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Portraits of Disability and Difference
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Video Games and Disability: A Complicated Story

A hacker in modern day San Francisco. An assassin in an 18th century style city. A resistance fighter under a Nazi regime. In recent years, disabled characters are being represented across many platforms, time periods, and genres within video games. As video game companies are simultaneously placing more emphasis on creating accessible games for disabled players and increasing representation of disabled characters, it is easy to feel accomplished for the work being done for accessibility in video games. However, as the prevalence of disabled characters increases in video games, we need to go beyond praising game companies for simply including disabled characters in order to analyze the quality and effectiveness of this representation. Just because a disabled character is present in a video game does not inherently mean that they provide good representation – in many cases these characters can feed into dangerous stereotypes about disability that perpetuate misinformation and harmful rhetoric. Therefore, we are going to dive into what makes a good representation of disabled characters in video games. To do so, we will analyze three games: Ubisoft's *Watchdogs 2*, Bethesda Softworks' and MachineGames' *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, and Arkane Studio's *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* for their representation of disabled characters to determine how effective, or how harmful, these representations are and how video games are a critical place for promoting inclusion.

Josh Sauchack is a member of the hacker group DedSec in Ubisoft's *Watchdogs 2*, set in modern San Francisco. The "hacktivist" group, which consists of the game's main character, Marcus, as well as supporting characters, Sitara, Wrench, Horatio, and Josh, fights against the

corrupt tech company Blume and their predatory ctOS operating system. It is in this setting that we meet Josh, a highly skilled hacker and activist with Asperger syndrome. While the idea of a highly intelligent, somewhat awkward programmer being the representation for Asperger's, or any diagnosis on the autism spectrum for that matter, at first would seem to be playing on stereotypes too much, Ubisoft takes care with Josh's character to ensure that he is not reduced to a stereotype of autism. The first way they do this is through the setting of the game: while Josh is a highly skilled programmer, being described as "a genius hacker who can break through just about any security system," he is surrounded by other highly intelligent hackers within the DedSec community and in a game centered around "hacktivism" and computer programming.¹ This ensures that this aspect of his personality is not treated as some extraordinary trait or as a way to turn Josh into a "supercrip," but rather to show the ways that he helps contribute to an already strong team.

Moving away from the hacker side of Josh's character, it would seem that Ubisoft placed great care into how they represented Josh's relationships with the DedSec members. Though Josh occasionally misunderstands jokes or references within the group, such as the time when Sitara had to explain the slang word "cornhole," he is neither alienated by his group for this, nor is he infantilized for misunderstanding.² Rather, Josh has close friends within the group, like Marcus and T-Bone, as well as those who he butts heads with, such as Wrench.

Outside of DedSec, Josh is given the opportunity to shine and take advantage of his enemies underestimating him, showing how Ubisoft put care into how they represented autism as well as those who infantilize autistic people. In a scene when one of the game's antagonists, another hacker named Lenni, is teaming up with DedSec to steal research from a corrupt tech company, Ubisoft uses Lenni's demeaning interactions with Josh both to vilify Lenni and give Josh the chance to shine in the field. At the beginning of the cutscene when Lenni, Marcus, and

¹ *Josh Sauchak*, Watch Dogs Wiki

² *Josh Sauchak*, Watch Dogs Wiki

Josh meet, Lenni refers to Josh as "little Mr. Spectrum" and "a little puppy" several times, while either only talking to Josh in a baby voice or speaking about the heist plans only to Marcus and leaving Josh out of the conversation.³ These kinds of interactions go on throughout the mission, even after Lenni forces Josh to stay outside, saying that "we're not risking him. Sugar plum stays put."⁴ At the end, however, as Lenni is attempting to run away with the research that DedSec sought to destroy, Josh stops her and asks to see the tech, which she agrees to only because of him "puppy dogging" her.⁵ While she is showing Josh the nanotech, however, she does not realize that he is simultaneously scanning her briefcase to gain evidence to incriminate her in the theft. When Josh explains this to Marcus, who is confused about why Josh let her get away, Josh tells Marcus "don't fuck with the Hawt Sauce" (Hawt Sauce referring to Josh's online pseudonym), showing how Josh took advantage of Lenni's underestimation in order to gain information on her and the technology she stole. Rather than having Josh rely on Marcus to protect him from Lenni, Ubisoft strategically decides to give Josh the opportunity to shine in the field and show how he uses the way that his enemies underestimate him to his advantage. In doing so, Ubisoft allows Josh to use his disability to his advantage, not because of some mysterious superpower that it gives him, but because of the way he is able to take advantage of his enemies not seeing him as a threat. In this way, the game creates a strong character, both in terms of hacking prowess and strategic work in the field, and a good representation of Asperger's that empowers without infantilizing or demeaning its autistic audience.

Max Hass, a member of the Kreisau Circle, a group of resistance fighters in the Nazi-ruled world of MachineGames' *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, has an intellectual disability stemming from an unknown brain injury as an infant. Though it would at first seem good for a video game to represent an intellectually disabled character, given that this kind of representation is incredibly rare in video games (to my best knowledge, *Wolfenstein* is the only

³ 007Tubemaster, *Watch Dogs 2 - Don't **** with the Hawt Sauce*

⁴ 007Tubemaster, *Watch Dogs 2 - Don't **** with the Hawt Sauce*

⁵ 007Tubemaster, *Watch Dogs 2 - Don't **** with the Hawt Sauce*

AAA game with such a character to date), Max's character is poorly executed and plays too heavily into stereotypes and super-crippling. Max is portrayed as having superhuman strength in a game where, though the characters have more enhanced abilities than the average person because of their occupation in fighting Nazis, none even come close to the near superpowers which Max is given. Max is shown in one scene in particular as surviving, and in fact barely noticing, being shot in the chest multiple times while fighting, and is then seen ripping a door fully off of a car in that same scene.⁶ Beyond his incredible and largely unexplained strength, Max is described as "showcasing a mysterious level of intelligence" despite his intellectual disability, and is able to beat a "genius-level" man at a game of chess, unlock a secret in "advanced philosophical literature," and pull off incredible tricks of physics at a pool table.⁷ None of these abilities are explained by his backstory, which includes him being "raised in secret by his grandmother" and later taken in by a resistance member, neither of whom were likely to teach him "advanced philosophical literature" or chess.⁸

While it is important to show that people with intellectual disabilities can still think for themselves and be independent, going to the extreme of giving Max incredible, untrained and unexplained knowledge in fields which the other characters have spent their lives learning feels like a cheap way to have the audience and other resistance members be continually surprised by Max's "mysterious...intelligence." In doing so, the audience is unintentionally alienated from Max, and this idea of his brain being "mysterious" seems to accentuate a lack of understanding, and lack of care to understand, how intellectually disabled people see and understand the world. By boiling his personality down to the stereotypical behaviors of intellectual disability and simultaneously giving Max superhuman abilities, MachineGames takes away the ability that video games hold to promote empathy to their audience, especially for people with intellectual disabilities who are rarely represented in mainstream media.

⁶ genericHenle, *Wolfenstein: The New Order - Best Max Hass Scene*

⁷ *Max Hass*, Wolfenstein Wiki

⁸ *Max Hass*, Wolfenstein Wiki

This lack of empathy for Max is also seen reflected in the way his able-bodied crewmates interact with him. Examples range from Dr. Set Roth yelling at Max and calling him a "stupid golem" after he loses a chess match to Max, to his fellow crewmates saying "here comes the idiot" and "he's going to kill us all" when Max is helping stabilize a bomb.⁹ By having all of the other main characters - characters whom the game humanizes by giving them each their own flaws and complicated backstories - treat Max this way, it encourages the player, who may relate to some of those main characters, to do the same. Additionally, instead of providing good representation for people with intellectual disabilities, those who play this game will only find a stereotypical supercrip representing their community, and see that supercrip being continually rejected by his own community.

While MachineGames seemed to be making good steps towards inclusion, especially given that they had two disabled characters in *Wolfenstein: The New Order*, while most games have only one if any, quantity cannot be taken over quality in terms of representation. Because of the way that MachineGames uses Max as a supercrip and fails to build empathy for his character, they seem to unintentionally discourage understanding and representation of intellectual disabilities rather than promote it.

Our final representation of disability in video games is Billie Lurk, the main player character for *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* who is a skilled assassin and member of the Whalers, a group of assassins in the fictional city of Dunwall. Billie is in many ways fantastic representation of the disabled community: she is a black, queer, disabled woman who is not stereotyped, patronized, or made into a martyr by the game. She is portrayed as powerful and a skilled assassin both in her game, *Death of the Outsider*, and the game's predecessor, *Dishonored 2*. Additionally, though Billie has superpowers, such as the ability to use a Windblast scream, shoot thorns from her wrists, and increased health, these kinds of abilities are found in other characters as well and are not related to her disability. The Windblast scream and thorns

⁹ BabyZone MAX HASS Best Scenes - *Wolfenstein 2 The New Colossus*

in particular are from her alliance with a group of witches in the game who also possess this power.¹⁰ Though the game does start to edge towards the territory of "supercrapping" by giving Billie magical abilities through her crystal eyepatch, these abilities are explained in the plot as more of a function of the crystal itself, rather than her disability giving her some unexplained superpower, as we see with Max Hass gaining mysterious abilities seemingly out of nowhere.

In these ways, Billie's role in *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* overall carries good representation of the disabled community. However, as we dive into previous games in the *Dishonored* series and Billie's roles in those, things start to get a little more complicated. In particular, there is a certain route which one can take in *Dishonored 2*, the prequel to *Death of the Outsider*, in which the player is able to reverse time to prevent an accident that resulted in Billie's loss of an arm and eye. While this is a very minor and easily missed ending in *Dishonored 2*, the implications among the *Dishonored* fanbase are enormous. Specifically, the fanbase seems to validate the player going back in time to "fix" Billie's disability. As a result, when searching for this ending on message boards, it is not uncommon to come across comments like "she got un-maimed" or have people berating the game for not outwardly validating the players for "fixing" Billie, stating, "I just really wanted [Billie] to know that we unfucked her eye and arm."¹¹ Having these kinds of endings create unintended consequences within the game's fanbase and community, paving the way for ableist comments and language about how she should be cured, and creating a bad environment for people with these disabilities who cannot time travel to "fix" themselves, nor would likely want to. Including this ending then encourages a toxic mindset within the game's majority able-bodied audience that disability should be corrected or cured, even if it is through difficult or hidden routes - a mindset that becomes all the more troubling with the new inventions of CRISPR and other such gene altering mechanisms threatening to make these "fixes" into a reality.

¹⁰ *Billie Lurk*, Dishonored Wiki

¹¹ GM Pax, *Megan foster Recovery? :: Dishonored 2 General Discussions*; Lahogoni, *r/dishonored - *spoiler* Does Meagan Foster Comment On Her Arm?*

Though the game developers are not wholly responsible for their fanbase making ableist comments, by creating endings where a player can "fix" a disabled person, they promote an idea that, even if this path is a difficult one to find naturally, it is morally the right one. An easy solution to avoid this reaction from the fanbase would be to simply take out this minor detail from the time travel mission, and still include the other aspects of restoration, such as when a building and land are restored from their previously ruined state, while leaving out the "restoration" of Billie's eye and arm. Arkane Studio's *Dishonored* series therefore proves to be complicated in its representation of disabled characters, though they at least appear to be moving in the right direction with their newer titles.

Video games are an entertainment medium that has the potential unlike any other to build empathy, by literally allowing the player to step into another person's life for a while, and they provide a crucial opportunity to not only give disabled gamers representation, but also to build empathy within a larger able-bodied audience. For this reason, in addition to the fact that a large portion of the gaming community consists of young adults and teenagers who are still learning empathy for different groups of people or who are seeking validation and representation of their own identity, it is critical that representation of disabled people is done right and does not promote stereotypes. While many companies, like Ubisoft with *Watchdogs 2*, are making great steps in the right direction by including disabled people in the game-making process, companies like MachineGames still have strides to make if they want to include good representation of disabled people. As the disability activism saying goes, "nothing about us without us," and the many examples of bad or ineffective disabled representation in games prove how critical this inclusion at the game-maker's table is when bringing disabled characters into this medium.

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