

CYBER
BODIES:
CHEAT CODES
DISABLED
Autistic characters
Sanity systems

Memory
Insufficient

*the games
history
e-zine*

Disabilities
and games
history

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MEMORY INSUFFICIENT

the games history e-zine



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Memory Insufficient is a celebration of history.

First and foremost, it is an attempt to promote and encourage historical writing about games; social histories, biographies, historically situated criticism of games and anything else.

It is also a place to turn personal memories of games past into eye-opening written accounts. It is a place to honour the work of game developers who have influenced the path of history. It is a place to learn what games are - not as a formal discipline, but as lived realities.

Like all historical study, *Memory Insufficient* is fundamentally about citizenship. It's not enough to just remember and admire the games of the past. History is about understanding our place in the world; as developers, as critics and as players.

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CHEAT CODES DISABLED



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As gaming becomes more and more commonplace, the popular media has begun to explore how “gamer logic” (thinking that is informed by the lived experience of playing and socializing in virtual worlds) reflects and yet also recasts many of our traditional conceptions about the body. News stories attempt to explain new possibilities for embodied experiences in games through the figure of the disabled body which, such stories claim, stands to gain the most from technological advances that make the body obsolete. Such stories reinforce an ableist perspective even as they purport to reveal encouraging new developments in the lives of disabled people.

Yet gamer logics might also be useful in helping to transform what we imagine disability to mean and where we imagine it comes from. The 1984 cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* is an ideal site to catch glimpses of these alternate understandings of (dis)ability.

DISABLED BY WHOM?

I would like to begin by giving a brief introduction to the field of disability studies for those who might not be familiar. Disability studies scholars argue that the ways we have traditionally thought of and spoken about people with disabilities (as charity cases, as patients with medical problems in need of fixing, as unfortunate misfits or freaks of nature) need to be re-examined through a radical political lens.

They argue that disability is not something that is born into a body or something that tragically befalls a body.

In fact, they do not think disability exists as a property of the body at all! Rather, they believe disability is a label, a sorting system we construct through the descriptive words we use, the laws we write, and the environments that we build for ourselves, both social and physical.

According to this model, a body that doesn't conform to the expected norm only becomes disabled when the environment is built in such a way as to inhibit that body.

For example, someone who uses a wheelchair only becomes "disabled" when they need to enter a building which can only be accessed via stairs. This understanding of the category of disability is called the "civil rights" model, as one of the key theoretical insights posed by this model is the idea that systematic discrimination against people with disabilities has historically overlapped with that faced by women, people of color, and GLBTQ individuals. In fact, much of the rhetoric of used to justify discrimination against these groups is grounded in the discourse of disability, from the accusation that women are too hysterical and emotionally unstable to be trusted with responsibilities outside the home to the assumption that African Americans were biologically inferior to more highly evolved whites and so needed to be held in bondage by their supposed genetic "superiors" to the classification of homosexuality as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association up until 1974.

The disability rights movement posits that, because disability is an invented category and not some universal standard according to which all bodies must inevitably be measured, it is possible for us to intervene and rethink how we structure our world with regards to bodily difference. Since the 1970s, disability rights activists have been working on this very issue in diverse ways, advocating for returning veterans from the Vietnam War, working to educate the public about HIV and AIDS, and even occupying the Capitol Building in support of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which passed in 1990.

However, in contrast to the civil rights model adopted by activists and scholars, the medical model of disability remains dominant in the popular public discourse around the issue of disability. The medical model is an interpretive schema that describes disability as a bodily deficiency that varies from a preferred "normal" or "able" body and that must be diagnosed, monitored, and cured if the so-labeled individual hopes to fully participate in society. Scholars like Rosemarie Garland Thompson and Lennard J. Davis theorize that the medical model of disability remains so popular and widespread because, unlike categories such as race, gender, and sexuality, disability is a category that anyone can enter at any time, through an accident, the onset of illness, or even through what Thompson calls "the gradually disabling process of aging".

VIRTUAL NORMALITY

The fear that one might someday end up on the wrong side of the abled/disabled binary creates a need for reassurance that is assuaged when one tells stories about the fundamental, inherent differences between the two groups. These stories erect a distance between the abled and disabled that is not really there but that makes able bodied people feel more comfortable and less vulnerable. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder say that these stories function as "narrative prostheses," augmentations of our conception of personhood (which itself operates through discourse) that function in much the same way as a prosthetic leg functions to create an illusion of "wholeness."

When it comes to video game culture and media, narrative prosthesis abounds as advertisers and the news outlets tap into the medical model of disability, simultaneously explaining the wonders that virtual worlds are capable of and reinforcing the cultural line that separates the disabled from the able-bodied. Headlines like "Second Life is my Wheelchair", and "For Disabled, Video Games Can Be a Lifesaver" each tout the ability of video games and virtual reality to serve as a prosthetic, allowing a group marked by their physical differences at a more "normal" life.

Stories brag that using a digital avatar allows disabled gamers to, for example, “forget [their] disability and experience walking life”. Video games are also praised for allowing people with disabilities to avoid stigmatization from their fellow gamers by rendering their disability invisible in-game. In fact, many stories use the testimony of people with disabilities as a part of their framing. These stories emphasize the difficulty of living in a world that discriminates against disabled people and singles out video games and virtual realities as technologies that might allow one to avoid the stigma associated with being visibly different. For example, Mark Barlet, the founder of the AbleGamers Foundation, a charity dedicated to making digital games more accessible to people with disabilities (and himself a disabled veteran) told interviewers:

...you can free yourself from your disability through a video game, you can make friends, you can present yourself in a way that has less stigma around your disability.

And Nissa Ludwig, who plays everything from fantasy games like *World of Warcraft* to casual games like *Rock Band*, told NBC News that, when she plays games, she has “the opportunity to be a human being and not be judged by what I look like”.

I find it telling that, in each case, a media outlet sought out, published, and therefore authorized and valorized a story in which people with disabilities expressed relief that they could pass as able-bodied while online. This is not to say that those experiences and feelings are somehow false or wrong to have on the part of those who have them. Rather, I am concerned about the pattern that the selection and the repeated re-telling of that one story helps to normalize.



YOU CAN HAVE IT TOO

The repetition of this story suggests that this image of disabled people as anxiously chasing an able-bodied ideal and wishing that their bodies could be hidden from the public eye is that one news consumers expect and desire, one in which the problem of discrimination that disabled people face can be solved by making disabled people invisible. Rather than acknowledging the systematic prejudice that leads to the poor treatment of people with disabilities, this “solution” simply hides them away, so no able-bodied people have to be “confronted” with the presence of different bodies.

It is clear that this story fulfills a desire on the part of its audience, because it was also used in advertisements for high-tech products. This suggests that the ability to disappear disability is something that corporations think their customers want.

Take the television advertisement for MCI which aired in 1999, pictured above. Lisa Nakamura wrote this about this ad in her seminal book *Cybertypes*:

[It] sells not only MCI Internet services but also a particular kind of content: the idea that getting online and becoming part of a global network will liberate the user from the body, with its inconvenient and limiting attributes such as race, gender, disability, and age.

Note the implicit links being drawn between race, gender, and disability. Bodies that display the markers of any of those categories (in other words, the bodies of people of color, women, and people with disabilities) are made into problems that a utopian virtual existence can solve. In a way, being seen as raced or gendered (having a racial or gender identity that is not privileged) is constructed as an infirmity, a limitation, a “closed door,” a disability.

It would be easy to come to the conclusion that gamer culture is being used as nothing more than yet another tool used to maintain a division between able-bodied and disabled people. However, there is one thread of discourse running through gamer culture that cuts contrary to the typical story we tell about disabled bodies. That MCI commercial hints at this when it talks about the Internet as a place where “there are no infirmities, there are only minds”. Gamer culture posits that, in an all-digital environment, all bodies are “disabled” by virtue of being unable to navigate their (virtual) environment without the use of prosthetics like a keyboard and mouse or, in more imaginative fictions about virtual worlds, a console one can use to, as William Gibson put it in *Neuromancer*, “jack in” to cyberspace and divorce one’s consciousness from the “meat” of the body entirely.

Neuromancer is the story of a hacker named Case who is punished for stealing from his employer by having his ability to connect to the information superhighway called the Matrix destroyed. Case is not what one might typically think of as disabled. His body is normative, and he can navigate his physical environment perfectly well. But the physical world is not the environment he calls home. The Matrix is. And to get into the Matrix, Case must leave his body, which he derisively refers to as a “prison” or as mere “meat” behind and enter into a union with his computer module. In other words, Case considers himself disabled when he is deprived of his technological prosthesis.

Case’s negative perspective regarding “natural,” unaugmented bodies is reminiscent of Donna Haraway’s theory of the cyborg, which recognizes the piecemeal construct- edness of all bodies out of the cultural and technological “stuff” that surround them and looks for the advantages that such hybrid bodies can confer. Indeed, prosthetic enhancement is the new normal in *Neuromancer*’s Night City, from Ratz the bartender who wields a powerful plastic arm to Molly, whose “razor girl” modifications including augmented quicksilver lenses that encase her eyes and Wolverine-style retractable claws that she hides beneath her fingernails.

The conclusion of the novel suggests that the most ideal bodies are those that exist entirely outside of the biological and the natural. Case jacks into the Matrix and catches a glimpse of himself and his deceased girlfriend, Linda Lee. Their consciousnesses have been downloaded and recorded by an advanced artificial intelligence. These digital doubles will live together happily in the Matrix, freed from death, pain, illness, and all the needs of their physical bodies. The real Case is stuck in the physical world, still forced to deal with his grief over Linda’s death and using drugs as an escape.

This final image paints embodiment itself as a kind of impairment by suggesting that the digital construct of Case will live a much happier, more fulfilling life than the real one. The digital Case is now a permanent part of the Matrix that the physical Case loves so much. The digital Case can never lose access to this space, while the physical Case could once again lose his ability to jack-in due to a failing of his body. He will lose it eventually, when his body breaks down at the hour of his death.

Neuromancer planted the seeds for a new understanding of disability that might develop through video games and virtual worlds: new environments that call for new bodily configurations.

These narratives are echoed in content and tone by countless utopian accounts of virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* crafted by gamers in the here and now. However, this is not to say that cyberpunk's vision of the cyborg as the standard of able-bodiedness will necessarily translate into a more egalitarian system of apportioning resources depending on one's embodiment.

Novels like *Neuromancer* still draw a line between acceptable bodies and unacceptable ones, between those deserving of care and those worthy only of being discarded in the black markets of the criminal underbelly of Night City. But, importantly, the hyper-capitalist dystopian underpinnings of cyberpunk novels like *Neuromancer* make it clear that one's place in the system is determined largely by one's access to money and by one's technological skill set, not some innate or "natural" biological trait with which one is born.

Such concerns reinject the material world and its "meat" into the virtual one by raising questions about which kinds of bodies have access to the privilege of disembodiment.

DIGITAL DISABILITIES

In digital environments, the most abject cripples are those who, like Case at the outset of the novel, have no access to technology at all. They are rendered un-persons by their lack of access to the virtual world where business operates and power circulates (my own students occasionally must be reminded as they wax poetic about the democratizing effects of internet technology that, in fact, "everybody" does not have a personal computer, laptop, or smart phone).

The second most pitiable group are those who have access to technology but who lack the education or the skill to use it well, the "newbies" who are considered "disabled" by virtue of their inability to effectively harness all of the tools that a virtual environment has to offer. One need not spend much time in a competitive online game before the disdain for unskilled "noobs" becomes apparent and the ablest slurs that permeate gamer discourse begin to fly.

At the top of the hierarchy, occupying the position we think of as able-bodied, are the console cowboys, the digital natives (itself a rather problematic term) who, through a combination of access, privilege, money, education, and skill, are set up to thrive in a virtual environment, even to bend that environment to their will. These are the super-users, the elite gamers, and the content producers who work in the video game industry.

The gamer community is not a utopia where ableism has been abolished. Those familiar injustices we see in the physical world have been translated over into the virtual one.

However, translations are never direct and transparent. During the process of translation, a space is opening up in the discourse of disability. From this space it becomes possible for us to question whether injustice is inevitable. The overt and intentional investment of labor and resources that goes into crafting what might be thought of as an able-bodied self in a digital world directly contrasts with the traditional image of able-bodiedness, which justifies ignoring and mistreating people with disabilities because of a presumed innate and natural difference.

In a virtual world, nothing is innate and everything is constructed except, perhaps, for the physical body of the user, which is ideally discarded entirely or at least minimized in importance.

I am not arguing that gamer culture is especially enlightened (or unenlightened) when it comes to questions of disability. Rather, I am arguing gamer culture enables us to image different configurations of bodies and technologies. And once we have a place in our discourse from which we can begin to imagining alternatives like these, it becomes much easier to begin the work of imagining a truly egalitarian system, one in which environments are crafted to serve all bodies rather than one in which bodies are forced to bend to their environments or risk alienation.

RESOURCES

The Able Gamers Foundation

►**Visit Online**

Lennard DAVIS (2002)

Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions.

►**Preview Online**

William GIBSON (1984)

Neuromancer

Donna HARAWAY (1991)

Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature

Phil JOHNSON (2012)

‘For Some With Disabilities, Gaming Fills a Basic Need.’

IT World. ►**Read Online**

Kristin KALNING (2009)

‘For Disabled, Video Games Can Be a Lifesaver.’

NBCNews.com ►**Read Online**

David T. MITCHELL and Sharon L. SNYDER (2001)

Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse.

►**Preview Online**

Lisa NAKAMURA (2002)

Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet.

Rosemary Garland THOMPSON (1997)

Extraordinary Bodies:

Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature.

►**Preview Online**

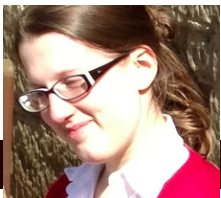
Rosemary Garland THOMPSON (1996)

Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body.

►**Preview Online**



DIFFERENT HEADS



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In my last year of university, I spent a weekend with some classmates and lecturers at an academic retreat. The keynote speech for the conference was so dull that rather than take notes in my notebook I drew a picture of the old country house in which we were staying. Later, when I showed the sketch to one of my lecturers, he said that it looked like it had been drawn by “one of those idiot savants”. When I told him that I had in fact been diagnosed with an autistic spectrum disorder – namely Asperger’s Syndrome – when I was ten years old, he said:

“Explains a lot.”

I already told this story in Issue 3 of *Five out of Ten*, but it’ll prove even more relevant to this topic. Because I’m not a savant, and nor are most people on the autistic spectrum, but you wouldn’t think it to look at books, movies, and now even video games.

Developers often say that they would love to include more minorities — be those of question of race, gender, or mental health — but don’t dare try in case they get it wrong. But those who would like to take a shot at writing one who is believable rather than just stereotypical would do well to start by looking at previous examples.

Meet David Archer, of *Mass Effect 2: Overlord* (2010). He is an adult male human, the brother of a Cerberus scientist called Gavin. He doesn’t like loud noises. He frequently recites numerical patterns, like the square roots of numbers like 912.04.

He has autism, and is also a mathematical savant.

David Archer is a useful example of the kind of bundle of characteristics that people who don’t know any better think of when somebody says the word “autism”, due in a large part to the Oscar-winning film *Rain Man* (1988). Like that film’s own autistic savant, Raymond, David repeats phrases that are irrelevant to the context, shows little evidence of emotions other than distress, and despite his ability to perform basic functions like walking and talking would likely be unable to live without supervision.

Like Raymond, David is at the mercy of a brother using him as a tool to advance his own goals, though rather than use his incredible mathematical skill to cheat at poker,

Gavin connects David's mind to a virtual intelligence in an attempt to learn how to control artificial intelligences called geth. Gavin tells Commander Shepard that David "volunteered to serve as a test subject" for this experiment, but he also says that he is "literally a human computer". This explains why he can communicate with the logical geth but also raises the question of whether he can give informed consent.

There's no subtlety to this ethical drama. When you reach David he is connected to a machine via all kinds of painful pieces of engineering, his mouth kept permanently open by two thick tubes, his eyes by several sharp-looking bits of metal. It's an image that is supposed to shock and disgust the player. A question of ethics all right, but one most reminiscent of the kinds of posters used in campaigns against animal testing.

David the machine, capable of complex calculations but not of conversation. David the poor abused beast, driven mad by the machinations of his captor. David the murderous monster, the bodies he and the VI leave in their wake a reaffirmation of the stereotype that people with mental health issues are dangerous.

Particularly poignant in this game in which humanity lives alongside various extra-terrestrials is this other comparison that Gavin makes:

"His autistic mind is as alien to me as an actual alien."

Like Gavin, the writers of the *Mass Effect 2: Overlord DLC* used David and his differentiating characteristics to achieve their own ends, and that's fine; that's what characters are for. But in emphasising autism as alienness they have pushed aside his humanity. That's dangerous. Creators are free to write the characters they want, but those with a conscience will consider what their audience takes away from those characters. They'll ask themselves if they really want to contribute to harmful stereotypes, or if they want to take their story in a new and more beneficial direction.

Autistic spectrum disorders exist along a spectrum. So even if there are people in the real world who really do act like David Archer (and we know that there is at least one real person on whom the character of Raymond was based), there are also people whose autism affects them in very different ways. Thankfully, a handful of games have opted to explore a different kind of autistic spectrum disorder.

Meet Patricia Tannis, of *Borderlands* (2009). She is an adult female human, employed by the Dahl Corporation to investigate the Vault on Pandora. She is highly intelligent. She finds it difficult to interact with other people without causing them and/or herself substantial discomfort.

She is described in one of the mission descriptions as "an insane introvert with Asperger's".

Already, Tannis is more complex than David Archer. Where he is a stereotypical autistic savant who exists in the *Mass Effect* universe purely so that he can be hooked up to that machine, she is a woman who has multiple psychoses, some of which she presumably had before she came to the planet of Pandora and some of which she seems to have picked up from extended exposure to its dangers.

If you know enough about autistic spectrum disorders, and Asperger's Syndrome in particular, you can spot traits that would have been relevant to Tannis' diagnosis. She has the "qualitative impairment in social interaction" and "restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities" that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fourth Edition) asks for. When she resorts to eating bugs, she does so in alphabetical order. She gets so stressed when a woman says "hello" to her that she has a spontaneous nose bleed.

Tannis' autistic behaviours are often over the top, and mingled in with behaviours that have other explanations — like when she tries to cope with undergoing torture

by talking to inanimate objects — but they're also more nuanced than those of David Archer. She might have been happy when one of her colleagues was eaten by a Skag because that meant that she could have his chair, but she feels differently when Roland dies, presumably because he is the first person who makes her feel that she could bear to live among others in the town of Sanctuary. She is complicated and contradictory. In other words, she is much more like a human than David is allowed to be.

We have to consider the motive. Tannis isn't labelled until *Borderlands 2* (2012), and only in that one mission description. Before that, she is just another quirky character. Given that she shares Pandora with people who commit mass murder and willingly set themselves on fire, it seems odd that she alone is given a clinical diagnosis. You have to wonder what made whoever wrote that one line feel the need to ask:

“How did an insane introvert with Asperger's manage to survive in Sanctuary?”

For anyone who has played the game and read many other mission descriptions before reaching this point, this reads like a joke, a quick one-liner meant to make you chuckle as you head off on your quest to find her scattered journal entries. Her mental illness becomes the punchline.

Maybe I'm being cynical and defensive, but if that description isn't meant to make us laugh then what purpose does it serve? Why label Tannis at all?

Perhaps the writers who worked on *Borderlands 2* ought to have paid more attention to previous games with characters on the autistic spectrum, in particular one that not only features two such characters but also never goes as far as to label them.

Meet River,

of *To the Moon* (2011). She is a female human, the acquaintance and then wife of Johnny Wyles. She struggles with many social conventions. She has what DSM-IV would call an “encompassing preoccupation” with lighthouses, and later with folding origami rabbits.

She has Asperger's Syndrome, but the game never directly tells you that.

To the Moon stands above other games in its portrayal of characters with autistic spectrum disorders for two reasons, and the first is this decision to never spell it out. Instead, the invisible protagonists talk amongst themselves about “her condition”, dropping hints like:

“Huh, I've never met a woman with it before.”

In travelling through Johnny's memories, which makes up the core of the game, the player even gets to see River receive her diagnosis. But still the condition isn't mentioned by name. Instead, the doctor gives her a book by Tony Attwood, whom particularly eager players might Google and discover to be a real clinical psychologist who specialises in Asperger's Syndrome. And that's the clearest hint the game ever gives.

It sounds simplistic, but because of this omission River is never reduced to “a person with Asperger's Syndrome”. She is just River, a person who has plenty of quirks but also has room for a unique personality in the player's eyes.

Like Tannis, River has behaviours that seem exaggerated — like her refusal to explain to her amnesiac husband why she is folding dozens and dozens of paper rabbits — but she's also given those shades of grey that make for interesting characters. When Johnny's longtime friend Nicholas says that River is “still so quiet”, Johnny points out that she is actually talkative around him and her friend (and Nicholas' wife) Isabelle and must just not be used to Nicholas. On their first date at the cinema she doesn't feel the need to sit next to Johnny or even let him know that she's there, but by the

time they're married we see her doing things like giving him a spontaneous hug when he suggests they build a home by her favourite lighthouse.

This nuance is further explored through the second reason that *To the Moon* should be studied by anyone wanting to include an autistic character in their game.

Meet Isabelle, of *To the Moon*. She also has Asperger's Syndrome. In the real world, of course, it's not particularly noteworthy to find two women with Asperger's Syndrome. I know more than one myself. But in a form of media that is frequently guilty of tokenism — the four-player co-op game that offers one female option, or that one black character thrown in to break up the sea of white faces — it's refreshing to see, especially when it's done with so little fanfare. Autism is more often diagnosed in men than in women, and yet here are two women on the autistic spectrum who have somehow found each other and become friends.

Besides which, Isabelle's presence is an educational one. She was diagnosed younger than River was and is more proficient with social interaction, so is better able to help the others to understand something about the condition. She might be blunt — like when she calls Johnny arrogant for saying he'll pretend to River that they can afford her healthcare and the house — but she also has enough introspection to explain herself:

“Well, I can't speak for her, but many of us do long for connections... Though, being able to articulate it is a different story. Just because she struggles to express it, it doesn't mean she doesn't feel anything. She's still there, right? Sometimes you just have to have faith that she cares.”

Just as Isabelle does, we can compare her with River and see without having to look too hard that labels — even doctor-approved ones — do not define people. That is the message that *Mass Effect 2: Overlord* fails to convey or even understand, and that *Borderlands 2* ignores for the sake of a joke. With *To the Moon*, it only takes a few words from one character to share that message. The fact that it's a character who is on the autistic spectrum herself makes it that much more poignant.

“Everyone with it is different, John. Just because she and I share the same syndrome, doesn't mean we share the same head.”

Now that DSM-V has subsumed Asperger's Syndrome under the broad umbrella of autistic spectrum, it should help creators to realise that Isabelle is right. No two people are the same, and so no two people with the same mental health issue are the same. Interesting autistic characters can only come from writers who keep that in mind.

RESOURCES

Laura Kate DALE (2013)

'To the Moon: A Story of Women and Aspergers'
Indie Haven. ►[Read Online](#).

Jordan Erica Webber (2012)

'Patricia Tannis, Asperger, and Me'
Five out of Ten Issue 3 (Reflecting Reality) ►[Read Online](#).

HOMICIDAL, GEOPHAGIC, CATATONIC



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Dungeons and Dragons is a poor source of information on holistic medicine. What we describe as ‘adventuring’ is in many ways a frighteningly militaristic pursuit, and the game’s approach to health, which has formed the bedrock of how most video games treat the question of life and death, is little more than a points-based assessment of a character’s ability to perform. Bodies are healed as easily as they are put down, with bedrest, potions and magic. Living vicariously through our fictional characters, we expect their bodies to heal on command or else give up entirely.

Minds are usually ignored in the tabletop game’s systems, but when mental health is introduced through supplementary rulesets, often the same ability-oriented principles apply.

Unearthed Arcana (I’m using the edition from 2004 as reproduced on dandwiki.com) introduces a system mostly borrowed from *Call of Cthulhu*. You take a psychological hit, and if it’s light enough you recover. More severe psychological damage scars the character permanently. Mental health—‘sanity’, as they call it in the olde-worlde parlance of DM guides—is primarily a question of how far the character has been incapacitated. Can they get up and keep fighting? Then push on. If not, well...

“The character may still attempt to stumble madly through the rest of an adventure. However, with her weakened grasp on reality, she is most likely a danger to herself and others.”

Tables are provided in *Unearthed Arcana* for both short- and long-term psychological injuries, to help players decide how mental health problems should manifest. Immediate effects are ranked in order of seriousness. If players roll a low number on their percentage dice, then they've got off lightly: perhaps their character temporarily faints (1-20%) or starts screaming (21-30%). A middling number leads to more serious effects, such as the sudden appearance of deviant eating desires (76-80%) or a rampant homicidal urge (61-65%). The highest rolls are given to 'stupor' and 'catatonia'. The implication is that uncontrollable violence is bad, but inaction is worse.

THE QUEST FOR CHANGE

This model of mental health is politically problematic, reflecting and contributing to a stereotype that people who suffer from mental illness are either dangerous, deviant or completely incapable. This is perhaps a result of the strange relationship that players have with their characters; they are vehicles for gameplay, so we push them into action the same way we as a society coerce people into working hard at the expense of their health. At least a homicidal character can keep adventuring.

This unsympathetic approach to health can also make roleplaying less satisfying. Emotional stories cry out for a simulation that addresses not just whether a character can act as desired by the player, but how their emotional journey progresses. In 2007, one user of an online forum lamented that the *Unearthed Arcana*'s sanity system was ill suited to modelling the psychological trauma of a sex abuse survivor:

“According to the rules, my character would only go into indefinite insanity and develop a mental illness if she lost 20% or more of her Sanity in one hour. She hasn't, and never has. She's been exposed to psychologically damaging stimulus over a long period of time.”

The forum poster also explained that even in the case of a single dramatic event such as rape, the probabilistic system of measuring damage is balanced such that a character more likely to survive with their mental health unscathed than to suffer any lasting damage. This, they remarked, is 'pretty optimistic'.

Amsel von Spreckelsen writes about sanity mechanics on their blog *Madness and Play*, even-handedly pointing out that while treating mental health with a similar hit points system to physical health makes good design sense, it can lead to poor results in terms of representation:

[These systems emerged] not, I believe, out of a desire to stigmatise or even make a point about how mental illness functions, but out of design choices based on modular thinking... [They] can be interesting, both mechanically and representationally, but they can also come with often unintended semantic baggage, implying things that are damaging and just untrue about the processes of mental health.

The design problem that von Spreckelsen highlights is one that has been bothering players for almost as long as tabletop roleplaying has existed. A search on Annarchive.com, Anna Anthropy's online collection of roleplaying magazines, reveals that attempts to improve *D&D*'s representation of mental health go all the way back to the 1970s.

FICTIONAL INSANITY

The magazines hosted on Annarchive gave role-playing game enthusiasts a way of sharing information and advice about running enjoyable and interesting campaigns. They show that early attempts to improve *D&D*'s sanity mechanics were largely concerned with a balance between creating a believable simulation of mental health, and making sure that the characters remained enjoyable to play.

In 1986, *Adventurer Magazine* ran two articles on psychology in games. Contributor Ste. Dillon provides a roll table for character traits such as 'calm' and 'imaginative'; using a roll table introduces a probabilistic system for character psychology, opening up the possibility for characters to behave in a less predictable manner. They offer the following entertaining example of how this might play out:

Ugbert the unshakeable with a CALM score of 9, is instructed to barter with Olga the fiery breathing, goblin-eating, schizophrenic Red Dragon, for the release of Piper the puny. Normally our hero would walk right up to Olga, look her in the eyes and demand the release of Piper. Today, however, the referee decides to test Ugbert. His player rolls 96 - oops! A failure. Olga is unimpressed by Ugbert's wavering bravado. She is relentless and decides to singe Ugbert, and eats Piper the puny for good measure.

Three issues later, writer Venetia Lee offered another perspective on character psychology, arguing that satisfying role-playing requires complex characters who cannot simply be summed up by their good-evil alignment. Her first example was a male fighter thief with relatively low physical strength. She supposed that perhaps he would have an inferiority complex, and that he would have developed an alcohol problem to drown out his feelings of inadequacy. She then reassures the reader that alcoholism need not be a disability:

Now, it really wouldn't be much fun playing a character who appears totally incompetent and cowardly, but the fact is he is neither. In the first place he is more capable as fighter and thief than his confidence suggests and, between his dexterity and racial bonuses, an excellent Bowman, assuring a useful role to his companions.

Mental health issues such as substance abuse are storytelling tools; the fear of incapacity hangs over the hero, but the game's systems ensure that the character remains 'useful' due to his physicality.

Another approach to psychology was proposed in 1978 in *Dragon Magazine*. A *D&D* variant system proposed by Kevin Thompson ran on the theory that a predisposition to mental health problems would come as a result of an imbalance between intelligence and wisdom; too much knowledge without the wisdom to put it in context could make one unstable, and the same was applied in reverse too. Any rolls for psychological injuries would therefore be weighed against the balance the character's mental faculties. Unlike the *Unearthed Arcana* sanity system, the rules proposed in 1978 would position mental health in the innate qualities of the character themselves; some characters were more likely to be incapacitated by catatonia than others.

Ten years later, another *Dragon Magazine* writer took up the issue again. This time, the concern was not how to implement a system for roleplaying character psychology, but how to purify the systems that existed so that they would not contain problematic references to real-world mental illnesses. Medical Pathologist Ed Friedlander drew a distinction between fantasy lunacy and reality, arguing that the *Dungeon Master's Guide* drew too much on archaic medical terms (e.g. 'melancholia', 'schizoid' and 'paranoia') for conditions that cause real harm in people's everyday lives:

“Real mental illness affects too many people and should not be a part of any game... When mental illness strikes a character, it should take a form drawn from heroic fiction, rather than one that may have touched the life of a player.”

Friedlander posited that ‘fictional insanity’ was fundamentally different in nature to real-world mental illnesses, and was in fact more fun to role-play. Rather than simulating painful experiences such as ‘suicidal mania’, or complicated issues such as developmental disorders (called ‘feble-mindedness’ in the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* at the time), he argued that fictional insanity ‘involves the acquisition of single fixed ideas and the behaviors that result’.

The examples given by Friedlander came with clear instructions about how the problems should manifest in the character’s behaviour. For example, if the character acquires an ‘exaggerated fear’ then they will cower in fear from a particular creature or situation every time they encounter it, and will ask about it constantly.

This attempt at purifying fictional insanity from real-world mental illness was well suited for a particular kind of scenario, where the players are constructing a world of pure lighthearted fantasy. Even if it had been widely adopted in place of the *Unearthed Arcana* system, it would be of little extra help to the forum poster twenty years later seeking to simulate the trauma resulting from sex abuse.

The representational politics of role-playing games have always been complex, with different players bringing different desires and needs to the table. The difficult work of balancing game design with narrative concerns has been going on for decades.

The choice between realistic simulation or enjoyable fantasy pervades role-playing game design, and opinion might always be divided on that front. But through the history of proposals about mental health in game systems there has been another divide at work: are the numerical systems of character health only suited for measuring capacity to act, or can psychology be simulated more sympathetically?

RESOURCES

‘Sanity’
Unearthed Arcana
Hosted on dandwiki.com ►[Read Online](#)

Venetia LEE (1986)
‘Alignment and Personality’
Adventurer Magazine ►[Read Online](#)

Alys, forum user (2007)
‘Sanity Rules from Unearthed Arcana need changing’
Wizards of the Coast ►[Read Online](#)

Ste. DILLON (1986)
‘Psychology in Games: an intelligent discourse’
Adventurer Magazine ►[Read Online](#)

Amsel VON SPRECKEISEN (2013)
‘A brief overview of sanity mechanics’
Madness and Play ►[Read Online](#)

Ed FRIEDLANDER (1988)
‘Methods to your Madness:
New ways to drive your characters insane’
Dragon Magazine ►[Read Online](#)

Kevin THOMPSON (1978)
‘Insanity, or Why is my character eating leaves?’
Dragon Magazine ►[Read Online](#)



MARKETING AND GAMES HISTORY

Call for submissions

Winter is coming. It's always an important time for the games industry, digital and otherwise, as the peak sales season for anything giftable or leisurely. This year's holiday season is particularly significant for the video games industry, with a round of long-awaited product launches hotly anticipated. It's a good time to reflect on the history of marketing and its relationship with games.

Every issue's topic title can be read in any order. For example, you could write about the kind of ideas and lifestyles that games have marketed to their players historically, or you could write about how games have been marketed to different demographics in their historical context. Alternatively, you might decide to explain the historical reasons why a particular marketing strategy is problematic or ill-conceived.

Any kind of history will be accepted: social, biographic, documentary, personal, descriptive or polemical. Submissions are unlikely to be rejected for being 'not history,' because nobody has the authority to decide what that means. Likewise, nobody has the authority to decide what a game is. Both digital and non-digital games are acceptable subjects of study.

Feel free to get in touch with any questions or suggestions. The deadline is **2nd December**, but earlier is much appreciated. Send them to rupa.zero@gmail.com or tweet @rupazero.