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Research Project Overview

Gaming as Business and Professional Communication Practice: Ableism, Accessibility, and Persuasion

This project builds upon recent work in disability studies, rhetoric, and professional/technical communication, especially Fiona Kumari Campbell's *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness*, Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Gaming: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Maurice Charland's concept of constitutive rhetoric, Sushil Oswal's research into accessibility and participatory culture, and Lisa Meloncon's edited collection *Rhetorical AccessAbility: At the Intersection of Technical Communication and Disability Studies*. What this project introduces to this rich discussion of disability in professional rhetorical contexts is the argument that tabletop gaming—as both an increasingly important economic sector and as a communication practice within businesses—remains a particularly inaccessible and ableist part of the commercial world. It also follows the current trend in disability studies to weaken negative stereotypes by shifting attention from the person with a disability or individual impairments and redirecting it toward the strategies used to define the standards of an ideal, non-deviant, and ableist body. American and British policies such as the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act and the Equality Act 2010 have often shaped practices in ways to counteract ableist assumptions embedded in workplace contexts, including business and professional communication. However, as Oswal observes in his advocacy for participatory design, many of these so-called fixes act as “retrofits” that further ostracize people with disabilities by marginalizing their needs in the design and development of various media. The needs of people with disabilities become little more than afterthoughts.

For example, through the lens of Bogost's idea of procedural rhetoric, several issues surface with professional games *vis-à-vis* disability studies. Businesses use professional games as a form of communication to train new employees and to prepare managers; these games mount claims about the best ways to handle customer service or to tackle a team project. However, if these professional games are not accessible or demonstrate embedded ableism, then people with disabilities may not get jobs easily, may be less likely to receive a promotion, or may feel disregarded. In other words, internalized within the procedural rhetoric they use, professional games implicitly claim that people with disabilities can never achieve these novel methods of dealing with business situations. Also, vividness through interactivity and expressive content is a key component in procedural rhetoric, but the types of vividness that people with disabilities experience might change from one situation to another. For example, professional games often deliver an ocularcentric application of visual images in their expressive content to the exclusion of haptic, aural, or other means of communication via the senses. These games assume sightedness as a standard and a norm, though people with visual impairments can experience vividness in ways. In the workplace, the lack of diverse sensory expression in professional games encourages people with disabilities to avoid calling attention to themselves and may encourage passing or may discourage alternative strategies for a professional game's goals.

The Minefield, a professional game developed by Elite Training, acts as a specific instance of this practice. *The Minefield* uses the process of finding a safe path across a simulated minefield as a way to argue for the most effective methods in handling a team experience within

the business world. According to the Elite Training support material that accompanies the game, the game focuses on developing teamwork through risk taking in problem solving, planning, communication, and leadership. Therefore, the game puts forth the claim that risk taking is the most important contributing factor to creating a successful teamwork experience. However, the use of disability through the game's interactivity and expression positions disability as harmful and as something to be feared or pitied. In short, disability becomes a deterrent. Because the game's interactivity relies upon the facilitator asking players to traverse a simulated minefield, players confront the idea of their own temporarily-abled bodies, or TAB. TAB is a somewhat contested term in disability studies alluding to people's inevitable decline, through age, disease, or accident. Stepping on a mine discloses this fear of, symbolically, perceived somatic fracture and, within the rules of the game, blindness. Disability, then, is depicted in an automatically negative way. In the end, then, *The Minefield* uses a procedural rhetoric of risk management that places people with disabilities in one of two groups: the "sacrificial lamb" who takes a risk for the good of the group and the "mistake" that costs the group capital.

As a result of my scholarship on professional games, procedural rhetoric, and critiques of ableism, I am currently working to extend this approach to gaming business spaces: game stores, game conventions, game development businesses, and online spaces devoted to tabletop gaming, such as Facebook groups and Kickstarter. Using the framework of constitutive rhetoric, for example, I have begun to examine the ways in which a local game store offers the potential to call their customers into the performance of a particular type of gamer identity through documents advertising game nights, posted rules of behavior, and the design/layout of the store. This "ideal" gamer identity does not account for and often implicitly excludes potential gamers with disabilities.