No Heroes: The Erasure of Chronic Health Conditions from Videogames

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ABSTRACT

Exposure to diverse representations in media is an important part of identity formation and the dismantling of stereotypes and stigma (Athanases 1998: 292). Videogames, as popular entertainment media, play an important part in this process (Morris & Forrest 2013). Rich, complex pre-constructed characters can present the player with a variety of unfamiliar (and familiar) crafted viewpoints, but other forms of media—literature, film, TV—also allow this possibility. Games with customisable, player-created protagonists are uniquely able to provide an experience where the player—their visage, their values, and their decisions—can be the central agent of change.

With regards to representation, the largest benefit of character creation tools in videogames is that the player is presented with a simple, seemingly 'blank-slate' character onto which they can more easily project their own identity (Papale 2014). This should offer the player the opportunity to experiment with facets of their identity, allowing them to process, understand, and accept these facets, thereby strengthening their sense of self. However, the ability to customise any character elements beyond the cosmetic or superficial—like the presence of chronic mental or physical illnesses and disabilities— remains absent from even the most robust and current of games. The ability to create a likeness of almost any face—including the faces of celebrities or other videogame characters—in Bethesda's *Fallout 4* (2015) does not offer all players equal opportunity to recreate substantial aspects of their identities, which enforces exclusionary notions of 'normal' and 'heroic' that exclude sufferers of chronic health conditions.

'Chronic health conditions' includes a vast range of illnesses, injuries, and diseases. Anderson and Horvath (2004) define chronic conditions as 'conditions that last a year or more and require ongoing medical attention and/or limit activities of daily living.' These conditions can manifest differently, to varying degrees of severity, and do not always have obvious physical symptoms—or are deliberately concealed by the sufferer (Joachim & Acorn 2000); these factors contribute to a lack of understanding and awareness about chronic health conditions that gives rise to stereotyping and stigmatisation.

Stereotyping and stigmatising is where the issue arises: character creation tools, in not providing an avenue for chronic health conditions to be represented, contribute to a culture of misunderstanding. *Fallout 4* offers players the opportunity to recreate and then insert themselves into a digital wasteland but demands that the player-character be able-bodied. Players with chronic health conditions— encouraged to take on the role of whomever they wish and do whatever they desire—are met with a firm realisation: they can be anybody except themselves. While a facial likeness can be achieved, and while *Fallout 4* does offer opportunities to express some degree of gender and sexuality identity, the player-character is unable to express or experience symptoms of a mental or physical chronic health condition. This lack of freedom is exacerbated by the broader lack of representation of chronic health conditions in videogames; when coupled with the fact that disability is often used as an 'easy' way to characterise villainous characters—such as *Fallout 4*'s proto-villain, Conrad Kellogg—this can leave chronic health sufferers with only negative representations or no representation at all.

Correcting this lack of representation and beginning to dismantle the normative values that *Fallout 4*'s approach to character creation perpetuates requires more than a quick fix. There are a number of technical obstacles for developers to overcome, and an effective solution requires chronic health conditions to be implemented in a meaningful way. This paper will discuss these challenges as they relate to *Fallout 4* and the ways in which they inadvertently contribute to normative values that erase sections of the player base.

BIO
Dakoda Barker is a DCA candidate at the University of the Sunshine Coast researching the representation of chronic health conditions in videogames. He currently tutors in serious games at the University of the Sunshine Coast. His writing has been published online at *Kill Screen*, *PC & Tech Authority*, and *Impulse Gamer*, and in print with *Hyper* and *PC Powerplay*. He really loves pork buns.

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