

# **Players, Diverse Bodies and Embodied Interpretation: Issues in Research Design**

**Diane Carr**

UCL Institute of Education  
University College London  
23-29 Emerald Street  
London WC1N 3QS

## **Keywords**

Embodied interpretation, lived experience, science fiction, disability, research design

## **INTRODUCTION**

Our lived experience plays a part in shaping the interpretive resources we bring to a game. Play is an embodied activity (e.g. Gee 2008; Gregersen and Grodal 2009). Yet bodies vary. For this reason, accounts of player embodiment that implicitly construct a standardized or universal body are problematic (Carr 2013). One of the aims of this research is to develop a satisfactory account of embodied meaning-making that is based on an acknowledgement of the dynamic relationship between bodies, lived experience, knowledge and interpretation. The links between corporeality and epistemology have been explored in some depth within critical disability literature (e.g. Snyder and Mitchell 2010). Such literature informs this study, which focuses on disabled players' interpretations of science fiction themed games.

In this presentation I discuss the design of this research including issues of conceptual framing and ethical considerations. In addition to engaging with literature from critical disability studies, this will involve reflecting on the power relations that pervade research practice, and acknowledging the prevalence of particular models of disability within game studies, academic culture, and popular discourse.

## **BACKGROUND**

Generic science fictions (including relevant action adventure games and RPGs) typically focus on the relationship between technologies, identity and societal change (Sobchack 1987). From 'mad' doctors to experimental prosthetics, depictions of disability are common in science fiction (Allen 2013, Smith 2011, Scherman 2013). Historically, the relationship between disabled people, new technologies, and research has been exceedingly fraught. At the same time, the assessment processes that disabled people encounter often incorporate game-like tests of some description or other. Meanwhile, applied and clinical research continues to construct disability as an individualized deficit that must be either hidden or fixed. In contrast to these clinical and medical models of disability, critical disability theorists have proposed models of disability that stress the social and environmental construction of disability (Oliver 1996), the embodied experiences of disabled people, and the epistemological aspects of this lived experience (Snyder and Mitchell 2010). Exploring the dynamics between lived experience, situated

**Proceedings of 1<sup>st</sup> International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG**

© 2016 the author. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

knowledge and embodied interpretation is one of the goals of this research, as is a commitment to unsettling the dominant discourses around disability and technology.

## DESIGN

In preparing for the study, we have reviewed work at the overlaps between game studies, Internet studies, fan studies and critical disability studies (e.g. Kociemba 2010). We are consulting with experts in audience studies and participative research design, and building relationships with ‘gate keepers’ to prepare for chain-referral sampling. We are exploring creative methods of data co-construction. Researchers with an interest in cultural politics face a number of challenges when designing research on issues of disability. These include the academy’s historical tendency to conduct exploitive research on disabled people. Snyder and Mitchell (2010) have described the assumption that disabled people should make themselves available to researchers as one of the most obnoxious forms of oppression experienced by disabled people. Obviously it would be a mistake to artificially homogenize either disability, or disabled people’s experiences. Other issues of concern include the under-representation of disabled people within the academy, the marginalization of work on the topic of disability, and the ongoing dominance of clinical models of disability within the academic in general (and game studies in particular). For all these reasons, designing research to explore the embodied interpretations of disabled players involves a number of potential pit-falls from an ethical perspective. While addressing some of these issues may be relatively straight forward, others require continuous reflection. Our aim is to collaborate with players to explore embodied perspectives on mainstream depictions of technology and impairment in games. In the process, we hope to foster opportunities for critique and dissent.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is supported by the AHRC as part of “Disability and Community: Dis/engagement, Dis/enfranchisement, Dis/parity and Dissent” aka the D4D project.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allan, K. (2013) *Disability in Science Fiction: Representations of Technology as Cure*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carr, D. (2013) “Bodies, Augmentation and Disability in *Dead Space* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*” for FROG, Vienna. September 2013
- Gee, J. P. (2008) “Video Games and Embodiment” in *Games and Culture*, 3, pp 253-263.
- Gregersen, A. and Grodal, T. (2009) “Embodiment and Interface” in *The Video Game Theory Reader*. B. Perron and M.J.P Wolf (eds.) New York: Routledge pp 65-84
- Kociemba, D.(2010) "This isn't something I can fake': Reactions to Glee's representations of disability". *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 5.
- Snyder, S.L. and Mitchell, D.T. (2010) *Cultural locations of disability*. University of Chicago Press.
- Scherman, E.L (2013) “Of Big Blue Butts and Bias”, in *The Worlds of Farscape: Essays on the Groundbreaking Television Series*, S.Ginn ed. pp.142-159
- Smith, A., (2011) *Hideous progeny: Disability, eugenics, and classic horror cinema*. Columbia University Press.
- Oliver, M. (1996) “Defining Impairment and Disability: Issues at Stake” in *Exploring the Divide*, C. Barnes and G. Mercer, eds. Leeds: The Disability Press, pp.29 -54
- Sobchack, V.C., (1987) *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. Rutgers University Press