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Online Gaming and Emancipation: The Case of People with Physical Disabilities Communities of Practice

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Plain English Summary

1. Introduction

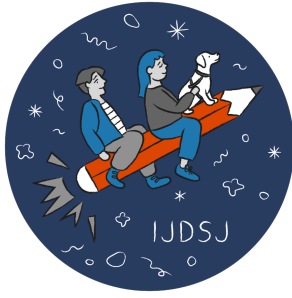
This research explores the impact of online gaming for people that live with a disability. People with a disability (PwD) experience disadvantage and exclusion which directly impacts their participation within society. Online gaming has become a popular space where people can connect with others. This research explores how features like anonymity in online gaming can support PwD to feel more included and confident. It also considers whether these positive experiences carry over into their offline (real-world) lives.

2. Summary of the research approach

This research explores whether playing online video games can empower PwD within and outside the game. 15 young Australian gamers with disabilities were interviewed about their gaming experiences. Personal experiences from the lead author (who identifies as an online gamer and person with disability) were analysed in the paper as autoethnography. The research focused on online gaming through the lens of entertainment and leisure rather than a type of therapy. To situate the research, we distinguished the differences between an online and offline world (real-world).

3. Summary of the main findings

We found that anonymity through online gaming played a large role in empowering PwD within and outside the online gaming world. We also found that the way that society talks about disabilities impacted the way that the participants felt about themselves. It was mentioned that the negative perceptions of disability limited their online and offline social



IJDSJ

interactions. One participant described how they would hide their identity in online gaming in fear of being identified as someone that lives with disability. Another participant had a similar experience, although this time it was related to gender. They would both experience anxiety in showing their identity in online spaces. They both explain that having this anonymous nature of online gaming would allow them to freely participate in online gaming, and this was a liberating experience.

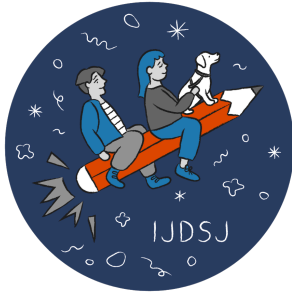
Another major finding was how the gamers would experience freedom, independence, and greater social participation through playing online video games. Online gaming was able to provide a platform where PwD can achieve greater confidence and to feel good about themselves. Two participants said they felt they wanted to live a more independent life outside of gaming because of the freedom they experienced through online gaming. For many of the participants, online gaming became an anonymous space where they could make a new identity for themselves, less focused on their disability, describing this process as a freeing experience.

Through reflections and analysis of my own experiences throughout my life, I was able to have a greater understanding of the impact of online gaming in both my online experiences and beyond in the outside or real world. It was my experience of remaining anonymous within online gaming that helped me feel empowered and less self-conscious, where I could express my authentic self. As I realised I was accepted for who I am outside of my disability, I experienced empowerment and greater confidence in expressing myself in the outside world. My experiences were very much the same as my participants, and this showed the potential of online gaming in helping to make an empowering difference in the lives of PwD outside of gaming.

4. Summary of the main implications of the research

We argue that online gaming should continue to be researched as it is an important space to investigate in relation to its empowering qualities, particularly for people with disability, who experience social exclusion and isolation throughout society. It is extremely important to understand these online spaces as the prominence of online gaming will continue to rise. This paper pushes forward the conversation and arguments around the potential empowering nature of online gaming or people with disability.

Our findings demonstrate the importance in having gaming developers prioritise accessible options and features for gamers with disabilities, rather than being a secondary thought. This



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process can extend to having games with disability as part of the testing or design process. Having more inclusive practises, particularly through gaming design are steps towards social justice for people with disability.

5. More information

Please seek out the full journal article which is published in the International Journal of Disability and Social Justice.