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Prosthetic metaphors, rejection, and representation in games.

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Prosthetic Metaphors, Rejection, and Representation in Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The prosthetic metaphor is a familiar lens for examining how people may enact their own—or other—identities in games and virtual spaces (e.g., Nakamura 1995, Nguyen 2009, Klevjer 2012, and Purnomo et al. 2019). Influenced by science-fiction and cyborg anthropologists (Haraway 1991[1985]), applying "prosthetic" to virtual bodies that players *articulate* to interface with virtual worlds seems natural. In this paper, respecting scholars with lived prosthetic experience who have considered this metaphorical use (Kurzman 2001, Sobchack 2006), we re-evaluate how playable game avatars are a *mix* of practical *and* metaphorical prosthetics. Using events in the game *Rust* as a conceptual case study, we present preliminary analysis re-visiting prosthesis as an analytical lens to consider how "prosthetic rejection" may help game scholars reframe how differently represented groups of players may relate to virtual bodies and virtual worlds.

The application of *prosthetic* to virtual avatars operates as both metaphor and object. Metaphors are displacements that highlight "certain relations of structural or functional resemblance that might not be noticed without the transportation of a foreign object into an otherwise naturalized scene," thus effecting an analogy (Sobchack 2005, 21). Common prosthetics are themselves both object and metaphor. A prosthetic arm is not an organic arm but signifies the idea of one through its structural, functional, and cosmetic resemblance. The avatars that players *don* to participate in digital games are similarly *metaphors* of embodied performances displaced from, but often representative of, our actual world. *Prosthetic* is one way we describe how players become *attached* to avatars through which they interface with digital environments.

"Prosthesis" entered the medical lexicon in the early 18th century, referring to the replacement of missing body parts with artificial ones (Wills 1995, Jain 1999). In the late 20th century, prosthesis entered human-technology interface literature through the concept of the "cyborg," this time largely as metaphor (Jain 1999, Sobchack 2005). The metaphor of "technology as prosthesis" highlights certain relationships between bodies, technologies, and shifting subject positions. Critics of this metaphor point out how technology as prosthesis goes beyond the medical sense of replacing a

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missing part. Jain (1999), Kurzman (2001), and Sobchack (2006) argue scholars using this metaphor rarely rely on insights from amputees and their prosthetic devices, and often ascribe agency and autonomy to prosthetics while neglecting those traits in their users.

Rejection is a powerful example of this agency. Burrough and Brook describe rejection as "the non-use or minimal use of a prosthesis which has been *fitted* to an individual" (1985, 40; emphasis ours). Wilson writes how rejection may arise from challenges such as *poor fitting* (1970). McKenzie describes poor comfort, unnatural appearance, and the reactions the wearer gets from other people as reasons a prosthetic may be rejected (1970). Kurzman describes how "an artificial limb which is never quite incorporated usually indicates that an amputee is having difficulty adjusting to the amputation" (2001, 371); that is, struggles with the loss of *their* body.

Massively multiplayer online survival game *Rust* provides a unique case for reconsidering how virtual bodies may come to matter to, or be rejected by, different players. Unlike similar games that allow players to customize avatars, *Rust* assigns players pre-determined avatars. Initially all *Rust* avatars were white males. In 2015, updates began diversifying player avatars by randomly—and retroactively—applying different skin tones and other physiological traits, including genitalia (Grayson 2015, Garza 2016, Johnson 2016). Avatars are linked to players' Steam IDs meaning that even should they delete their avatar, new ones will retain the same appearance.

Many games orient gameplay around characters whose visible characteristics players cannot control. The difference between *Rust* and these games is that generally all players receive the same *default* avatar. To apply the prosthetic metaphor, default avatars tend to follow a "one virtual body fits all" approach. And previous scholarship has identified how that "one body" tends to overwhelmingly be *fitted* to white and male players (Williams et al. 2009, Passmore et al. 2017, Gardner & Tanenbaum 2018).

Players cannot be defined by a single demographic identifier whether limb count, skin tone, gender, or sexual identity (Shaw, 2014). However, it is still worth noting many players are in a position where they cannot *reject* demographically poor-fitting common mass-produced default avatars should they wish to participate in digital games at all. Meanwhile, non-white or female avatars were apparently too poor a demographic fit for a large group of *Rust* players who *rejected* them (Grayson 2015, Garza 2016, Johnson 2016).

Rejection took the form of requests for refunds, a bombardment of poor reviews, and heated messages penned to the developer on forums and social media about how unacceptable it is to have to be Black or worse, "a FUCKING WOMEN the rest of [their] life" in-game (Johnson 2016). Despite the less physiologically immediate stakes of these avatar-prosthetics, these rejections followed similar logic to the medical contexts above. These players argued their avatars were now a *poor fit* because of an unacceptable appearance. These overwhelmingly white-male players could not adjust to losing *their* bodily representation in-game and struggled when another was provided.

Burrough and Brook Write that creating prosthetics with cosmetic desirability *and* high functionality can be challenging (1985). However, in games visual appearance and function are not inherently constrained by each other. For instance, *Rust* avatars function the same regardless of appearance, making rejection based on technical capacity an unlikely explanation.

Games scholars can remix this example of avatar rejection in *Rust* to reflect on the experiences of players of color, women, and others for whom avatars are still rarely made to *fit* by default. White male player demands to retain their "privilege of immersion" (Passmore et al. 2018)—even when infused with racism and misogyny—highlight the circumstances underrepresented players regularly face. Re-visiting avatars as performative prosthetics that *fit* different players differently—and through which we articulate gameplay—better recognizes important facets of how diverse players may become *attached* to games.

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