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**Representing dis/ability and
depicting ableism in video games**

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Transcript

Hello everybody. I'm glad to be part of this wonderful conference, even if I'm not with you physically.

My name is Hélène Sellier, and I'm a French narrative designer and researcher working in the indie studio The Seed Crew. This talk is about representing dis/ability in video games, and especially games for children.

But first things first. What is dis/ability ? In our western contemporary societies, disability is often understood as a medical condition. In the USA and in the UK, this understanding is maybe a bit less common than in France (from which I am talking to you), because of the disability rights movement that appeared in the second half of the twenty-first century. But the medical model of disability is still very much present in our western cultures. In this approach of disability, the main focus is on individual physiological and/or cognitive impairments. This biologically essentialist view of disability has been criticized, and the scientific fields that challenged it the most are called Disability Studies and Critical Disability Studies. The main idea is that disability and ability are social constructs, different from one culture to another. Since ability/disability are not absolute and immutable concepts, there are power relations involved in the social construction of what is an impairment or not. One seminal work on this subject is Goffman's book *Stigma*. Goffman not only points out that the significance of disability is socially constructed, but also what is perceived as different is constructed as a stigma. This work, as well as Robert Murphy's theory on liminality (which shows how disabled people are defined as the margins of the social space), inspired a lot of researchers. For example, in *Extraordinary Bodies*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson creates the notion of "normate" to describe an idealized position that has dominance and authority in society (Garland-Thomson 1997: 8). I'm not going to give you a complete history of Disability Studies, and I'm not an expert of this field, but when it comes to understanding disability from a social point of view, one concept is essential: ableism.

The definition which is often given is Fiona Campbell's one. She writes that ableism is "A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human." (Campbell, 2001, p. 44).

Other researchers added to this definition, and I find Dan Goodley's also useful. He explains (2018) that "the dis/ability complex recognizes that in order for disability to be reproduced it requires its hidden referent to be present; namely, ableism. Disability all too often appears in our cultural psyche as a problem of body or mind, as an object of rehabilitative or curative intervention. Ability, meanwhile, is posited as an idealized marker of successful citizenship."

He considers ableism as oppressive actions which exclude, eradicate and neutralise individuals which are deemed abnormal in a capitalist society which values performance.

Recent research tries to widen and question the concept of the social model of disability. On one hand, Crip Studies, inspired by Queer Studies and the pride reclaimed by minority groups, develop the idea that difference should be acknowledged and praised. On this subject, you can read Alison Kafer's book *Feminist, queer, Crip*. On the other hand, some researchers argue that the social model of disability tends to reduce impairment to a mere discursive term and tends to ignore how disability is lived physiologically and psychologically. See Tom Shakespeare's research on this topic.

What we should retain from these rich/inspiring discussions is that disability is a complex and multifactorial phenomenon. To sum up its different aspects, I like this quote of the French sociologist Alain Blanc : "Si la déficience est un attribut, le handicap est une relation impliquant trois registres liés et inégalement prégnants dans le temps et dans l'espace : un corps défaillant doté de capacités décalées vis-à-vis des normes sociales et des attentes collectives ; un environnement matériel et social inhospitalier, parfois rétif au bon accueil des personnes handicapées ; des conceptions générales, eugénisme ou solidarité, encadrant et organisant les relations entre nous et ces gens-là."

["If deficiency is an attribute, disability is a relationship involving three interconnected elements that are unequally hierarchized over time and space:

1- a defective body endowed with capacities that are out of step with social norms and collective expectations;

2- an inhospitable material and social environment that is sometimes resistant to welcoming disabled people properly;

3- and general notions, either framed as eugenics or solidarity, that structure and organize the relationship between us and these people."]

Because disability is such a complex phenomenon which intertwines individual, social, political and cultural aspects, you could expect a large variety of fictional representations of disability. However, since our fictional representations are shaped by our collective beliefs, this is not the case. On the contrary, "disability tends to be figured in cultural representations as an absolute state of otherness that is opposed to a standard, normative body" to quote Snyder, Brueggermann and Garland-Thompson. This means that our cultural products reinforce an ableist ideology.

Representations of disability in video games are often especially problematic and hurtful. Disability is depicted as threatening, and is often used for horrific purposes. Diane Carr draws this conclusion in her study of *DeadSpace*, for example.

Video games also tend to represent the body in terms of measurable abilities (such as health) and promote able-bodiedness as the invisible norm. Diane Carr uses the example of *Deus Ex: Human Evolution* to make her point. Simon Ledger makes the same argument, and adds that in video games (as in other media), dis/ability is used to express something more : "Even if characters appear that are marked as disabled, there is nearly always an accompanying plot which explains this variation from the norm".

Some games try to give another representation of disability (for example *Borderlands 2* according to XXX or *Overwatch* according to XXX), but it's still very uncommon. The same observations can be made for children's books: they correspond to cultural contexts and are mainly fuelled by ableist ideology. In her PhD thesis on children's books in France and Italy, Laurence Joselin explains that there are different stereotypes for each impairment. For example, autism is often associated with violence. The books in her corpus all depict a disabled character who evolves from a horrible and lonely situation to a position where they are integrated in the family or society, and the texts thus suggest that being disabled is something inherently sad.

The contemporary representations of disability in video games and in children literature, as in other media and genres, don't do justice to the complexity of dis/ability. But how can we improve those representations? And more precisely, how can we convey such a multifactorial phenomenon in a game *for children*? How can we depict the intertwined layers of social construct, lived experience, interpersonal codes of conduct, collective beliefs, systemic organisation and make them understandable for children?

I don't have final answers to those questions, but I will give potential design solutions, taking our game *Alix et Yanis: la disparition d'Albert le hamster* as an example. It's a small narrative and puzzle game for children. The game tells the story of the disappearance of the class' hamster, Albert. The player controls Alix, a girl who is a very enthusiastic girl with ADHD who likes sport. She is always with her friend Yanis who is a shy boy who loves detective stories and hates talking to people. During a school week, the two children investigate to try to find Albert with the help of their classmates.

A quick warning. The design solutions I will give are not at all revolutionary, they are well-known tricks in creative writing and narrative design. But the main idea of the talk is to see how they can be adapted and combined to represent dis/ability.

The first design solution I want to talk about is **narrative mechanics**. Often, serious games tend to use gameplay to sensitize players to a given impairment. For example, some games use the gameplay to make the player understand "how it feels" to be blind or to use a wheelchair. This systemic representation of disability can be problematic, because there's a chance that the player might end up believing that they have fully understood a complex physical and social experience only by playing a digital game for a few minutes. The user may also believe that playing the interactive experience is a good deed in itself, while nothing has really been done to help marginalized people. These arguments have originally been made by queer creators about the appropriation of their personal games in order to educate people on LGBTQIA+ identities, but a similar reasoning can be used for games representing disability through gameplay. Bo Ruberg thus criticizes a rhetoric of empathy in video game discourses. She argues that it leads to "taking up residence in the experiences of another". In this logic, playing a disabled character could be a form of "identity tourism" (according to Lisa Nakamura's concept) which would lead to a "wish feeling" (Sarah Ahmed). The question is thus simple: should we give up creating disabled main characters for assumed valid audiences? Should we give up using narrative mechanics to depict the impairment? I personally don't think these radical solutions are the best answer. But I do think that we need to take precautions when using gameplay to depict disability. The first precaution is to be careful and make clear in the design that the character is not a mere extension of the player, not a white page whose only characteristic is their impairment. I think

that the design must explicitly remind the player that there is a difference between the representation of disability in a game and its lived experience. In *Alix et Yanis*, there are characteristics that the player can choose about Alix (for example which sport she likes), but she already has an established personality. In this way, we encourage the player to develop an empathetic attitude. Empathy is here not understood in Bo Ruberg's way, as an appropriation, but rather as an emotional and cognitive phenomenon, following Jean Decety's work in the field of neurosciences. Empathy is defined in his research as the ability to perceive and understand the emotions of another person, sharing their feelings or not, but remaining conscious of one's own individuality. Empathy has an emotional component (which corresponds to the ability to identify other's feelings and to create a resonance between oneself and others), as well as a cognitive component (which corresponds to the ability to know that the other person has a different experience of the world than one's own). In the design, insisting on the idea that the depicted story is different from the player's own experience is essential for creating a game that doesn't colonize the life stories of marginalized people. In order to highlight the peculiarities of each individual experience, one solution is to refuse using only one modeling, but instead use variations of a model in order to show differences. This may seem abstract and complicated, but it can be very easy.

For example, in *Alix et Yanis*, we used this design principle to determine the number of choices given to the player. In most cases, the player must choose between two options, but a few times, the player is faced with numerous options. They represent the flow of Alix' disjointed thoughts. More than the fact that there are multiple possible answers, it's the discrepancy between the common binary choices and the rare multiple choices that may question the player. This design doesn't aim to faithfully represent the thought process of a girl with ADHD, but rather to create the possibility for the player to reflect upon another way of thinking. Another example taken from *Alix and Yanis* would be the variation in the design of interacting with the schoolbag. At the beginning of the game, it teaches the player that the object should be picked up at the beginning of the fictional day. During the first three days, the story does not proceed until the player has successfully done this action. However, during the fourth and fifth day, if the player forgets to pick up the bag, the story continues, but the teacher makes unpleasant comments. Since there is a good chance that the player doesn't remember to pick up the bag, the design lets them experience something similar (but not identical) to difficulties some people with ADHD have. It's an opportunity to create a resonance, while emphasizing that the experience can't compare in terms of distress and repercussions. This design solution consisting in creating variations rather than using one model throughout the game also has the advantage making clear that the narrative mechanic is a simplification which can't faithfully transcribe a lived experience. Using gameplay to depict disability can be interesting, but only if the design and the discourse accompanying the game insist on the idea of a schematization. This allows to defuse the problem of the appropriation of marginalized people's lives. However, representing impairments through narrative mechanics cannot be the only representation of disability because it tends to support a medical model of disability and conceal social and cultural elements. I'll give you a few other design solutions to represent dis/ability as a social construct, but don't worry, I'll be more concise than for narrative mechanics.

Another narrative tool to represent the dis/ability in its complexity is **character design**. First, while imagining the character traits or the visual aspects of the characters, stereotypes are to be banned for an appropriate representation of dis/ability. For example, the point is to

make sure that they won't be labeled "inspirational" and "uplifting". In our game, Alix does not solve the investigation about Albert's disappearance alone, her thought process is not depicted as a "superpower" that would allow her to see something that the others couldn't. On the contrary, all the children try to help.

This realistic representation also means that no character should be perfect in the way they treat another human being. Even if Alix has ADHD (and thus could be considered disabled), she makes mistakes about how to approach the topic of one's disability with other characters. The adults' behavior also isn't impeccable. For example, the teacher calls Alix a name for being forgetful ("tête de linotte" in French), even though she's not to be blamed for this.

So, the disability is part of the character's identity (for example, Nathan is deaf/hard-of-hearing), but their entire personality and their interests are not defined by the impairment (Nathan loves rollerblades). As Stuart Hall argues, identities are always evolving, depend on the social context and contain a discursive dimension. Nathan is first defined to Alix as a deaf person by the adult who helps him, and he reclaims this identity for himself only at the end of the game.

Creating a variety of round characters is an interesting way to raise the issue about social norms. For example, in *Alix et Yanis*, Sofia's scar on her face is perceived as abnormal by the characters, whereas Hugo's glasses are not deemed strange by the children. The difference of treatment of a physical aspect allows players to question the notion of normalcy. Common considerations in character design can be used and adapted to represent disability in relation to one's identity.

Besides narrative mechanics and character design, **branching narratives** is an appealing tool to represent dis/ability because it is a way to highlight the social experience of dis/ability. The choices make it possible to depict both the strategies used by a disabled character to navigate an ableist and normative social world (such as passing) and the various potential reactions to another person's disability (such as rejection or solidarity). In *Alix et Yanis*, this representation of dis/ability is often used. For example, Hugo tells Sofia that her scar will frighten Albert and the player can choose to contradict Hugo. Or in another part of the game, the player can decide to ask Sofia about her scar, but the question is intrusive and leads to Sofia not trusting Alix.

Another example is when the player can choose to say hello to Julie even if the teacher explained that she can't talk or to continue the conversation. If Alix acknowledges Julie, she'll say hi by waving her hand. Such interactions aim to represent the wide spectrum of behaviors, from "benevolent" ableism to respect. One thing to keep in mind in the design of consequences for branching narratives is that actions shouldn't be rewarded just because they're benevolent or harmless. For example, in our game, Alix can help Yanis to manage his social anxiety by encouraging him to ask questions, but Yanis' friendship doesn't become stronger because of this choice. Branching narratives and variables are a useful tool to depict the different attitudes someone can have, but shouldn't be linked with the kind of moral system traditionally found in video games for a nuanced representation of dis/ability.

The type of story also influences how dis/ability is represented. A **story about everyday life** is particularly suitable for representing disability in mundane situations (such as going to school). This setting shouldn't be a pretext to show how a disabled character still manages to do something common - which would be an ableist narrative, but rather allows to represent individual needs, adaptations and to focus on accessibility. Instead of promoting a category-based approach of disability by only stating the characters' disability (Alix has ADHD), our game tries to use realistic dialogues to insist on the manifestations of disabilities. For example, the teacher reminds Alix to sit in the first row or Aïda explains to Alix and Yanis that they need to be close to Nathan in order for him to understand them.

Favouring realistic situations and conversations also gives an opportunity to represent what remains unspoken. For example, Linh has difficulties reading and writing and that is how her issues are described, but her disability or her diagnosis is never named, and she doesn't benefit from special accommodations. The story paradoxically points out the importance of a medical diagnosis in France as a condition for accessibility measures.

Using disability as a **plot element** is tricky, because it can lead to essentializing, in the sense that it reduces people's life to their disability. However, in an everyday life story, disability can be used in the storyline to represent the non-existent level of literacy.

For example, at one point of the game, Alix and Yanis think Aïda is responsible for Albert's disappearance and that she has kidnapped him. Their suspicion is anchored in their lack of knowledge about her role as Nathan's learning assistant.

Even for an everyday life story, the **representation of the world** may contain statements about dis/ability. In Alix et Yanis, we have three backgrounds : the playground, the classroom and the toilets.

The third place might seem a bit weird at first (why not represent the lunchroom or the library or the gym ?), but it offers the possibility to show how dis/ability is also constructed as a margin in the social spaces. The toilets are the place where Sofia goes when she wants to be alone during recess, where Linh and Hugo ambush Alix to criticise her forgetfulness and accuse her of letting Albert escape. Depicting a peripheral space such as toilets allows for other representations of dis/ability than the traditional discourse of sympathy. The visual depiction in itself also gives an opportunity to question how disabled people are marginalised. We purposefully decided not to represent toilets for disabled people to show how common their exclusion is.

Because it's difficult to address the idea of systemic and structural aspects of ableism (especially in a fiction for children), the **organization of the narration** is an interesting tool to represent this aspect of the social construction of dis/ability. Rather than having a character denounce how our institutions and their management tend to exclude disabled people, we decided to represent this alienation by translating it in the structure of the narration. Julie is a girl who doesn't use spoken language and is enrolled in a specialised school. She only comes to "regular" school a few hours every week.

To highlight this segregation, we decided that Julie would have a central role in the story (she is the one who notices Albert is missing), but that she would have a minimal role in the

narration (she is present in two episodes out of five). This narrative structure mimics the social place which is attributed to the character.

To conclude, since dis/ability is a complex phenomenon which intertwines individual, interpersonal, social, cultural and economical factors, a game about dis/ability cannot focus on only one aspect (such as impairment) and use one narrative device (such as a disabled character). Different narrative tools (such as narrative mechanics, character design, branching narratives, story, plot, worldbuilding and narration) need to be combined in order to give a truthful representation. In the same way, a contemporary representation of dis/ability cannot exclude the depiction of ableism, even if the oppression is not the centre of the narrative experience.

Thank you for listening. I hope you find my ramblings interesting !

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