Digital Gaming, Disability, and Social Capital: Understanding Intersectional Pleasures and Community Formation

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This extended abstract presents a developing programme of research examining how adults with acquired brain injury (ABI) participate in digital gaming communities, and how these environments may support social connection, pleasurable engagement, and community belonging. Existing work on disability and gaming has often focused on accessibility, impairment, and exclusion (Hassan and Baltzar 2022), while emerging work has begun to examine how disabled players actively negotiate sociality, communication, and belonging in gaming spaces (Baltzar et al. 2024; Nilsen et al. 2024). This project extends this literature by focusing specifically on ABI, a population for whom social participation is often affected by fatigue, communication changes, stigma, identity disruption, and reduced access to offline leisure opportunities. It asks how adults with ABI use digital games and game-adjacent spaces not only as entertainment, but as sites of pleasure, social meaning, identity work, and relational participation.

The project is informed by social capital theory, particularly bonding, bridging, and linking forms of connection (Putnam 2015), while also responding to game studies scholarship that conceptualises gaming spaces as affinity spaces rather than bounded communities (Gee 2005). This distinction is important because many gaming-related interactions occur across loosely organised networks, such as Discord servers, guilds, Twitch chats, subreddits, Facebook groups, and multiplayer lobbies, rather than within formal or stable communities. For adults with ABI, these affinity spaces may provide opportunities for flexible participation, shared interest, reciprocal support, and recognition through competence, playfulness, and collaboration. The

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contribution of this work is therefore twofold: it brings ABI into conversations about disabled play and intersectional pleasure, and it uses ABI as a standpoint from which to examine how gaming spaces scaffold, constrain, or transform social participation for disabled players more broadly.

Within this framework, pleasure is conceptualised as affective and relational rather than purely recreational. Research with disabled gamers and people with spinal cord injury suggests that online play can support social participation, reduce isolation, and provide valued opportunities for connection, agency, and shared activity (Baltzar et al. 2024; Nilsen et al. 2024). Although ABI-specific research on digital gaming remains limited, broader ABI literature has shown that fatigue, mobility limitations, communication changes, and stigma can restrict participation in social and leisure activities (Åkerlund et al. 2021; Bracho and Salas 2024; Williams and Willmott 2012). This creates a strong rationale for investigating whether and how digital play may offer alternative routes into social connection and pleasurable participation for this group. Games may be especially relevant because they provide structured goals, shared tasks, identity cues, narrative immersion, and low-barrier forms of interaction that can be adapted around fluctuating cognitive, sensory, communicative, or physical capacity.

The planned mixed-methods programme will involve three connected phases. First, a scoping review will map existing research on videogames, disability, ABI, social participation, and pleasurable engagement. Second, qualitative interviews and/or focus groups with adults with ABI will explore lived experiences of gaming, including preferred platforms, social practices, barriers, pleasures, and meanings attached to play. Third, a survey and possible digital case studies will examine patterns across a larger group, including types of games played, modes of social interaction, perceived social capital, wellbeing, identity, and participation. Potential play activities of interest include cooperative multiplayer games, massively multiplayer online games, casual mobile games, social simulation games, virtual reality experiences, and game adjacent practices such as watching livestreams, joining Discord servers, or participating in online fan and player groups. This broader understanding of play is important because adults with ABI may engage socially through watching, chatting, spectating, modding, organising, or providing informal support, even when active gameplay is limited by fatigue or access needs.

Preliminary qualitative and anecdotal accounts suggest that some adults with ABI use games to form supportive micro-communities, maintain long-term relationships, and access spaces where disability is less visible or less socially penalised. These observations are consistent with existing disability gaming research showing that online play can enable communication, peer recognition, and social participation in ways that may be difficult in offline environments (Baltzar et al. 2024; Nilsen et al. 2024). They also align with broader game studies work on affinity spaces, where shared interest and situated participation can generate meaningful social ties even in loosely structured digital environments. However, systematic investigation is needed to understand how these processes operate for adults with ABI, and

how they are shaped by intersecting factors such as age, gender, class, disability identity, gaming history, and technological access.

The research also considers how gaming environments operate as socio-technical systems that can both facilitate and restrict social capital. Platform design, communication infrastructures, moderation practices, accessibility features, and broader cultural norms all influence how disabled players participate and the forms of pleasure that become available. Rather than treating "community" as an assumed good, the project examines the conditions under which gaming spaces become supportive, exclusionary, ambivalent, or inaccessible. This includes attention to toxicity, ableism, communication demands, disclosure practices, and the uneven distribution of social recognition within game cultures.

Through this orientation, the project contributes to emerging conversations within game studies about intersectional pleasures, disabled play, and the relational possibilities of digital affinity spaces. By centring ABI, the work aims to generate insights relevant to inclusive design, community governance, digital leisure, and social prescribing approaches that recognise games as more than entertainment. Ultimately, the project asks how digital play may function as a site of pleasure, social meaning, and community participation for adults with acquired brain injury, while also offering broader insights into how disabled players create connection, agency, and belonging in contemporary gaming cultures.

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