quoting Spivak (1982):

> A critical view of the subject of ideology would call the clarity of these distinctions into question and thus ask the critic to address a less simplified view of the world. It would deconstitute and situate (*not* reject) the 'we' who experiences the productivity of alternative investigative postures, the 'legitima[cy]' and 'power' of the 'acceptable standpoints'" (p. 119).

In my experience of playing video games, I have begun to have an increasingly difficult time interacting with the games because video game controllers largely cater to able- bodied gamers. Adding motion technology to controllers is the most obvious example to me, as it assumes that all gamers can interact with a very specific, able-bodied level of mobility and/or dexterity. Those of us who are disabled

are expected to adapt to an able- bodied standard of play, to overcome and reshape our disabilities so that we may have the ability to engage with video games. Garland-Thomson (2011) notes: "The twin ideologies of normalcy and beauty posit female and disabled bodies, particularly, as not only spectacles to be looked at, but as pliable bodies to be shaped infinitely so as to conform to a set of standards called *normal* and *beautiful*" (p. 24). Similar to Wendell's (1996) analysis of the difficulty that disabled bodies have in accessing able-bodied spaces, areas only accessible to a particularly able-bodied population, disabled and able-bodied gamers are forced to experience gaming in a specific way, which creates a generalizable understanding of what a gamer should look like and how she should conduct herself while playing video games

C. How To Make Gaming Accessible

To echo the early sentiments of Oliver (1990), the disabled body is held accountable for its own limitations as a function of its very own disability. As far as gaming goes, the disabled gamer is not recognized as a gamer. Priestly (2003) states, "... social institutions continue to shape our understanding of a normal life and the 'problems' that arise when individuals or groups 'fail' to make proper progress through it" (p. 26). Disability becomes a symbol for transcending one's own bodily limitations. The disabled gamer exists as a cyborg, as something that does not resemble a gamer at all, as something that does not and can not exist: "No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household.

Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other" (Haraway, 1990, p. 192).

How can we account for the disabled gamer in a way that does not simultaneously exclude her? Firstly, an attempt must be made by video game developers to recognize the existence of disabled gamers. To do this, it must be understood that disability is not merely a result of a person's individual impairment, and that disability is not something exclusively created by the environment in which the disabled person dwells. The disabled experience is a complex interaction between factors that reside within and outside of the individual, which produces her disablement: "The experience of a disabled person results from the relationship between factors intrinsic to the individual and extrinsic factors arising from the wider context in which she finds herself" (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 55). The disabled gamer's limitations are both a product of her own, physical limitations, and limitations that are imposed upon her from the ways in which she is forced to interact with the process of playing video games. No matter how inclusive the design, video game controllers are only as accessible as a gamer's ability allows her to be.

If each person's disability impacts the extent to which she can engage in playing video games, then how do we begin to approach accessibility? Video games must have the capacity to extend an equal amount of accessibility to people with differing levels of mobility. To ensure that disabled gamers with varying types of disability have equitable access to engage with video games, developers should offer an option to personalize the way that these gamers experience video games.

Through stagnant button configurations and a lack of alternative, controller-based alternatives to motion-based technology, the disabled gamer becomes marginalized within the context of gaming. There are a number of approaches to begin incorporating disabled gamers into the experience of gaming, including but not limited to: providing button re-mapping for players that have difficulty accessing specific buttons on a particular controller; providing button- or joystick-based alternative for motion-based games; providing different styles of video game controllers that cater to people with varying types of mobility disabilities; offering the option to turn on subtitles, providing deaf and hard of hearing players with not only the ability to read dialogue that occurs between characters in the game, but a way to experience auditory cues that developers may incorporate into gameplay mechanics; and providing gamers with visual impairments the option to invert the colors displayed in the game. These options are still relatively vague, but show the ways in which video game developers could take their audience's accessibility into account. I'm not arguing to establish a singular, standardized method for increasing video game accessibility for disabled gamers; instead, I'm trying to show that there are a variety of ways to create a more inclusive environment for gamers with disabilities. Though each gamer will require specific modifications to allow her the ability to play, these options will provide disabled gamers with varying types and levels of disability the opportunity to tailor the gaming experience to her own, individual disability. In assessing the accessibility of modern video games, I will conduct an autoethnographic analysis of my own experience with gaming. I will utilize a few research questions to guide my research:

1. How have video games been instrumental in informing me about the way that I have come to understand my own disability and the way that others perceive it?

2. As technology has advanced, how has my experience with gaming changed?

3. How are video game mechanics such as motion-based control informed by an able-bodied ideology that permeates throughout the disabled experience?

By delving into my own experiences with video games, I hope to show and tell how an able-bodied ideology has punctuated the experience of the disabled gamer. My own involvement with video games will serve as an indication of the many ways in which society assumes each individual to have a standardized level of mobility, sight, and intellect, all measured in accordance with an understood, generalizable level of able- bodied ability. The struggle of accessibility for the disabled gamer is one that echoes through the concept of access, at its most fundamental level. By excluding disabled gamers from engaging with video games, technologies such as motion-based controllers influence the ways that society comes to recognize, stigmatize, and communicate about, the disabled gamer. The gamer who happens to be disabled is silenced and rendered both invisible as well as hyper-visible through her ultimate failing and inability to conform to an ideologically able-bodied definition of what it means to be a gamer. According to Foucault (2012):

> The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body—to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces" (p. 136).

The "signs" that either pay attention to or fail to acknowledge the existence of disabled gamers are indicative of the ways that an ableist society communicates about the disabled body. Through a lack of talk about disabled gamers, we are rendered invisible. Through talk, we are delegitimized by the ideology that keeps disabled people at the margins of society (Basu and Dutta, 2013). I hope to show that disabled gamers struggle to conform to able-bodied standards of gaming, and that this is indicative of able-bodiedness as a pervasive ideology, which assumes and communicates that disability is a debilitating experience (Campbell & Oliver, 2013; Hall, 2011; Linton, 2006; Mitchell & Snyder, 2006; Oliver, 1990; Priestly, 2003; Shakespeare, 2006).

Methodology/Methods

A. Autoethography As Theory

Adams and Holman Jones (2008) describe autoethnography as a hinged

methodological approach: "Autoethnography, whether a practice, a writing form, or

a particular perspective on knowledge and scholarship, hinges on the push and pull

between and among analysis and evocation, personal experience and larger social,

cultural, and political concerns" (p. 374). In my own opinion, it is not possible to

separate yourself from your research. As Basu and Dutta (2013) note, the poetic

process of autoethnography allows me to connect my own frustrations with

accessibility and disability to a much broader, cultural context. My life as a disabled

gamer has informed my interest in the subject, and continues to in the way that I

conduct my life. Through engaging with the process of storytelling, I will be able to

show the ways in which accessibility affects how I conduct my own life. The stories

that I tell will serve as a cultural indication of the ways that a disabled individual

lives within a society which prioritizes and caters to the needs of the able-bodied,

just as it prioritizes the needs of white, heterosexual men (Garland-Thomson, 2011;

Hall, 2011). In doing so, I hope to elicit a response out of my readers, to help them

look at disability and accessibility in ways that they likely never even considered.

Autoethnography will also allow me to assess my own position and will help

me to learn about the way that I regard my own disability (Ellis, 1998). From there, I

can begin to negotiate a collaborative meaning of disability in relation to differing

perspectives, where other people and cultures intersect and diverge from how I

have come to define disability. The autoethnograhic process, a process in which I

may offer my own stories as examples of the pervasiveness of an able-blodied ideology (Garland- Thomson, 2011), will serve as a way for me to be critical of my own positionaity in coming to terms with these differing definitions of disability. Autoethnography allows me to be reflexive of the ways in which I understand myself as oppressed by an able-bodied ideology. With it, I can weigh my own experiences with that of the culture where I live.

At this juncture, I may begin to unpack the significance behind my feelings toward my oppression. According to Goodall (2000): "…reflexivity refers *to the process of personally and academically reflecting on lived experiences in ways that reveal the deep connections between the writer and her or his subject*" (p. 137). The reflexivity that autoethnography calls for will grant me the avenue through which I can show and tell the reader how the ideology of able-bodiedness in gaming has had a material impact on the way that I conduct my life. Critical Disability Theory will aid me in demonstrating the existence of able-bodiedness as having power over disabled bodies, which autoethnography allows me to unearth through reflexively engaging with examples from my own life.

B. Critical Disability Theory

Through assessing my own positionality in the world as a disabled individual, it has become apparent to me that an ideology of able-bodiedness pervades throughout our culture. Initially, critical disability theory was interested in separating the disabled experience from the totalizing, individualistic, medicalized context with which it has always been strongly associated with (Shakespeare, 2006). Through the social model of disability, Oliver (1990) embarked on creating what he perceived to

be a better representation of the lives of disabled people. In doing so, his work showed that disability was more than merely an individual problem to overcome, and allowed for a change in the legal understanding of disability. His efforts rendered disabled people the means through which they could gain access to physical structures, employment, and public transportation, just to name a few.

While Oliver's efforts helped disabled people to gain recognition by the government and by the public, it also produced a restricting definition of what it means to be disabled. Because he was so adamant about separating disabled people from a medical context, through which their disabilities were reduced to individual impairment, Oliver neglected the physical presence of the disabled body and the ways in which it could be restricted by biological as well as social forces. Recently, there has been a movement within disability studies to reclaim the disabled body by recognizing that impairment is an important factor in assessing the totality of the disabled individual's identity (Barnes, 2012; Davis, 2006; Linton, 2006; McMahan, 2005; Priestly, 2003; Shakespeare, 2006; Siebers, 2006). The material qualities of the disabled body have the propensity to restrict the lives of disabled people, whether it be through limb loss, blindness, chronic pain, cognitive deficiency, etc. Limitations of the disabled body are apparent when any disabled individual's impairement(s) render her incapable of playing video games.

IV. Findings and Discussion

A. Framing the Disabled Gamer: Interacting With Assumptions About the Disabled Body

Behind me, the cold, January night radiates darkness. I follow my brother, Kent, through the front door and into our house. The moment we enter, Kloey, our four-year old golden retriever, meets us at the door. Her wet nose first touches Kent's cold, left hand, moves on to smell my left arm, and continues onward to inspect our new friends, Jake and Paul. As they enter through the doorway behind my brother and I, I turn to watch the two as they introduce themselves to Kloey. She acknowledges this exchange enthusiastically, only stopping when my brother calls for her to leave our new friends alone.

"That's a really friendly dog you have there," Jake exclaims as he lowers himself into the chair that my brother has offered him, a smile splashed across his face. Kloey takes a seat on the floor next to him and nudges his arm with her nose. Jake humors this attempt, and rests his hand lightly on the top of her head, tickling her snout with outstretched fingertips.

I push my right arm forward against the familiar, smooth surface of my wheel chair's joystick. The motors whir into life as I turn myself one hundred-and-eighty degrees so that I may see Jake's face as we begin talk. Paul takes a seat at the table across from where I'm positioned with my wheel chair, and my brother takes his own place to the left of to me.

"So, what do you guys want to do?" Jake inquires to the three of us. "It's too damn cold to do anything outside. I think we should watch a movie or something." Suddenly, Jake realizes something, and a smile blooms across his face.

"Heeeeeey," Jake draws out the vowel for dramatic emphasis. At this point, we are all looking toward him, guessing that he's come up with some grand idea. "Kyle, I know that you're *really* good at Smash Bros., right?" he asks enthusiastically.

At this, Paul's head shoots up, and a surprised look colors his face. "Wait a minute," he posits and then pauses. "You can play video games?" Immediately, I have to force myself to hold back from noticeably wincing. I guess that it wouldn't be surprising for anybody who doesn't know me to formulate a generalized stigma (Goffman, 1963; Ellis, 1998) about my own ability to engage in particular activities. In this interaction, my disabled body is framed as incapable through an assumption of my inability to physically interact "normally" with an activity often assumed as "able-bodied." I feel disheartened and taken aback by Paul's assumption of my inability to play video games, as I feel that it is rooted in a similar, constructionist notion of stereotype posed by Wendell (1996). My own experience as a disabled individual is totalized by an able-bodied assumption about disability, where disability becomes something disadvantageous, and is negatively constructed within the context of an able-bodied environment in which disabled people must awkwardly learn to navigate. Paul's reaction communicates his belief that video games are an able-bodied space, where my own disability is defined by his perception of my inability to access that space.

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With Jake egging us on, Paul and I head into my room to begin a match of Smash Bros. Brawl for the Nintendo Wii. For both of us, this experience has something to prove. On Paul's end, he simply wants to show that he is a better player than I; however, there is a lot more at stake for me than bragging rights. Upon discovering that my disability doesn't prevent me from playing video games, Paul's surprise indicates that he is astounded that I can play, at all. Though our interaction shows Paul that I can physically play video games, it doesn't innately mean that I can play them *well*.

I roll my wheel chair into my room and pull the switch behind the joystick. The seat of my chair moves forward and downward along the actuator that is secured to its frame. Once the seat is almost touching the ground, I hop onto the blue carpet and begin walking from my wheel chair over to the coffee table where all of my gaming controllers and consoles are. Once there, I grab the T.V. remote in between my right shoulder and my chin, push the power button with my bottom lip, and hop over to the Wii, which I also turn on with my lip. I ignore the fact that Paul and Jake are staring at me.

When we turn the game on, I ask Paul if he is comfortable playing under the rules that I am used to, and he agrees. Finally, our match begins. As I navigate my character on the screen, I place him in a position to launch Paul's character over the edge. Paul glances over for a second to pay closer attention to the way that I use the controller. With my left arm resting on the joystick, I use my chin to press the buttons on the right side of the controller, and flip it on its side in a quick motion if I need to reach the trigger buttons, located on the underbelly of the device. I take

advantage of his momentary distraction and knock his character over the side of the stage, where she plummets to her death.

A blue explosion erupts from the bottom of the screen, and green lettering pops up in the middle of it. The announcement: GAME! My character is shown standing on a podium, clapping enthusiastically in response to the victory. With the match over, and Paul suffering an obviously bitter defeat, he throws the controller to the floor and yells: "How the hell did that happen?!" Jake is seated on my bed and Kent is on the floor. They are both laughing so hard that they can't sit up straight.

"I told you… that I knew… he was good," Jake manages to squeal in between fits of laughter. Paul's face flushes from his apparent embarrassment. I stand there for a moment behind the coffee table that I am using as a resting place for my controller. How am I supposed to respond?

"Well, I told you I was good," I point out to Paul, in rather matter-of-fact fashion. I can't help it as I begin to crack a smile.

"Yeah, well, I was distracted," was his only answer.

"Do you want to play again?" I inquire, feeling aggravated by Paul's poor sportsmanship, yet sympathetic toward the look of utter defeat that is written across his face.

"Sure, there's no way I can play any worse than I just did," is Paul's response. I push the start button and begin the next match.

I win again.

~

Michael Oliver (1990) has been a very influential voice inside and outside of Disability Studies. Through his social model of disability, Oliver argues that disabled people are disenfranchised by a society and government that prioritizes the needs of able-bodied citizens over those of the disabled. His work has been important because it allowed ableist lawmakers to reframe disability; instead of referring to disability as an individualistic impairment, Oliver helps us understand that defining disability through a strict, medical frame, creates a totalizing view of the disabled as a disenfranchised group of people.

Of course, there are some pitfalls in Oliver's social model. In seeking alleviation from a medical model of disability, the social model fails to acknowledge that material and biological limitations *actually* exist for disabled people. Shakespeare (2006) accounts for these aspects of the disabled identity, claiming that an interactive model of disability is needed, a model that accounts for medical *and* social constructions of disability as equally important to the disabled individual: "The experience of a disabled person results from the relationship between factors intrinsic to the individual, and extrinsic factors arising from the wider context in which she finds herself" (p. 55).

Inherently, a critical study of disability requires a look at the framing of the communicative factors granting power and privilege to the able-bodied over and at the expense of the disabled. In an ableist society that legitimizes able-bodiedness as "normal," there is a risk involved in merely *existing* as disabled. Disability implies an inability to conform to particular bodily standards (Garland-Thomson, 2011). These standards force the disabled to pay particularly close attention to our own bodies,

forcing us to become hyper-aware of our own bodies in relation to those of able-bodied people. Sacks (1984) describes such standards as concretized in a particular way that transforms them into a definition of what it means to be ordinary, which isn't even possible for particular, disenfranchised people to achieve: "So one part of the job is that you have to know what anybody/everybody is doing; doing ordinarily. Further, you have to have that available to do. There are people who do not have that available to do, and who specifically cannot be ordinary" (p. 415). Because disability is not considered "ordinary," our inability to conform to standards created by able-bodiedness contributes to our own marginalization. We are held responsible for the stigmatizing qualities that create negative stigmas of the disabled body (Goffman, 1963).

My reasons for studying disability are heavily influenced by the way that I experience it through my own, disabled body. The exchange between Paul and myself serves as a means of showing how able-bodiedness assumes disabled people as incapable of excelling at particular activities that are assumed to be exclusively able-bodied. Paul didn't expect me to be a proficient gamer because, to him, my disability was indicative of an inability to play. In experiences similar to this, I have noticed a particular pattern emerge, where the disabled are rendered incapable or inferior by our inability to transform ourselves to meet able-bodied standards, in a way that would allow us to transcend the inferiority that able-bodiedness assumes about disabled people and our bodies. Ultimately, through ableist assumptions about disability, able-bodiedness constructs disability as a symbol of failure, where the disabled body can only ever fail because of its inability to transcend disabling

qualities: "One can transform oneself in order to integrate the self with the flow of events in time, and/or one can transcend an immediate failure by identifying with some overarching, enduring principle governing past-future relations" (Payne, 1989, p. 97-98). The enduring principle governing disabled people is able-bodiedness and the assumption that disability implies failure to integrate into an able-bodied mode of being, which is framed by able-bodied, bodily standards.

I find this particular story I narrated to be moving because it is the embodiment of Shakespeare's (2006) interactive model. Proponents of the social model of disability (Amundson, 2005; Barnes, 2012; Wendell, 1996) might be inclined to jump to the conclusion that able-bodied constructions of the disabled body as inferior have alone led to Paul's own assumptions about my inability to play video games. Paul's initial understanding of me as incapable of playing video games is influenced by the social model of disability, but is also affected by his own, material and lived perception of my physical body as a barrier. For example, the medium through which we engage with video games is the controller. However they may look or function, we use controllers to interact with the games that we are playing. Using what he has learned through material experiences and what society has taught him about disability, the context of my interaction with Paul forces him to reevaluate his perception of the disabled body as inherently limited: "The interactional view of framing as a process of coevolving interpretation can be traced to Bateson's discussion of communicative patterns in face-to-face situations and the importance of context as a necessary resource of meaning making" (Jorgenson & Steier, 2013, p. 391). Disability is interactive by nature, as it requires one to account

for and negotiate between how society has constructed disabled bodies and identities, and how one experiences disability as a lived, material existence (Siebers, 2006). By telling this story, I hope to frame disability as an exchange between the social and medical constructions of disability. It is more productive to think of disability as a frame for recognizing the pervasiveness of able-bodiedness, rather than using able-bodiedness as a frame for legitimizing the inferiority of disabled people and their bodies.

My own positionality as a disabled gamer has considerably impacted the ways in which I conceptualize accessibility and video games. It is vital that I acknowledge myself within this project, as I share a long-lasting, intimate relationship with it. Though I don't conduct statistical analyses of disabled gamers, or look for themes that emerge through dialectical analysis, my use of autoethnography speaks directly of and to my own experiences with the struggles that I've had as a disabled gamer. My story exists as a conversation between myself and the reader, where we may use my own experience as a method for co-constructing a narrative that describes accessibility and video games (Dutta & Basu, 2013).

Through my story, it becomes possible for me to reflect on my own experiences as a disabled gamer, and for the reader to reflect on the limitations of the disabled body in relation to able-bodied assumptions about it: "Our conversation is a reflection… on our reflexivity, our positionality as humans/scholars who strive to thrive on hope, compassion, and the pragmatic possibility of solidarity with the margins of civil society that have been and continue

to be erased from so-called civil sites of discourse" (Dutta & Basu, 2013). The process of engaging with autoethnography allows me to legitimize my own experiences as a disabled gamer. My story is an example of many that often go unheard, silenced by a "civil society" that refuses to legitimize our struggle with accessibility or inability to adapt to able-bodied standards of mobility: "However, social institutions continue to shape our understanding of a normal life and the 'problems' that arise when individuals or groups 'fail' to make proper progress through it" (Priestly, 2003, p. 26).

My stories about accessibility and gaming are important because they serve a few, different communicative purposes. According to Browning (1992), both lists and stories are complimentary ways of conveying messages and lessons, where lists offer finite instructions that will ultimately end in a predictable result, and stories are detailed reportings of experience that are created from experience and account for one's positionality. Stories can be complimentary while also serving different purposes: "The stories-list dialectic can be reread as follows: When cultures agree, they can be captured in a list; when cultures have differences, only today's stories inform the observer" (Browning, 1992, p. 296). Browning's method for explaining the "stories-list dialectic" serves as a means for showing that the medium of communication affects the interpretation of it's meaning.

If we take Browning's dialectic into account and apply it to the way that we communicate to and about marginalized people, stories become a means for pushing back against a system of oppression. While the accessibility of video games exists as something that impacts only one part of the disabled person's identity, the

principle can be applied to a larger context. If disabled gamers are disenfranchised and excluded from engaging with activities that are important to them, then is it even productive or conducive to dismiss the accessibility of video games as a non-issue? The exclusion of the disabled gamer becomes an active *model* of her exclusion, not only from the games that she loves and the communities that are built around them, but from society as a whole and it's unwillingness to account for and legitimize the experiences of disabled people at a foundational level. My story serves as a way of disrupting the marginalization of the disabled gamer, and of showing that an able-bodied ideology has informed society about disability in ways which imply that the disabled body is naturally and inextricably tied to a debilitatingly false classification that the disabled exist exclusively as deficient and incapable. Couser (2006) notes:

> Like life writing by other marginalized groups—women, African Americans, and gays and lesbian—life writing by disabled people is a cultural manifestation of a human rights movement; significantly, the rise in personal narratives of disability has roughly coincided with the disability rights movement… Disability autobiography should be seen, then, not as a spontaneous "self-expression" but as a response—indeed a retort—to the traditional misrepresentation of disability in Western culture generally" (p. 400).

Telling stories about the lives of disabled people pushes against these negative assumptions by offering precise events from disabled people's own lives. These

narratives serve as acts of disruption because they challenge negative expectations about disabled people and disabled bodies.

Because video games are often characterized by "play," engaging with these games is often framed as superfluous. In my own experiences as a disabled individual, video games have always been an integral part of my life. Since I am a quad-amputee, there are real, material limitations to what my body can and can't do. Video games were always accessible to me, while I was incapable of excelling at other, able-bodied activities. The act of "playing" video games was an important activity to me because I genuinely enjoyed playing them. More importantly, as gaming became increasingly important to me, the process of engaging with video games became indicative of something far more intimate than the act of "playing video games" initially suggests: "Expanded, the statement 'this is play' looks something like this: 'These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote'" (Bateson, 1972, p. 180). Playing video games was important to me because this activity functioned as a medium through which I could interact with other people in ways that didn't draw attention to my disability as a debilitating quality. Video games became a communicative buffer, where the act situated my disability as *part* of my identity, rather than drawing attention to it as a totalizing quality.

Bateson (1972) describes "play" as a psychological concept that is neither physical nor logical. Framing "play" in this manner is important because it shows that "play" is important in both a physical and logical context, while remaining too abstract to define in either a physical or logical context. To frame "play" in this way

is important in a communicative context because it implies that "play" becomes a medium for communicating with and about other people. Though this form of communication isn't framed *as* communication, it is an important means of instructing people about their own positionality in the world, as well as the positionality of other people.

"Play" is important to discuss in terms of video games because it gives me the tools to be reflexive of my own existence as a disabled gamer, while forcing other, able-bodied gamers to find ways of empathizing with the differences between disabled and able-bodied gamers alike. "Playing" video games creates a communicative space to assess disability from a vantage that has often gone unnoticed in my own experiences. Instead of situating disability as a hardship that I've overcome (Linton, 2006), "playing" video games affords me the privilege of not having to account for my disability, as this process is transformative. It becomes more important *that* I engage with video games rather than *how* I do so.

Most importantly, a framing of the disabled gamer as a legitimate player comes with redefining the very notion of what it means to be a gamer in the first place. Through my interaction with Paul and Jake, I have come to understand that a misconception of the disabled gamer as inferior is informed by an inability to realize that different types of bodies can interact with video games in different ways. To actualize this, our definition of what it means to engage with video games, as well as how we engage with them, must be reconceptualized to acknowledge that bodily difference is not equal to bodily-deficiency.

Since the disabled body is physically different than the able-bodied body, the methods that able-bodied gamers use to interact with video games must be considered. Because video game controllers are tailored for able-bodied gamers, this physical space may become difficult for the disabled gamer to traverse. While these controllers are constructed to fit comfortably in the palms of able-bodied gamers, disabled gamers who can't hold these mediums of "play" in an able-bodied fashion are immediately ostracized. What is needed is a controller that takes the entire body into account. People with disabilities learn to accomplish tasks differently than our able-bodied counterparts. We use unconventional parts of our bodies to accomplish tasks that are often taken for granted: "…the disabled body changes the process of representation itself. Blind hands envision faces of old acquaintances. Deaf eyes listen to public television. Tongues touch-type letters home to Mom and Dad. Feet wash the breakfast dishes. Mouths sign autographs. Different bodies require and create new modes of representation" (Siebers, 2006, p. 173). In a critical analysis of the disabled body, we must reframe the epistemology that dictates how we even begin to conceptualize the ways that a body should function, or redefine what a body is altogether.

The disabled gamer is no different. In order to create a more inclusive environment for gamers with disabilities, we must dig deep down inside our ideological conceptions of the body (Garland-Thomson, 2011). While it might seem odd to able-bodied players that I place the controller on an easel, maneuver the joystick with my left arm, and press the buttons with my lip, I have always played this way.

Since I am a disabled gamer, I am forced to think about my body differently than other, able-bodied players. Why am I so different? Why does my difference even matter? Actually, in what ways can I make my difference matter? Sacks (1984) articulates these questions very well on his quandaries involving rationalizing "ordinary" as "normal." In regards to gaming and the way that I interact with accessibility in the world, I am constantly aware of my own presence in able-bodied spaces, and of how my disability requires me to navigate these spaces in unconventional ways. Accessibility has made me keenly aware of the social differences between disabled and able-bodied people, and video games have been no different. Because I do not have the ability to interact "ordinarily" with video games, my existence as a disabled gamer is framed as non-existence. If I do not possess the "availability to do," then I am not capable of engaging with video games "ordinarily," which must mean that I am incapable of interacting with them at all.

Obviously, since I *can* "play" video games, Sacks's conception of "ordinary" doesn't *completely* meld with my existence as a disabled gamer; however, it does offer a few insights into ways that would allow us to begin a reconstruction of the gamer's body. Through my story and analysis, I'm working toward a conception of the different ways that we can begin to look at disabled and able-bodied gamers alike. Our framing of the gamer as inherently able-bodied has influenced the way that video games are created, which has also influenced how we have come to "play" video games. I'm attempting to engage in a process of sensemaking that incorporates the needs of disabled gamers into what it means to "play" video games. Wieck, (1995) says: "Occasions for sensemaking are themselves constructed, after

which they become a platform for further construction" (p. 85). It is my hope that this endeavor will encourage gamers to be critical of what it means to be a gamer and interact with video games. I'd also like to offer my story as a tool for recognizing the ways in which our society privileges people with very specific kinds of bodies, and legitimizes their experiences over those who do not fit the criteria needed to have an "ordinary" body (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

Since it is necessary to redefine the term "gamer," I'd like to propose that we begin a movement toward understanding the process of gaming in relation to what Schon (1983) describes as a generative metaphor. A generative metaphor takes the product and process of the metaphor into account, where it acts as a tool to frame particular, social interactions, in a way that's meaningful to those involved in the storytelling process. It allows us to assign meaning through interaction. The disabled gamer is not a person that can be easily defined solely through a medical diagnosis of her condition, nor can she be exclusively defined through her social interaction (Shakespeare, 2006). Looking at accessibility and gaming, it becomes apparent that the physical and social aspects of the disabled gamer's identity impact the way she interacts with video games. Accessible gaming should exist as a metaphor for the identities of disabled and able-bodied gamers alike. What is a gamer? How does her body impact the way that she navigates the world? What is accessibility? Again, I do not have or propose answers to these questions. In assessing the pervasiveness of able-bodiedness, I offer my own story as a way to be reflexive about my own conceptions of disability and the disabled gamer (Basu & Dutta, 2013). To create a more inclusive environment for disabled gamers, we must

change the way we claim to know and communicate about disability and disabled people.

B. Game Over? The Frustrations of Gaming With A Disability

I'm struggling to put words on this page, because even the title strikes a chord of defeat. I am wounded and branded, cast aside and frozen in place by the very issue that necessitates further exploration. Sometimes, the most difficult part of living comes with recognizing that our bodies are finite, physical matrices, whose very existence demarcates both the potential and limitation of those bodies: the vessels of flesh that we exist in. To have a discussion about the disabled body amplifies this by a thousand-fold, as a generalized consensus amongst disabled and able-bodied people alike leans toward neglecting the importance of the body. The way that we even speak to each other about disability has recently been seized by an idea of "People First" language, where it is taught that the person should be addressed before the disability. I've witnessed this in lectures that I've been a part of, as a way of teaching employees "proper" methods for communicating with disabled customers.

It becomes a grueling task to create methods for conveying the frustration involved with limitations of the disabled body. As a disabled individual, how can I even begin to describe such experiences to able-bodied people, who are so removed from disability and disabled people that the two seem fictitious? Similar to the struggle that Basu and Dutta (2013) face in conveying postcolonial pressures to the white man, so are we disabled people forced to convey our stories of the glee, hatred,

relief, and disgust, that we feel in attempting to adapt our disabled bodies to fit within able-bodied confines of our projected identities. This is similar to what Dutta and Basu note: "So, here we were once again, caught in our need to translate our research findings and the value of our work to the Eurocentric center, far away from the immediacy of the context within which we carry out our work on the ground. We have to sing to the White man to gain our own voice" (p. 4). Every so often, these able-bodied ideals leave me defeated. They often exist as a barren wasteland, reminding me of the particular ways that my disabled body fails. No able-bodied hands reach out to help me regain my composure; instead, I'm left to fend for myself, to make sense of something that I will never quite understand. My body fails *because* it is disabled. My disability fails because it disables my body.

~

It is 2005, and Nintendo has just revealed it's new console. Satoru Iwata, the company's president, is referring to the Wii as a revolution. The first couple of commercials for the console show people holding Wii Remotes in one of their hands, waving them around like swords. In an instant, another joystick-type device, called the Nunchuk, is plugged into one of the Wii Remotes. A man holds both of these, one in each hand.

We are informed that the Wii is a "revolutionary" piece of hardware because it will put gamers, body and mind, into the video games that they are playing. Motion control will offer an experience that no other console has ever offered. It will convince so many people, who have traditionally disliked video games, to become avid Nintendo fans. It will convince gamers to get off their couches, to quit being fat,

antisocial slobs. It will transform gaming into something inconceivable and pave the way for physically interactive gaming in the future.

The Wii will move (into) the future of gaming and leave me behind.

I wrestle with this news, try to grapple with it. I want to force answers out of the game developers at Nintendo. I need them to offer solutions. *I have to talk to Iwata and show him why this is a mistake*, I think. I must show him my short, scarred arms, and ask: "What about me? What about other, disabled gamers?" A metallic taste bubbles at the back of my throat, coming to rest on the tip of my tongue. The shock makes me feel breathless, like I have been punched in the stomach by a ninth-degree black belt. The weightlessness presses on my mind as if it will collapse on itself in an instant. Mostly, I feel helpless.

"Oh, come on. It's not that big of a deal," my brother Kent tells me. "We'll figure it out, just like we always have. You'll see." I snap out of my daydream and begin to respond, but see only the garage door as it closes behind him. I'm now alone in the middle of our kitchen.

My right arm presses gently on my power wheel chair's joystick. The magnetic brakes make a light clicking sound as they release, followed by the soft, methodical patter of wheelie bars coming into contact with the tile of our kitchen. I'm left alone. Isolation begins to creep from the darkest depths of my mind into the physical world. It's a nasty feeling, a mixture of despair, hopelessness, ridiculousness.

I move to the garage door. Through the door's window I see my brother seated at a bar stool in front our father's workbench. Absent-minded, he rocks back

and forth as his fingers effortless work over a strand of fishing leader that he ties to a separate piece of monofilament fishing line. I watch as he automatically repeats this process. His hands are effective tools because they allow him to make more tools. They are indicative of his efficiency and a marker of his worth.

Hands are complicated, I muse. People rely on their hands so much. Handshakes and clasps on the shoulder grant access to conversation. In those conversations, they act as nonverbal buffers between people. Outside of those conversations, they act as material buffers between people and the environment. But all of these situations can be "handled" without hands.

I begin to wonder whether I'll be capable of handling the Wii without hands.

Emotions clamor inside of my head. Nothing that I've ever known about video games has prepared me for this. Suddenly, my experiences begin to bleed together, and bleed through into other aspects of my life. I'm scared about advancements in technology. If technology could faze me out of video games, what other power did it hold?

My brother gets up from his stool and gestures at me that he wants to come in the house. I back up from the door, unaware that my nose is only inches away from the window. He comes into the kitchen and walks over to the sink to wash his hands.

"You know," Kent begins, "now that I think about it, I don't think I really like the idea of the Wii. If I want to play baseball, I'll go play it outside instead of flailing my arms around in the house. If I want to play video games, I want to have a regular

controller that I already know how to use. I mean, it's kind of cool, but I also think that it looks stupid. You know what I mean?"

I smile because I know that he's trying to make me feel better. I also know he is being honest. I wonder, s*ince he feels this way, I guess that other, able-bodied people might share his opinion*. The thought plants a seed of hope in my mind. I desperately wish that I won't come to associate this generation of consoles as the time when gaming became impossible for me.

~

I have been a quad-amputee since I was about a year old and I've been playing video games since I was about three. The first console that my parents bought me was a Nintendo Entertainment System, or NES. The amputation resulted in the length of my arms extending just below my shoulders. The shape of my arms made it difficult for me to navigate the small D-Pad and buttons on the NES controller. Luckily, my dad found an alternative for me: an arcade-style controller. The NES Advantage had a large joystick in place of a D-Pad, and large, arcade-style buttons instead of the smaller ones on the standard controller. Since I used a joystick to navigate my power wheel chair, and large buttons to turn its power off and on, I quickly became familiar with the NES Advantage. If not for this arcade stick, I wouldn't have had access to video games at an early age. Without it, I might have never even played in the first place.

~

After taking my limbs, meningitis has left many scars on my body. While I've largely been positive about my disability and my disabled body, my psyche has

become scarred by the inevitability of inaccessibility. Sometimes, I can go for a while without running into any issues. Other times, it isn't nearly as easy. Currently, video games have become something that straddle the line between these experiences. Playing video games can bring back the same joy that I felt while playing Ninja Turtles on my NES twenty-three years ago; however, video games also have the capacity to force me into being both hyper-aware of, and frustrated about, my bodily limitations.

When I run across a video game that I would love to play, yet am incapable of doing because of my disability, I feel… unsettled, I guess. I feel exposed and inferior, my disabled body existing as a symbol that demarcates my material existence from my identity. The fact that I lack "normal" body parts indicates that my body exists as both a stigmatized object and a stigmatizing quality. My body is an object stigmatized by its very existence. Goffman (1963) states:

> The Greeks, who were apparently strong on visual aids, originated the
>
> term *stigma* to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something
>
> unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier. The signs
>
> were cut or burnt into the body and advertised that the bearer was a
>
> slave, a criminal, or a traitor—a blemished person, ritually polluted, to
>
> be avoided, especially in public times. (p. 1)

This feeling of helplessness and inferiority has become increasingly intense. An advancing technology is making it either impossible or difficult for me to play video games, an activity that was once, easily accessible to me.

As an adult, I have grown to see that able-bodiedness largely informs society about what the body is, what the body does, and what the body should look like because "...notions of health, of physical ability, are not absolutes, nor pre-given qualities of the human body, but function both as norms and as practices of regulation and control that produce the bodies they govern" (Shildrick & Price, 1999, p. 432). Video games are an interesting cultural artifact in that the content of the games, as well as the mediums through which we play them, prioritize and prize very specific types of bodies. Grammenos (2014) notes:

> For many years, the mainstream games industry... has been designing games based on the myth of the "average" player. According to this approach, game designers target a fictitious character with a specific range of characteristics, which are based on statistical data (or sometimes just assumptions) about the potential players of the game. This results in "one size fits all" games, in which even small design details may lead to the exclusion of large groups of players. (p. 26)

While they have no voice themselves, controllers are not passive objects; instead, they communicate to us about the acceptable methods for playing video games. With the implementation of technologies such as motion control, or even the button layout of specific controllers, able-bodied modes of gaming come to define the process of playing video games. Created by an able-bodied ideology (Garland-Thomson, 2011), these standardized assumptions come to define the process of gaming, and the body of the gamer, as inherently able-bodied.

The process of playing video games exists as only one particular instance in which disabled bodies are stripped of their legitimacy. Grammenos (2014) states that the difficulties of gaming with a disability are not recognized by large studios, which create most of the games that are on the market. As disabled gamers, we are forced to take it upon ourselves to build assistive devices, modify standard controllers, or find somebody who can help us do either of these. We must do this to be capable of even playing the games that every able-bodied person can pick up and play, with very little to no physical difficulty. Prosthetics for, or modifications to controllers, exist as communicative markers that blame our disabled bodies for failing to adapt to able-bodied standards. The goal of such technologies is to bring us closer to an able-bodied way of performing the task of playing video games. According to Price and Shildrick (2006), "Within disability, this is clearly seen in the actions of medical staff as they encourage disabled people to achieve ways of being, of moving, that in the name of rehabilitation approximate more closely to the actions and practices of 'able-bodied' people" (p. 67).

As disabled gamers, we are forced to use able-bodied modes of being as foundational models for the way that we conduct our own lives. This philosophy is problematic for two reasons. It automatically assumes that the underlying structure of design is already accessible to the disabled body, and that disabled people should want to conduct their lives in such a way that would allow them to feel, or appear, more able-bodied.

While adapting a controller, or adding prosthetic devices to it, may alleviate an accessibility issue for a single person, nothing is being done to show that this

issue manifests in the lives of many disabled gamers. Controllers are not being constructed with more inclusive designs, forcing gamers, both disabled and able-bodied, to experience gaming in a very rigid continuum. Modifying controllers can give a false sense of empowerment, while making the individual feel as if she has succeeded in "overcoming" her disability. This pretense is problematic, as it fails to acknowledge the gamer's disability, which is a vital part of her identity. Such stereotypes are proliferated by an able-bodied philosophy, which states that, because of their disabilities, disabled people are incapable of achieving able-bodied standards of expertise. As Hall (2011) notes:

> Commentary during the Olympics is saturated with stories of athletes
> who have overcome disabling impairments, and various 'special'
> Olympics are held for athletes who are disabled. In the overcoming
> narrative of disability, it is precisely through acts of athletic prowess
> that a disabled person 'overcomes' disability" (p. 3).

Instead of relying on adaptations to standard controllers, or prosthetics designed to give disabled gamers access to them, developers should keep in mind that gamers have varying levels of mobility. The design for a more inclusive controller should use this knowledge to form an alternative means of interacting with video games on a foundational level.

Disability and impairment require disabled people to think about their bodies in ways that able-bodied people are simply exempt from. We must think about our bodies when going to restaurants, when going to a friend's house, when going to school, when going to the bathroom in an unfamiliar place. To successfully

navigate the world, which was historically constructed with only the able-bodied in mind (Wendell, 1996), disabled bodies must constantly negotiate between themselves and the environment. While many buildings and streets are now constructed in accordance with the American with Disabilies Act and its laws of accessibility, some buildings and other private arenas are still inaccessible to people with disabilities. The concept of universal design (Smith, 2013) has been implemented to avoid problems involved with inaccessibility; yet, we are still required to be hyper-aware of our bodies and their orientation in the material world.

My amputated limbs have forced me to construct my identity around my disabled body. This body requires that I remain conscious of, and account for, my physical limitations. According to Wendell (1996), "The onset of illness, disability, or pain destroys the 'absence' of the body to consciousness… and forces us to find conscious responses to new, often acute, awareness of our bodies. Thus, the body itself takes us into and then beyond its sufferings and limitations" (p. 332). I simultaneously envelope, and am enveloped, by my disability. We are locked in an eternal embrace, engaged in a constant negotiation between body and self. I use this exchange to help me navigate through, and make sense of, a world constructed for and by able-bodied people.

Because my disability is inextricably connected to my body, and because I must constantly be aware of my body's relationality to the material world, I acknowledge that I am a body, and that my body requires me to conduct myself in very particular ways. Mairs (1997) notes: "I *have* a body, you are likely to say if you talk about embodiment at all; you don't say, I *am* a body. A body is a separate entity

possessable by the 'I'; the 'I' and the body aren't, as the copula would make them, grammatically indistinguishable" (p. 298). The materiality of my disabled body impacts the way that I must conduct myself as a gamer, just as it impacts the way that I must conduct myself as a student, a friend, a son, or any other role that I may assume. It only makes sense that my favorite games are easily accessible to me. Who I am as a gamer is informed by my disability.

C. Challenger Approaching

In a world governed by able-bodied people, defined thusly by the "normality" associated with their able-bodied bodies (Dyck, 2010; Hall, 2011; Garland-Thomson, 2011; Wendell, 1996), various assumptions are made about disability and disabled people. This phenomenon manifests itself within our culture in a variety of ways. People with disabilities are caught in a double bind, where we are expected to adhere to these able-bodied norms. Additionally, expectations about the disabled body prevent people from believing that these bodies can succeed in the first place. For disabled people, the issue of accessibility is constructed as an obstacle that must be overcome. Various examples in the media teach disabled people that accessibility is an issue we must combat, rather than something that we are capable of negotiating with. This rationale has informed an able-bodied orientation toward solving problems of accessibility for disabled people. We are taught by a rhetoric of able-bodiedness that we can only overcome these limiting qualities by transcending them, by becoming 'supercrips.' Meeuf (2009) states that the "'supercrip' trope constructs disability as simply a metaphor for individual achievement while

ignoring the material realities and discrimination faced by people with disabilities every day" (p. 89). Though it may be physically or cognitively impossible for disabled people to adhere to these rigid, able-bodied definitions of the body, disabled bodies are held responsible for upholding able-bodied bodily standards (Price & Shildrick, 2006).

Video games are not merely a cultural artifact. As consumers, we are instructed not only to buy these products, but that we must use them appropriately, and conduct ourselves accordingly with these standards. To participate in the activity of gaming, we must transcend our disabling qualities (Wendell, 1996) in order to conform to "acceptable" means for doing so. While some may possess the ability to adapt to able-bodied notions of gaming, a part of the disabled population who are incapable of achieving this goal, will ultimately be excluded (Grammenos, 2014). The bodies of disabled gamers then become debilitating qualities, which serve as the very reason for their exclusion. We are made to feel that the onus of our exclusion lies in our own, physical limitations, rather than in the ways that video games are constructed. Disabled people are blamed for their own marginalization amongst the gaming community.

A critical cultural analysis of video game accessibility calls for a critique of able-bodiedness as an ideological structure (Garland-Thomson, 2011). There is a deeper, more foundational problem rooted in an unwillingness to construct video games with disabled gamers in mind. Able-bodied gamers have the power to construct and hence, communicate what it means to "play video games," and this definition has the capacity to exclude large groups of people that do not have access

to meet this very rigid criteria. The issue of accessibility and video games speaks to a much larger issue at work, which generally seeks to delegitimize the lives of disabled people. The acceptable method for playing video games lies solely with one's ability to play them as an able-bodied individual. Whether she is able-bodied or not is no longer relevant.

What does this exclusion communicate to disabled gamers, and to other gamers who might not be disabled? In either case, acceptable means of playing video games differentiates between a superior and an inferior way to game. To those able-bodied people who create games exclusively for other, able-bodied gamers, we must recognize that a "normal" body's functional capacity is taken for granted. Since this has the propensity to exclude large numbers of disabled gamers, this claim necessitates a critical analysis of the ways in which people come to define the role of "gamer" and the process of "gaming." According to Nathanson (1982), "We need to evaluate the consequences of employing particular methods or standards in a given context. If applying rational methods of evidence assessment yields undesirable results, then the application of those methods are itself irrational" (p. 574). In this case, able-bodied gamers have the power to define particular methods for gaming as either "rational" or "irrational."

Because accessibility for disabled gamers isn't problematic for able-bodied gamers, and since they set the parameters for gaming in an "acceptable" manner, disabled gamers do not have the ability to address accessibility and gaming as problematic. It becomes infinitely difficult to communicate an injustice to a system of power that is responsible for creating that imbalance of power in the first place

(Althusser, 1970). The disabled gamer is delegitimized by her inability to game "properly," and is prevented from speaking out about her injustices because the system of power does not give her the language to communicate about her problems.

The problematic nature of accessibility and video games becomes an issue tied into an inability to claim agency over one's own body. Basu (2010) defines "agency" as:

> "...the capacity of human beings to engage with structures that encompass their lives, to make meanings through this engagement, scripting texts of engagement with structures, living within these structures, and, at the same time, creating discursive openings to transform those structures" (p. 416).

How can disabled gamers, flawed and silenced by the structure of able-bodiedness, claim agency over their own bodies and bodily limitations? To gain agency of our own bodies, we can tell stories about our joys, pains, and frustrations with video games. Through storytelling, we make room for our own experiences as examples of how dominating structures affect the real, lived experiences of the people who live within them (King & Ussher, 2012). Narrative gives disabled people the ability to self-advocate and push against the oppression of able-bodiedness, and gives us the tools to challenge the stereotypes that the structure of able-bodiedness creates about disabled people and our bodies. According to Mitchell & Snyder (2006), "Literary narratives begin a process of explanatory compensation wherein perceived 'aberrancies' can be rescued from ignorance, neglect, or misunderstanding for their readerships" (p. 208-209). My own stories about the

frustrations that I've felt with the inaccessibility of modern video games illustrates

the ways in which an ideology of able-bodiedness (Garland-Thomson, 2011) can

impact the lives of people with disabilities. They resist debilitating assumptions

about the disabled body and show how able-bodied, video game creators, assume

that their entire audience can access video games in an able-bodied fashion.

I feel that telling stories about disabled people and their bodies is an

important step in putting critical disability theory into practice. As an

autoethnographic endeavor, this project showcases the importance of the

intersection between my body, it's presence in the material world, and the

ideological pressures that I encounter on a daily basis. Payne (1996) writes:

> The personal narrative attempts to write from the site of the body—
>
> where it was, what it was doing, what was done to it. The theoretical
>
> text is also a story, but one told through my intellectual exploration of
>
> the themes and ideological critiques of contemporary scholarship.
>
> Even so, this theory also renarrates the site of my body in an
>
> ideological universe (p. 50).

As is true for the bodies of people disenfranchised by race, gender, class, etc., people

with disabilities fall victim to ideological violence on a number of different levels.

While we may be excluded by material barriers, social and ideological barriers

additionally bar the inclusion of disabled people. An alienation of disabled gamers

from video games is a way of enacting this form of material, social, and ideological

violence. Our exclusion from video games is a reflection of the difficulty that

disabled people have in accessing other forms of environmental and social

atmospheres, which are exclusively intended for able-bodied people. While there is not one, easy solution that would allow access of people with varying kinds and levels of disability, video game developers should recognize that standardized controllers are not accessible for every gamer. Disabled or not, no two bodies function the same way. In an arena such as video games, where we use our bodies to navigate digital spaces, we need a movement toward incorporating controllers that take these bodily differences into account.

V. Review

While necessary to address, the material and social qualities of the disabled gamer's identity make a discussion of accessibility tedious and stressful. My own experiences as a disabled person have lead me to believe that universal access (Ellis & Kent, 2011; Grammenos, 2014; Smith, 2013), whether it be in reference to video games or other environmental barriers, is a phantom goal. Disabled and able-bodied people ultimately face disabling experiences in both social and material contexts. As Shakespeare (2006) says, "Moreover everyone, even the supposedly able-bodied, experiences limitations: it's not just the wheelchair user who is unlikely to climb Everest… Disabling barriers make impairment more difficult, but even in the absence of barriers impairment can be problematic" (p. 43). Within the context of gaming with a disability, it is pertinent to recognize that impairment *and* environmental barriers intersect to render the experience of gaming either accessible or inaccessible. While these personal and contextual limitations may ultimately impact the inclusion or exclusion of disabled gamers, able-boldied gamers are also subject to suffer similar, debilitating exclusion.

The stories that I offer in this study include accounts of gaming with and without a disability. Though disabled and able-bodied gamers may face physical and/or social barriers that limit their access to play video games, my stories show that disability, over any other quality of a person's identity, communicates an inherent *in*ability to play. The difference between gaming with a disability and without a disability lies within the power that able-bodied gamers have in defining what it means to play video games "normally." This reigning philosophy has carried

over to how video games are created, which privilege an ableist perception of what the body is, how it looks, and how it functions (Garland-Thomson, 2011).

We need to create an alternative way for discussing the issues associated with accessibility. Universal access takes too much for granted about the disabled body, and implies that all debilitating and/or limiting factors of impairment can be eliminated. We need to reframe the epistemological structure of accessibility so that the goal lies in constantly working *toward* making the environment more accessible for disabled bodies. In order to push back against the problems inherent in and from accessibility, we must acknowledge that accessibility is a cyclical process that is always in flux, changing shape as it manifests itself within the individual, her body, her material environment, her ideological environment, and back again (Dyck, 2010; Hall, 2011; Linton, 2006; Mairs, 1997; Mitchell & Snyder, 2006; Price & Shildrik, 2006; Priestly, 2003; Shakespeare, 2006; Siebers, 2006; Smith, 2013; Wendell, 1996).

To have a discussion about accessibility for gamers with disabilities, a topic that has and will remain very important to me, requires that I acknowledge my own position in the research that I've conducted. My perspective is important to this study because *I am* a disabled gamer, and because my own stories show how our society privileges able-bodied people over people with disabilities. Autoethnography allows me to accounted for my position as a researcher (Basu & Dutta, 2013; Ellis, 1998) while continuing to acknowledge that my own experiences function as examples which illustrate how an able-bodied ideology (Garland-Thomson, 2011) has come to encapsulate everything that we are, and everything

that we do. Reiterating Adams and Holman Jones (2008), auotethnoraphy hinges on the push and pull between and among analysis and evocation, personal experience and larger socio-cultural concerns. My stories position accessibility for the disabled gamer as a metaphor. These narratives take the reader and me through a journey between myself, between my disability, and between the social and material contexts in which we both live. The autoethnographic process allows me to show that my own experiences with accessibility and video games are relevant to a discussion about accessibility for disabled people in many other communicative arenas.

Through the telling of my stories, I have attempted to comment on the frustrations that I've had in adapting to new technology. While technological advancements continue to provide me with the resources that I require to have autonomy over my own transportation, and protect me from discrimination in the work place (Blackmore & Hodgkins, 2012), they simultaneously restrict my access to engage with other activities, including gaming. "However, technology is not neutral and digital technology has been both enabling and disabling for people with disability—a 'realistic mirror' for disablism" (Ellis & Kent, 2011, p. 5). Thanks to adaptive equipment, I can drive myself to and from my university to meet with students and teach. I also have the ability do things that some people may take for granted, such as meeting up with friends and family for dinner. Despite the independence that adaptive technology has afforded me, other advancements in technology continue to limit my access to activities such as gaming.

In writing this piece, I have learned many new things about my identity as a writer. The entire process has been taxing, to say the least. This project has forced me to confront feelings of frustration that I felt in the past, and continue to feel in the present. More than anything, my writing has made me realize how important these stories are in creating a method for communicating about disabled bodies. My stories provide me with a means of accounting for the disabled body's dialectic, social, and material presence within an able-bodied ideology. Facilitating a discussion about the disabled body means acknowledging that our methods for communicating about disability and impairment are constantly changing. This is what Mitchel and Snyder (2006) have to say:

> This textual performance of ever-shifting and unstable meanings is
> critical in our interpretive approach to the representation of disability.
> The close readings that follow hinge upon the identification of
> disability as an ambivalent and mutable category of cultural and
> literary investment. Within literary narratives, disability serves as an
> interruptive force that confronts cultural truisms (p.206).

Bodies create meaning for and about themselves when they are placed together within a communicative and material context. To make sense of this phenomenon, we must place the social and material qualities of our bodies in conversation with each other. We must transcend conceptions of the disabled body perpetuated by either the social model or the medical model, and recognize that disability results from an interaction between the two. An interactive model of disability (Shakespeare, 2006) shows how the identities of disabled people are created

through an exchange between medical and social properties. It is only within this intersection that a conversation about accessibility for disabled gamers, and disabled people, in general, can occur.

My research and my stories act as a method that I use to account for, and take ownership of, my disability and my disabled body. To borrow terminology from Mitchel and Snyder (2006), my narratives function as a communicative prosthesis. Mitchel and Snyder refer to narrative prosthesis as a method for acknowledging and compensating for limitation of disabled characters in a narrativistic setting.

Whether I'd like to admit it or not, this project has made me question the very ways in which I have come to know storytelling. I now believe that all stories function as pieces of adaptive equipment, autoethnographic tools which give us access to particular kinds of knowledge that slip through the cracks of our own experiences and ideological frameworks. I think that we come to wear stories on our ideological bodies, and that we wear them as narrative prosthetics. We use these stories to make sense of our own lives, of other people's lives, and of how these converge and diverge in the process of meaning making. Stories afford us the ability to take agency over our ideological bodies.

So what? How is all of this related to the disabled gamer, and how can we use this in communication with and about disabled people and their bodies? I would love to say that this thesis has led me to some profound method for solving problems involved with accessibility and video games. I would love to offer a singular, general method for including disabled bodies within able-bodied spaces; however, this autoethnographic endeavor has led me to believe that we can't

combat an ideologically able-bodied world by offering generalizable solutions to the problems inherent in a discussion about accessibility. Instead, we must look to the lives of disabled gamers for guidance, and include their stories within an overarching narrative about what it means to live with a disability. From there, we can begin to address the privileges that our society affords to able-bodied people, and ultimately find a method for circumventing able-bodied assumptions about the disabled body.

VI. Theoretical Contribution

A critical cultural analysis of the disabled gamer has lead me to critique the ways in which able-bodiedness comes to define disability, the disabled body, and the disabled experience. Within this context, it is pertinent to recognize able-bodiedness as a structure of power that defines the disabled body as "other" because it exists within the margins of society (Basu, 2010). Disability and disabled bodies are rendered invisible by a dominant form of discourse which privileges particular types of bodies (Garland-Thomson, 2011), indicating that able-bodied bodies are "acceptable," and disabled bodies are "inacceptable." This erasure is an act of cultural violence enacted upon disabled people and their bodies. The privileging of able-bodied people and their bodies comes to define the very act of living as a disabled individual. Thus, in talking about disability and disabled bodies, a rhetoric of loss, informed by the medical model of disability (Oliver, 1990), is adopted. This communicative exchange functions exclusively on stigmatizing qualities (Goffman, 1963) of disabled people. We are witnessing an enactment of hegemonic able-bodiedness, where able-bodied discourse holds the power to assign value to the act of being disabled. Hegemonic able-bodiedness is even more dangerous because it ascribes meaning to disability and disabled bodies from a distance. This exercise of power is particularly dangerous to disabled people because it operates separately from them, and does not account for their own, lived experiences as disabled people.

In assigning meaning to particular kinds of bodies, hegemonic able-bodiedness seeks to silence the voices of those who do not fit the criteria to be classified as "able-bodied." As a scholarly method, and a method of disruption,

autoethnography allows me to use storytelling to challenge bodily norms established by hegemonic able-bodiedness (Couser, 2006). It allows me to show how these communicative injustices have functioned within my own experiences as a disabled gamer, and how these same experiences inform the way that disability is treated within, and applied to, the broader context of society. Ellis (2007) tells us:

> "As a genre of writing and research, autoethnography starts with personal experiences and studies 'us' in relationships and situations. Doing autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiencing and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience" (p. 13-14).

My own stories function as a tool for navigating between the experiences of disabled people and hegemonic able-bodiedness. They allow us to see the cracks in able-bodiedness as a hegemonic discourse, and to combat the totalizing qualities (Goffman, 1963) of the stigmatized, disabled identity. My own narratives serve as an act of resistance against the totalization of disability and disabled bodies. They are creative opportunities that highlight the shortcomings of hegemonic able-bodiedness, and reveal disability as a multi-faceted part of a person's identity, which informs how we communicate with and about disability, disabled people, and disabled bodies. As extensions of our disabled bodies, storytelling give us agency over them. Narrative functions as a communicative prosthesis because it affords this type of bodily agency. Just as physically disabled bodies sometimes require the use of prosthetics or adaptive equipment to traverse exclusively able-bodied spaces (Wendell, 1996), narrative works as a prosthetic which allows disabled and able-

bodied people to examine disability through a critical lens. Engaging with narrative gives disabled people agency over our own bodies by creating a discursive space to account for our experiences; likewise, narrative gives able-bodied people the ability to try on our stories, which serves as a means of disrupting norms about disability, disabled people, and disabled bodies.

In a struggle to include disabled gamers within the realm of video games, we must reassess the notion of accessibility through the application of Shakespeare's (2006) interactive model of disability. The current issue of gaming accessibility extends from the inability of large corporations (Grammenos, 2014) to put the medical and social models of disability (Oliver, 1990) in conversation with each other. By failing to recognize that a disabled gamer's disability and environment directly impact her ability to engage in the act of playing video games, developers create methods of interacting with games which exclude gamers with various types of disabilities.

Finally, I believe that the accessibility of video games for gamers with disabilities isn't recognized as a legitimate issue. Why? Government agencies that give aid to the disabled do so under the guise that it will help us establish a job and make the workplace accessible. We are granted funds to ensure that our own homes are accessible, but no money is given to ensure that we can leave them, unless we are going to work. Laws created to "help" the disabled lead productive lives prioritize work, and refuse to recognize the importance of engaging in leisure activity, with people other than ourselves, our roommates, our caregivers, or our

families. We are confined to our own homes by laws that are supposed to grant us equal rights and agency over our own bodies.

Leisure activity and play are areas of people's lives that are as important as their academic or vocational endeavors. Accessibility to leisurely or playful activities such as video games are important because they allow us to discover ourselves and give us the opportunity to relate to people in ways that would be impossible through any other communicative venue. Nachmanovitch (2009) posits a description of play:

> Play is easy to recognize but impossible to define. We may try to define it, but our definitions will be clumsy, inadequate, and circular. That is because play is *about* definition… In playing, we are fluidly changing definitions of things: the piece of rubber is a sword, the sword is a penis, ad infinitum… In play, definitions slip, slide perish, decay with imprecision, steal from the poets" (p. 15).

By playing video games, I have learned, and continue to learn about the ways that I interact with myself, my disability, my body, my friends, and strangers. Video games are such an integral part of my life because they have forced me to be hyper-aware of myself and the ways in which I relate to the rest of the world. Over them, I have forged meaningful relationships, solved communicative disputes, and learned how to be comfortable with my own body. Since playing video games has taught me so much, it saddens me beyond articulation to witness a decrease in video game accessibility for gamers with disabilities. I begin to think about disabled children who will have extreme difficulty in experiencing gaming similar to my own. I am

distraught over the opportunities that they are missing out on, and wonder how we can begin to make gaming accessible again. I don't believe that this feat can be accomplished by implementing a standardized method for creating accessible video games; instead, I want to make a call for us to reconstruct the general, legal, social, and medical epistemologies of, and related to, accessibility for disabled people.

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