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(DE)HUMANIZATION OF PHYSICALLY DISABLED BODIES IN BORDERLANDS 3

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ABSTRACT

The video game industry has played a role in both affirming and erasing stereotypes surrounding minorities, especially those with disabilities. This study aims to analyse *Borderlands 3*'s in-game narrative that represents physically disabled characters through their characterization, visualization, and individual character development in the main plot campaign, illustrating how positive representation helps fight common stigmas and negative stereotypes. By using Shakespeare's social model of disability as a theoretical framework, the analysis will view the game as text to identify physically disabled characters and determine if they face discrimination in the in-game universe. Results show that characters with prosthetics are considered 'cool' futuristic bodies symbolizing strength, while disfigured bodies still encounter discrimination with the enforcement of negative stereotypes and derogatory language. This unequal representation creates a social imbalance among physically disabled people, with the public assuming that different types of physical disabilities are superior to others.

KEYWORDS

Physical disability, social model of disability, unequal representation, video game narrative, *Borderlands 3*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Video games have been trying to create positive representation of minority groups in their media. However, modern portrayals of physical disability are still mostly discriminative and stereotypical, reaffirming negative assumptions surrounding disabled people. This is most prevalent in two video game genres: first-person shooters (FPS) and horror games. FPS games thematically center on war theme, which typically has no space for physically disabled soldier characters. The reason behind this omission is a perception that impairment and deformity are a disadvantage, sometimes even liability, on battlefields because they hinder a soldier's ability to handle firearms, which is the main point of playing FPS games. Horror games further dehumanize physically disabled bodies by portraying them as misshapen and grotesque objects of horror (Carr 2014). They feature reanimated corpses with amputated or missing limbs and unnatural bodily mutations that cause odd

physical deformities, resulting from illegal experiments on the human body. Other than being dehumanized as 'gross creatures', these bodies are also consistently portrayed as enemies, further antagonizing them in the eyes of players.

The video game industry mostly thrives and originates in the United States, hence why most games reflect American society's attitude towards physical disability. Over the last decade, ableism has become a prominent issue stemming from direct and indirect sources, such as discriminative behaviour by society and the normalization of systematic ableism by their environment and living conditions. A survey conducted by Shakespeare (2010) showed that 80% of people diagnosed with achondroplasia, commonly known as dwarfism, have experienced verbal abuse at least once in their lives. In addition, Cogentica's survey (2021) revealed that only 30% of subway stations in New York are accessible to wheelchair users, presenting a difficulty for disabled bodies to use public transport. Given this situation, it comes as no surprise that video games developed by US-based studios contain ableist and derogatory language directed at physically disabled people, especially video games of the horror FPS genre. Not only are disfigured bodies antagonized, but they are also often the victim of blatant ableist comedy. Examples of these are derogatory terms, including 'midgets' and 'shorties', as well as the mockery of missing limbs.

Borderlands 3 (Gearbox Software 2019) sets itself apart from other FPS games by improving its representation of physical disability. The game series itself is already widely known for its positive portrayal of other minority groups, such as queer, mentally disabled, and people of colour (POC) characters. Reportedly, the third instalment of the series has removed ableist terms and discriminatory behaviours, portraying physically disabled characters in a positive light that humanizes their identity as disabled individuals. The *Borderlands* series is also considered a cult classic among the community of FPS players in the US. It is widely popular, and has been praised for its unique takes on societal issues in various areas. Given its large audience and popularity, the game possibly influences its players' opinion regarding physical disability, contributing to reducing ableism and erasing negative stigma and stereotypes surrounding disabled bodies through its representation of physically disabled characters.

Research by Shapiro and Rotter (2016, 3) elaborated on how characters with mental disabilities tend to be antagonized and stereotyped as 'homicidal maniacs'. Among 42 identified characters from various video games, five originated from *Borderlands 2*, with three characters as the antagonists (Handsome Jack, Psychos, and Face McShooty) and two characters as the protagonists (Tiny Tina and Krieg). Notably, all of the characters display uncontrollable murderous tendencies. The results show that the inaccurate portrayal of frequent violent behaviours in mentally disabled individuals contributes to forming the stereotype that they are dangerous people, which further alienating them from able society.

Gibbons (2015, 32) also pointed out the significant lack of positive portrayal of disabled bodies, especially when compared to other minority groups. The study also showed that positive disability representation is mostly found in games made by independent developer studios with a small, niche audience. In contrast, popular titles, produced by big-budget developer studios and released by famous publishers, rarely represent an accurate portrayal of disabled bodies. Furthermore, prior studies mostly focused on the subject of disability representation in video games, particularly mental disability rather than physical disability.

Borderlands itself mostly presents issues outside of the games' diverse cultural representation of minority groups. Tomczak (2019) analysed the Foucauldian power relation in *Borderlands 2*, focusing on the construction of a social hierarchy in Pandora. The perspective of the main antagonist, Handsome Jack, was explored as he exercised his dominance through the abuse of power over the inhabitants that do not possess any resources to rebel against his ruling. Puruhito (2016) wrote a language analysis regarding the use of swearing as a form of expression in *Borderlands: The Pre-Sequel*, showing aggression as a

method for relieving frustration and anger. Meints and Green (2019) have researched positive disability representation in *Borderlands 2* through rhetoric and player agency, discussing how disability is effectively presented through its gameplay and the perspective of the players. The study also utilizes social model of disability as a theoretical lens to analyse how society in a fictitious universe perceives disability differently based on the applied societal laws. The study concludes that in *Borderlands 2*, physical deficiency is not seen as a major issue by society due to survivability being their main concern. Rather, a person's ability and disability are perceived differently compared to how they are seen in real life (Meints and Green 2019, 45).

Based on the summary of past studies mentioned above, this research may be able to provide a new perspective and deeper insight into how disability is represented in video games, specifically physical disability representation that is seldom found in popular game titles. While disability itself has already been examined in *Borderlands 2*, this study seeks to explore the game narrative to identify the portrayal of physical disability through its characters. Additionally, the release of *Borderlands 3* indicates that there is more to explore in the *Borderlands* series regarding the issue of disability, as the game universe is expanded to include the whole *Borderlands* planetary system, consisting of culturally and historically diverse planets with various living conditions and societal values compared to Pandora.

With these reasons in mind, this study aims to examine how physically disabled bodies are represented in *Borderlands 3* through its in-game characters, focusing on how the storyline involves physically disabled characters and dissecting their characterization, visualisation, and individual character development. The social model of disability will also be used to determine whether any forms of discrimination against physically disabled individuals still exist in *Borderlands 3*. In addition, it will evaluate how different forms of physical disability are treated in the game. If such differences exist, then the cause of varying opinions would also be analysed using the model.

We expect that this research will raise more awareness of the importance of discussing issues related to physical disability, besides other concerns about minorities. It will also illustrate how accurate portrayals of physically disabled bodies, i.e. the ones that humanize rather than demonize them, can defeat common stigmas and negative stereotypes surrounding physical disabilities. The positive representation of physical disability in *Borderlands 3* would encourage other game developers to participate and construct more positive portrayals in their games, contributing to erasing discrimination against physical disability. In addition, we hope that this research will be useful in upcoming studies regarding physical disability representation in various media forms, especially video games.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tom Shakespeare (2006) explains that the social model of disability draws a clear distinction between disability and physical impairment. In this framework, disability represents a social division between the disabled and non-disabled that stems from a deep-rooted psychological ideology that establishes inherent superiority and inferiority within society. On the other hand, impairment refers to physical limitations experienced by an individual. The model viewed disability as a certain phenomenon of culture and history instead of a constant, global essence. It is also different compared to the medical or individual model as it characterizes disability as a social construct, examining the relationship between impaired individuals with a society that disables and excludes them from full participation.

Oliver (2004, 19) states that the basis for the social model is the notion of externally imposed restrictions (as cited in Shakespeare 2006, 268). The model also points out the difference between disabled and non-disabled individuals, a distinction made by non-disabled people who often cause the oppression towards

the disabled. Negative social identities emerged from cultural differentiation causes disabled individuals to internalize these identities, affecting them psychologically by lowering confidence and self-esteem (Tregaskis 2002, 462).

Shakespeare also introduces a newer theoretical framework within the social model, focusing on how negative attitudes towards disabled individuals could strongly impact on their performance in a work environment. This leads to reluctance to pursue career opportunities and undervaluing their capabilities due to a lack of positive encouragement and support during childhood and teenage years (Shakespeare and Watson 2022, 9–10). However, consistent application of the social model in society has effectively helped in improving the self-esteem of the disabled as it shifts the problem of disability from the individual's fault to the social barriers that exclude them from society (Shakespeare 2006, 271).

Culture in society plays a big role in forming and maintaining the exclusion of disability from full participation in society. The current societal forms responses to a person's impairment or physical deficit are viewed as a cultural product resulting from the relation between the means of production and societal values central to the identity of certain societies (Barnes 1996, 51). Disabled people have been socially constructed as the "other" who cannot fully participate in mainstream society. This exclusion is perpetuated by cultural images that depict differences from what is considered normal and unacceptable, often portrayed negatively in various media forms. In addition, the use of language further perpetuates negative stigma surrounding disabilities (Tregaskis 2002, 461).

Examining cultural phenomena using the social model of disability has various advantages that are not as apparent when using the medical model. It clearly defines actions and people that can be considered 'allies' or 'enemies', indicating those who support disabled people or those who discriminate against them. It also identifies what social barriers presented by society against physically disabled people that should be removed. This perspective shows that challenges faced by disabled people are not solely a result of their impairment; rather, it is a product of social oppression and exclusion (Shakespeare 2006, 271). The blame for social exclusion is placed on society, requiring the removal of these barriers to enable the participation of disabled people in mainstream society. The implementation of the social model has also proven to be effective from a psychological standpoint by improving the confidence of disabled people and forming a positive collective identity among them (Shakespeare 2006, 271).

Oliver (2004) has provided examples of the application of the social model and explained the effects it has upon its implementation and comparison. The first attempt in the application was to reconstruct the notion of social work for disabled people by adhering to the characteristics of the social model (2004). While the attempt failed and concerns surrounding disability remain to be ignored within social services, the model had created a huge impact on the subject of disability politics. It played a huge role in creating connections between the diversity of experiences among the disabled community that suffers from a multitude of impairments (Campbell and Oliver 1996). Furthermore, the social model was mainly created to encourage society to consider the commonalities between the able and disabled individuals, as well as barriers faced by disabled bodies (2004).

Recent additions to Shakespeare's framework of the social model of disability also suggest that, to make the theory encompass the underlying experiences of each individual with physical impairment, the model should include a combination of critical realism and capability theory (CT). It highlights the dynamic nature of a disabled person's identity, which always evolves based on the cultural environment around them. It emphasizes the difference in experiences while factoring in other aspects such as gender, ethnicity, and economics that form diversity in the disabled experience.

Critical realism allows for a more in-depth analysis of the layered experiences of a disabled person interactively, starting from a biological and medical aspect to an exploration of multiple cultural aspects that make up the full experience of disability. Capability theory emphasizes a person's freedom to act and their realistic capacity to achieve something. A person's well-being is indicated by their capability to live, highlighting that people, even under the same circumstances, will choose different ways of living and should have the freedom to do so (Shakespeare and Watson 2022, 16). There is also the 'conversion handicap' that explains how social barriers faced by the disabled incur additional costs for them to convert resources that they have into their capabilities. The challenges include individual, social, and structural difficulties.

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive qualitative study that involves the process of categorizing the collected data, extracting meaning from the data based on these categories, and explaining the observed phenomena based on the extracted information (Lankoski and Bjork 2015). This study examines the narratives presented within the context of the research and draws several conclusions. In this particular research, the plot of *Borderlands 3* is viewed as a text with a certain story to be told, focusing on key elements of its narrative which includes in-game speech transcript, visual aesthetics, and individual characterization. They are used to identify parts of the main narrative that illustrates the portrayal of physical disability and to identify any possible discrimination against disabled characters through a comparative analysis with Shakespeare's social model of disability.

Primary data is taken from a complete playthrough of *Borderlands 3*, which will be recorded and uploaded in video format to keep track of the collected data. Primary data also includes speech transcript (in-game audio collectable and character dialogue), visual aesthetics, and characterization depicted in the game narrative, featuring characters classified as physically disabled. Additionally, secondary data is collected from other related studies, articles, journals, books, and online websites that cover the portrayal of physical disability in video games and the social model of disability. These data are used to study the representation of physical disability through playable and non-playable characters (NPCs) in *Borderlands 3*.

Data collection is conducted using the descriptive qualitative method with purposive sampling to specify the scope and limitations of this research, as well as mitigating redundant information. The sample is chosen based on the characteristics of the population and the objective of the study. A comparison with Shakespeare's model is conducted to select characters that align with the research criteria. The collected data comes in the form of speech transcript (in-game audio collectable and character dialogue), visual aesthetics, and characterization depicted in the game narrative, featuring characters classified as physically disabled. To accumulate the data, we have taken several steps:

1. A full playthrough of *Borderlands 3*, using the selected playable character and recording parts of the narrative that features physically disabled characters;
2. Collecting data related to the problem statements; and taking notes and interpreting the data based on the objectives of the study.
3. The portrayal of disability is determined through three aspects within the character's narrative: (1) the attitude towards physical disability, (2) the individual character development, and (3) the treatment towards and from other characters, both able-bodied and disabled.

The three aspects are used to reveal the portrayal of physically disabled individuals in *Borderlands 3* and to identify any possible discrimination towards them from other characters. Furthermore, the collective opinion of certain groups based on the planets or locations depicted in the narrative is used to determine

whether the societal rules in specific planets or locations are welcoming or discriminative towards physically disabled characters.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Portrayal of Physically Disabled Bodies through In-Game Characters in Borderlands 3

Results show that multiple characters with a prominent role in the main narrative of Borderlands 3 are depicted as physically disabled characters. These characters are not featured as simple caricatures or objects of comedy; rather, they play important roles in the narrative as quest givers or allies to the players' chosen main character. However, further analysis revealed that the portrayal of physically disabled bodies is differentiated based on whether the characters have prostheses. Disabled characters with prosthetics are considered to be 'cooler' than disabled characters that do not own one, specifically disfigured bodies. Prosthetic users are portrayed positively, while disfigured bodies tend to face discrimination and ridicule in the game. Moreover, there is a noticeable pattern where the majority of prosthetic users are protagonists, while most disfigured characters are classified as antagonists.

According to majority of society in Borderlands 3, prosthetics and cybernetics are superior compared to a fully organic human body. This preference for prosthetics is driven by two reasons: functionality and aesthetics. In cyberpunk media, prosthetics are not merely tools to replace lost limbs; they can also enhance a person's physical prowess through futuristic technological advancements, provided that the individual can afford these features. The use of prosthetics was only introduced in Borderlands 2 with disabled characters, such as Sir Hammerlock, Gaige, Captain Scarlet, and Helena Pierce. At the time, prosthetics were only used as limb replacements, and the technology in Pandora had not yet achieved the capability to significantly boost a person's combat abilities. However, owning a prosthetic is considered an achievement in Pandora as it shows a person's resilience and aptitude for surviving various dangers on the planet.

Sir Hammerlock is a recurring character in the Borderlands series who first appeared in Borderlands 2. He is introduced as a cyborg hunter that boasts various prosthetic limbs and organs, such as a robotic eye, a prosthetic arm, and a prosthetic leg. His prosthetics were not a matter of choice but rather replacements for limbs he lost during his hunting adventures. It was mentioned in Borderlands 2 that Sir Hammerlock lost them when he encountered Old Slappy, a considerably larger Thresher creature than most threshers found in Pandora. He stated,

"You're wondering why I don't go out into the field. The answer is Old Slappy, a thresher that nearly killed me. Science demands I forgive it. Vengeance demands I kill it. Today, my friend, you will be my vengeance. Old Slappy removed several of my limbs the last time we met."

(Sir Hammerlock, Slap-Happy, Borderlands 2).

Hammerlock's physical impairment is very apparent in his design, and he does not make any attempts to hide them. He wears a pair of round glasses with the right lens cracked, revealing his robotic eye. His prosthetic arm and leg are not covered by fabric, fully exposing these distinct robotic appendages when compared to his biological ones. Current prostheses in modern society use silicone and other types of plastic for the outer shell of the limb, and steel or aluminium for the frame of the intricate components that allows movement and neural integration (Horton's Orthotics and Prosthetics 2015). Sir Hammerlock's limbs do not have a silicone covering. Instead, they are shown as bare simple metallic limbs with visible joints and circuitry. Hammerlock proudly shows off his prosthetics and does not miss out on an opportunity to tell the

tale behind them. He views his impairment not as a disability but as an achievement, symbolizing his ability to survive when being attacked by dangerously large creatures in the Borderlands.



Figure 1. Sir Hammerlock's Concept Art. (Debos and Brosa 2019).

The prostheses worn by Sir Hammerlock closely resemble the current state of modern prostheses. These prosthetic limbs are designed to appear as machine-like as possible, which are heavily influenced by cyborg limbs often found in cyberpunk media. Sir Hammerlock's prostheses do not give him physical enhancements or special abilities; rather, they help him retain basic bodily functions and regain vision in his eye. The most advanced prosthetic that can be achieved with modern technology to date is the Atom Touch developed by Atom Limbs, which is set to launch in 2023. Atom Touch is a function-based prosthetic known for its capability to achieve near-natural movement, which includes intuitive control over individual finger movements and an unlimited number of grips, mimicking the movement of an organic arm (Williams 2022). It allows amputated individuals to have more control over their hands, enabling various forms of activities similar to those that can be done by able-bodied people. Sir Hammerlock is already able to simulate natural limb movement akin to the function of organic limbs, illustrating how in the future modern prosthetics may be able to reach the same level of functionality.



Figure 2. Prototype Image for the Atom Touch Bionic Hands. (Williams 2022).

Prosthetic modifications only started making an appearance in *Tales from the Borderlands* with the introduction of Rhys Strongfork. He returns to *Borderlands 3* as a central NPC in Promethea. As the CEO of the Atlas company, he managed to rebuild the corporation from its former state. He also sought help from the Crimson Raiders when Maliwan, a rival corporation, attempted to invade Promethea and force Rhys into a business partnership by threatening the planet's destruction.

Rhys' extremities are notably his most unique features that distinguish himself from the other characters, aside from his 'odd' sense of fashion. He has a cybernetic eye which was revealed to be an ECHO eye implant, giving him the ability to scan various objects in the environment and access any electronic system remotely. He also has a prosthetic right arm with a built-in digital interface, which connects to the *cyberware* planted in his eye. In *Tales from the Borderlands*, Rhys explains that he willingly gave himself the implants and paid for them himself. His motivation was to gain an advantage against his co-workers in Hyperion's data-mining department, where he used to work. Rhys is shown to possess different-coloured prosthetics between the two games, implying that he may have periodically changed his prosthetics for aesthetic and/or maintenance purposes.



Figure 3. Rhys Strongfork's Official Concept Art. (Allcock 2019).

Prosthetics in modern society have not yet reached the same level of body enhancements seen in characters like Rhys, but the notion of intertwining cybernetic implants with robotic limbs is often found in cyberpunk media that focuses heavily on post-human narratives with human-machine hybrids. One of the first cyberpunk novels that sparked the discussion of prosthesis as a form of body modification is *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson.

In the novel, a character named Molly Millions has enhanced vision and prosthetic fingertips made of razor blades, which are connected to the *cybernetic* nerves implanted inside of her. According to Molly, the modifications to her prostheses are necessary because in the world she lives in, prosthetics are constantly changing and she needs to surpass her modifications by adding the newest gadgets and technologies. In Gibson's fictional universe, prostheses are highly important to a person's survivability and success in a post-apocalyptic futuristic setting, which is similar to the setting of *Borderlands 3*.

Rhys' extremities are quite similar to Molly Millions in *Neuromancer* where he has a prosthetic limb and cybernetic implants that directly connects with his neural system, allowing him to access various forms of technology. While not combat-oriented like Molly, his ability to retrieve, tamper with digital information, and hack into any system in the universe is one of his strengths that allow him to rise to his current status as the CEO of Atlas.

When we retrace Rhys' former occupation as a Hyperion employee, he stated that he willingly paid for an experimental prosthetic surgery to insert *cyberware* into his body and amputate his arm to replace it with a bionic one. The reason behind this decision is to give him advantage over Hyperion's data-mining department, as he can remotely access data more efficiently through his arm and his built-in ECHO interface. The closest, real-world comparison to Rhys is Stelarc, a performance artist in the 1990s that constructed a 'Third Hand'. This appendage is attached to his body and neurally connected to his brain, allowing Stelarc to control the prosthetic hand and manipulate it to write for him, turning himself into an Internet-wired cyborg.

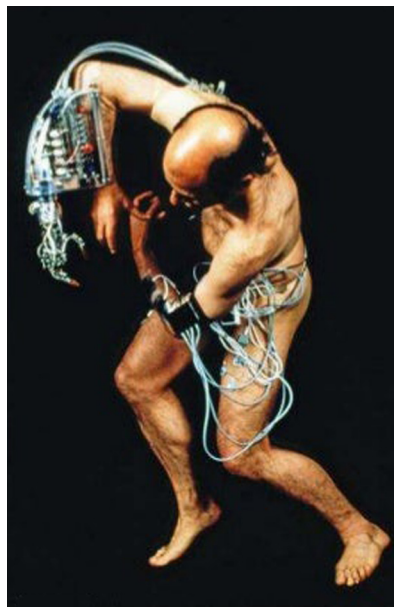


Figure 4. Stelarc's Third Hand. (Source: Stelarc n.d.).

In some regions in the game, prosthetics are also recognized as an object of aesthetics and considered as a beauty standard compared to fully organic bodies, such as the region where the character Ember was born in. Ember is a quest giver introduced in the DLC campaign *Moxxi's Heist of the Handsome Jackpot*, a friend of Timothy that works in The Handsome Casino as an artist and a dancer who has an obsession with fire. As an expert in pyrotechnics and explosions, she assists Timothy in his plan to defeat Pretty Boy and seize control of the casino.

Ember is seen wearing a pair of prostheses, sporting a bionic right arm and a left leg. According to her own words, she told Zane that her cybernetic limbs were not the result of an accident, but her deliberate decision to modify her body into a cyborg body that is not fully organic. During a side mission, Ember says:

"In case you were curious, I did not lose my limbs in a fire. That was my decision. Where I come from, we are liberal with our accessories, and bodies are ever-changing works of art."

(Playing with Fire, *Borderlands 3*).



Figure 5. Ember's In-Game Model. (Source: Borderlands 3 2022).

Ember implied that, compared to other regions, the planet or area where prosthetics are praised as objects of aesthetics also creates a beauty standard in which bionic bodies are viewed as more beautiful than organic ones. Ember's situation also reflects how, in reality, women are forced to undergo various body modifications to appeal to the current beauty standard, which can be painful at times, such as extreme diets and intense workouts to maintain the ideal body shape. While not forced to fit into her hometown's beauty standards, Ember had to impair herself to insert the prosthetic limbs and fuse them with her own body. Ember also embodies the current trend of 'prosthetic aesthetics' in which prosthetics are gradually seen as a fashion statement.

A real-life professional actor and model, Aimee Mullins, is considered a famous double amputee Paralympic athlete. She was amputated below the knees when she was still an infant because Mullins was born without fibular bones and replaced her missing limbs with prosthetic legs. She first made her appearance in the fashion industry when she opened for Alexander McQueen's London show, wearing prosthetic legs carved from wood and solid ash with additional integral boots. Following this, she frequently appears on various magazine covers, such as *Dazed and Confused*, *Wired*, *Pulp*, and many others, displaying a variety of prostheses shapes and styles. Mullins' appearance in the fashion media has shifted beauty standards to include bodies that are not fully organic. It has shifted their attention toward body modifications as a new form of aesthetic, which is portrayed in Ember's liberal choices of getting prosthetics to appear more beautiful.

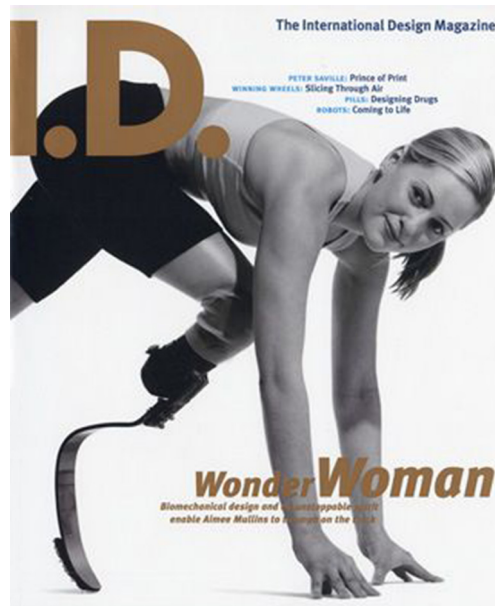


Figure 6. Aimee Mullins was featured on an I.D. magazine cover, showing off her prosthetic legs.
(Source: I.D. Magazine 2012).

Based on the above analysis of prosthetic users, it can be concluded that they are all labelled as heroes according to the character narrative theory. Heroic characters are identified by several basic traits, including strength, benevolent intentions to protect others, possession of a source of strength that includes physical power, intelligence, or other technical skills, and a source of goodness that are mostly unrelated to physical strength (Bergstrand and Jasper 2018). Taking these traits into consideration, the main character is classified as a hero due to their good intentions to prevent the Calypso twins from destroying the universe. Additionally, friends and allies of the main hero character or individuals who harbour the same benevolent goals are also considered heroes, which include Sir Hammerlock, Rhys Strongfork, and Ember.

The power of characters comes from the emotional reaction of the audience—in this case, the player—to create resonance in the narrative (Lynch 1998). Therefore, to invoke positive emotions associated with hero characters, they must be presented in a way that makes them likeable and solidifies their role as hero characters. Physically disabled characters affiliated with the main character are portrayed as strong characters with the goal of empowering the player and making them appear relatable, specifically physically disabled.

These physically disabled heroes in *Borderlands 3* are given individual storylines through side quests, allowing players to get to know them better outside of what is presented in the main narrative. Additional information and characterization of the characters are given through quests, in-game conversations with other characters, and audio collectables scattered throughout the game. Visualization of the protagonists also helps to illustrate their identity as physically disabled individuals without appearing too distinct and alienating them when compared to the rest of the cast.

As gameplay continues, it is evident that the majority of characters (mostly NPCs) in *Borderlands 3* are highly judgmental towards physically disabled bodies that suffer from deformity and disfigurement, especially those afflicted with gigantism and dwarfism. They are regarded as unusual body shapes and people would react differently based on the type of disfigurement. In addition to experiencing oppression due to their physical deformities, they are also victims of verbal abuse from various factions and societies across the universe. Even among the antagonist group, they are considered fodder for other villains and used as test subjects by the Calypso twins to test out their anointing abilities.

Goliaths are human mutant enemies characterized by their unusually large bodies and metal helmets to protect their disfigured heads and keep their emotions in check. Due to high Eridium exposure, goliaths are genetically mutated, resulting in a condition called gigantism, where the body grows excessively and appear much larger than most people in the Borderlands. Other than their large bodies, goliaths also possess deformed heads with unprotected skull and missing lower jaw. When their helmet is shot off, the goliath becomes enraged, causing their skull to burst upwards along with the spine connecting to their torso.

Other than a change in appearance, it is noted that the goliaths also behave differently when they are enraged. A normal goliath speaks in a sluggish tone, emphasizing each syllable. However, when enraged, their tone becomes harsher, and they can form complex sentences unlike when they are calm. Goliaths are also part of the Children of the Vault (COV), the main antagonist group that worships the Calypso twins as their gods and saviours. Most goliaths that the main character encountered during their adventures are cultists, with the exception of Agent Dee who works for Clay as part of the Jakobs Corporation on Eden-6.



Figure 7. Goliaths' Concept Art. (Source: Debos and Brosa 2019).

While the term 'goliath' itself is not discriminative towards giant people, it is used to separate them from able-bodied enemies and categorise them as an entirely different subclass. This categorization shows a phenomenon known as 'othering', where giants are perceived as different from the rest of society. There is also no significant difference between normal goliaths and significant goliaths encountered in boss stages, as they are simple reskins and recolours of the typical goliath found across the universe. This lack of distinction can make the bosses unimpressible and easier to forget, as they blend in with their normal counterparts.

Gigantism is a rare physical condition, both in real life and in Borderlands 3. According to the Barrow Neurological Institute, there have been only around 100 reported cases of gigantism in the United States (Little 2021). The latest media coverage of a giant was seen in the late 20th century featuring André René Roussimoff, nicknamed André the Giant, who was a professional wrestler and an actor in The Princess Bride. Due to its rarity, giants are viewed as highly unusual by people who encounter them. People often find them unnerving due to the sheer size of their bodies.

This sentiment is reflected in Borderlands 3 during the mission 'Going Rogue' on Eden-6. The main character gets to meet Agent Double Dee, one of the Rogues that work for Clay who is currently undercover as a COV cultist to obtain information on enemy movements. Originally, Dee's appearance is the same as that of goliaths, but to appear attractive and charm the cultists, he disguises himself as a slim woman with an able body.

This implies that gigantism is not considered beautiful according to the beauty standards in Eden-6, showing their preference for able bodies and prosthetic users over disfigured bodies. To further solidify this fact, when Agent Dee tries to talk with the protagonist, he should slip into something more comfortable, using his disguise before properly conversing. This indicates his awareness that most people find giants unnerving to interact with.



Figure 8. *Left*, Agent Dee's Original Body with Gigantism; *Right*, Agent Dee's Disguise to Blend in with the COV. (Source: I.D. Magazine 2012).

Other characters are Tinks, a group of characters mutant human enemies that have unusually small bodies, a result of genetic mutations from Eridium radiation that stunts their growth and causes dwarfism. The term 'Tinks' derived from a shortened form of 'tinkerers', which refers to their occupation as gadget makers and technical repairmen of the COV. Unlike the previous dwarf people in *Borderlands 2*, they have higher intelligence and deeper understanding of machinery, enabling them to make autonomous sentries and turrets from scrap metal as weapons to be utilized by the COV. Their increased intelligence is shown in their appearance, which includes large heads disproportionate to the rest of their bodies and a wider cranium, implying that their brains are larger in comparison to normal bandits.



Figure 9. Tinks' Official Concept Art. (Penrod and Brosa 2019).

Another version of tinks is seen in the form of NOGs, who are dwarf people employed by Maliwan to provide support for their troopers. They are distinct from tinks as they wear large Maliwan helmets and uniforms. They utilize technologically advanced equipment in combat, such as drones to attack their enemies or create shields for their allies. During the side mission 'Technical NOGOut' in Promethea, Quinn reveals that the helmets worn by the NOGs are actually virtual reality visors. These visors deceive them into thinking that they are simply playing a video game, keeping them unaware of the fact that they are fighting in a real combat.



Figure 10. NOGs' Full Body Appearance. (Source: I.D. Magazine 2012).

Tinks and NOGs face significant discrimination and unfair treatment compared to other disabled bodies. Similar to 'goliath', 'tink' and 'NOG' are not derogatory terms on their own, but they serve to create a division that separates these dwarf characters from normal enemy groups, basically 'othering' them from the rest of society. In the COV itself, other cultists often use derogatory language and terms to refer to the tinks. They are referred to as an energy source or 'food' by the leaders of the COV, the Calypso twins. Tyreen Calypso herself calls them 'popcorn shrimp' which relates to their small body size,

"... Ugh, I'm so hungryyy! I guess I'll...I dunno', leech a pile of tinks? They're like popcorn shrimp, but more... screamy."

(Cold as the Grave, Borderlands 3).

Not only verbal abuse, NOGs also experience exploitation for entertainment and free labour in various societies throughout the Borderlands 3 universe. During the side-quest 'Technical NOGout' in Promethea, the main character meets Quinn, a scientist conducting experiments on a new grenade modification that could allow the resistance to hack the mind of NOGs, dwarf people with enlarged heads who are employed by Maliwan with large helmets and high-tech combat equipment. Initially, Quinn claims that he had captured a few of them to use as test subjects for the grenade modification. However, when the player returns to Quinn's lab, the scientist accidentally reveals that he had been setting up a betting pool and utilizing the NOGs for illegal ring fighting. He calls his test subjects as NOGadors, designating them different names based on the different elements they were assigned during past experiment,

“... Listen, I CERTAINLY haven’t been pit-fighting reprogrammed NOGs for the locals to bet on, heh...Certainly not.”

(Technical NOGout, *Borderlands 3*).

From Quinn’s speech transcript, it can be inferred that the local citizens of Promethea view NOGs, or dwarf people, simply as objects to entertain them. While one can argue that the Prometheans dislike all Maliwan troops and view this action as revenge against the corporation for ravaging their planet, the NOGs physical appearance also plays a part in the discrimination they face as it is also a recurring event for dwarf people within other regions in *Borderlands*.

Tinks are also held in captivity, being used for both entertainment and free labour. Near the fairgrounds of Carnivora, there is a location named ‘La Cage O’ Tinks’, where a large number of tinks are imprisoned in cages, presumably to be used in Pain and Terror’s annual slaughter events held in the Carnivora. The large vehicle used for hosting these events share the same name. Furthermore, inside the Guts of Carnivora, specifically in the Gutworks area, tinks are forced into labour as they work relentlessly to keep the vehicle running by continuously performing maintenance on the gigantic engine that keeps the Carnivora running.

This mirrors a long history of dwarves being exploited for entertainment to spectate and laugh at, often used as court jesters by the nobility. In the early 19th century, they were also bought by circuses and treated as property and entertainers due to their peculiar tiny bodies, which was perceived as ‘adorable things’ (The Guardian 2019). Circus also exploited dwarves to forced breeding to produce more entertainers, solidifying the fact of longstanding fetishization of dwarfs in American culture.

Even in modern society, the objectification of dwarves still exists, as they are used to provide entertainment for the able society. The Micro Wrestling Federation was founded in 2000 by Jack Hillegass, an able person. They feature a cast of professional wrestlers under ‘five feet tall’. While the intention behind Micro Wrestling was to provide opportunities for dwarves to pursue athletic careers, which is impossible under normal circumstances, it does not erase the fact that Micro Wrestling attracts large audiences not because of the performance, but because of the performers’ small bodies, making them entertaining to watch. In an interview with Cara Reedy, Hillegass claims that he is not exploiting dwarf people for entertainment, stating that it is ‘impossible to exploit someone who loves what they are doing’ (The Guardian 2019).

Based on the analysis of physically disabled characters with disfigured bodies, it can be concluded that they are all labelled as villains according to the character narrative theory. Villain characters are identified by several basic traits, such as malevolence, the capacity to pose a threat to society, a lack of self-sacrifice, and inability to reason (Bergstrand and Jasper 2018). The Calypso twins are considered villains due to their greed and their pursuit to leech the powers of Vault monsters, which could destroy the universe in the process. Additionally, they have the ability of Sirens, which is considered the strongest race in the *Borderlands* universe. As with allies of heroes, any character that is affiliated with the main villains is also considered a villain.

Villains are created to oppose the hero and their ideology, evoking hatred and fear in players. These emotions can transform into a sense of anxiety and frustration, leading to indignation, a sense of purpose, and anger (Gamson 1992, 29). This is why physically disabled characters that are affiliated with the COV or categorized as enemies are mostly portrayed in a negative light and treated unequally compared to disabled hero characters. It is worth noting that *Borderlands 3* is also known for its harsh language and humorous banter between heroes and villains as part of their interactions during the combat portion of the game. Often, there would be certain voice lines from hero characters that mock and taunt the villains, including physically disabled villains.

Based on the results, it can be inferred that in *Borderlands 3*, physical disfigurement is considered inferior and associated as something bad that is highly discriminated against, leading frequent objectification and dehumanization inside the game. When compared to prostheses, prosthetics users of artificial limbs are portrayed as a revolutionary technology of the future representing the ideal human body that is often fantasized about in cyberpunk media. Prosthetics have an empowering image, while disfigured bodies are stigmatized as weak due to their deformed limbs, creating an assumption that they are less capable to do the same actions as able-bodied individuals. These assumptions by able society create a division of social classes among physically disabled people, with prosthetic users represented as the upper class and disfigured bodies as the lower class.

4.2 Transformation of Disabled Body Image: 'Prosthetic Aesthetics'

The portrayal of prosthesis users in *Borderlands 3* may be influenced by recent changes in public opinion regarding the body image of physically disabled individuals who use prosthetics. With the hype surrounding Paralympic events and its participants that use prosthetics to compete in the games, there are various discourses surrounding the cyborg bodies of these Paralympians in the media. Oscar Pistorius was one of the first Paralympic medallists from the 2012 London Paralympics that garnered positive coverage in news outlets and mass media because of his stellar performance during the competition. He was dubbed the 'Blade Runner' by the media due to his identity as a double amputee who used carbon fibre prosthetic limbs to replace his missing legs (Tamari 2017, 26). Through Pistorius' success, the disabled body is considered a 'new' phenomenon that opens up the possibilities for the fusion of organic bodies and non-human entities to achieve futuristic cyborg bodies, a theme commonly seen in cyberpunk media.

Post-World War I prostheses became an element of the 'New Man' trope, which, driven by techno-fetishism, shaped the appearance of modern prostheses in Western countries from human-like models to non-human, more machine-like designs with advanced biomechanics (Tamari 2017, 31). In the media, the focus on Paralympian athletes often highlights their prostheses rather than the individuals themselves. The Paralympic cyborgs are perceived as a variation of the 'becoming body', an extended type of a human's living body. The empowering image of an ultimate body often exposes synthetic bodies to heroic narratives highlighting the concept of 'self-made man', where an individual's personhood is determined by their survivability and personal capabilities.

There is also the aestheticized disabled body as a form of beauty outside of the enhanced functionality of prosthetics. The prosthetics of a disabled individual are central to their identity, as it extends bodily boundaries, creating a fluid sense of identity that shifts with the presence of these prosthetic devices. This transformation also opens up various possibilities for their sense of identity (Tamari 2017, 34). The appearance of Aimee Mullins in fashion magazines and films has redefined the way beauty is seen by the general public. She shows off various designs of her artificial limbs, which were created by fashion designers interested in incorporating the disabled body in their artistic endeavours. Her image illustrates the possibility of having disabled bodies to be featured more often in fashion magazines, challenging traditional beauty standards and promoting diversity in aesthetics. It also opens up the opportunity for a new type of beauty which includes bionic limbs and proves that organic 'humanness' is no longer essential for a person's beauty (Tamari 2017, 35).

4.3 “Class of Deformities” among Physically Disabled People

The difference in the portrayal of physically disabled bodies in *Borderlands 3* brings up another issue outside of misrepresentation in the media. By humanizing prosthetic users and dehumanizing disfigured bodies, it creates an assumption that they are different despite both involving physical deformities. It also sends a negative message that separates the two into different social classes, with prosthetic users occupying a higher class compared to disfigured bodies. This stigma is problematic as it can propagate more discrimination toward disfigured bodies, a group that has faced exclusion in society and unequal treatment for centuries.

As mentioned in the previous section, positive discussion and media attention surrounding disabled bodies focus solely on the image of prosthetics as a futuristic product, symbolizing the possibility for a superior human body that combines organic entities with non-organic or machine-like limbs. Media narratives featuring Paralympic athletes portray them as bodies in a permanent state of “under construction”, mimicking cyberpunk ideas that believe in the ultimate cyborg body (Tamari 2017, 31).

On the other hand, media depiction of disfigured bodies often portrays them as a grotesque illness in need of removal to return a sense of normalcy for the ‘patient’. News coverage on disfigurement typically focuses on extremely rare and severe forms of disfigurement, emphasizing the gruesome impacts of the illness by documenting highly graphic footage of the disfigurement and the operation process to treat it (Wardle et al. 2009, 126). Disfigurement is also portrayed as a condition deserving of pity rather than empathy. In fact, 63% of analysed news stories reporting on disfigurement feature children, with a patronizing and condescending narrative that silences the child’s own experiences. (Wardle et al. 2009, 126–127). The children are used to manipulate the emotions of the audience, and the reports often describe disfigurement as a disadvantage that subtracts from a person’s beauty, implying that disfigured bodies do not fit into the beauty standards of society. *Borderlands 3* worsens the problem of the inferiority of disfigured bodies through discrimination and derogatory jokes in its portrayal of disfigurement, particularly when compared to the portrayal of prostheses users. It confirms the public’s assumption, shaped by mass media and other forms of media, that among physically disabled people, bodies with prosthetics are superior to disfigured bodies despite the reality that both groups face exclusion from society due to their physical impairments.

5. CONCLUSION

Physically disabled characters in *Borderlands 3* who play central roles in the main narrative are labelled as protagonists in a way that does not objectify them as people with undesirable conditions. Instead, the game humanizes them through various aspects that show and emphasize that being disabled is not necessarily a negative identity. However, the game still draws a distinction between able and disabled bodies, particularly how prostheses are depicted. In *Borderland 3*, prostheses are portrayed as tools to assist with basic physical movements rather than as enhancements or modifications. Nevertheless, the idea that prosthetics are seen as a symbol of strength and a ‘future body’ through prosthetic-wearing characters helps in erasing the negative stigma surrounding the functionality and appearance of mechanical prosthetics worn by physically disabled individuals.

On the other hand, the game still perpetuates ableism through its language and attitude toward characters with physical disfigurement. It employs existing harmful stereotypes of disfigured bodies for comedic and entertainment purposes, passing off derogative slang and discriminatory attitude as part of its ‘quirky humour’. It also illustrates how physical disfigurement is still excluded from the majority of society and not as readily accepted by the public when compared to prosthetic users due to their ‘abnormal’ appearance. This unequal representation of different forms of physically disabled bodies in *Borderlands 3* may cause

social inequality between prosthetic users and disfigured bodies without prosthetics. It also encourages techno-fetishism in society and further affirms the widespread assumption that disfigured bodies are inferior in every aspect to prosthetic users, who are considered the prototypes for future cyborg bodies.

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