

Atypical Virtual Worlds: Technology, Culture, and (Dis)Ability in the 21st Century

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My project explored the ways in which diversely abled adults engage with technologies and virtual spheres. I conducted the project in conjunction with Chapel Haven, in New Haven, CT, a ‘residential school and independent living facility offering a range of supports for adults with Autism and Asperger cognitive disabilities.’ Due to Covid, I did my research remotely, reading anthropological literature, watching documentaries, exploring the work of disability rights activists, and most importantly, conducting Zoom interviews (four with Chapel Haven professionals, four with Chapel Haven students, and one Chapel Haven community member.) Below is a summary of my key findings.

My purpose was to explore how neurologically diverse adults use technology in their day to day lives, how they engage with social media, play video games, and ultimately engage with virtual worlds. There were two key points that I took from my preliminary reading. The first was that disability is just as much a socially constructed idea as race or gender. The second was that neurotypical people have a learned, acceptable way of existing in a reality and communicating within that reality which society validates as ‘the norm’. My study explored how technology provides a multitude of ways of communicating and existing, some of which are particularly appealing to neuroatypical people.

Neuroatypical people use a multitude of technological devices in a variety of ways just as anyone would. Students really stressed the use of Facetime, for example, because a visual really helps to calm them if they are uncomfortable or anxious. Texting was also a great way of conversing for students, as one said, “I’ve never been great with the fluid conversation one on one... and with texting it’s not really like that. You text, then they respond to your text. It’s very structured. I’m high functioning autistic but maybe neurotypical people are better at fluid conversation.” Social media, in contrast, can be a struggle for neuroatypical people, for whom interpreting subtlety and implications in conversation is often a difficulty; this is amplified on social media. Predators, although rare, are an extreme concern for students, but they also may overshare, putting themselves out there and not realising that someone else is not interested, or worse, responds in a hurtful way. On the flip side, however, many of the difficulties of social interaction that ‘disable’ certain people in the non-virtual world do not exist online. For example, it is OK to be a bit ‘quirkier’ in online communities, like Discord, or other similar online chats for gamers; many students will spend hours sharing their passion with other enthusiasts for something like Minecraft.

Gaming is a large part of many students’ lives at Chapel Haven. A community member I spoke with, who was an avid gamer, told me: “There is definitely an appeal to a virtual world. It’s a very interesting philosophical conversation. Compared to the real world there are no lasting consequences, there are very quick, relatively easy rewards for very little work, and there is a promise of success if you work hard enough at the game, and failure is not lasting. It’s a world with rules, but the rules are less strict and unforgiving than in the real world.”

The idea of ‘escapism’ came up a lot in my study. Some anthropologists argue that it is patronizing to say that neuroatypical people use games or virtual worlds to ‘escape’; but in my opinion we all seek to escape the reality of everyday life now and then. It is a part of human existence, and neuroatypical people just ‘escape’ for different reasons. Virtual worlds provide a space where the societal norms that ‘dis-able’ neuroatypical people (and that we constantly reproduce in our everyday interactions) do not exist.

As Mel Baggs, the late disability rights activist, acutely pointed out in their work, the ways in which neurotypical people communicate are just some ways of communicating. Further research might consider communication in a broader sense, where virtual worlds are an important space in enabling more comfortable communication for various people. If someone prefers talking to people over text, on Discord, on an online forum, or through a video game, deeming this as ‘not a “real” conversation or reality’ is a naive lack of understanding of ways of communication. Until we start to validate these ways of communicating and realities as credible and legitimate, we diminish the credibility and legitimacy of neuroatypical lives.

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