**Disability and Video Games Journalism:**

**A Discourse Analysis of Accessibility and Gaming Culture**

**Abstract:**

In this article, we conduct a discourse analysis of sixty articles to reveal themes that describe how games journalism reflects and constitutes understandings of disability and accessibility in gaming. First, we map prior research on media’s relationship to disability, as well as approaches to disability in game studies, including the introduction of two primary paradigms for addressing issues of accessibility in gaming. Second, the project reveals six thematic categories that describe how games journalism reflects and constitutes understandings of disability and accessibility in gaming: gamers with disabilities, portraying disability, game design, game controllers, discussing accessibility, and advocacy. Further comparison of the categories reveals four additional themes of discourses, namely self-congratulations, fetishization, awareness as advocacy, and problem solving. The article concludes with implications for the games industry, for theory, and for how the field of game studies can investigate disability.

**Keywords:**

discourse analysis, video games, journalism, culture, disability, accessibility

What is the media discourse on game accessibility and game players with disabilities? How can we use this to understand how to better support accessibility? This article reviews the discourse in the emerging areas of player disabilities and game accessibility.

Unlike other popular media, video games tend to be ‘quite demanding’ physically and ‘often require mastering inflexible, quite complicated, input devices and techniques’ (Grammenos, Savidi, & Stephanidis, 2009, p. 2). Previous understandings of accessibility in gaming rely on two primary paradigms: a design paradigm that describes best practices for player experience, and a legal paradigm that aims to legislate accessibility in mass-marketed games (Grammenos, Savidi, & Stephanidis, 2009; Powers, Nguyen, & Frieden, 2015). This project proposes a third paradigm, a cultural paradigm, which describes the nature of disability and accessibility through discourses in culture, including gaming culture. These discourses require a disability media studies perspective to tease out how they relate to the broader contexts of media representation, disability advocacy, and games studies research.

In this article, we conduct a discourse analysis of sixty articles to reveal themes that describe how games journalism reflects and constitutes understandings of disability and accessibility in gaming. The following section maps prior research on media’s relationship to disability, as well as approaches to disability in game studies, including the introduction of two primary paradigms for addressing issues of accessibility in gaming. The article then addresses research questions and methodological considerations before presenting the study’s findings and analysis. The article concludes with implications for the games industry, for theory, and for how the field of game studies can investigate disability.

**Disability, Media Studies, and Game Studies**

Central to our project is the notion that disability is socially constructed. We adopt the perspective that identity, including disability, is a socialized mediatized experience. The argument for a social model of disability began in the 1970s (Priestley, Finkelstein, & Davis, 1975), and it initially distinguished between impairment and disability, in that all bodies have impairments, and those impairments only become disabilities in certain social contexts. For instance, people with less than perfect vision often do not identify their visual impairment as a disability given the common social resources provided by eye care, such as glasses, contacts, and eye surgery. Thus, disability is not a medical diagnosis; rather, it is a social reaction to particular bodies (Shakespeare 2014; Corker & Shakespeare 2002).

Such social contexts can arise in media portrayals of disability. For instance, Colin Barnes (1992) identifies the ‘disabling stereotypes’ found in popular media such as movies and books (39). Norden (1994) problematizes common harmful tropes regarding disability, and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2001) provides a taxonomy of representations of people with disabilities. Put simply, ‘disability tends to be figured in cultural representations as an absolute state of otherness that is opposed to a standard, normative body’ (Snyder, Brueggemann, & Garland-Thompson, 2002, p. 2). Davis (1995) argues that, ‘the “problem” is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the “problem” of the disabled person’ (p. 24). While these media representations are inaccurate, they may also create a false dichotomy between a vision of ‘normalcy’ in contrast with the supposedly ‘abnormal’ bodies with disabilities (Davis 2010; McRuer 2006; Davis 2014; Ellcessor & Kirkpatrick 2017). Snyder and Mitchell (2006) suggest that ‘there are significant stakes in the humanities-based analysis of disability [because] disabled people must negotiate a finite repertoire of social meanings’ (p. 168-169). In other words, how media portrays disability, how cultural outlets discuss issues of accessibility, and—especially in the case of games—how persons with disabilities are allowed to interact with that media may dictate how people with disabilities may see themselves (Anderson & Johnson, 2021). These portrayals and discussions constitute a discourse about ability and disability, and that discourse influences the lives of people with disabilities (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Linton, 1998).

For the sake of our project, we look to games journalism as an expression of popular culture to which we can turn to study disability. Understanding how media—including journalistic media—expresses concepts of disability and accessibility will help us to further investigate disability and advocate for people with disabilities.

***Game Studies and Disability***

Most scholarly work on games and disability primarily focuses on games as medical interventions. For instance, Balan, Moldoveanu, & Moldoveanu (2015) describe how audio-based games may aid people who are blind in learning how to improve real-life tasks that require navigating space. Another project finds that using the Xbox Kinect video game system was effective for helping young people with motor disabilities (Chang, Chen, & Huang, 2011). Kato (2010) reveals how games can help people with disabilities improve physical performance, and Stendal (2012) suggests that video games have the potential to help people with disabilities on several fronts, such as with rehabilitation and increasing feelings of empowerment. Several projects detail how games can aid students with learning disabilities (Marino et al., 2014; Marino & Beecher, 2010), and how children with disabilities can improve their motivation to physically train when video games are used as a therapeutic intervention (Wästerfors, 2011). A medical approach to studying gaming and disability may be useful, but these projects suggest a prevailing paradigm of games as interventions or therapies instead of as discourses that constitute what disability and normalcy mean.

Outside of a medical paradigm, some researchers have written about how games can help to reduce (or spur) biases around disability (Schrier, 2018), or how games may portray or express disability narratively (Carr, 2019; Carr, 2014; Derby, 2016). For instance, researchers have explored how games may provide—or not provide—critical options for persons with disabilities in imagining or performing their own subject position (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006).

However, this type of work on the narrative representation of disability can be better contextualized with an understanding of game culture’s relationship to disability and the discourses around accessibility and players’ places in game culture. The design decisions that contribute to how disability is portrayed in games are not isolated from the rest of culture: discourses about disability can inform how disability is imagined and later implemented in video games. Game designers are not isolated from culture—they are affected by and affect how people represent disability through media. For instance, if discourses surrounding games and disability consistently focus on accessibility tools such as wheelchairs or prostheses, then game designers may portray disability primarily by showcasing those tools. Our project seeks to fill a gap of knowledge that gives greater context to how and why games and their designers approach disability—in fictional representations, as well as in how games act as expressions of discourse that exist in other forms, such as in journalism.

***Accessibility and Gaming***

Video games, unlike other media formats, ‘are usually quite demanding in terms of motor, sensor, and mental skills needed for interaction control, and often require mastering inflexible, quite complicated, input devices and techniques’ (Grammenos, Savidi, & Stephanidis 2009, p. 2). Bierre et al. (2005) address specific issues regarding accessibility in video games by outlining specific types of disabilities that affect people’s ability to play games, such as visual, auditory, mobility, and cognitive disabilities. For instance, players with auditory disabilities would oftentimes benefit from closed-captioning of in-game dialogue, and some players with cognitive disabilities would be better able to play a game with speed control or difficulty level adjustment options. While Bierre et al. (2005) explain that there are several ways to better support accessibility, including community modding of games, they conclude with several questions for future consideration, including, ‘How could we define a minimum accessibility standard that is easy enough to implement for all game developers?’ (p. 9). Such a standard seems impossible in some respects given the breadth of the types of games and interactions that take place within those games. However, basic standards for closed-captioning, as one example, could easily be applied to almost any game with dialogue.

Two current paradigms emerge—one legal and the other design-focused—in supporting accessibility in games. Powers, Nguyen, and Frieden (2015) suggest the legal approach to addressing these issues of standardization by using established legal precedent for requiring accommodations for persons with disabilities in the United States. Eschewing the notion that mere advocacy or social awareness will solve the many issues faced by video game players with disabilities, they argue for a legal strategy to establish guidelines for video game design, publication, hardware design, and sales. They write that ‘to achieve equal access in this industry, a legally binding accessibility standard for video game design ought to be adopted’ (para. 1), and they describe various pieces of legislation as examples for accessibility in other contexts, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the 21st century Communications and Video Accessibility Act. Current groundwork for similar legislation for video games comes in the form of white papers and best practices sheets published by advocacy organizations.

Grammenos, Savidi, and Stephanidis (2009) speak to the design-based paradigm and propose the design principle of universally accessible games, meaning games designed for players with a wide range of abilities/disabilities, specifically with the ability to adapt to players’ varying abilities. They conclude by stating that ‘universally accessible games may be a demanding but still manageable and achievable task’ (p. 25), before listing a set of best practices to accomplish that goal, and that games that are universally accessible will not only better support individuals with disabilities, but all people with all different types of abilities. As an example of the design-based paradigm, the AbleGamers Foundation created a series of design patterns to help designers create a more accessible player experience (Barlet & Spohn, 2013). Similarly, Brown and Anderson (2020) study game design to outline how contemporary design trends approach accessibility and describe a set of best practices for the games industry. The design paradigm complements the legal paradigm inasmuch as both focus on advocacy.

**Research Process**

In addition to the design and legal paradigms—a design paradigm that outlines best practices in developing games and a legal paradigm that looks to legislate accessibility in mass-marketed games—this project also suggests a third paradigm. This third paradigm, a cultural paradigm, calls for a holistic understanding of the nature of accessibility and disability through discourses in game culture, including discourses regarding games, controllers, and accessibility design features. This paradigm aims to describe how games culture constitutes the nature of disability and accessibility, and identify any challenges that emerge, so that solutions to any challenges can come from the study of actual, every day, and lived-experience phenomena.

To this end, the guiding research questions for this project are as follows:

R1: What discourses exist in game culture regarding disability and accessibility?

R2: What challenges and solutions do these discourses present regarding disability and accessibility?

This study uses a discourse analysis of game culture because this method helps to describe how participants in a subculture both dictate and emulate normalcy on any given topic. Discourse involves ‘an interest in properties of texts, the production, distribution, and consumption of texts,’ especially in terms of ‘the relationship of social practice to power relations, and hegemonic projects at the societal level’ (Fairclough, 1992, p. 226). This method does not simply aim for an analysis of the texts, but to also describe how social constructs are created and repeated. In other words, the phenomenon we aim to investigate is culture, and we access culture by examining how the texts that culture creates describe disability and accessibility. Our specific approach to discourse analysis stems from the critical discourse analysis (CDA) tradition, as typified by Gunn (2011), but with a focus on journalism or news values as argued for by Bednarek and Caple (2014).

To analyze discourse in game culture, we reviewed games journalism, selecting sixty articles from three of the most popular games journalism outlets as our corpus: Kotaku.com, Polygon.com, and PCGamer.com. The articles were chosen through keyword searches on a third-party search engine—meaning a search engine not hosted on the websites themselves. We selected articles that address issues of disability and accessibility by searching for game journalism that included the keywords ‘disability’ or ‘accessibility.’ We found ten articles per keyword per site to provide a saturation of data. The three news sites therefore yielded twenty articles each. The search for articles took place in October 2018. The discourse analysis focused on the overarching subject matter of the articles, and the data was coded according to the Grounded Theory Approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

We selected the Ground Theory Approach method of data analysis for two primary reasons: first, it allows for exploring the conceptual connections among discourses, and second, it encourages site-specific analysis, meaning the analysis never reaches beyond the site of investigation. Grounded Theory encourages theory creation about the subject matter itself which is especially beneficial with novel or less than widely studied phenomena.

With this approach, we first examined the articles to assess their overarching content, looking for the primary news item being conveyed to guide that process. We then sorted the articles into temporary categories whenever articles shared similar or identical primary news items. During this process of categorization, and following the Grounded Theory Approach, we consolidated temporary categories into larger theoretical categories when similarities became apparent. We also created new categories if the existing categories no longer reflected the specific content of a given article. This iterative process of refining theoretical categories continued until all articles were adequately sorted into categories. The goal of the process is to construct an explanation of the phenomenon by describing and comparing categories of data, thus grounding the theory to the data and the specific phenomenon. We discuss the findings and analysis in the following two sections.

**Results**

The sixty articles were sorted into six categories that describe their overarching subject matter. The articles demonstrated strong thematic consistency in subject matter with no uncategorizable articles. Each article correlates with a single thematic category, except in the case of three articles that fit two categories simultaneously. The oldest article was published in June of 2008, and the most recent article was published in September of 2018. The six categories and the number of articles in each are described in Table 1.

Table 1.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gamers with Disabilities | 14 articles |
| Games Portraying Disability | 5 articles |
| Game Design and Accessibility | 15 articles |
| Game Controllers and Accessibility | 9 articles |
| General Discussion of Accessibility | 10 articles |
| Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities | 10 articles |

As expected, the categories were not perfectly comparable to each other regarding the number of articles in each category. However, a mean of 10.5 articles per category adequately reflects the general distribution of the articles: five of the six categories include nine articles or more. The category with the fewest number of articles, ‘Games Portraying Disability,’ maintained thematic consistency to the point that it merits inclusion in this study: the articles were strongly similar to each other, and they were not uncategorizable outliers. As we describe examples from the corpus of sixty articles, we offer a complete list of categorized articles, including author names, publication dates, and URLs, which can be found at https://pastebin.com/9MzRwG6H.

Articles in the ‘Gamers with Disabilities’ category showcased persons with disabilities and how they engage with games and game culture. Seven articles discussed notable persons with disabilities who play games, such as players with disabilities who stream their gameplay live on the website Twitch.tv. Some of these players are regular game streamers and are microcelebrities in the game streaming world. Others faced unexpected celebrity when their stories regarding their disabilities spread online. For instance, an article in PCGamer.com describes a streamer who only uses their mouth to play a popular multiplayer game, while another featured an interview with a player with cerebral palsy who gained notoriety after other players discovered how he plays a game with his chin. An important caveat is that one article discussed the controversy of a game streamer who had been faking his use of a wheelchair to garner viewers and attract donations. The remaining articles in this category address a variety of topics all related to featuring game players with disabilities. One article showcased a player with a fine-motor disability and his interactions with the games industry, specifically how he campaigned to add more accessibility options to a game he could not finish on his own. Three articles highlighted challenges that game players face with specific disabilities, such as players with mobility disabilities who have difficulties with *Pokémon Go!* or players with vision disabilities. And three articles discussed disability in terms of personal narratives and difficulties in gaming and game development, including a player with chronic pain, a game developer with chronic back pain, and a *DOTA 2* player with an autism spectrum disorder.

Articles in the ‘Games Portraying Disability’ category address instances of games that showcase, or otherwise include, fictional characters with disabilities. These articles usually praise games for their inclusivity and progressiveness for showcasing people with disabilities. While one article takes a broad approach to discussing a wide variety of games and how they portray people with disabilities, the remaining articles take individual games as their primary subject matter. For instance, two articles discussed a game in development called *Katawa Shoujo*, a visual novel romance game wherein players can court a variety of women, all of whom have a disability. The articles praise the game’s innovation in how it represents people with disabilities as being sexually active and attractive. Another article addresses the disability of the protagonist in the 2015 game *Mad Max*, as the character wears a leg brace in reference to an injury he sustained in one of the movies upon which the game is based. Lastly, an article briefly mentions disability as a primary characteristic in a thriller game in development.

The largest category, ‘Game Design and Accessibility,’ primarily includes articles that showcase particular games given either their accessibility options or the accessibility design processes that went into the games’ development. Five of the articles are announcements or reports on games winning ‘Most Accessible’ awards, such as *Final Fantasy XIV* winning ‘Most Disability Accessible Game’ of 2013, or they are general discussions of the best games for players with disabilities. Six of the articles discuss particular games with notable accessibility options, meaning options that players may choose can support a more accessible gaming experience. Games showcased include *Assassin’s Creed: Origins*, *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*, *Madden NFL 17*, *Uncharted 4*, and *Splatoon 2*, and options include colorblind modes, and the ability to remove visually confusing mini-map markers, adjust difficulty levels, and alter required fast button presses, among others. Four articles discuss games as developed with accessibility built into the design process of the game. Such a process includes accessibility options but also how designing the entire gaming experience around being accessible supported a much wider audience that traditionally expected.

Articles in the ‘Game Controllers and Accessibility’ category speak to conversations surrounding the materiality of gaming and the often inherently physical requirements of playing video games. Four of the articles address the same event of Microsoft announcing and releasing their Adaptive Controller, a controller designed for Xbox systems and PC computers that aims to add physical accessibility because it can be adapted, changed, and customized. The articles provide a general description of the controller and the design thinking that went into it. The remaining five articles in this category showcase newly invented or modified controllers, either in development prototypes or currently for sale, which aim to enhance accessibility. For instance, two articles discuss one-handed adapters for controllers on the Nintendo Switch and PlayStation 4 systems, and another article explains a wheelchair accessibility modification to the *Rock Band* drum kit.

Articles in the ‘General Discussion of Accessibility’ category all introduce readers to issues of accessibility in gaming culture, how game companies are designing accessibility features, and possible avenues for solving accessibility issues with games. They are catch-all pieces that either celebrate certain innovations in game culture or give a general explanation of issues of accessibility in gaming. For example, one article’s thesis is to simply explain why gaming accessibility matters by providing a list of examples of players with disabilities and accessibility options found in several games. One article discusses designing games for persons with hearing disabilities, while another addresses issues for players with vision disabilities. The majority of the articles provide a broad explanation of the subject matter, such as articles with titles such as: ‘Special Report: Accessibility in Games,’ ‘Five Tricks Developers Should Use to Help Disabled Gamers,’ ‘Game Accessibility Guideline Project Aims to Help Developers Understand and Design for a Wider Audience,’ and ‘Avoid Barriers to Make Gaming Accessible.’

The final category, ‘Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities,’ includes articles that address organizations and individuals advocating for players with disabilities. Five articles in this category showcase organizations that aim to advocate for players with disabilities, including the AbleGamers Foundation, Gamers Gift, and SpecialEffect. Two articles described events put on for players with disabilities, such as a disability-focused e-sports tournament for children in Korea and an event called Accessibility Arcade in Toronto, Canada. Two other articles addressed accessibility game jams—hyper-focused, short-term game creation sessions—including the Global Game Jam 2013 Accessibility Challenge and Accessibility Jam. The articles discuss the purposes of the game jams and the games produced to include more players with disabilities. A final article wrote about musician Stevie Wonder’s public advocacy for accessible games while speaking at a game awards event.

As a final item regarding results, fifty-five of the sixty articles include dates of publication, and those dates reveal that topics of accessibility and disability are published in waves or trending moments. 2013 and 2016 were such moments, with ten articles from both years, the largest number for any of the years. Since 2016, accessibility and disability appear to be trending down in frequency for the subsequent two years, with only nine articles from 2017 and five articles from 2018. We draw no readily apparent conclusions from these trends besides acknowledging that certain games or actions from games industry leaders may lead to spikes in discussion about these topics.

**Discussion: Analysis of Themes**

The categories reveal the topics of disability and accessibility discourse in game culture, but useful insights can be gained by comparing the categories and extrapolating interconnected discourses within those categories. To address the study’s second research question regarding challenges and solutions that these discourses present regarding disability and accessibility, in this section we analyze the thematic connections that arose among categories as part of the Grounded Theory Approach. While not categories of data, these themes give terms to describe the implications of the categories.

***Discourses of Self-Congratulations***

Many articles carried with them implicit self-congratulations in both subject matter and how the articles addressed the topic in tone. By implicit self-congratulations, we mean that many articles showcased subject matter or language that suggested that games culture is improving in how it addresses issues related to disability. This discourse appeared in articles in the categories of ‘Games Portraying Disability,’ ‘Gamers with Disabilities,’ and ‘Game Design and Accessibility.’ The tone of these publications, the article authors, and game culture in general says, ‘We did it. We solved disability in gaming.’ These articles acknowledge the challenges faced by players with disabilities, but they also suggest that both the present and future will hold fewer problems with regard to accessibility than is likely true. Put simply, self-congratulations lean more toward thinking that a game is fully accessible and less toward the fact that *all* games can continue to be more accessible. Discourses of self-congratulations overly simplify the need for nuanced, complex, and dynamic accessibility solutions. We acknowledge that accessibility in gaming has improved over time, but self-congratulations by necessity emphasizes success and reduces the impetus to continue to address accessibility needs.

This type of discourse was particularly prevalent in the category ‘Games Portraying Disability’ inasmuch as the articles approach individual games and characters as evidence of game culture’s inclusivity. For example, the two articles about the game *Katawa Shoujo*, the dating simulator wherein the potential love interests are all women with disabilities, write at length about why this game is a step forward for game culture and how it is a positive example for other games to follow. The article about the titular character’s disability in *Mad Max* describes how the game’s portrayal demonstrates how disabilities do not define individuals, ultimately lauding how the game represents Max’s disability. And the article ‘A Look at Characters with Disabilities in Video Games’ is rife with instances in which the author praises how games portray people with disabilities. Articles in other categories echo this language, such as in the ‘Game Design and Accessibility’ category wherein several articles laud game companies for including accessibility options. Articles in the ‘Gamers with Disabilities’ category occasionally take a personal approach by describing how game companies have solved accessibility issues faced by individual players, with the players being quoted in the article expressing their gratitude.

This type of ‘toxic optimism’ is problematic because it squelches the need for further problem solving and design around accessibility issues. Self-congratulations is rarely, if ever, helpful for any traditionally marginalized group. A feeling of accomplishment exaggerates what has been accomplished while diminishing the obstacles that persons with disabilities continue to face now and in the future. In combination with the discourse of fetishization, self-congratulations inform an unexpectedly insidious way of talking and writing about disability and accessibility in that it incentivizes attitudes that reduce scrutiny on game culture. In other words, it punishes individuals who continue to advocate for change by suggesting that there no longer exists a need for change.

***Discourses of Fetishization***

Another theme is the discourse of fetishization. While the term stems from the social act of imbuing objects or ideas with power (Schroeder, 2008), we use ‘fetishization’ in the scholarly sense: the act of commodifying something (Shumway, 2000). When discourses fetishize identities, those identities are described as a fascinating ‘other’ that does not belong naturally in culture (Wagman, 2017). Therefore, fetishizing identities is a problematic, though often unintentional, practice. Fetishization primarily appears in the ‘Gamers with Disabilities’ category, but it also occasionally arises in other categories as well. This discourse fetishizes persons with disabilities by not only addressing their existence in game culture as a newsworthy or unique event, but also by performing a fascination with how they participate in gaming at all. This discourse is particularly prominent in articles that showcase a person with disabilities, such as by delving into how they hold their controller, describing the personal challenges they have faced, or through publishing photos of players playing games differently than players without disabilities.

Fetishization can be defined as fascination with how players with disabilities participate in a such a physical medium. The titles often reveal this fascination without even needing to dive deeper into the articles’ texts. For instance:

‘How a Gamer with a Disability Speedruns Some of the World’s Fastest Games’

‘Interview: *Dead Space 2* Disability Campaigner Gareth Garratt’

‘Meet Rocky NoHands, the Paralyzed PUBG Streamer with Kicks Ass Using Only His Mouth’

‘Even with One Hand Paralyzed, this *CS:GO* Player Continues to Kick Ass’

‘How the *CS:GO* Community’s Compassion Changed the Life of a Disabled *CS:GO* Streamer’

Several also articles include images of players with disabilities using specialized game controllers with their mouth or hands or sitting in wheelchairs. One image consists of a close-up of a player controlling a computer mouse with his chin.

The balance between visibility and fetishization is always tenuous, and particularly evident in the history of Queer representation in cinema (Russo, 1987). Showcasing players with disabilities is certainly welcome inasmuch as it provides a means to negotiation ‘social meanings’ (Snyder and Mitchell, 2006, p. 169). However, the articles’ focus on the mere existence of players with disabilities as being newsworthy, combined with how the articles offer extraneous detail as to how player ‘somehow manage’ to play games, contributes to a cultural understanding of disability as not only being outside of normal but also as being a subject of corporeal fascination. These players’ bodies are treated subjects of interest as anomalies, rather than a ‘normal’ part of the spectrum of the human experience.

***Discourses of Awareness as Advocacy***

The articles we analyzed attempt to increase awareness of disability and accessibility issues in gaming culture. All six categories of articles demonstrate a focus on informing readers on disability in gaming. These articles include language that emphasize the need for recognizing the challenges players with disabilities face. Many articles also couch this information in the language of advocacy. For instance, one journalist writes that ‘there are simple things that every developer can do to make games accessible to the majority of gamers. So, why don’t the big companies do them?’ (Griliopoulos, 2011, para. 14). Another journalist writes that ‘many games still don’t take physical disabilities into account. A new project hopes to increase awareness about how and why accessibility considerations can add to a gamer’s experience and increase the audience’ (Cox, 2012, para. 2). A third example takes on the entire subject of accessibility awareness with the title ‘Why Game Accessibility Matters.’ While these are specific examples, almost every article produces language that implies that readers should become more aware of disability and accessibility. There is nothing inherently wrong with increasing awareness or encouraging advocacy about issues in gaming culture regarding disability and accessibility, as long as the discourse avoids the tendency to fetishize, as discussed above. Continued discussion regarding these topics will aid in justifying the need to address these challenges in the breadth of game culture, from game development to journalism.

***Discourses of Problem Solving***

Articles in the corpus often target particular challenges faced by persons with disabilities and propose solutions to those challenges through game design options, material design changes, inclusivity, and public advocacy. These articles appear in the categories of ‘Game Controllers and Accessibility,’ ‘Game Design and Accessibility,’ ‘Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities,’ and ‘Gamers with Disabilities.’ Accessibility itself, as a concept, is housed within notions of solving problems inasmuch as access is an avenue to remove barriers for persons with disabilities. Therefore, in articles that target practical applications of accessibility, such as with modified controllers or accessibility options in games, the discourse of problem solving is the dominant issue at play.

Articles that continue this discourse tend to showcase how people at every level of game culture, from game companies to individual players, are ‘solving problems’ faced by persons with disabilities. For example, articles in the ‘Game Controllers and Accessibility’ category address how people solve problems through re-designing game controllers. The article titles adequately showcase how they approach their subject matter:

‘Microsoft Announces New Controller for Gamers with Disabilities’

‘The Xbox Adaptive Controller’s Package Design Is Just as Accessible’

‘Rock Band Accessibility Mod Makes Wheelchair Rockin’ Possible’

‘Nintendo Switch One-Handed Joy-Con Adapter Opens Up the Console to Everyone’

Articles regarding accessibility options also tend to showcase specific challenges faced by players with disabilities followed by how game companies add in-game customization options to address those challenges. For example, two articles discuss how the developers responsible for *Uncharted 4* patched the game with additional accessibility options, such as removing required quick button presses. Other articles focus on optional colorblind modes included in games such as *Splatoon 2* and *Madden NFL 17*.

Problem solving discourses are beneficial in that they educate both players and developers on how simple, and even cost-effective, it is to increase the accessibility of their games. For example, one of author’s sons has fine and gross motor delays and needs accommodations to fully participate in the world, including for playing video games. The other author is an independent game designer who learned about methods of increasing accessibility through simply offering easily-programmable options at the beginning of their games. These examples also demonstrate the difference between accessibility options and accessible design thinking in game development. Four articles addressed how accessibility was built into the fabric of the design logic of particular games such as *Celeste*, *Risk System*, and *Dawn of War 3*. Universal design is a beneficial approach as it removes the ‘othering’ that can occur by focusing on the goal of having everybody engage in a similar gameplay experience (by including accessibility options and adaptations) rather than certain players having to remove elements of gameplay (Grammenos, Savidi, & Stephanidis, 2009).

**Conclusions and Future Directions**

Currently, the majority of the work on gaming and disability comes in the form of research on games’ utility as medical or therapeutic interventions (Balan, Moldoveanu, & Moldoveanu, 2015; Chang, Chen, & Huang, 2011; Kato, 2010; Stendal, 2012; Wästerfors, 2011). While medically-focused studies are useful, this project aims to expand beyond a strictly medical paradigm for understanding disability, as disability is cultural, and media constitutes and reflects culture (Shakespeare, 2014; Corker & Shakespeare, 2002). Instead, this article targets accessibility as the central issue regarding disability in gaming, and it argues for a third paradigm for addressing accessibility: how discourse creates ideas and ideals of accessibility and disability in games culture. While the legal and design-focused paradigms described previously are relevant (Powers, Nguyen, & Frieden, 2015; Grammenos, Savidi, & Stephanidis, 2009), we contend that a cultural paradigm is also important, as a basic understanding of how culture conceptualizes accessibility in gaming can help support more effective solutions. Continual self-reflection or simply describing phenomena does little to improve the lives of persons with disabilities.

Thus, in this study, we conducted a discourse analysis on a corpus of sixty articles from games journalism to better understand discourses around accessibility and disability in game culture. This project revealed six categories that describe how games journalism reflects and constitutes understandings of disability and accessibility in gaming: gamers with disabilities, portraying disability, game design, game controllers, discussing accessibility, and advocacy. Further comparison of the categories reveals four additional themes of discourses, namely self-congratulations, fetishization, awareness as advocacy, and problem solving.

Our analysis suggests that many articles engaged in a discourse of ‘self-congratulations’ or a toxic type of optimism that implies that change is no longer needed and problems do not exist and do need to be solved. This is problematic because it further squelches the perspectives of those who seek to enhance accessibility for games and reduces self-critiques. This further marginalizes people with disabilities and also stymies the critical changes necessary for games and game culture.

Our analysis also revealed the discourse of ‘fetishization’ or a featuring of people with an over-focus on their disabilities. This is problematic because it furthers the concept of disability as an anomalies, and it further reifies a notion that there is a ‘normal’ rather than portraying disability as part of a spectrum of human experience. The analysis also revealed two other themes: a discourse of ‘advocacy’ (bringing awareness to issues of disability) and one of ‘problem solving’ (proposing solutions to the needs of people with disabilities). These discourses may be beneficial, so long as they do not combine with the discourses of fetishization and self-congratulations.

There are further opportunities afforded by this study. First, while this project targets discourse as it emerges in games journalism, given the power of journalism to reflect and constitute what accessibility means, future avenues of research should continue the tradition of mixed-methods work suggested by a disability media studies approach to the topic (Ellcessor, Hagood, & Kirkpatrick, 2017). Therefore, future work should address how portrayals of disability in games continue or contradict the discourses this article describes. Other areas of games culture may also prove fruitful to this end, such as: material design analysis of accessibility-designed controllers, interviews with players with disabilities, interviews with members of game production companies, autoethnographic work, and translational research in the form of creating games, live streamer communications, forum interactions, and video essays that continue these discussions.

Based on what we found, what implications do these findings have for games journalism, game studies, future avenues of research, and the games industry? The following areas of improvement stem from the discourses that arose in the study.

*1. Avoiding toxic optimism and fetishization in games journalism*. The toxic optimism that accompanies self-congratulations in game news articles may be detrimental to future disability advocacy. We encourage games journalism outlets to avoid toxic optimism by addressing successes in accessibility as steps toward improvement rather than a reason to celebrate prematurely. Similarly, the fetishization of people with disabilities, especially in how news photographs frame them, is hurtful and condescending. We advise that game news organization portray people with disabilities as they would anybody else and avoid extraneous details, in text and in images, regarding their disabilities to the point of corporeal fascination. Efforts to avoid toxic optimism and fetishization would uphold principles of advocacy and problem solving.

*2. Cultural change in the norms around designing for accessibility*.Second, there is a meaningful difference between adding accessibility options and building accessibility into the design-logic of game projects. Universally accessible design perhaps cannot be perfectly applied to every game (Grammenos, Savidi, & Stephanidis, 2009), but game developers can apply thoughtfulness toward accessibility in the game creation process. We need greater awareness and cultural acceptance of design approaches that are inclusive, such as for enhanced accessibility. This may lead to improved games for the widest possible game-playing audience.

*3. Further communication between developers and players with disabilities*. The third suggestion, related to the second, is to develop a culture of communication and co-design with players with disabilities. While the articles in this study often fetishized players who reached out to game companies to ask for accessible design changes, this suggestion preempts this by including players with disabilities, and their concerns, into the game design process. Rather than seeing people with disabilities as separate individuals, designers should consider how to see them as partners who can collaborate to build the experience. The game *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* found great success by doing something similar with persons who experience symptoms of psychosis (Antoniades, 2016). Mass-marketed, wide-release games, which often spend years in development, should include persons with disabilities as consultants and co-creators, especially since their input would most likely improve the experience for all players.

*4. Advocacy for sharing best practices and standards*. Fourth, large game studios should publicly announce how they adhere to current best practices for universal design and accessibility. In addition, they should continue to further the field, and participate alongside other studios across the industry in developing and sharing guidelines and design patterns that can help all organizations. These documents should come with suggestions on how to adapt the guidelines to different types of game experiences so that game companies can adjust how they approach accessibility depending on the nature of each game. Organizations like AbleGamers Foundation are already sharing best practices and design patterns (Barlet & Spohn, 2013). The FairPlay Alliance can serve as a model of how game studios can share best practices across the industry so that each studio does not have to continually recreate policies or practices.

*5. All players benefit from greater accessibility*. While we are discussing how changes in culture and design can better support people with disabilities, these changes will also help all people. We have played video games our entire life, and they form both a part of our identity and how we spend our time. Following O’Toole’s (2013) invitation for researchers to disclose their relationship to disability, we typically inhabit a subject position without disabilities, but we can recall moments when greater accessibility would have helped. For instance, one author shattered an elbow in a bicycle accident. The splints and the surgery that included a metal plate and seven screws affected their ability to play games. The other author was pregnant multiple times and extremely ill each time—causing limited ability to navigate virtual environments—and then was nursing a child afterward, further limiting movement. How important it would have been—to our identity, psyche, and sense of self—to be able to play games one-handed or with other accessibility options during those months of recovery or pregnancy and nursing! Throughout the lifespan, people’s ability to play games may change, and this has acutely real consequences. Adequately understanding how we implicitly talk about accessibility in gaming carries with it the potential to practically improve lives. Designing for accessibility, and creating a culture of accessibility, makes games and game culture more accessible for everyone.

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