



The Enhancement Of The Disabled In Transhuman Media

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Abstract

Science fiction often brings to question the repercussions of a technologically advanced future. Since man has become the dominant species on the planet through cunning and scientific innovation, would further development herald a bright and optimistic future? The answer is not so clear cut, as the perceptive man has come to question whether all of this is truly necessary. One field which comes to mind often with doubts regarding technology is that of human enhancement, and by extension the eradication of disability.

The disabled in society have often been marginalized, rather perceived especially within literary narratives. If man is able to enhance himself and transcend past his natural limits, would that eliminate all of his flaws? This question is the nagging point in this paper, asking for critical discussion in the works of science fiction such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), the video games *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011) and *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* (2016).

Keywords: Cybernetics, Disability, Implants, Prosthesis, Transhumanism

Introduction:

The image of the human being that has been established since antiquity has begun experiencing unprecedented changes with the rapid advancement of technology. The term posthuman has been established to identify the idea of this new form of mankind that is being conceived. Transhumanists are held to be advocates of this change, but as opposed to those who are partial to a slower, conservative pace. In the transhuman view of progress, the adoption of machines/computers in providing aid to disabled individuals to perform on the same capacity as normally abled human beings is evidence of mankind's eventual movement towards a posthuman future.

This paper proposes to examine the depiction of disabled individuals in the novel *The Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson, and the two video games *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011) and *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* (2016) by Eidos Montreal. Both sources are regarded as seminal works within the field of science fiction and benchmarks for the depiction of transhumanism in popular culture. These worlds are set in the not-so-distant future where the human body is subjected to radical changes in the form of implants and augmentations. These enhancements of the body will be put under scrutiny; whether they truly are improvements and thus eradicate the concept of a disabled person, or whether they only contribute further to the ostracization of individuals without the capability of acquiring these enhancements.

According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, a person has a disability, if the person:

- (1). Has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, e.g., someone with bipolar disorder, diabetes or addiction to alcohol.
- (2). Has a history of impairment that substantially limited one or more major life activities, e.g., someone who is in remission from cancer or someone in recovery from the illegal use of drugs.
- (3). Is regarded as having such an impairment, e.g., a prison assumes that an inmate has an addiction to drugs (even though that inmate does not have an addiction), and takes a negative action based on that belief, such as placing the inmate in a segregated cell.

Neuromancer

The *Neuromancer* (1984) written by William Gibson follows the story of a criminal hacker named Henry Dorsett Case. In the futuristic dystopian world of the novel, skilled individuals such as Case are able to access a virtual reality space called the matrix, akin to the real-world internet. This matrix stored valuable data for large corporations, of which Case and other hackers made a living by stealing off.

The disability in the novel occurs when the protagonist Case is captured, when he attempts to steal secrets from one of his employers. They precisely burned his nervous system with a Russian mycotoxin in order to deprive him of the ability to access the matrix ever again as punishment. Having built his adult life out of this skill, Case subsequently fell into a deep depression when he was deprived of his hacking ability. Desperate to find a way to cure himself, Case moved to Chiba City in Japan, the gathering point for all who were involved or interested in the culture of augmentation. Unable to find a way to regain his lost hacking ability, Case turned to drugs and engaged in self-destructive behavior in order to numb the pain he felt. For him who had experienced the bliss of the matrix, being confined to the physical world was like being stuck in a "prison of his own flesh" (Gibson 6). Although his disability is not something that is relatable for every

human being in the world, it is a life altering event that prevents him from achieving tasks that he could have easily performed before his injury.

Case is eventually approached by a mysterious and wealthy individual named Armitage who offers him a way to repair his neural damage in exchange for the utilization of his hacking talents. Despite not trusting the man, Case has become so emotionally fragile and vulnerable at this point of his life that he accepts the offer. His ability to enter the matrix is restored after surgeries that included replacement of his spinal fluid, and organ transplants. Now, he being designed a transhuman desires the safe space that only the matrix can provide, being detached from his worldly body and he revels in his newly returned capabilities.

Aside from Case, the other human characters such as Molly Millions, Peter Riviera and Armitage, as well as countless others across the world have taken to augmentation. These myriad augmentations of the human body through artificial means provide options for the people to change their trajectory in life, which would not have been possible with their pre-existing bodies. In addition, the multitude of people who spend most of their time inside of the matrix would suggest that man feels unsatisfied and uncomfortable in his current body, and he wishes to find relief from this insecurity by inventing more ways to enhance himself. Case's addiction to drugs in order to relieve himself from his pain and depression are more relatable in a real-world sense, and are of course a type of disability on their own. Most of Gibson's works focus on characters in these transhuman worlds that attempt to find the answers to their hardships by relying on stimuli obtained from science and technology – whether that be in the form of drugs, augmentations to the body or living inside of a virtual world. These characters are reliant on modern technology which “takes the form of a drug that sustains the lives of Gibson's run-down characters until it too, eventually fails them” (Steiner 21).

Within these technologically advanced worlds, the prosthesis or implants are no longer simply a necessary compensation for a disabled individual to perform a task; they are now voluntarily added to human beings who wish to become better than they already are. With regards to the character of Molly Millions, a cybernetically enhanced prostitute-assassin for hire, her choice to enhance her body has been described as:

Molly's prostheses are not material surrogates that compensate for an incapacity or failure in embodiment but augment her body, actualizing an improved self. No longer do her prostheses provide the material means through which she looks and behaves like a normal, able-bodied workingwoman. Instead, they are proof of power, self-conquest, and self-mastery.... (Tarapata 95)

With this new view of cybernetic implants and enhancements in mind, then it would perhaps be mislabeling to refer to these individuals as disabled as understood in the modern sense. So then it is for man to take up the task of finding an inclusive new definition for those who would be regarded as disabled that have subsequently become enhanced.

The Ubisoft Montreal Dystopia:

Deus Ex: Human Revolution is a video game developed by Ubisoft Montreal and released in 2011. Its sequel *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* was released in 2016. The setting of *Deus Ex* is similar to the world as seen in *Neuromancer*, a futuristic world filled to the brim with amazing technology, but where lawlessness runs rampant.

Similar to Henry Dorsett Case from the *Neuromancer*, the protagonist Adam Jensen suffers from crippling injuries and becomes disabled as a result of them. Working as Head of Security for a tech company named Sarif Industries, Jensen is injured in a terrorist attack. In order to save his life and to restore functionality to most of his body, he is subjected to extensive augmentation. This procedure results in Jensen having over half of his original body being replaced with artificial implants. Jensen is deeply resentful of his new body as the first thing he does when he looks into a mirror post-surgery is to shatter it, being unable to stand looking at himself. After his augmentation, Jensen reflects on his augmentation with a sense of remorse and helplessness, stating that he never asked for what has been inflicted upon him. While his thoughts on the matter of augmentation before his accident are not explicitly shown, having the choice stripped away from him and being forced to adopt the artificial implants has unequivocally left him feeling conflicted.

In the futuristic world of *Deus Ex*, there is a clear divide between those in society who wholeheartedly accept augmentation and those who are opposed to it. This conflict escalates to the point that violent protests against human enhancements are being held in major cities across the globe. Thus, Jensen stands at a crossroads between these two ideologies as he was augmented not by choice. In order to keep their bodies from rejecting their new implants, augmented human beings have to take regular doses of a drug called Neuropozyne. Despite the theoretically superior capabilities offered by augmentation, the augmented have to rely on a drug in order to maintain themselves. Thus, the augmented people further fall into two groups – the wealthy who have a steady access to Neuropozyne; and the less fortunate who have to resort to desperate means to acquire their drug, and are often exploited because of their acquired necessity. The transhuman world of *Deus Ex* thus suggests an interesting quandary of which is the disabled – the human being in their natural form, or the augmented of society who have surpassed their base human counterparts in many aspects but are reliant on a drug. One tormenting truth of the transhuman world is that the augmented cannot transcend love of normal life, which is further complicated by unnatural pain, drug and fear of death.

The plot of *Human Revolution* culminates with an attempted global genocide of all augmented humans. This incident is referred to as the “Aug Incident”, and it is brought about by an ironic series of events. Hugh Darrow, the scientist responsible for the development of augmentations as they exist in the world, is unable to augment himself due to his genetic makeup rejecting all artificial implants. His initial goal of creating complex augmentations to aid people came about after a skiing accident left his knee debilitated and unable to be corrected through surgery. Perhaps as a result of his longing for a remedy to his disability and being forced to witness others attain what he could not, he secretly harbored

a deep-seated grudge against all augmented human beings. Each augmented person had to be outfitted with a biochip that regulated the implants functions in order to be compatible with the body. However, unbeknownst to the public at large, Darrow had used his connections within the technology industry to possess control over all of these chips. At the climax of the game, he broadcasts a worldwide signal that causes all augmented humans to violently attack anyone within their sights. This caused the death of 50 million people, with many more being injured in the aftermath.

Hugh Darrow is an interesting figure who represents how “deviant subjectivity violently erupts upon the surface of its bodily container” (Mitchell Snyder 58) in narrative forms. Physiognomy has been relied upon by many cultures in order to ascribe traits onto individuals, and this has persisted into narrative works as well. However, this does not necessarily infer that the normal narrators were prejudiced against the other; rather it is a device used in narratives to mark the other as mysterious and full of depth without explicitly stating it to be the case. Although Darrow believes himself to be well-intentioned, stating:

For humanity to survive beyond this century, it must abandon ill-conceived notions about transcendence and embrace change. But for that to happen, the hard lesson must be learned. Blood must be shed. (*Deus Ex: Human Revolution*)

Years of hidden resentment and jealousy had amassed to create a man that was willing to commit genocide. Yet there was another motive to Darrow’s plan that paints him in a more sympathetic light, he was just a pawn under a greater scope villain – the Illuminati. A cabal of the world’s most powerful and influential individuals gathered together to control the workings of society through clandestine means, of which Hugh Darrow was a member. Realizing that the Illuminati planned to keep all of mankind subservient to them using the augmentation biochips, Darrow went against his cohorts decision and decided that it was a better alternative to rid the world of the chips altogether. Artificial chips now deprive the augmented of normal human sympathy and love, a central value of life. Further, this lends credence to the fact that internal deviance does not necessarily equate to pure evil, as the disabled Darrow was flawed like any other human.

Because of the nature of the *Deus Ex* series as choice driven video games which permit player expression and variability with regards to the outcome of many dialogues and plot points, some canonical inconsistencies might occur from the first game to the sequel. *Human Revolution* has four possible endings that can be attained:

- (i) Revealing the truth of the biochips and the Illuminati
- (ii) Concealing the truth of the biochips and placing blame for the signal broadcast on the extremist faction, Humanity Front
- (iii) Concealing the existence of the Illuminati and blaming the technology behind augmentation
- (iv) Not revealing anything, but letting the people decide for themselves what is best

This is remedied somewhat by the fact that Mary Demarle, lead writer for *Mankind Divided* stating in an interview with magazine PC Gamer, “The thing that is true, that everyone knows, is that millions of augs went crazy and hundreds of millions of people died, and the Panchaea installation got so damaged that it collapsed and people died in it, and then there are rumours.” This means that as far as the first game goes, all four of the possible endings hold true, with the fine details of the events shrouded behind rumours and mystery. Regardless of what ending has been chosen, the signal to all augmented people is broadcast and the destructive aftermath sends the world reeling and struggling to recover.

The sequel *Mankind Divided* takes place two years after the end of *Human Revolution*, with the balance of the world having been shaken by the Aug Incident. The protagonist, Adam Jensen no longer works for tech companies but is now a full-fledged agent of Interpol tasked with pacifying augmented terrorists. While the Illuminati’s plans for complete control of all augmented individuals was foiled by Darrow in the previous game, they have gone about working on a new initiative called the Human Restoration Act. This proposal at the behest of the United Nations would force all augmented people to have a control chip inserted to monitor them at all times or otherwise they would be cordoned off into specially designated facilities. Following the Aug Incident, fear and paranoia have gripped the common man, setting him against the augmented more so than ever before. The rise of anti-augmented sentiment moves some to take drastic measures, causing segregation between the populations worldwide. All of a sudden, millions of wealthy, privileged people have become the disabled outcasts of society as a result. Questions arise: What is then attained by augmentation in reality terms? Is the augmentation a real blessing?

The plot of the sequel game involves Jensen moving about between both augmented and non-augmented communities with the freedom afforded to him by Interpol, and attempting to unravel the mystery behind the Illuminati and their goals. It is revealed that Jensen has had numerous augmentations that were further hidden within his body, but is only able to activate a few of them at any one moment. These hidden augmentations are incredibly powerful tools but they are unstable and pose a risk to use. Here the negative and positive aspects of being augmented or disabled are put into display much more than in the previous game. Players of the game have to deliberate between which augmentations they choose to prioritize and turn on, and which ones they would have to turn off. Now that Jensen is so much more powerful and potent than nearly every other single individual, it could be argued that he is the dominant and most superior of the species. But it only makes him powerful in a physical sense, since his status as augmented still makes him marginalized as being part of the other. And then further marginalized from even his augmented peers since he is exceptional compared to them. A pertinent question arises: Does augmentation obliterate the metaphysical problem of otherness? Does it attain the state of equality or equanimity?

According to David-Jack Fletcher, “Notions of disability are largely based on presupposed ideological frameworks of what constitutes the “human” – furthermore, the “whole human” – particularly regarding perceived understandings of normalcy” (14). Thus, the supposed enhancement of an individual faced with crippling disabilities is not so clear cut as it

seems. The human need for categorization has existed since the dawn of early civilization and continues to exist to the modern era, eventually giving rise to the concept of human rights along the way. These definitions of categories have evolved as time has passed, with some older categorizations and definitions having been deemed inappropriate in the modern world. With regards to categorization and definition are some critically important points to be kept in mind:

This categorization of human nature should take into account several circumstances, aspects, and traits making up our identity, such as death, dependency, pain, suffering, effort, imperfection, or limitations, which are often the clearest expression of human diversity and freedom. (Roig 15)

Conclusion:

Despite being denied by some, it can be stated to some extent that mankind has changed in his essential nature. Most of civilization can no longer exist without attachment to machines, whether that machine be as mundane as a mobile phone or a vehicle for transportation. Humankind's need for a new sense of identity and definition is being stressed all the more not only with regard to science, but also with the development of gender identities and politics as well. The formation of these new identities and categorizations must be carefully deliberated upon and factor in all of the important facets of an individual.

Natasha Vita More, a prominent transhumanist writer has stated that prosthetics and implants are no longer merely a replacement of a missing part of the body with an artificial one; but rather they "have already altered the realm of normal" (78). The existence of these prosthetics, or ways to enhance the disabled is not a complete solution or a means to eradicate the disabled. The purpose of utilizing technological advances to remedy certain disabilities does not make it so that the disability is eradicated completely. Rather, the disabled become enabled in some other way without becoming fully restored as a whole "normal" human. Hence, more than ever before, the concept of the disabled must be redefined in a transhuman world with such a variety of enhancements present at the disposal of mankind. As can be seen from the analysis of both *Deus Ex* games and *Neuromancer*; despite finding ways to seemingly overcome certain disabilities on paper, in practice, additional obstacles continue to arise. Simply attempting to obtain a remedy for the impairment or deficiency at a surface level often proves to be futile. Notwithstanding artificial devices to enhance, the intelligent man cannot achieve transcendence in the metaphysical sense, but he is prone ironically to desire which keeps him enslaved. Transhumanism seems a novelty in existential miasma. This awareness instead attempts to forge and reinforce a new concept of what it means to be a human, or to be normal, a state of being which would ideally be more easily attainable by all of humankind.

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