

What can video games tell us about neurodiversity and autism?

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INTRODUCTION

Video games are increasingly recognized as cultural artifacts capable of shaping public perceptions of societal norms, including neurodiversity. Autism, as a form of neurodivergence, offers a unique lens to explore the intersection of media representation, cognitive diversity, and societal narratives. This extended abstract examines the reciprocal influences between autism and video games to highlight their relevance as tools for fostering inclusive and critical discourses. Specifically, it explores how autism narratives influence video game design and how video games serve as platforms for counter-discourses that challenge dominant societal norms. Counter-discourses, in this context, refer to narratives opposing stereotypical or deficit-based views of neurodiversity, instead reframing autism as a valid and natural variation of human cognition. This work highlights video games' dual role in reinforcing dominant discourses and fostering non-pathological representations of cognitive differences. While this analysis primarily engages with games from the past twenty-five years (reflecting a recent increase in the presence and discussion of autistic-coded characters) it does not impose a strict temporal or geographical frame. The evolving definitions of autism and the increasing visibility of neurodiversity in game culture shape the scope of the study in dynamic ways. Although many of the examples discussed are from Western-developed games, this reflects the current state of the database under construction, which draws from a mix of personal research and community-sourced identifications (Reddit threads, fan wikis, Facebook groups, etc.). The corpus remains open to expansion and includes titles with explicitly autistic characters as well as those with ambiguous or unofficially interpreted traits. This fluid, exploratory approach allows for the inclusion of diverse perspectives and highlights the complexities of naming, categorization, and interpretation across cultures and genres.

HOW AUTISM NARRATIVES SHAPE VIDEO GAME DESIGN AND REPRESENTATION

Autism narratives shape the design, gameplay, and reception of various video game types. Using a framework of research paradigms and conceptions of neurodiversity (Rebecchi, 2023), three game categories emerge: therapeutic games, awareness-

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focused games, and representation-focused games. Each reflects social and scientific discourses of autism (medical disability, social disability, and cognitive diversity paradigms) which influence game mechanics and storytelling.

Therapeutic games, such as *Skills for Autism* (Skills Global LLC., n.d.) and *FaceSay™* (Symbionica LLC, 2015), align with the medical model of disability (World Health Organization, 1980), framing autism as a deficit to be addressed through intervention. These games often incorporate tasks aimed at improving communication or emotional recognition, reflecting a prescriptive approach. While offering benefits for autistic players, they implicitly reinforce autism as a condition requiring correction. This perspective influences both design, emphasizing clear goals, and gameplay, often rigid and task-oriented.

Awareness-focused games, such as *Auti-Sim* (Kadayifcioglu, 2013) and *An Aspie Life* (EnderLost Studios, 2018) adopt elements of the social model of disability (World Health Organization, 2001), portraying autism as shaped by environmental and societal barriers. These games invite neurotypical players to experience the sensory and social challenges of autism, fostering empathy. However, framing autism primarily through difficulty risks perpetuating a deficit-oriented narrative. While some players report increased understanding, others view the focus on struggles as reductive, reinforcing stereotypes of autism as inherently negative.

Representation-focused games, such as *Watch Dogs 2* (Ubisoft, 2016), embody the cognitive diversity paradigm by normalizing autism as a natural variation of human experience. *Watch Dogs 2* introduces Josh, an autistic character whose traits are seamlessly integrated into the story. His skills contribute meaningfully to the team, challenging deficit-based perceptions. Players have praised the nuanced portrayal, avoiding caricature while embedding diversity into the broader narrative. While this third category tends to highlight representations that move beyond deficit-based framings, it is important to avoid a simplistic binary of “positive” versus “negative” portrayals. Each representation participates in a broader discursive ecosystem, where meaning depends on narrative context, player interpretation, and cultural framing. Some characters, though portrayed as difficult, unstable, or socially isolated, may still reflect complex, humanized narratives that resist easy classification. Rather than judging representations solely on perceived positivity, it is more productive to consider their position within wider social narratives and power structures, as well as their potential to evoke empathy, critique stereotypes, or reinforce normative ideals. This highlights the importance of positionality, not only of the characters but also of the developers, players, and scholars engaging with these portrayals.

VIDEO GAMES AS SOCIAL LABORATORIES AND TOOLS FOR REDEFINING NEURODIVERSITY

The concept of normality (and by contrast, abnormality) has long been shaped by cultural and medical perspectives, often positioning neurodiversity as a deviation to be addressed or corrected (Canguilhem, 1972; Dumas, 2013). By emphasizing “typical” traits, media often marginalize those outside these norms. Societal concepts of normality are organized around cognitive models prioritizing “typical” examples (Rosch, 1973), leading to structural biases where neurodivergent individuals are perceived as “deviant.”

Media framing further compounds this problem by emphasizing specific realities while downplaying others, shaping public perceptions (Goffman, 1974). When neurodiversity is framed through a deficit lens, it reinforces stereotypes and stigmas, maintaining norms that marginalize neurodivergent individuals and perpetuate dominant societal power structures (Bottomore, 1991). Video games often mirror these biases, associating neurodivergent traits with instability or danger (Ferrari et al., 2019; Buday et al., 2022).

Yet video games also challenge these portrayals, offering immersive spaces to explore diverse cognitive perspectives. Acting as “social laboratories” (Craipeau, 2009), games create environments with new rules, inviting players to question societal norms. For example, *Overwatch 2* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2022) introduces Symmetra, an autistic character portrayed as competent, creative, and integral to her team. This narrative reframes autism as a strength, moving beyond pathology-driven depictions. Players engage with Symmetra’s abilities through gameplay, experiencing her traits as assets rather than deficits. Such portrayals shift discourse by embedding neurodiversity into the core of the gaming experience (Rebecchi, 2025).

Interactive games further enable inclusive storytelling, reframing neurodiversity as part of the human spectrum. Collaborations between researchers and game designers could amplify this potential, fostering portrayals that challenge stigmatization and enrich understanding. As “utopian” and “heterotopic” spaces (Boutet et al., 2014; Atallah, 2019), games allow players to engage with diverse cognitive perspectives, fostering empathy and promoting inclusivity.

Finally, these three categories are not fixed, and the boundaries between them are increasingly porous. The trajectory of autism representations in video games reflects not a linear progression toward “better” portrayals, but rather an ongoing negotiation of meaning, shaped by technological affordances, cultural discourses, and evolving understandings of neurodiversity. This fluidity highlights the narrative plasticity of video games, which are constantly reframing subjectivities and allowing for new intersections between gameplay and discourse. In this sense, the intersection of autism and video games is less about clear evolutionary paths and more about a shifting landscape of meanings, co-constructed by developers, players, and communities.

CONCLUSION

Examining the relationships between autism and video games underscores the role of these platforms in shaping nuanced understandings of neurodiversity. By adopting varied perspectives (therapeutic, empathic, and inclusive) video games reshape dominant discourses, challenge neurotypical standards, and promote alternative views on cognitive diversity. Beyond representation, video games act as laboratories for rethinking societal norms, encouraging meaningful engagement with neurodivergent perspectives. Reimagining neurological difference not as an anomaly but as a natural expression of human diversity, video games pave the way for a more inclusive society.

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