

“Freaking Fans”

An Oral History of Disability in Fan Spaces

by

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract:

This oral history, under the lens of critical access studies, provides case studies that illustrate the long and interconnected history of disability and fan communities. Through interviews of eight disabled fans from varying communities, I have discovered a key understudied theme in the shared history of disability and fandoms. I argue that a fan community is a relational space where fans share access with each other. To be a fan is to offer room in this shared space for people of similar body/minds. For disabled fans, their identity founded on lived experiences facilitates relationships or fosters barriers within these fan spaces, constituting “access.” Disability activism within fan spaces consists of disabled fans finding empowerment through creating inclusive spaces that further empower other disabled individuals who share in this space. Disabled fans seek inclusion through providing extra room in spaces for others that they see themselves in. In this way, relationships form and sustain fan spaces. Rather than conceiving of fandom as a textual relationship between fan and creator, I advocate for considering how fans construct their own spaces, their opening or closing of which reveals whom they identify with among their fan communities. This reveals a perceived hierarchy based in historical forces in fandom that excludes marginalized groups, not just the disabled community. However, “fannish” acts and practices of inclusion resist the exclusion present in fan spaces where historical forces such as ableism encourage fans to share space at the expense of the marginalized. This is a novel and useful paradigm to conceive of fan communities as inclusive and exclusive spaces, as it reveals the hidden lives of my interviewees who shared with me their practices of inclusion, accessibility, and access. This study is also activist for stressing the importance of joy and pleasure in the disabled experience to complement the more common disability narratives of marginalization and activist struggles.

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One of the greatest privileges of my life will always be interviewing kindred spirits across the English-speaking world to talk about disability and fandom. I will always hold dear listening to other people's "cringe," as described by Dakota King, interviewed for chapter three. I am forever indebted to my interviewees and our "mini-conventions" that the reader will discover in the following pages. Marilyn Teague, and Marcia Illingworth, you were my first interviewees, and I want to thank you for enjoyable conversations that flew by, allowing me to forget how

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As a historian, it is important that I contextualize the past using primary sources. Therefore, it was crucial to have access to the Internet Archive's massive repository of documents, particularly for chapters one, two, and three. Chapter one's history of science fiction would be incomplete without the Internet Archive's *Amazing Stories* collection. Additionally, its Wayback Machine

proved incredibly useful while conducting the Internet histories in chapters two and three. I thank the Internet Archive for their accessible treasure trove of digital information.

Both my zeal for learning and my passion for disability rights comes from my family. Without thanks to them, these acknowledgements would be incomplete. My parents brought me up to value education and its potential for liberation. My sister, my dearest and oldest friend, constantly reminds me of the power of bonds and compassion in the face of alienation. I also have to thank my grandparents for their constant support and overwhelming pride for everything I've accomplished thus far.

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Introduction

On a mild February evening in 2023, I connect with Marilyn Teague, a resident of the State of Georgia, over Zoom. She is my first interviewee for my oral history of disability in fan spaces. I sent recruitment messages for my project to various fan community email addresses, hoping for someone to reply. There was no guarantee that these addresses, found on websites rarely updated since the late 1990s, would connect me with anybody – and if they did, that they would be interested in participating. Fortunately, John L. Coker, publisher of the fan publication *Scientifiction*, replied to me. He told me of a fan organization in the 1980s and 1990s that provided accessibility services at fan conventions.¹ I was on the right track. A week later, Randy Cleary offered to post my recruitment email on the Southern Fandom Confederation Facebook page for anyone that was interested in my project.² That is where Marilyn, a member of the accessibility organization, found my email and replied. Marilyn tells me during our interview “I’m just glad that somebody forwarded your e-mail to me...And somebody said, ‘hey, Marilyn T., you know you might be interested in calling this guy or talking to them. I go, like, yeah, sure, always.’”³ Over the next hour, Marilyn shares her life story of providing access in the science fiction community.

Marilyn has an illustrious career in the fan community, which for her has been primarily centered in the southern United States. She tells me of carrying a physical banner at fan parades, meeting her husband in fandom, and raising a child on *Star Trek*. She also explains losing her family to illness. Her husband passed away from glioblastoma, and her son also passed from cancer. “So to me, cancer sucks....Can’t tell you how many people I know that have died

¹ In correspondence with John L. Coker on January 17, 2023.

² In correspondence with Randy Cleary on January 26, 2023.

³ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

because of cancer,” she says. “But, anyway, I move on.” We discuss grief in our conversation, but we also talk about sharing the joy and pleasure of fandom. “Fandom is all-encompassing, you know, basically,” she tells me. “It’s like you can go to conventions and you can be a person with a disability, and you can...be around other people, not so much disabled, but just people in general that you can become friends with.” She likens fan gatherings to “homecoming.” She mentions her husband organizing a mini-convention in his home town of Panama City in Florida. “It was...like it was homecoming,” she repeats. “You could do a little small 25 person gathering...or you can do an 80,000-person convention, either way, and still. Kindred souls, right?”⁴ “September Party,” as Marilyn calls it, was in association with Nova Odyssey, a fan organization that operated from the 1970s to the early 2000s.⁵ This remark sticks in my head in this moment, but also as I continue my project. Why do fans gravitate towards “kindred souls?” What constitutes a “kindred soul?” How personal is that connection? How does this connection intersect with the disabled lived experience? She also mentions something else that catches my attention. “It’s like, people like to talk about what they like with people who are accepting of...who like the same things, right?”⁶ I wonder: who is doing the “accepting,” and why do they accept certain individuals over others?

Through writing this dissertation, and interviewing seven other disabled fans, I have discovered a key theme in the history of how fans, especially disabled fans, form their communities. I argue that a fan community is a relational space where fans share access with each other. To be a fan is to offer room in this shared space for people of similar body/minds. For disabled fans, their identity founded on lived experiences facilitates relationships or fosters

⁴ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

⁵ In correspondence with Marilyn Teague and Sandy Ciccarella on September 11, 2024.

⁶ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

barriers within these fan spaces, constituting “access” (a term that I will define below). Disability activism within fan spaces consists of disabled fans finding empowerment through creating inclusive spaces that further empower other disabled individuals who share in this space.

Disability fan activism contains a wide range of creating inclusion in fan spaces. It can mean making buildings more accessible, writing and publishing about the disabled fan experience, fans creating stories together, or spectating a fan event together. My interviewees relate creating accessibility programs predating the Americans with Disabilities Act, writing journalism that expands disability representation, and creating virtual worlds online with kindred spirits, both disabled and non-disabled. The key is that disabled fans seek inclusion through providing extra room in spaces for others that they see themselves in. In this way, relationships form and sustain fan spaces.

Rather than conceiving of fandom as a textual relationship between fan and creator, I advocate for considering how fans construct their own spaces, their opening or closing of which reveals whom they identify with among their fan communities. Who shares access to a fan space reveals how inhabitants of that space see themselves through whom they associate. Just because a fan shares access to a fan space with someone else, does not preclude that this is an inclusive gesture. Often, sharing access to a space is created through denying entry to others. In this case, many non-disabled fans exclude disabled people through defining “true” fans as able-bodied and neurotypical. These non-disabled fans share space at the expense of disabled fans. This reveals a perceived hierarchy in fandom that excludes marginalized groups, not just the disabled community.

Personal Reflexive Statement

I am a disabled junior scholar. It is necessary to outline my experiences along with theory that informs this dissertation. I deeply connected with the past through my study of history during my undergraduate degree. However, after a diagnosis of bipolar II during my fourth year, I soon found alienation and a disconnect with my course of study. I could not find my experience in those written about by historians. After struggling through my Master's degree, I found myself even more alienated, unable to find a place in academia. I thought this was the end of my time in higher education. I faced spotty employment and an inevitability of living on social assistance. While on social assistance, I discovered that there were scholars who could identify the very same journey that I was on, but in the past in the lived experiences of disabled historical actors. I realized that there was a place in my discipline for voices like mine. Additionally, as I will expand upon below, I participate in fandoms, leading to an initial question: what are the experiences of disabled fans? What are their histories? I conceived of a dissertation project that would directly interview disabled fans for their lived experiences.

I introduce myself this way to articulate my positionality within the scope of this dissertation. I am a disabled and Mad scholar studying other disabled persons. Inherent to my connection to my interviewees is a subjective understanding that we share certain experiences. However, as a researcher, I take a position of power through poaching their words into a much larger analysis. In this regard, I borrow from feminist accountability. For the purposes of this study, I embrace my positionality of being close to my subjects in lived experience as outlined by Georgiann Davis and Torisha Khonach. By embracing my positionality within the scope of my disability history, I am positioning myself within it.⁷ However, the authors note some

⁷ Georgiann Davis & Torisha Khonach (2020) The Paradox of Positionality: Avoiding, Embracing, or Resisting Feminist Accountability, *Fat Studies*, 9:2, 106, DOI: 10.1080/21604851.2019.1628604

considerations with researchers being close to a marginalized group. For example, they point to the potential discrediting of such research for being “meseach,” a castigating term for work that is inherently self-discovery.⁸ In this way, am I merely using my dissertation as a project of self-discovery that does not have academic rigour and fails to provide useful insight to the research community?

I push back against the concept of “meseach” in several ways. For one, disability activism has always advocated for “nothing about us without us.” For so much of our history, our experiences have been explained to us by medical professionals who do not take our viewpoints into account. Instead, society should incorporate our voices to tell our stories, rather than relying on expert opinion that is just as mediated by cultural and social discourse. In other words, an oral history of disability in fan communities should be written by someone part of that community. I borrow from another feminist scholar, Kim V. L. England, when discussing this positionality. England argues, “We need to locate ourselves in our work and reflect on how our location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research, and how we write our research.”⁹ She advocates for understanding research as a process that examines the betweenness of the researcher and the researched, emphasizing how fieldwork influences both. Additionally, reflexivity can highlight power disparities.¹⁰ I reflexively embrace my closeness to my interviewees to highlight our interconnectedness and our authority when discussing our own experiences for the historical record. I may not understand the embodiment of fibromyalgia, but I do understand social obstacles standing in the way of my fulfillment as a human being as they intersect with my individual impairments, thus I can find common ground with my interviewees.

⁸ Davis and Khonach, “The Paradox of Positionality,” 107.

⁹ Kim V. L. England (1994) *Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research*, *The Professional Geographer*, 46:1, 87, DOI: 10.1111/j.0033-0124.1994.00080.x

¹⁰ England, “Getting Personal,” 86.

Additionally, the vast experiences of disability do not preclude that this is a “mesearch” project that seeks for me to solely understand my own experiences. I seek to understand myself but only in the same way that any humanities scholar should seek to find common humanity with their subjects while also embracing the chasm that keeps them apart. As much as I am part of the disability community, this community is far from monolithic. I have authority in this space, but I also seek to understand what is unfamiliar to me. I defer to other authorities within my community.

Literature review

This dissertation takes an interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon critical disability studies and fan studies. As I will demonstrate in this literature review, critical disability studies and fan studies is only just beginning a cross-discipline discussion that seeks to answer questions about the intersections of disabled identity and fan identity. Pleasure is an important concept in critical disability studies. It is also important in fan studies, as I will explain below. Much of disability history focuses on how we have been medicalized, observed, and marginalized. However, pleasure is still part of the disabled lived experience. Fan studies scholars Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc conceive of pop culture as “pleasurable.”¹¹ Additionally, critical disability scholar Katie Ellis builds on the work of Jenkins through examining how disabled people embrace the pleasures of popular culture that simultaneously depicts them with “negative and problematic representations.”¹² I extend the broad categorization of popular culture to include fan culture and fan spaces. Therefore, it is critical to understand how disabled people

¹¹ Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc, “Defining Popular Culture,” in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2002), 26.

¹² Katie Ellis, “A media manifesto” in *Manifestos for the future of critical disability studies* ed. Katie Ellis et al. vol. 1 (Routledge: London, 2019), 103.

interact, form, and live in fan spaces, because they are so essential to finding pleasure for many (not just the disabled). This oral history contains grief, sadness, and complexity, but my interviewees talked extensively of the pleasure that they have found in fan spaces. Finding pleasure while disabled is a revolutionary act. Sharing in that pleasure is revolutionary as well. The following literature review highlights the intersections of critical disability history and fan studies, introducing key themes fundamental to this dissertation's study.

Critical disability history

My exploration of disability is grounded in a much broader historical literature that seeks to contextualize the disabled experience through different historical contexts. Historical scholarship discussing disability has existed in some form as far back as the mid-19th century. Yet historians analyzing disability have often subsumed it into broader projects of social or labour history, while rarely making it central to their analysis. In that scholarship, disability was often framed in the broader context of pity. Within Canada, scholars have pushed against these limiting stereotypes and have utilized critical theory that emphasized the rights of the disabled to write histories that better serve the disabled. In this way, these critical narratives challenge the unhelpful and patronizing “great disability hero” narratives of previous scholarship.¹³ Thus, critical disability history is committed to justice through activist scholarship. My oral history is an important example of this tradition of activism through telling the stories of disabled fans, a narrative that has yet to be fully explored.

However, history as a discipline has not always had the best interests of the disabled in mind. For one, despite disability running through all of history, it is clearly neglected in what

¹³Geoffrey Reaume, “Disability History In Canada: Present Work In The Field And Future Prospects,” *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 36, <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v1i1.20>.

historians write as a category of analysis, such as race, class, or gender.¹⁴ Additionally, historians have struggled with defining disability in the first place. After all, conceptions of disability vary by culture and time, making any concrete analysis category difficult to settle on.¹⁵ For example, North American immigration policy during the twentieth century conceived of immigrants as “disabled,” medically inferior through applying a rhetoric of eugenics.¹⁶ At Ellis Island, doctors looked for any perceived aberrance in how bodies moved or appeared, citing these transgressions within a much larger “assembly line” of bodies. These ideas of eugenics were inherently tied with racist ideology within their historical context.¹⁷ Without a useful category, historians might rely on unfair stereotypes and assumptions or not include a discussion about the disabled at all. However, a dedicated group of historians have increasingly highlighted how, despite there being a nuanced evolution to disability, there are commonalities that can be identified and studied. A common disabled experience exists and is worthy of study. Not only that, but disability historians, such as Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen, insist that this field “is critical to explaining the human experience and holds tremendous import for other areas of historical study.”¹⁸ Despite a lack of scholarship in the past, disability historians strive to yield a fruitful discussion that can benefit the discipline. My oral history seeks to grow this discussion through directly engaging with my historical subjects through interviews.

¹⁴Diane F. Britton, Barbara Floyd, and Patricia A. Murphy, “Overcoming Another Obstacle: Archiving a Community’s Disabled History,” *Radical History Review* 2006, no. 94 (January 1, 2006): 212–27, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2006-94-212>.

¹⁵Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability*, ed. Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018), 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190234959.013.29>.

¹⁶Jay Dolmage, *Disabled upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 1-2.

¹⁷Dolmage, *Disabled Upon Arrival*, 14.

¹⁸Rembis, Kudlick, Nielsen, “Introduction,” 1.

Historians have struggled to settle on a unified model of disability after utilizing the overtly ableist medical model for decades. At first, disability history emphasized a medical model.¹⁹ This mode of disability history would examine medical records in a top-down fashion to show how a disabled individual is unhealthy, broken in a fundamental way. An obvious flaw with this model is that it deemphasizes the individual dignity of the person while assigning a moral nature to their disability. A disabled person can fix their fundamental flaw through accepting medical care. In this conception, this is the end goal of a disabled person's journey in life. They are completely dependent on their doctors. If they refuse care, then fault lies on them, and any harm befalling them is due to their actions. This goes hand in hand with disability as a personal tragedy. A disability is objectively a bad thing, a pitiable condition needing to be cured.²⁰ This perspective has uncritically adopted the underlying thinking of medical experts who have produced the records on disability. This model prioritizes the voices of medical experts over disabled individuals, negating it ever being a representative account of disabled voices. In this thesis, I will explore how institutionalization and medicalization has affected my interviewees. My final chapter details how Ontario's social assistance program elongates the history of institutionalization and medicalization in that Canadian province. Additionally, my interviewees each relate to me how they have encountered their local medical programs that sometimes provide empowerment, such as the prescription for a power wheelchair, but also result in pain from surgeries and treatments.

¹⁹Julie Anderson and Ana Carden-Coyne, "Enabling the Past: New Perspectives in the History of Disability," *European Review of History: Revue Europeenne d'histoire* 14, no. 4 (2007): 447–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507480701752102>.

²⁰Licia Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 5.

Disability historians shifted away from the medical model with the advent of social history. Under a social model of disability history, a disabled person's impairment does not come from a biological flaw; rather, a disability is the set of obstacles put upon someone by society.²¹ Society, seeing someone different as evidenced by their disability, will ostracize and create barriers for an outlier with a disability. To use a common example, a wheelchair user is only disabled when they have no access to a building due to a lack of ramps. Society has created the barrier of entry by not including an accessible entrance. What is important is how society differentiates a disabled person from a non-disabled person. There is nothing "wrong" with a disabled person. The difference is that society treats them negatively for being different. Disability is a social construct.²² For a while, this model liberated disability studies from an overly oppressive medical model. This resulted in disability being another category of analysis, such as gender, class, or race.

An oversight of the social model, however, is the place of impairment in the disabled experience. Postmodernist scholars criticized the importance of society in constructing a disability. If disability is socially constructed, why can disabled people express the realities of living with their disabilities? Apart from any social obstacles, disabled people still experience their disability every day, and that is not connected to any socially constructed barriers. Someone with bipolar disorder still experiences mood swings irrespective to how society might treat them. Additionally, there can be disadvantages to a disability. The bipolar person in the middle of a depressive episode might have a hard time identifying a positive part of that experience. The social model glosses over how painful disability can be at times, because it is society's construction and not a lived experience. To a scholar of the postmodernist turn in disability

²¹Anderson & Carden-Coyne, "Enabling the Past," 447.

²²Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability*, 5.

studies, the most important question is: “what does it mean to be disabled?”²³ Identity and the unique experiences of disability are fundamental to this conception of disability. Postmodernist scholars emphasized these critiques, advancing critical disability history to the position it is in now. At the start of this decade, disability history had skeptical leanings towards explaining how disability fits within society. Building from the rich tradition of critical disability history, I seek to understand how disability fits in with fan communities. This dissertation engages with questions of intersecting identity in what it means to be a disabled fan, following this line of questioning. In chapter one, this will be explored by examining how fans identify as seekers of joy within the context of the science fiction community while also identifying with the painful aspects of being disabled. In chapter two, I detail how disabled video game journalists identify as disabled, but also as writers who create empowerment for themselves and their audience. In chapter three, this will lead us to learn about disabled role-players in online communities who craft intersecting online identities through their collective creative writings. Finally, this culminates in chapter four with the writings and testimony of a disabled journalist whose identity exists as a blind Ontarian in a province without adequate social assistance, but also a joyful sports fan who participates from the sidelines.

Critical disability history adopts humanist philosophy, even though humanist scholars struggle to fit disability into their narratives. Disability scholars, however, have pivoted from ableist thinking to weave disabled experiences into larger frameworks. For example, philosophers have struggled talking about the intellectually disabled.²⁴ Classical philosophy prioritizes concepts like rationality as a hallmark of humanity. For those who cannot speak for themselves in a typical way, this means that they are dehumanized and not considered human as

²³Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability*, 8-9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-8.

much as others (if at all). Disability scholars have challenged this canon to stop the devaluing of intellectual disability, and to instead reframe intellectual disability as fundamentally a human experience.²⁵ After all, disability studies delves into what it means to be human within the framework of the liberal arts.²⁶ Critical disability scholars have been integral to expanding the scope of the humanities field of disciplines to include the disabled experience as a fundamental narrative. The theory behind critical disability history critiques and employs a humanist tradition.

Critical disability historians carefully read primary sources to understand the disabled experience in the past, often finding creative solutions to source issues. Historians bring to the discussion an important toolkit. Within broader historiographical debates, historians are experienced when discussing the importance of the individual within a larger context. Although some historians, such as Braudel, might more overtly emphasize larger historical processes, overall, historians are adept in the paradigm of individuals having agency that influences, and is influenced by, society and culture.²⁷ Historians accomplish this with a close reading of a broad number of sources. Critical disability historians have pioneered reading sources to ascertain disabled experiences. Historians overcome the difficulties of listening to silenced voices through creatively reading sources, ranging from written diaries to material sources.²⁸ One study examined the politics of postage stamps depicting disabled individuals, for example.²⁹ Another used colonial casebooks as a way to engage with colonial conceptions of abnormality.³⁰ Indeed,

²⁵Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability*, 7-8.

²⁶Catherine J. Kudlick, "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other,'" *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (2003): 764-7, <https://doi.org/10.1086/529597>.

²⁷ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* (London: The Folio Society, 2000).

²⁸Rembis, Kudlick, Nielsen, *Introduction*.

²⁹Geoffrey Swan et al., "Licking Disability: Reflections on the Politics of Postage Stamps," *Radical History Review* 2006, no. 94 (January 1, 2006): 228-32, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2006-94-228>.

³⁰Catharine Coleborne, "Disability and Madness in Colonial Asylum Records in Australia and New Zealand," in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*, ed. Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190234959.013.17>, 281-292.

the written records left behind by the disabled in biographies, although not as well known, are critical for our understanding of the historical disabled experience.³¹ Historians have a flexible method for engaging with sources that allows for unique breakthroughs. I employ oral testimony to directly engage with the disabled experience. In chapter one, I complement oral sources testifying about the science fiction community in the 1980s and 1990s with foundational science fiction stories from pulp magazines in the 1930s and 1940s to provide a panoramic scope of ableism in the science fiction community. In chapter two, I conduct an Internet history of one of my interviewee's favourite childhood websites to explore the potential of online environments for providing access for fans. This leads to chapter three with further web sources that detail how disability is present in virtual role-playing communities to underscore the testimony of my interviewees. Finally, in my fourth chapter, I conduct a social history of social assistance in Ontario using contemporary news sources that detail the creation and failure of the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP), a key theme in my interviewee's journalism and lived experience.

Critical disability historians have also framed the historical conversation around the importance of continuity. Continuities may be minor, or they may be profound and at times harsh realities. Leslie J. Reagan drew a centuries-spanning thread from sixteenth century "monstrous births" to present day abnormal bodies: "It might surprise the modern reader, however, to learn that a sixteenth-century 'monstrous birth' transported to the present might find the cultural reactions toward people with visually unusual bodies quite familiar."³² These disability

³¹Kim E. Nielsen, "The Perils and Promises of Disability Biography," in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*, ed. Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190234959.013.2>, 21-40.

³²Leslie J. Reagan, "Monstrous Births, Birth Defects, Unusual Anatomy, and Disability in Europe and North America," in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*, ed. Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen, vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190234959.013.23>, 386.

continuities extend beyond just abnormal bodies. As mentioned, critical disability is inherently intersectional. I draw upon Kimberle Crenshaw's watershed definition of the term. Crenshaw sought to underscore how scholars "treat[ed] race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis."³³ Crenshaw emphasizes the importance of analyzing and centring those who are "multiple-burdened" through marginalization.³⁴ Ultimately, "Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse" because the intersection of race and gender is not properly explored.³⁵ For disability studies, scholars emphasize how disability intersects with other factors, such as race and gender. Jay Dolmage rhetorically analyzed the construction of disability and race in *Disabled Upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability*, writing "How is it possible that we are still, one hundred years later, living in a culture that might best be characterized by anthropologists, hundreds more years in the future, as obsessed with borders and driven to exclude? How are we still a culture that vilifies disability and disables racial otherness?"³⁶ A historical perspective allows us as a society and community to understand the ever-present category of disability, even if the powers that be diminish or even erase it. This is true for anyone who experiences disability, whether they identify as BIPOC, queer, or even a fan.

Fan studies

Although a relatively new field, fan studies has recently grown to be an interdisciplinary endeavour that showcases how widespread fan activity is in society. Since Jenkins and Bacon-

³³ Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Anti-Racist Politics." *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 139, 139.

³⁴ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 140.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁶ Jay Dolmage, *Disabled upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 141.

Smith lay the foundation for the discipline in 1992, fan studies has diversified and grown.³⁷ Almost all of fan studies scholarships owes itself to Jenkins' seminal work with "textual poachers".³⁸ This commonality means that, whether in agreement or dissension with, all fan studies scholars refer to the ethnographical concept of textual poaching. Fundamental to any analysis is a look at the fan's relationship to the larger intellectual property. However, situated within this context are fan scholars shifting the discussion towards fans connecting over disparate digital platforms.³⁹ With the advent of the World Wide Web, then the Web 2.0, and social media platforms, fans now have nascent methods to communicate and form communities. Now fan study scholars must attempt to piece together fandoms over various digital platforms.⁴⁰ No longer are fandoms as seemingly monolithic as they once were.

Throughout all of this, fan scholars have expanded the notion of who is a fan. Previously, studies were limited to specific groups (ex. female Star Trek fans, etc). Now, however, fan scholars are not limited by genre, or even period. Studies are reaching as far back to study the 19th century, such as Daniel Cavicchi's study of music fandom in the nineteenth-century.⁴¹ Some less traditionally studied fan groups, such as those of female wrestling and even porn, are

³⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Twentieth Anniversary (New York: Routledge, 2013); Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

³⁸Katherine Larsen, "Moving Forward Looking Back," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.2.1.32>.

³⁹Lucy Bennett, "Tracing Textual Poachers: Reflections on the Development of Fan Studies and Digital Fandom," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 5–20, https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.2.1.5_1.

⁴⁰Bennett, "Tracing Textual Poachers," 5-20.

⁴¹Daniel Cavicchi, "Loving Music: Listeners, Entertainments, and the Origins of Music Fandom in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 109–26.

studied.⁴² One burgeoning subfield studies fan communities in musical theatre.⁴³ Now is an excellent time to enter fan studies, because more options are opening up, but it is still relatively new, meaning that the possibilities are endless.

Another continuity within fan studies that has evolved is the concept of the “aca-fan.” Fan studies scholars often co-exist between two inherently separate spaces: fan spaces and academic spaces. An aca-fan is an academic studying fan culture who is a fan themselves.⁴⁴ In this way, their identity rests contested. Are they more of a fan or academic? On the one hand, they participate in fan communities, but on the other, they are observing these same fan communities from an outsider perspective. I identify as an aca-fan, having participated in fan culture since childhood. Much of my interest in fan studies stems from the relationships I have made by bonding over things like nerd culture. This positionality offers insight into fan identity (myself being a fan), but does intersect with my academic identity, an outsider’s perspective that seeks to understand the processes that I study. Since the early 1990s, this split nature has only increased in complexity as the field’s historiography has developed less of an ethnographic focus, and more of a text-based analytical focus.⁴⁵ The ethnography of older studies situates itself within the ranks of fans to study their perspective. However, newer works seek to closely read fan texts rather than engage with fan communities themselves. Even if aca-fans are distinguished from

⁴²Tom Phillips, “‘Angry False-Teeth-Chattering Mayhem’: Synecdochic Fandom, Representation and Performance in Mature Woman Fandom of British Professional Wrestling,” in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 227–42; Alan McKee, “Porn Consumers as Fans,” in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 509–20.

⁴³James Deaville, “Play It Again (and Again, and Again): The Superfan and Musical Theater,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 355–63; Jessica Hillman-McCord, “Worshipping Lin-Manuel Miranda: Fans and Totems in the Digital Age,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 325–34; Kelly Kessler, “‘Trash Talk and Virtual Protests’: The Musical Genre’s Personal and Political Interactivity in the Age of Social Media,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 335–44.

⁴⁴Paul Booth, “Augmenting Fan/Academic Dialogue: New Directions in Fan Research,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 1, no. 2 (October 1, 2013): 119–37, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.1.2.1191>.

⁴⁵Booth, “Augmenting Fan/Academic Dialogue,” 119–37.

their non-fan academic counterparts, they will always have to struggle in translating academic theory to the lived experiences of fans.

A strength, however, of fan studies since its inception has been its push to include female representation in fan works. This carries to the present day. Jenkins primarily studied female fans and Bacon-Smith exclusively highlighted female fans in television communities. As the conversation surrounding gender advanced over the years, by the mid 2000s, academic dialogues bridged the gender gap between male and female aca-fans.⁴⁶ As much as any scholar will have preconceived prejudices about gender, the field as a whole has always been conscious of how gender plays into fandom, and has grown into a highly gender-conscious field.

Fan studies employs a wide scope for analysis. Ethnography, literary criticism, and psychoanalysis all played a part in developing the field starting in the 1990s.⁴⁷ Following this, fan scholars adopted new methodologies to study previously unexamined subcultures such as musical theatre and sports. This lends itself to a more unstable field, as there is less of a strict methodology guiding research. After all, in comparison to other disciplines, fan scholars do not have as rigorous of a discussion when it comes to methodology.⁴⁸ Some have argued that this makes for a rather undisciplined discipline.⁴⁹ But, as scholars like Sam Ford have pointed out, this agnostic approach to methods allows for exciting new topics to become relevant.⁵⁰ An expansive methodology also means a wide tent: scholars from across the humanities and social sciences have laid claim to this field. More than anything, what unites these scholars is a

⁴⁶Sam Ford, "Fan Studies: Grappling with an 'Undisciplined' Discipline," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 53, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.2.1.531>.

⁴⁷Adrienne Evans and Mafalda Stasi, "Desperately Seeking Methodology: New Directions in Fan Studies Research" *Participations* 11, no. 2 (2014): 9-12.

⁴⁸Evans and Stasi, "Desperately Seeking Methodology," 21.

⁴⁹Sam Ford, "Fan Studies: Grappling with an 'Undisciplined' Discipline," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.2.1.531>.

⁵⁰Ford, "Fan Studies," 54.

scholarly reflexivity — fan scholars are simply not just their departments, but also united in being fans.⁵¹ The act of being a fan scholar is about examining the self to better represent the whole despite popular misconceptions of “crazy fans.” Furthermore, in the digital age, fan scholars can transcend cloistered fan communities by demonstrating the interdependence of fans across fandoms.⁵²

With this growing conception of methodology, fan scholars are also able to discuss sources more thoroughly. Fan scholars have a growing awareness of how sources are archived and preserved and what this process says about fan communities. They are seeing themselves as “cultural stewards.”⁵³ Additionally, there is an emerging robust discussion on how the provenance of sources can say a lot about fans. For example, Sarah Ford examined how the process of writing and preserving Lord of the Ring fanzines reveals the class, gender, and race of those writing in the fandom during the 60s.⁵⁴ Even beyond print, scholars are studying digital sources, such as with the work of serial fiction in podcasts.⁵⁵

However, conversations about the relationship between content producers and fans are still part of the discussion. Jenkins in 1992 began this scholarly conversation about the relationship between content producers and fans. Since then, as noted, the conversation has expanded to many more topics, but even still the present day sees the link between content producers and fans as important. In *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*, Mel Stanfill has complicated this well-trodden debate with even more nuance. Starting with

⁵¹Adrienne Evans and Mafalda Stasi, “Desperately Seeking Methodology,” 14.

⁵²Adrienne Evans and Mafalda Stasi, “Desperately Seeking Methodology,” 15.

⁵³Cait Coker, “Editors’ Introduction: Archives and Special Collections and Fan Studies,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs000282>.

⁵⁴Sarah Ford, “From the Hobbit-Hole: The Lord of the Rings Fanzines of the 1960s and Archival Limitations,” *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 33–50, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs000311>.

⁵⁵Robert Yeates, “Serial Fiction Podcasting and Participatory Culture: Fan Influence and Representation in The Adventure Zone,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (April 1, 2020): 223–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418786420>.

Foucault's understanding of power, Stanfill articulates a version of fandom where fans poach content, but also are constrained by a tight relationship with content producers. This is a departure from the previous understanding of "bottoms up" where fans take power. In Stanfill's conception, fans are constructed by the power dynamic they are part of. Not only that, but producers themselves create ambiguity when they co-opt fan culture to identify as part of the fan community. Overall, what Stanfill seeks to highlight is not simply that fandom is an improvement in culture, but rather who is being included and who is being excluded.⁵⁶ The conception of fandom, therefore, is far more complicated than Jenkins' female fans writing erotic queer fan fiction as a form of feminist resistance. Stanfill has an eye on power. As they put it, "The organizing metaphor of this book is the domestication of fans."⁵⁷

Even still, within this widening debate, there is more of an emphasis to study the myriad of ways that fans form communities. Print is an obvious communication method being studied, such as in the latest work done by Ford on *Lord of the Rings* fanzines.⁵⁸ Beyond that, scholars are examining how fans utilize but also negotiate with space.⁵⁹ An excellent example of this is a 2020 study examining the development and theory behind fan conventions.⁶⁰ Fan scholars have a growing conception of the many ways that fans embody their identities within spaces. How fans perform their activities reveal much more about themselves than ever thought previously. There is not as much of an emphasis on fans negotiating their place within corporations' intellectual

⁵⁶Mel Stanfill, *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans* (University of Iowa Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvd7w89q>, 6-8.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁸Sarah Ford, "From the Hobbit-Hole: The Lord of the Rings Fanzines of the 1960s and Archival Limitations."

⁵⁹E. J. Nielsen, "Introduction: Fan Spaces," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 5, no. 2 (June 1, 2017): 139-40, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.5.2.1392>.

⁶⁰Benjamin Woo et al., "Theorizing Comic Cons," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 9-31, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs000071>.

properties, and more on the diversity of fan communities. Fans not only exist despite copyright, but they also create spaces for themselves.

With an expanding parameter of who gets to be included in fandom, comes an increasingly intersectional current in fan studies. Fan studies has always employed a feminist lens. Not simply that subjects of studies have been female fans, but a feminist lens prioritizes subjective writing to tell truth.⁶¹ The initial ethnographic approach present in much of fan studies has synergy with a feminist lens. This connects to how fans express themselves to form communities of similar individuals. Communication, hierarchy, and relationships are conveyed through self-expression in fan communities. It makes sense, then, that a feminist lens would yield great insight through the self-expression that is often written by fans through things like fan fiction and music. Additionally, there has been growing literature on the place of toxic masculinity within gender dynamics in fandom.⁶² The feminist scholarship present in fan studies not only elucidates our understanding of gender dynamics in fan communities, but it also encourages scholars to lead with empathy when studying communities that they may not be part of.

One component of intersectionality that is understudied in fan studies is that of race. This has led to gaps surrounding race and racism in fan communities.⁶³ As fans are becoming more visible in media, issues that are not about gender are coming to the surface.⁶⁴ According to Rukmini Pande, the issue revolves around which fans are and not being noticed based on a complicated interplay of race, gender, and sexuality. There is an assumption that whiteness is

⁶¹Briony Hannell, "Fan Studies and/as Feminist Methodology," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33, no. Fan Studies Methodologies (June 15, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1689>.

⁶²Katie Wilson, "Red Pillers, Sad Puppies, and Gamergaters: The State of Male Privilege in Internet Fan Communities," in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 431–46.

⁶³Rukmini Pande, "How (Not) to Talk about Race: A Critique of Methodological Practices in Fan Studies," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33 (June 15, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1737>.

⁶⁴Sam Ford, "Fan Studies: Grappling with an 'Undisciplined' Discipline," *The Journal of Fandom Studies* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2014): 66, <https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs.2.1.531>.

normal, and Pande claims that this is “whitewashing.”⁶⁵ Another fan studies scholar, Suzanne Scott, agrees, arguing that more needs to be done to disrupt the many binaries that blind us to intersectional analysis surrounding race, gender, and queerness.⁶⁶ Indeed, more work needs to be done to bridge intersectional gaps in the literature. Disability is yet another category for fan scholars to study. However, fan scholars are only just beginning to connect the importance of disability to fan identity. This dissertation positions itself as one such voice in this much larger conversation.

The state of disability fan studies

Despite the growing literature on disability, there is little on disability and fandom. This needs to be studied, because exploring fandom provides a unique look into how people form communities and craft identities. The implications of studying fandom with disability open a wide range of avenues for both disciplines to grow. We can be better disability advocates if we understand how communities form and develop with shared interests.

Other scholars from fan studies and critical disability studies have come to a similar realization. One of the first concerted scholarly efforts to connect the two disciplines was a 2019 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*. Scholars studied varied aspects of disability in fan communities based on studies of fan fiction. The authors in this volume write thought-provoking and trail-blazing work, but unfortunately the intersection of disability and fan studies begins only here in 2019. Derek Newman-Stille lays excellent groundwork in his outlining of how fan fiction intersects with disability with the hurt/comfort genre of fan fiction. In this genre,

⁶⁵Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race* (University of Iowa Press, 2018), 2-6.

⁶⁶Suzanne Scott, “The Powers That Squee: Orlando Jones and Intersectional Fan Studies,” in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 387.

canonically non-disabled characters are disabled in some way to make them more sympathetic.⁶⁷ Authors featured in the issue also explored challenging questions regarding archiving fan sources, such as Adrienne E. Raw's exploration of tagging fan fiction of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.⁶⁸ As of writing, the fan studies journal *Transformative Works and Culture* has put out a call for a special issue on disability for future work on the topic.⁶⁹

Critical Access Studies: Defining Fan Spaces

Central to my argument is understanding a fan community as a "space." In this dissertation, I will demonstrate the vital importance of employing a critical access lens to the study of fandom. By space, I draw upon the recent development in critical disability studies of critical access studies. Aimi Hamraie defines the field as such: "Critical access studies...examines the political, ethical, epistemological, and experiential dimensions of built environments..."⁷⁰ In other words, critical access studies unpacks and dismantles the social and cultural forces that might make a space inaccessible for a disabled person, based on their unique intersectional identity. Hamraie states, "Critical access theories...approach access as an 'interpretive relation between bodies.'"⁷¹ Rather than having a space be compliant with accessibility legislation, critical access studies seeks to remove intersectional barriers, such as racism, sexism, or homophobia that impact whether or not a disabled person can exist in a space. I build on this definition by conceiving a fan space, such as a convention centre or a virtual role-playing world, as an intersectional

⁶⁷Derek Newman-Stille, "From Slash Fan Fiction to Crip Fan Fiction: What Role Does Disability Have in Fandom?," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (April 28, 2019): 73–95, <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v8i2.492>.

⁶⁸ Adrienne E. Raw, "Normalizing Disability: Tagging and Disability Identity Construction through Marvel Cinematic Universe Fanfiction," *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (April 28, 2019): 185-220.

⁶⁹ "Disability (3/15/26; 1/1/2025)," <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/announcement/view/147>, accessed July 30, 2024.

⁷⁰ Aimi Hamraie, "Mapping Access: Digital Humanities, Disability Justice, and Sociospatial Practice," *American Quarterly* 70 no. 3, (September 2018): 459.

⁷¹ Hamraie, "Mapping Access," 456.

environment where culture, social norms, and identity collide, either providing or inhibiting access for disabled fans through interdependence.

I further draw upon Hamraie’s historical argument concerning accessibility in a Western context. Hamraie explores the history of access and accessibility in their book *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*. Throughout the twentieth century, Hamraie argues, endeavours for inclusivity for the disabled community constituted a specific form of “access-knowledge,” a way of “knowing and making” of the ideas, concepts, and storytelling we have created for accessibility.⁷² In this way, accessibility, as we conceive of it, is based on its historical context like any other hegemony. Hamraie discusses the U.S. American context, but in this dissertation, I expand this to the historically contingent Western world, encapsulating North America, and even a European context.⁷³ Ultimately, the liberal and Western conception of disability facilitated the processes of “objectification, surveillance, and standardization,” according to Hamraie.⁷⁴ The historical forces that Hamraie discusses are intricately woven into the global history of fandom, as I will show in this dissertation. Rather than fan history being separate or aberrant from regular society, fan communities have existed within the context of history, thereby inhabiting historical forces such as progress, bodily control, and, of course, ableism. Examining the history of access in fan communities reveals a complicated picture of historical change in the face of the continuity of ableist and disableist forces.

Briefly, I will define “space” in the context of this dissertation. Access is a crucial, yet underused, concept for discussing fan communities as a space of knowing. Bodies inhabit and constitute spaces through experiencing them. I further draw upon the works of other critical

⁷² Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2017), 5.

⁷³ Hamraie, *Building Access*, 9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

access scholars to define fans in relation to the communities they inhabit. According to scholar Gretchen E. Henderson, “we are bodies living with other bodies, sharing and shaping the spaces that we inhabit.”⁷⁵ Access, to Henderson, is about asking how we experience spaces with our bodies.⁷⁶ I seek to understand how disabled fans sharing space with each other shape the fan spaces that they inhabit. I also focus on how they constitute these spaces through various embodiments: this may mean physically providing a scooter at a convention or listening to a radio broadcast of a baseball game. In this way, I define fans as embodying spaces and constituting those spaces through sharing knowing and experiencing. Therefore, access can constitute many forms, as it is dependent on how a body interacts and perceives a space. This flexibility allows me to conceive of fan spaces as a wide range of built environments. This dissertation covers, as I will demonstrate, physical spaces like convention centres, but also imagined communities on the Internet. These are all what Hamraie would consider “built environments.”⁷⁷

Central to my conception of fans is how they choose to share their spaces with others. I build this off a key concept in critical access studies: how access is something shared. Louise Hickman and David Seulin argue that “access [is] not...something given by one group to another, but as something shared from its inception and thus horizontally distributed across multiple bodies and technologies.”⁷⁸ I argue that this concept of access perfectly fits in with the actions of fans. The fans I talked to were eager to tell their stories of fandom, and share their fan

⁷⁵ Gretchen E. Henderson, “Sharing and shaping space: Notes towards an aesthetic ecology” in *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability: Looking Towards the Future* ed. Katie Ellis, et al. vol. 2 (Routledge: London, 2019), 62.

⁷⁶ Henderson, “Sharing and shaping space,” 67.

⁷⁷ Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 14, <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctt1pwt79d>.

⁷⁸ Louise Hickman and David Serlin, “Towards a crip methodology for critical disability studies,” in *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability: Looking Towards the Future* ed. Katie Ellis, et al. vol. 2 (Routledge: London, 2019), 136-7.

lived experiences. In their stories, they also relate how exhaustive their efforts were to share access to their fan spaces with others. This is how fan spaces are created: they are interdependent, mutually constitutive, and laterally built.

In this way, I critique the long-held theory in fan studies that scholars can either argue from the “ground up” or from the “top down.” Instead of emphasizing the hierarchy between fans and creators, I seek to dismantle this paradigm and instead focus on how fan communities are a space built by fans sharing access with each other. I advocate that this is a way forward in fan studies, something to further enhance our knowing of the lives of fans. More than anything, a critical access studies approach is integral for understanding intersectionality in fan spaces, no less the topic of disability.

Fan studies has always examined communities surrounding media consumption, but critical access studies also provides a theoretical lens to expand our understanding of this key phenomenon. Scholar Katie Ellis argues that media analyses of disability often focus on disability representation, but scholars should also look at how media intersects with the lived experience. A key theme in her argument is how media fosters (or inhibits) social inclusion.⁷⁹ I also argue the valid importance of media, but highlight how communities surrounding media are contested sites of social inclusion and exclusion. I argue that a fan is someone who shares access to spaces, but I do not undervalue the importance of media in this discussion. Fans have important relationships to their media, often identifying with some aspect of it. This is the same process as fans identifying with each other. In this way, these media communities are sites of social inclusion or exclusion through identifying who belongs or who does not based on the

⁷⁹ Katie Ellis, “A media manifesto” in *Manifestos for the future of critical disability studies* ed. Katie Ellis et al. vol. 1 (Routledge: London, 2019), 92.

intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and disability. Ultimately, fans seek to share their spaces with people of similar body/minds surrounding media.

Sharing access with fans of similar body/minds is a form of practice. This is how fans build, reinforce, and hide spaces. As Adam Hubrig and Ruth Osorio note: “We believe that access is dynamic. Access is relational. Access is intersectional. Access is political. In the words of disabled women of color Mia Mingus, Alice Wong, and Sandy Ho, access is love.”⁸⁰ Fans practice building spaces through dynamic relationship-building along intersectional lines. Critical access scholars also conceive of access as interdependence. Assistive technology scholars Cynthia L. Bennett, Erin Brady, and Stacy M. Branham discuss how interdependence can improve assistive technology.⁸¹ Interdependence is a key theme in my interviews, as my interviewees relate how they depended on others and others depended on them. According to Hamraie and Fritsch, “interdependence acts as a political technology for materializing better worlds.”⁸² Fans create interdependence through caring for each other. This caring is a form of practice. According to scholar Meryl Alper in an examination of how universal design fails to properly provide access for autistic movie-goers, practices form the spaces of movie theatres.⁸³ Fan access is a form of practice of including other fans, not just through invitations. It is also a practice of caring for each other. It is interdependence. In this way, the inclusion of fans more

⁸⁰ Adam Hubrig et al “Enacting a Culture of Access in Our Conference Spaces,” *ODU Digital Commons: Women’s Studies Faculty Publications*, ed. Adam Hubrig, and Ruth Osorio, 2020, 88.

⁸¹ Cynthia L. Bennett, Erin Brady, and Stacy M. Branham, “Interdependence as a Frame for Assistive Technology Research and Design,” in *Proceedings of the 20th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility (ASSETS ’18: The 20th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility*, Galway Ireland: ACM, 2018): 161, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3234695.3236348>.

⁸² Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, “Crip Technoscience Manifesto,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5, no. 1 (April 1, 2019): 13, <https://doi.org/10.28968/cft.v5i1.29607>.

⁸³ Architect Ronald Mace popularized the concept of universal design. The seven principles of universal design advocate for “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.” “What Is Universal Design? | Centre for Teaching Excellence | University of Waterloo,” accessed March 8, 2025, <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/catalogs/tip-sheets/what-universal-design>; Meryl Alper, “Critical Media Access Studies: Deconstructing Power, Visibility, and Marginality in Mediated Space,” *International Journal of Communication* 15, 2021, 855.

resembles a round table than it does a top-down hierarchy of a fan's relationship to a text. Relationships constitute a fan space. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, these relationships can be exclusive, with fans barring access to those whom they deem not worthy of the practice of care. In this way, the sharing of fan space is paradoxically exclusive with the selective sharing of access to a fan space.

Critical access studies presents a novel framework for studying fans' lives. Rather than focusing on the relationship a fan has to a creator or a text, my dissertation focuses on the formation of communities through the lens of accessing spaces. Not only is this useful for understanding how my disabled interviewees access often inaccessible spaces, this is also useful for studying fans of any sort of intersectional identity. However, for the case of my study, the themes of accessing spaces, knowing spaces, and barring spaces is critical for understanding the intersectional lives of my disabled interviewees. Ultimately, each interviewee I talked to discussed how they have shared access to their fan spaces through a range of practices. My interviewees demonstrated how fans practice creating spaces through sharing these spaces with people of similar body/minds (which are constructed along intersectional lines), surrounding media. From a lens of critical access studies, fans share access to their spaces out of love, relationships, and lived experience.

Methodology: Oral History

As a disabled junior scholar, I understand the importance of storytelling in my community. As I will demonstrate later in this dissertation, experts, doctors, and politicians have medicalized my community, often writing our stories. Many of us have never contributed a word to our own stories. When I decided to do my PhD on fan disability history, it was obvious to me that this

needed to be an oral history. For too long, academics have used medical records, or sources distanced from our perspectives. My history would directly engage with my subjects, and I would have the privilege of working with members of the fan community to tell our stories. Although discussing the designing process of assistive technology, Cynthia L. Bennett and Daniela K. Rosner argue that the disabled lived experience should lead disability knowledge.⁸⁴ I extend this to knowing our own history and stories. The disabled community also understands storytelling as something empowering, while also resisting ableist narratives. Carl M. Rice, Chelsea Temple Jones, and Ingrid Mündel argue that story-making resists early death, a reality of being disabled.⁸⁵ Storytelling is critical for the disabled community, despite us never getting to tell most of our stories.

The discipline of history has a rich tradition of oral history as a methodology. Accordingly, I draw upon the work of Steven High as a model to fashion my own oral history. I adopt High's concept of "sharing authority," a central idea within oral history. In "sharing authority," an oral historian collaborates with their subject, in this way having a working relationship that is founded on trust.⁸⁶ In this case, I do not conceive of myself as an academic studying my subject. Rather, we are joint storytellers, and it is my job to listen and collaborate. Ultimately, my interviewee has the final say about how I represent them. Each interviewee has had the opportunity to review my work and offer their input. Additionally, I conceived my questions for each interview as open-ended. It was my job to listen and record, not direct my

⁸⁴ Cynthia L. Bennett and Daniela K. Rosner, "The Promise of Empathy: Design, Disability, and Knowing the 'Other,'" in *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (CHI '19: CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Glasgow Scotland Uk: ACM, 2019), 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300528>.298.

⁸⁵ Carla M. Rice, Chelsea Temple Jones, and Ingrid Mündel, "Slow Story-Making in Urgent Times," *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 22, no. 3 (June 2022): 251, <https://doi.org/10.1177/15327086211072230>.

⁸⁶ Steven C. High, *Oral History at the Crossroads: Sharing Life Stories of Survival and Displacement*, Shared, Oral & Public History Series (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 7-10.

interviewee in their responses. Most of the time, my interviewees directed the flow of the conversation with my occasional affirmation that I was listening. I also followed up on certain comments for elaboration.

I adopted High's analytical approach of understanding how my interviewees represent themselves in their storytelling. According to High, "As an oral historian, I believe it is essential that we try to understand the ways in which people define themselves. What words do *they* use to describe their experiences? Whom do *they* identify with and against?"⁸⁷ Identity is a fundamental theme in the stories of my interviewees. Central to understanding how fans provide access is properly analyzing intersecting identities. Therefore, I conceived of my questionnaire through asking open-ended questions surrounding themes of identity. I then opened the conversation for my interviewees to comment on how their identities intersected along lines of disability, fan identity, gender, and sexuality. In this way, I echo High's own call to have sharing authority through the practice of an oral history methodology and the relationships I gained with my interviewees.⁸⁸ Additionally, I draw upon the work of Critical Disability scholars Dorothy Atkinson and Jan Walmsley who advocate for an "inclusive history" in oral history that builds towards a "*shared* history" for the disabled community.⁸⁹ Overall, I seek to create an oral history through collaboration with my interviewees, rather than be the sole authority on their lived experiences.

Throughout this dissertation, I will refer to my interviewees subsequently by their first names, highlighting our relationship as collaborating storytellers. This also points to the

⁸⁷ High, *Oral History at the Crossroads*, 20.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁹ Dorothy Atkinson and Jan Walmsley, "History from the inside: Towards an Inclusive History of Intellectual Disability," *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 12, no. 4 (November 2010): 273, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15017410903581205>.

humanity of the individual I talked to, something that is uncommon in academic literature that so often has depersonalized the disabled through assigning numbers in place of names and anonymizing data for the purposes of a given study. I stress the agency and individuality of the interviewee in the telling of their stories. Researchers employ anonymity with their subjects to protect their research participants in various disciplines. However, I aim to let my interviewees speak for themselves in how they want to be represented. During the interview process, I asked them by what name they wished to be represented. Upon reviewing their testimonies, they accepted or asked for changes in how I used their names. Juni, for example, asked explicitly to be referred to by their first name.⁹⁰

Initially, there were several methodological challenges in approaching this topic for a dissertation. For one, I wanted to conduct the interviews myself, rather than relying on archival sources. This made conducting interviews in person difficult. If I wanted to reach out to disabled fans, I would need to conduct virtual interviews over platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Adopting a virtual scope allowed me to speak internationally to fans across the English-speaking world. To accomplish this wide casting, I needed a methodology that would allow me to broadcast my recruitment literature to a wide audience as possible.⁹¹ I employed email recruitment to online fan organizations who could then disseminate my information to any interested participants. It was also necessary to reach out to prominent disability activists over social media to contact them for the study. In this way, I had two options for recruiting. One involved widely emailing fan organizations, and the other was more directed. Ultimately, it was up to the individual whether they were interested in responding. Through these methods, I

⁹⁰ In correspondence with Juni, December 2, 2024.

⁹¹ Before recruiting my interviewees, I received ethics approval for my research protocol, which included documentation like recruitment scripts, and interview questionnaire scripts.

scheduled meetings with eight individuals for roughly one-hour sessions. I then took a recording of the virtual meeting, and then put the audio through transcription software for writing purposes. Ultimately, what I thought would be a challenge in contacting people online was a viable way to conduct oral history.

While conceiving of the dissertation's approach, I considered two ends of a spectrum for conducting interviews. I realized that I could conduct a wide scope of participants, potentially interviewing dozens of people (for example, 30-40). However, I aimed to take a deep dive approach to dwell on the key themes of my interviewees life and encourage a co-authorship between myself and them. As mentioned previously, I aimed to highlight the agency and individuality of my interviewees, and focusing on under ten people allowed my narrative to highlight the specifics of their lives. Additionally, as I found out in the recruiting process, this scope lined up with the amount of recruits who did contact me. Ultimately, I would have needed more resources and time to gather around thirty or forty individuals for my study.

The cornerstone of my methodology in approaching difficult topics is the fact that I am a disabled scholar doing disability history. This is a further layer of the sharing authority mentioned earlier. I do not position myself as an objective academic seeking to understand the disabled experience while not being *of* that experience. I positioned myself this way to my interviewees, so that we had an understood similarity of experiences. They always were keen in telling me their stories, because I shared my own. In this way, there was a collaboration occurring with both of us confiding in each other. They were vulnerable with me, but I was also vulnerable with them.

I differ from other oral historians that use archival oral testimony. For example, an oral history repository for disability history is Bodleian Libraries website "Disability History

Resources: Audio and Video.”⁹² A disability oral history that utilizes archival testimony in addition with original testimony is Fred Pelka’s *What We Have Done: An Oral History of the Disability Rights Movement*.⁹³ I set out with the intention to conduct my own interviews, because I wanted to build relationships with my interviewees in the name of sharing authority. I think it is activist that myself, a disabled author, is writing an oral history with other disabled authors when so often our stories have been written by non-disabled authors, archived for use by potentially other non-disabled writers. Additionally, I think the co-authoring process properly occurs when the oral historian conducts the interviews with their collaborator. I asked my interviewee to follow up on a point, or gently direct our conversation in a specific direction based on curiosity and insight. This is truly a collaborative process, impossible if I pored through archived oral testimony.

I also borrowed heavily from fan studies’ tradition of ethnography previously mentioned. Benjamin Woo outlined in *Fan Studies Primer: Method, Research, Ethics* how to conduct oral interviews for fan studies. I build onto the concept of sharing authority with these methods. Critical to my oral history is understanding fan communities as a kind of space. Therefore, asking questions surrounding how a fan culture operates is key. Woo advocates for “thick descriptions” where interviewees are prodded to explain the dynamics of their experiences for the interviewer to analyze and interpret how a culture operates.⁹⁴ My open-ended questions encouraged my interviewees to provide thick descriptions of their time writing in fan

⁹² Isabel Holowaty, “Oxford LibGuides: Disability History Resources: Audio and Video,” accessed December 11, 2024, <https://libguides.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/disability-history-resources/audio-and-video>.

⁹³ Fred Pelka, *What We Have Done: An Oral History of the Disability Rights Movement* (Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2012), x-xi.

⁹⁴ Benjamin Woo, “Asking Fans Questions: The Ethnographic Interview,” in *A Fan Studies Primer: Method, Research, Ethics* ed. Paul Booth and Rebecca Williams (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021), 98.

communities or providing accessibility. I then took those descriptions, contextualized them, and constructed a substantive picture of how their specific fan community operated.

For my oral history, I drew upon the methodology of historians and fan studies scholars for conducting an ethnographic oral history. Fundamental to my methods is a cultivated relationship of sharing authority I had with my interviewees. This broad concept has wide-ranging implications for my dissertation. As a disabled scholar myself, I advocate for more histories of disability in fan spaces to be based on this sharing authority of common disabled experience considering a long tradition of relegating (or even erasing) the disabled experience to the back in place of expert authority. My interviews were semi-structured, allowing for a collaborative process where I never knew quite where my interviewee was taking me, and one where I could ask questions in a collaborative manner. This resulted in interviews of thick descriptions that I contextualized to construct a substantive picture of a fan space.

Structure of chapters

My dissertation is divided into chapters that reflect four different types of fan spaces. In this way, I employ a case study approach to study the history of disability and fandom. In each chapter, disability, fan identity, and other intersectionalities collide within different spaces. My first chapter, “The Electrical Eggs and the Genre of Scientifiction: Disability in the Science Fiction Fandom,” details the Electrical Eggs, a science fiction fan organization that provided accessibility at fan conventions predating the Americans with Disabilities Act in the 1980s and 1990s. This chapter conceives of accessing a space in terms of “physical architecture.” The Eggs (as they are affectionately known) shared access to physical spaces through providing scooters, booking rooms with accessible hallways, among many other things. The Electrical Eggs shared

access to their fan spaces through activist work that fostered accessibility at convention centres. At the centre of this story are the lives of three women who formed life-long relationships through their crip activist work.⁹⁵ I argue that the disabled lived experience of these three science fiction fans mattered despite American science fiction's long history with ableism and eugenics.

My second chapter, "Playing With Power, Confining With Shame: Video Game Journalists Write About (In)Accessibility," examines the lives of two video game journalists, separated by the Atlantic Ocean who both report on the state of accessibility and disability in gaming culture. In this way, the second chapter examines the space of the video game community. The space of video game culture is relatively new, but has a historical tradition with an intersectional history of the identities of gamers. Ultimately, video game culture has seen improvements in providing inclusion for marginalized groups, but still has a major problem with historical forces like sexism, homophobia, and ableism. My interviewees have extensively written about how video game culture can be more accessible, and, in this way, they share access to their community through their writing.

Similarly, in my third chapter, "Coming Together for the Werewolves, Sticking Around For Each Other: Fan Creative Praxis in Online Role-playing Game Communities" disabled fans share access through their writing, but with each other over the Internet in role-playing games. In this chapter, I conceive of space as "virtual." My interviewees are prolific writers in online role-playing games, such as Multi-User Dungeons and play-by-post forum RPGs. My interviewees

⁹⁵ Crip identity is a central concept drawn upon in this dissertation, as I explore how my interviewees' crip identities intersect with their fan identities within the context of historical forces, such as ableism. Scholars, activists, and individuals all have worked for a common definition of "crip," but generally it refers to an individual's unique experience with their disability and the various looming forces that oppress them. Partly connected to pride in being disabled, it also asks disabled individuals to ask what it means to be disabled. Alison Kafer, "After Crip, Crip Afters," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (April 1, 2021): 415, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916158>; Mel Chen, "Brain Fog: The Race for Cripistemology," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (January 2014): 178, <https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2014.14>.

demonstrate how they create access for those of similar body/minds through the medium of collective storytelling in online role-playing games. I argue that online role-playing communities are spaces where disabled fans connect with like-minded individuals through original creation, not necessarily textual poaching.⁹⁶ Here, I critique Henry Jenkin's seminal concept of fans as textual poachers, instead highlighting how fan identity is generative, not iterative. The disabled fans I talked to discuss how they have formed online communities with other fans all based on common interest and stories of their own.

Finally, in my last chapter, "Finding Inclusion at the Rogers Centre: Ontario's Social Assistance, and Sports Fandom," I examine the case study of social assistance in Ontario and how it intersects with the lived experience of a disabled fan. In this way, I conceive of fan space as "local." The provincial government of Ontario has historically barred access for the disabled through restrictive social assistance policies. Social assistance in Ontario has continually failed to provide support for the disability community while politicians used it as rhetoric fodder, failing the hundreds of thousands of disabled Ontario residents. Within this larger history is my interviewee, a journalist who primarily covers social assistance and Medical Assistance in Dying in Canada. Her disabled lived experience is inextricably tied into her fan identity as a follower of local sports. In this way, my interviewee has found access to local spaces and a connection to her community through sports like baseball, despite her province's policies alienating her.

These are intentionally widely disparate case studies to demonstrate the breadth and depth of the disabled fan experience, broadly in the Western world. Although they may not seem

⁹⁶ "Like-mindedness" is an overarching theme in this dissertation. I noted the idea during my interview with Juniper when they mentioned finding "like-minded" people in their online communities. I noticed this common theme throughout my interviewees while writing this dissertation. Although I do not draw upon a formal definition of the term, generally I cite my interviewees' desire to find people with similar life experiences in their fan communities, thus bonding over common lived experiences.

to initially have much in common, all my interviewees discussed the common historical forces of eugenics, ableism, and fan identity, among many others, in their testimonies. Through this case study approach, I endeavour to demonstrate continuity and commonality among all the unique lived experiences of disabled fans across various English-speaking contexts. This study is not comprehensive but is a rallying cry for future studies along similar methodological lines. The disabled fan experience is worthy of being studied and allows historians and scholars to understand complex historical forces such as ableism. Additionally, disability history blooms when we consider the pleasure and joy within the disabled lived experience. Our histories often depict suffering, medicalization, and erasure. Or, they record our activist struggles within a larger narrative of pushing for progress. As much as these are critical for understanding the disabled experience, I caution against them being the only ones available on the shelf. All my interviewees were effusively gleeful when talking about their fan interests. We are fans just as much as we are disabled.

Chapter One – The Electrical Eggs and the Genre of Scientifiction: Disability in the Science Fiction Fandom

“Since I was a child, I’ve been around people who were disabled, didn’t think anything about it, you know,” Marilyn Teague tells me, reflecting on her childhood. For the most part, this dissertation when referring to individuals follows the convention of using their full name upon introduction, and last name subsequently. However, for key individuals, I will use their first name after introducing them. This includes interviewees, and individuals critical to the oral history who have agency in changing their surroundings. This is to highlight the humanity of those involved. At 74, Marilyn speaks to me about her lifelong passion for *Star Trek* and fan conventions. However, before talking about *Star Trek*, she mentions “Uncle Marky,” her father’s best friend. As a child, she would watch her father pick him up in his car, carrying his friend into the passenger seat, and folding the wheelchair for the back seat. “I think he had polio,” she reasons. “He was a wheelchair user and it impressed me that my dad was strong enough to pick up this man and transfer him from his wheelchair to the front seat of dad’s car.” She suspects they met in the army. Without fail, Marilyn’s father drove his friend to work every day. Marilyn’s father worked in the barber shop in front of Uncle Marky’s tailor shop. “I mean, it didn’t occur to me that this man was disabled. He was just Uncle Marky to me, you know,” Marilyn mentions.¹

By the 1950s, polio, if that is what Uncle Marky had survived, had receded thanks to a robust public health campaign across North America. When he was younger, polio epidemics were a real concern. In 1916, an epidemic spread through New York and the Northeastern States with 27,000 cases and 6,000 deaths. In New York City alone, there were 8,900 cases and 2,400

¹ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

fatalities.² Although an intestinal virus, the poliovirus kills cells in the spinal column, where motor neuron control limb muscles, resulting in limbs atrophying, shrinking, and deforming. In one fifth of paralyzed patients, the virus invades the nerves of the spinal cord's cervical area, directly affecting the patient's ability to breathe. Patients have needed ventilators, such as the iron lung.³ After the Sable and Sabin vaccines were available starting in the 1950s and 1960s, polio cases plummeted.⁴ In 1952, there were 57,879 cases in America. By 1970, there were only 33.⁵ However, for many polio survivors, the scars of the disease remained. Many lived with mobility issues, using wheelchairs. They returned from hospitals and polio centres, finding a world not designed for them.⁶ Marilyn's uncle, Uncle Marky, might have been one of them.

Even if Uncle Marky was not a survivor of polio, navigating the world in the 1950s with a wheelchair was no easy feat. Building entrances, stairways, and activities were largely inaccessible, the world not built for wheelchair use. However, the advent of modern wheelchairs, like the Everest-Jenning wheelchair after World War II, gave greater freedom to wheelchair users, especially used in conjunction with a car.⁷ Marilyn's memories of Uncle Marky hold special weight, considering how disability has been present throughout her life. At 74, with certain health issues, she herself uses a wheelchair, due to the amputation of her leg. She excitedly tells me how the prosthetic leg she will soon have can have a picture on it. "I said, okay, I want Nichelle Nichols. I want Uhura on my prosthetic leg," she says. "I think it's gonna

² J. K. Silver and Daniel J. Wilson, *Polio Voices: An Oral History from the American Polio Epidemics and Worldwide Eradication Efforts*, The Praeger Series on Contemporary Health and Living (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2007), 2.

³ Thomas Abraham, *Polio: The Odyssey of Eradication* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 15.

⁴ Nidia H. De Jesus, "Epidemics to Eradication: The Modern History of Poliomyelitis," *Virology Journal* 4 (July 10, 2007): 70-70, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1743-422X-4-70>.

⁵ Silver and Wilson, *Polio Voices*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁷ MARY TREMBLAY, "Going Back to Civvy Street: A Historical Account of the Impact of the Everest and Jennings Wheelchair for Canadian World War II Veterans with Spinal Cord Injury," *Disability & Society* 11, no. 2 (1996): 149-70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599650023209>.

be so cool walking in DragonCon with a prosthetic leg with Lieutenant Uhura on it. I've already got the photograph." She smiles over our Zoom call.⁸ Marilyn is my first interviewee, but she highlights a key theme throughout the rest of my interviews: the intersecting nature of a fan's disability and their pursuit of joy and pleasure in their fandom.

As I discuss in the introduction, crip identity intersects with fan identity for those I interviewed. Crip identity is a complex concept, unique to anyone experiencing their disability. The lived experience of disability is expansively complicated. Part of crip identity is pride, but deeper down, disabled scholars, activists, and individuals ask questions of their disabilities and the looming forces that oppress them. For disability writer Alison Kafer, crip is "a word, an orientation, an affiliation, a feeling."⁹ Kafer argues that crip is constantly in negotiation, interrogating concepts like time, innocence, and simultaneity.¹⁰ Scholar Mel Chen draws connections to trans studies when claiming that disabled persons "are all *becoming*..."¹¹ More than anything, I want to highlight how my interviewees, through their lived experiences, challenge oppressive norms concerning their disability, crafting instead a place for themselves within a larger community.

For Marilyn, the prosthetic leg is a unique expression of not only her fan identity, but also her crip identity. Lieutenant Uhura, one of pop culture's most enduring icons of Black feminist power, is displayed on her prosthetic leg, a marker of agency. As I will explore in this chapter, fan identity and crip identity are related for disabled fans like Marilyn, if not intertwined. In this chapter, I argue that although science fiction as a genre began with a problematic understanding

⁸ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

⁹ Alison Kafer, "After Crip, Crip Afters," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (April 1, 2021): 415, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916158>.

¹⁰ Kafer, "After Crip, Crip Afters," 416-419.

¹¹ Mel Chen, "Brain Fog: The Race for Cripistemology," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8, no. 2 (January 2014): 178, <https://doi.org/10.3828/jlclds.2014.14>.

of disability, disabled fans regardless exerted personal agency to become pillars of their community. Before Marilyn's career as an ASL interpreter, and before she joined a group of crip activists, science fiction began as a genre that negotiated the place of disability in society. Forty years before Gene Roddenberry created Marilyn's beloved *Star Trek*, pulp writers speculated on humanity's future in the cosmos.

Amazing Stories: The Beginnings of Science Fiction

Science fiction is difficult to define. Ever since the 19th century, authors have postulated different definitions. Speculative fiction author Theodore Sturgeon argued that science fiction “is a story built around human beings, with a human problem and a human solution, which would not have happened at all without its scientific content.”¹² The novelist Kingsley Amis also focused on humanity's relationship to science. He wrote that science fiction “treat(s) a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovation in science or technology...”¹³ Scholar James Gunn, who quoted the previous authors, put it simply: science fiction is “the literature of the human species.”¹⁴ Hugo-award winning writer Ursula K. Le Guin argues that science fiction is “descriptive” of the present, not quite predicting the future.¹⁵ Each writer has their own personal definition of the genre.

Academics have also arrived at their own conclusions. Some academics closely read texts to build detailed taxonomies, while others use quantitative means to test for the core of the

¹² James E. Gunn and Isaac Asimov, *Alternate Worlds: The Illustrated History of Science Fiction*, Third edition (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018), 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, “Author's Note,” in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (New York: Ace, 2019), xviii.

genre.¹⁶ Some academics highlight how the genre is a kind of tradition shaped by readers and writers.¹⁷ Academics Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint argue that there is no single definition of science fiction: writers, reader, and publishers with their own agendas discursively create the genre in a never-ending process of conversation.¹⁸ My intention is not to provide my own definition of the genre. Rather, I am interested in how fans have interpreted and thought about the genre throughout their history. Therefore, Bould and Vint's definition of a never-ending discourse of fans, authors, and publishers is most relevant to this chapter. In this conception, the agency of fans is noted when discussing the evolution of the genre.

Fans did not identify as science fiction fans until Hugo Gernsback founded the pulp magazine *Amazing Stories* in the 1920s. The origins of science fiction is also contentious. Some scholars chart the genre's origins as far back as Plato, Homer, and even the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Historically, in the nineteenth century, a growing reading public developed interests in the progress of science, founded on contemporary colonialism. Authors posited how advanced technology could allow the white race to build a utopia and "save" lesser races.¹⁹ The publishing of dime novels sought to sate this voracious reading audience. These were essentially cheap paperbacks and magazines, publishing genre fiction (such as western, romance, and science fiction). They were cheap to make, printed on wood pulp paper, saving money in bulk printing.²⁰ These pulp magazines housed fan discussion through letters and the establishment of fan zines

¹⁶ Ryan Nichols, Justin Lynn, and Benjamin Grant Purzycki, "Toward a Science of Science Fiction: Applying Quantitative Methods to Genre Individuation," *Scientific Study of Literature* 4, no. 1 (October 2, 2014): 25–45, <https://doi.org/10.1075/ssol.4.1.02nic>.

¹⁷ Simon J. Evnine, "But Is It Science Fiction?: Science Fiction and a Theory of Genre: Science Fiction and a Theory of Genre," *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (September 2015): 7-8, <https://doi.org/10.1111/misp.12037>.

¹⁸ Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*, 1st ed (London ; New York: Routledge, 2011), 1-19.

¹⁹ Bould and Vint, *Concise History of Science Fiction*, 24-36.

²⁰ Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, Second edition, Palgrave Histories of Literature (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 253-7.

and fan societies. As *Amazing Stories* was the first to name the genre, it acts as a case study for early science fiction fandom.

The new genre of “scientifiction”

Amazing Stories is an ideal place to find the origins of contemporary, dominant, and predominantly white science fiction. It is the first English language publication to write down the norms of the genre. Additionally, the Internet Archive hosts its early issues, providing insight into the emergence of science fiction. To properly establish a study of the science fiction fandom, it is necessary to understand how the genre came about. *Amazing Stories* is the best publication to glean the genre’s origins. Not only that, within the pages of *Amazing Stories*, fans wrote into the magazine. The first well-documented, publicly visible science fiction fandom communicated within these pages. Building from my core concept of “fan space,” these readers of the *Amazing Stories* public built an international space founded on their relationships with each other. Also constituting their own fan space, my interviewees are part of a fandom that stretches back to the early days of *Amazing Stories* in the 1920s. Although my interviewees participated in fandom starting in the 1960s, it is necessary to establish science fiction’s relationship to conceptions of disability in the pages of *Amazing Stories*.

In the May 1941 issue of *Amazing Stories*, the editor reminisced on the fifteenth anniversary of the magazine. “It marks the climax of fifteen long years of constant conquests in a new field, of the welding of the friendship of many hundreds of thousands of readers, of the creation of an outlet and medium of expression for a new kind of creative art—imaginative fiction based on science.”²¹ The trailblazing magazine stood at a new frontier for the emerging genre, establishing a vibrant community sharing a common identity. The fifteenth anniversary

²¹ J. Fred Henry, “The Observatory by the Editor,” *Amazing Stories*, May 1941, 6.

edition embodies the same spirit as the first issue. In it, the editor Hugo Gernsback (the namesake for the Hugo Awards) outlined his vision for a new genre. He claimed, “this is not ‘another fiction magazine,’ *Amazing Stories* is a new kind of fiction magazine! It is...something that has never been done before in this country.”²² Gernsback clunkily named the genre “scientifiction.”²³ Although not a term used today, scientifiction first carried the banner of modern science fiction. In it, genre examples had to have fidelity to scientific principles. Gernsback proselytized this concept as editor of *Amazing Stories*. Drawing on the writings of Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and, curiously, Edgar Allan Poe,²⁴ scientifiction stories were “a charming romance, intermingled with scientific fact and prophetic vision,” according to Gernsback.²⁵ This foundation for the genre would guide science fiction through the twentieth century and into this one.

The fandom of *Amazing Stories* is most notable for their adoption of Gernsback’s definition of the genre. One editorial author in the July 1929 issue wrote, “The stories in [*Amazing Stories*] give the development of the past and present of science and its possible future development....what has been done in the last fifteen years in the way of scientific progress teaches us to be very slow to pronounce an unachieved advance in science....”²⁶ Another editorial echoed these sentiments: “Must man pass with the earth, or will Human Intelligence rule on, a new factor in the universe?....Science is the doorway to the future: scientifiction, the golden key.”²⁷ The writers, publishers, and readers of *Amazing Stories* shared a vision of a genre

²² Hugo Gernsback, “A New Sort of Magazine,” *Amazing Stories*, April 1926, 8.

²³ Gernsback, “A New Sort of Magazine,” 8.

²⁴ Typically, modern audiences do not consider Poe a science fiction author, instead emphasizing his contribution to macabre literature.

²⁵ Gernsback, “A New Sort of Magazine,” 8.

²⁶ T. O’Conor Sloane, “Appreciation of the Common,” *Amazing Stories*, July 1929, 293.

²⁷ Jack Williamson, “Scientifiction, Searchlight of Science,” *Amazing Stories*, Fall 1928, 435.

that squinted into the future to see what lay in store for humanity, regardless of how impossible that seemed.

Authors sometimes touched on themes present today but were rooted in their historical context. G. Peyton Wertenbaker wrote a story in 1929 that warned against the dangers of climate change and how it would spell humanity's doom.²⁸ This narrative forecasted present day concerns about humanity's effects on the planet. In the far future, the earth's climate has grown dangerously cold, with New York existing in a newly formed Artic hemisphere. As of writing, climate change concerns are still popular within science fiction writing. Scholars Andrew Milner and J. R. Burgmann call this genre "cli-fi." They chart its origins with flood narratives to the present day. They conclude that "these fictions are warning, rather than predictions or prophecies, and warnings are there to be heeded and acted upon."²⁹ However, authors were still rooted in their context, basing their stories on contemporary knowledge bases. Charles S. Wolfe wrote in the same issue as Wertenbaker a story about the "ether": a principle of space around matter in the universe that dates to ancient times.³⁰ Rather than predicting scientific developments along a linear timeline, these science fiction stories are still beholden to their cultural context, reflecting popular attitudes towards understandings of science. Indeed, in the 1920s when these were written, the discovery of the ether still felt possible. In an introduction for a different story, the editor described an experiment by a scientist from Alsace-Lorraine where animal tissues were made "practically transparent" through injection.³¹ Gernsback's vision of

²⁸ G. Peyton Wertenbaker, "The Coming of the Ice," *Amazing Stories*, June 1926, 232-237, 288.

²⁹ Andrew Milner and J. R. Burgmann, *Science Fiction and Climate Change: A Sociological Approach* (Liverpool University Press, 2023), <https://directory.doabooks.org/handle/20.500.12854/9857>, 194.

³⁰ Charles S. Wolfe, "Whispering Ether," *Amazing Stories*, June 1926, 247-249.

³¹ "The Man Who Could Vanish," *Amazing Stories*, January 1927, 901.

science fiction was culturally rooted above all, reliant on present day understandings of the current state of science.

Early science fiction also reflected contemporary events, from wars to pandemics. Writing during the Second World War, one author detailed how a global war destroys civilization, spiralling humanity back to a primitive state.³² It is not hard to see how the world war impacted science fiction writers. Writers were transparent about that relationship. In 1944, when the US had ramped up the war effort, an editor countered claims that science fiction had nothing to do with the current war. “*Amazing Stories* has, inherent in its nature, the power of prophecy. Writers dream of the future, producing its image in fiction... We can number a thousand realities of today which were once only fiction in our pages.”³³ Although some might argue that it is a stretch to say that a pulp magazine predicted the Second World War, what is notable about this quote is that it highlights an aspect of science fiction that is rarely discussed. These science fiction authors are conscious of the progress of history, even if what they write is speculative. They looked forward in time by grafting contemporary knowledge to future speculation. There is a clear historical consciousness that unfolds in science fiction stories. For science fiction readers, they were keenly aware that they were witnessing history unfold.

The fans of Amazing Stories

A fifteen-year-old reader from Burbank, California, one of many like him, wrote to *Amazing Stories* in 1944. “Upon removing the envelope from the letter you will find a neatly wrapped and prepared brickbat, the first one off the assembly-line,” he wrote. After listing critiques of the various stories in previous issues, he concluded, “In spite of the knocks dealt out the magazine is

³² P. F. Costello, “Flame for the Future,” *Amazing Stories*, October 1941, 108-115.

³³ B. G. Davis, “The Observatory by the Editor,” *Amazing Stories*, March 1944, 10.

still a buy for a quarter. The covers are years ahead of other publications, fine drawing and colors.” The editor replied in surprise. “You are actually the only reader who did not rave about Rocklynne’s yarn.” The fan signed his name: “Philip K. Dick.”³⁴ Dick went on to write foundational science fiction texts, such as *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, and *A Scanner Darkly*.

Gernsback’s project of a fan community flourished in the pages of *Amazing Stories*. From the second issue on, the magazine ran a “Readers’ Letters” column where Gernsback hoped to hear fans’ opinions.³⁵ Although in later decades published letters waned, Gernsback’s conception of the genre inspired fans to learn about science. This fan community was interactive within it. Readers communicated through these pages, forming a community. *Amazing Stories* readers hailed from across the Global North. Although primarily an American audience (and certainly English-reading), writers regularly included their country of residence attached to their letters.

Fans voraciously read the magazine. “One of our great surprises since we started publishing *Amazing Stories* is the tremendous amount of mail we receive...[from] who[m] seem to be pretty well oriented in this sort of literature,” Gernsback wrote in June 1926. “Some of these fans are constantly visiting the book stores with the express purpose of buying new or old scientification tales, and they even go to the trouble of advertising for some volumes that have long ago gone out of print.”³⁶ Fans often wrote expressing hunger for more content. In July 1929 Edith Stuver from California wrote, “You have a wonderful book and – just give us more.”³⁷ Fans were often educated, or at least had interest in learning as much as possible. Although it is difficult to discern precise demographics of readers, insight can come from letters. L. G.

³⁴ Philip K. Dick, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, March 1944, 205-6.

³⁵ Hugo Gernsback, “Now that you have looked over...” *Amazing Stories*, April 1926, 56.

³⁶ Hugo Gernsback, “The Lure of Scientification,” *Amazing Stories*, June 1926, 195.

³⁷ Edith Stuver, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, July 1929, 384.

Townsend anecdotally related in 1928 that “I have found that doctors, lawyers and business men make up most of your readers.”³⁸ Fans often asked questions in their letters. In June 1930, Dominic Bochicchio from New York asked, “What I would like to know is the figures on the speed of light and sound and how these are tested.” If they could not provide answers, however, Bochicchio asked for a book recommendation that could.³⁹ The editors knew their niche. They would often include puzzles and quizzes to engage curious minds. In one science trivia quiz, they wrote, “Readers of *Amazing Stories* have frequently commented upon the fact that there is more actual knowledge to be gained through reading its pages than from many a textbook.”⁴⁰ Fans shared the sentiment. In 1927, Marguerite Keeley from Los Angeles wrote, “I believe that *Amazing Stories* will help a great deal to make people give more attention to science and to let scientists have more of a chance.”⁴¹ To many, science fiction stories were better than school. “I wouldn’t mind if textbooks were written like *Fantastic* and *Amazing* magazines...” wrote another fan.⁴²

Many fans treated reading science fiction as a vocation. In September 1943, Claire Beck from New York wrote, “I believe that imaginative literature is the most important sort of popular fiction, not only as prophecy or as an intellectual stimulant, but as an influence on the thought and planning of people with minds fresh enough to see through the ‘vener’ of present apparent reality.” To emphasize, Beck concluded, “Reading science fiction is by no means an idle or a fruitless pastime.”⁴³ Science fiction was just as noble as any other pursuit of knowledge.

³⁸ L. G. Townsend, “Your Viewpoint,” *Amazing Stories*, Fall 1928, 574.

³⁹ Dominic Bochicchio, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, June 1930, 279.

⁴⁰ “What Do You Know?” *Amazing Stories*, July 1930, 323.

⁴¹ Marguerite Keeley, “Discussion,” *Amazing Stories*, December 1927, 913.

⁴² G. Dallas, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, March 1944, 204.

⁴³ Claire Beck, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, September 1943, 203.

A community of letters

In the letters columns, readers commented on stories from previous issues. The most common topic was a story's faithfulness to "scientifiction." Readers were not subtle. In April 1930, Frank Brueckel Jr. from Milwaukee wrote, "The mathematics in 'Fourth Dimensional Space Penetrator' by Julian Kendal Jr. were interesting, but, sad to relate, incorrect. Or rather, most of them were correct, but based upon false assumptions and therefore leading to false conclusions."⁴⁴ Diagrams and equations often accompanied readers' critiques. A reader from California drew a diagram representing gravity in June 1930.⁴⁵ Another in the fall of 1928 calculated different water volumes.⁴⁶ "I have been grinding my teeth at a few stories you have published," wrote another reader in July 1928, "which insult the name of scientifiction."⁴⁷ Fans engaged with the scientific content of these stories, setting a precedent for future science fiction fans. This set the foundation for future science fiction fans to be deeply engaged with their fandom.

This emerging fan identity precipitated a growing community. Early in the genre's history, fans constituted a shared space surrounding a love of, and passion for, science fiction. One reader from Brooklyn in May 1941 wrote, "If there are any readers who'd like to correspond with me, I'd be tickled to receive a letter or two."⁴⁸ Networks outside of the pages of *Amazing Stories* soon formed. As early as 1929, a reader from Philadelphia wrote, "It seems to me that it would be a good plan if the readers of *Amazing Stories* would form a correspondence club." After all, waiting for each issue would take too long. "To carry a debate or discussion by [the columns of *Amazing Stories*] would be impractical since two months would elapse between

⁴⁴ Frank Brueckel Jr., "Discussions," *Amazing Stories*, April 1930, 89.

⁴⁵ S. P. Meek, "Discussions," *Amazing Stories*, June 1930, 281.

⁴⁶ Francis D. Uffelman, "Your Viewpoint," *Amazing Stories*, Fall 1928, 573.

⁴⁷ Daniel J. Pflaum, "Your Viewpoint," *Amazing Stories*, Summer 1928, 431.

⁴⁸ Dario Milazzo, "Discussions," *Amazing Stories*, May 1941, 239.

question and answer.”⁴⁹ Leave it to science fiction fans to find a more efficient method of community building.

Amazing Stories printed letters of fans eager to connect. In the April 1930 issue, The Science Correspondence Club defined Article II of its constitution: “The institution will remain an organization to establish a better co-ordination between the scientifically inclined laymen of the world, regardless of sex, color, or race. There will be no restriction as to age.”⁵⁰ By this point it hosted 130 members, but steadily grew over 1930. By July, their branch boasted resources of their own, including a telescope, three hundred scientific books, magazines, and even ores, rocks, and fossilized bones.⁵¹ They regularly set up the telescope as an event for members to view the stars. The member writing in, F. B. Eason, was currently looking to establish a permanent club house for the branch.⁵²

Amazing Stories fans built international communities. By 1934, the British Interplanetary Society was established.⁵³ Anecdotally, one reader explained how science fiction societies had grown considerably in England.⁵⁴ In 1935, Kiwi fans established the New Zealand Science Fiction Association.⁵⁵ In Australia, the fan magazine *Luna* came out in 1940.⁵⁶ Science fiction fans joined the New York World Fair in 1939, perhaps the biggest fan convention held up to that point.⁵⁷ A year later, Chicago hosted the World Science Fiction Convention on the Labor Day holiday.⁵⁸ The Futurian Society of Sydney wished the best to the Chicago convention in the

⁴⁹ G. Joseph Griffin, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, July 1929, 376

⁵⁰ Walter L. Dennis, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, April 1930, 82.

⁵¹ F. B. Eason, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, July 1930, 371.

⁵² Eason, “Discussions,” 373.

⁵³ Leslie J. Johnson, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, April 1934, 142.

⁵⁴ Walter H. Gillings, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, January 1935, 137.

⁵⁵ N.S. Jenkin, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, January 1935, 136.

⁵⁶ Vol Nolesworth, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, February 1940, 139.

⁵⁷ Olon F. Wiggins, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, July 1939, 138.

⁵⁸ Mark Reinsberg, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, July 1940, 134.

letters column of *Amazing Stories*.⁵⁹ A reader from Bombay lamented the difficulty of sending money to the States, but still readily read the magazine.⁶⁰

Fans also created content, establishing long held fan traditions, such as fan fiction, “filking,” and “fanvids.”⁶¹ A reader from Brooklyn aimed to start a movie club “to write scripts and photograph complete Scientifiction stories with our own motion-picture camera, these completed films being available for showing to other science-fiction clubs.”⁶² This might be the first written mention of a fanvid.

The editors of *Amazing Stories* consciously cultivated a blossoming fandom. For some time, starting in 1940, the editors printed names and addresses of fans in their “Correspondence Corner.”⁶³ Fans wrote to each other internationally, troubling commonly held stereotypes of science fiction nerds. Rather than being loners dwelling in basements, science fiction fans were enthusiasts seeking like-minded people with similar passions. This was not relegated to the world of letters, either. The Pittsburgh Science and Fantasy Association had weekly Sunday meetings, discussing contemporary science fiction. They also organized dances and other non-science fiction events. Their library contained rare science fiction. They also were inclusive of gender, welcoming female fans into their ranks.⁶⁴ From the start of their history, science fiction fans collaborated and formed complex groups, all for the better enjoyment of the genre. However,

⁵⁹ William D. Veney, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, July 1940, 145.

⁶⁰ Dady A Ghandy, “Your Viewpoint,” *Amazing Stories*, Fall 1928, 575.

⁶¹ Fan fiction, filking, and fanvids are the most popular forms of media created by fans. Fan fiction is fan-written stories set in a fictional world, using characters, settings, and concepts from texts. Filking is fan-written music about fandom. Fanvids are fan-produced videos about fandom and often are set in fictional worlds, much like fan fiction. These are all examples of what scholar Henry Jenkins cites as fans “poaching” texts, such as *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and the tv series *Supernatural*.

⁶² Walter F. Williams, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, July 1940, 135.

⁶³ “Correspondence Corner,” *Amazing Stories*, July 1940, 142-3; “Correspondence Corner,” *Amazing Stories*, December 1942 236-7.

⁶⁴ Dave Elder, “Discussions,” *Amazing Stories*, June 1941, 141-2.

different “others,” such as disability and race, occupied a complicated position in the pages of *Amazing Stories*.

Disability and eugenics in science fiction

Disability has occupied science fiction since the beginning of the genre. In the pages of *Amazing Stories*, disability, illness, and madness are common tropes. Medicine and technology often overcome sensory disabilities, which are merely obstacles. One 1942 editorial showcased a device by the American Foundation for the Blind. “When the blind person comes near the building, his body cuts a light beam focused on an electrical eye. A photo-electric cell detects this and an electrical relay is operated to start an automatic speaker which” plays a message.⁶⁵ Editors often speculated on new technology. In another editorial, the editor postulated that proper vitamin nutrition can cure blindness, which could benefit “those races who will take advantage of the knowledge of nutrition, greater vigour, increased longevity, and higher cultural development.”⁶⁶ In other words: there was little in the way of humanizing the blind experience. Science could cure it.

In 1930’s “Flamingo: A Drama of AD 1950,” Clarence Edward Heller depicted a future where robots have replaced human entertainers. In one performance, there is assistive technology for the Deaf. “From the Deaf section, in which those, who were so unfortunate to be deprived of hearing, were seated, the cut-in waves of sound, from the Arboreal Hearograph, a peculiar sponge-like contrivance, that hung, suspended, overhead, rendered each one’s affliction neutral.” A “Spectrumscope” replicated “extinct retina images” for the blind, allowing them to

⁶⁵ B. G. Davis, “The Observatory by the Editor,” *Amazing Stories*, December 1942, 192.

⁶⁶ Lynn Standish, “Scientific Oddities,” *Amazing Stories*, December 1945, 145.

see the show.⁶⁷ “Flamingo: A Drama of 1950” leverages the lived experience of the blind and Deaf to illustrate the advancements of its speculative society. What is absent is any point of view of someone blind or deaf who has used assistive technology. One can imagine fan fiction speculating on Heller’s work that might explore troubleshooting and issues with a “Hearograph” or “Spectrumscope.”

In *Amazing Stories*, broken bodies existed as obstacles, just like earth’s gravitational pull. In one 1929 story, a doctor intends to cure abnormal growth and dwarfism. Unintentionally, he makes grasshoppers gigantic, causing monstrous devastation across the country.⁶⁸ This cautionary tale further villainizes abnormal sizes. In a similar story, a gigantic man arrives on the shores of America, promising to solve the world’s problems. However, the authorities do not trust him, their prejudices leading to violent conflict. The giant concedes, walking into the depths of the ocean, never to be seen again.⁶⁹ There is no place in the world for the freakishly big. Earlier medical treatment as a child caused his gigantism. However, the story describes his size to engender pity in the reader. The giant, faced with no other choice, walks to his watery doom in the ocean, the only place for him. Abnormal bodies have a constrained place in this early science fiction. They are monstrous, such as the grasshoppers, or they are to be pitied.

The story of disability in the pages of *Amazing Stories* is really the story of eugenics. Eugenics is widely known as a dark chapter in science history, but not fully understood. For the purposes of my exploration of disability in early science fiction, it is necessary to contextualize the contemporary scientific movement of eugenics. A Victorian scientist, Sir Francis Galton, coined the term “eugenics” after reading his cousin Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. He

⁶⁷ Clarence Edward Heller, “Flamingo: A Drama of A. D. 1950,” *Amazing Stories*, July 1930, 327-8.

⁶⁸ Walter Kateley, “The Hollister Experiment,” *Amazing Stories*, Winter 1929, 112-9.

⁶⁹ Ross Rocklynne, “Big Man,” *Amazing Stories*, April 1941, 70-87.

believed that selective breeding, as one would breed dogs, horses, or vegetables, lay at the key of humanity's progress.⁷⁰ Galton argued that, if one were to look, a famous man's male relatives were more likely to carry shared exceptional traits. He did not include women in his analysis.⁷¹ Galton believed a utopia could be reached, so long as western civilization "produce[d] a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations."⁷² How "advanced" a civilization was correlated to the advancements of a race. "Civilization is the necessary fruit of high intelligence when found in a social animal," he wrote in his 1892 book *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry Into Its Laws and Consequences*, "and there is no plainer lesson to be read off the face of Nature than the result of the operation of her laws is to evoke intelligence in connexion with sociability."⁷³ Inherently foundational to his conception of eugenics was the idea that certain races were better than others. As he puts it in the same book: "The mistakes the negroes made in their own matters, were so childish, stupid, and simpleton-like, as frequently to make me ashamed of my own species."⁷⁴ In the same chapter, he concluded, "If we could raise the average standard of our race only one grade, what vast changes would be produced!"⁷⁵ Galton crafted eugenics as a racist practice of science that categorized people according to their traits, labelled by grade.

Galton's concept of eugenics spread across the Western world, inevitably arriving on American shores. The main actor evangelizing eugenics in the States was a zoologist named

⁷⁰ N. W. Gillham, "Sir Francis Galton and the Birth of Eugenics," *Annual Review of Genetics* 35 (2001): 83–101, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.genet.35.102401.090055>, 83. Galton also coined the phrase "nature vs. nurture," ascribing traits to the former, not the latter.

⁷¹ Gillham, "Sir Francis Galton," 87-8.

⁷² Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry Into Its Law and Consequences* (London: MacMillan and Co. and New York, 1892), xxvii, 1.

⁷³ Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, 336.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 343.

Charles B. Davenport. In 1910, Davenport established the Eugenics Record Office.⁷⁶ In his book, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, he echoes Galton's excitement surrounding the concept of eugenics: "Recent great advances in our knowledge of heredity have revolutionized the methods of agriculturists in improving domesticated plants and animals....Now, great as are the potentialities of the new science of heredity in its application to man it must be confessed that they are not yet realized."⁷⁷ The Office's aim was to collect data on human families to advise on marriages, in addition to "establishing the legal and legislative support for the sterilization of so-called degenerate families and restricting them from entering the United States."⁷⁸ Davenport and his fellow eugenicists had an expansive criteria for traits. On the one hand, a eugenicist might record behavioural traits, but also aspects such as temperament, and likelihood of diseases.⁷⁹ A key concern for eugenicists was the cost "degenerates" accrued on the government's bill. The Office sought to demonstrate this cost.⁸⁰ Davenport wrote, "It is believed that a little money spent in studying the sources of reproduction of persons who are destined to become state wards will prove a highly profitable investment, since it may lead to steps that will diminish such reproduction."⁸¹ Thus, eugenics incorporated class into a person's "bad breeding." Davenport conceived of eugenics as a sort of marriage guide for better breeding. He wanted to encourage able-bodied youth "to fall in love intelligently."⁸²

Contemporary conceptions of eugenics are present in this era of science fiction. Eugenics elides the disabled experience in these stories. In the 1935 space opera, "The Contests of the

⁷⁶ Susan McKinnon, "The American Eugenics Record Office: Technologies for Terminating 'Degenerate' Family Lines and Purifying the Nation," *Social Analysis* 65, no. 4 (December 1, 2021): 25, <https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2021.650402>.

⁷⁷ Charles Benedict Davenport, *Heredity In Relation to Eugenics* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1913), iii.

⁷⁸ McKinnon, "The American Eugenics Record Office," 25.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸¹ Davenport, *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics*, v.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 4.

Planets,” the author described the colonization of Mars. “The planets have, for nearly seven centuries, through thirty generations of men, robbed earth of her greatest heritage, the near-geniuses. We have accepted only the strong, the intelligent and healthy.” The issue is that “Generation after generation we have taken from earth everything that makes the human race strong, we have left only the dregs, the weak, the stupid, the unadventurous, and—the contented.”⁸³ Although not specifically about disability, the author wrote with eugenic principles in mind. Colonizing Mars took the best of humanity, leaving behind inferior people to populate earth. Conquering Mars comes at the cost of propagating weaker humans on earth.

Eugenics also exists in the magazine’s editorials. Often, editorials showcased new medical treatment. One author in 1945 explained the cutting-edge field of vitamins. The author proclaimed that vitamins promise “to those races who will take advantage of the knowledge of nutrition, greater vigor, increased longevity, and higher cultural development.”⁸⁴ Medicine went hand in hand with racial ideas. Although not explicit, the author implied that white people should take advantage of medicine. Science was intended to serve the white race. To the readers and writers of *Amazing Stories*, a better future for the white race meant a better future for everyone.

Science based on eugenics ideas also had a place for the disabled, albeit limited. Disability existed as an obstacle for science to conquer. In 1934’s “Life Everlasting,” an asthmatic woman lives a miserable life in a stunted body. She joins an experimental serum treatment with three others. As the author put it, the astonishing serum makes her “the first of a new race.”⁸⁵ The serum also fixes other deviance. Doctors test the drug on “criminals, abnormals, and defectives” who would otherwise waste away on dwindling state resources.⁸⁶ The

⁸³ John W. Campbell Jr., “The Contests of the Planets,” *Amazing Stories*, January 1935, 21.

⁸⁴ Lynn Standis, “Scientific Oddities,” *Amazing Stories*, December 1945, 145.

⁸⁵ David H. Keller M. D., “Life Everlasting,” *Amazing Stories*, July 1934, 15.

⁸⁶ Keller, “Life Everlasting,” 30.

head doctor's ethos is that "a bad man is simply a sick man."⁸⁷ A diseased body, then, is a malevolent body. A doctor can save it, though, with modern medicine. After all, this fictional serum is just the next step in the human race's evolution. The future should have no disability or deviance.

Race tied to bodily deviance is a common theme in these stories. In 1934's "The Pool of Life," a group of "maniacs" rip apart a village, slaughtering its inhabitants animalistically.⁸⁸ Investigators initially assume that "pin-heads" committed the violence. Briefly, they later consider the involvement of an Aboriginal group. They ultimately discover a Neanderthal-like race of Aboriginal ancestors to answer their quandary.⁸⁹ Taxonomies of aberrant bodies fill these stories, seen in the author's descriptive language. "Their skin and hair are bleached and they have degenerated physically and mentally. Look at those apish arms—that receding jaw and the ridges over their eyes....With that deformed brain, I doubt that they could have used words anyway."⁹⁰ The narrator concluded, "these things were less than human!"⁹¹ The explorers discovered an inferior race incapable of having humanity.

The most blatant connection with disability and race is in "The Black Hand," a story published in January 1931. An artist needs his arm amputated. He bemoans, "But what's a stump to an artist? Fingers and hands are what he needs."⁹² His surgeon proposes a risky alternative: graft the arm of a "negro" convict onto the artist's shoulder. The artist briefly considers the stigma attached to having black skin. But the desperation to not be disabled overwhelms him, and he agrees to the surgery. Despite all odds, it is a success. The narrator proclaims, "Two

⁸⁷ Keller, "Life Everlasting," 29.

⁸⁸ P. Schuyler Miller, "The Pool of Life," *Amazing Stories*, October 1934, 14.

⁸⁹ Miller, "The Pool of Life," 15-23.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17-8.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹² Charles Gardner Bowers, "The Black Hand," *Amazing Stories*, January 1931, 909.

weeks later and the arm was healing rapidly. Two years later and complete sensation had returned. Five years later and the black hand was painting masterpieces....”⁹³ The artist is even more successful with a black arm. However, the artist soon descends into homicidal madness and paranoia. After mayhem and murder, the authorities lock him up. The story concludes with a psychiatric report: “A patient with a negative psychiatric history became criminally insane following a graft of a negro’s arm, although the operation was a physical and physiological success.”⁹⁴ This story highlights the intertwining history ableism and racism share.

Disability is a common topic in the pages of *Amazing Stories*. In truth, there is little space for disability or non-white people in the periodical’s vision for the future. Its narrative of progress erases the experiences of millions, covering them up and leaving behind the less desirable aspects of humanity. The emerging genre of science fiction painted in bold colours a future where the farthest star is humanity’s conceived limits. But it was a future that was white, male, and able. This directly reflects contemporary ideas about disability and race.

Nativism and eugenics in North America discriminated against the disabled and non-white people seeking refuge on the continent. As disability scholar Jay Dolmage argues, “Immigration has never been about immigration.”⁹⁵ A border may be a constructed idea, but as a rhetorical strategy, it aims to restrict people’s movements, and simultaneously disable and racialize their bodies. As Dolmage puts it, immigration restriction “reaches into and rearranges bodies, violently.”⁹⁶ However, this did not completely stop disabled immigrants. Many Deaf

⁹³ Bowers, “The Black Hand,” 923.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 923.

⁹⁵ Jay Dolmage, *Disabled upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 1.

⁹⁶ Dolmage, *Disabled upon Arrival*, 1.

immigrants at the turn of the century still managed to settle in America, forming their own communities, despite rampant discrimination and oralism in their new homes.⁹⁷

As *Amazing Stories* began publication in 1926, governments on either side of the Atlantic promoted eugenic policies. Many states in the US and the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia in Canada embarked on sterilization campaigns in the name of public health. The eugenics ideology was ostensibly about healthy living. However, more extremely, the eugenics movement fought to ensure that more “fit” individuals produced children, while “undesirables” did not.⁹⁸ As disability scholars have argued, “Underneath such ‘progressive’ goals lay solidly-entrenched patterns of structured social inequality and equally pervasive racist and sexist attitudes and beliefs.”⁹⁹ Fundamentally, a medicalization of social problems reinforced eugenics ideas as to how to grow a healthy population.¹⁰⁰ The history of eugenics directly troubles the idea that scientific thinking has only ever been “progressive.” Not long ago, educated people believed that the best thing for humanity was selective breeding, including the practice of involuntary sterilization. As a result of the efforts of the previously discussed Charles B. Davenport, eugenicists instigated the sterilization of more than 65,000 people in America.¹⁰¹

Options were limited for the disabled of this period. Many were at the mercy of professionals within larger institutions. These institutions existed as asylums and hospitals in

⁹⁷ Joseph J Murray, “Transnational Interconnections in Nineteenth-Century Western Deaf Communities” in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*, edited by Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, and Kim E. Nielsen (Oxford University Press, 2018), 432.

⁹⁸ Jana Grekul, Arvey Krahn, and Dave Odynak, “Sterilizing the ‘Feeble-Minded’: Eugenics in Alberta, Canada, 1929–1972,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 17, no. 4 (2004): 358, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6443.2004.00237.x>.

⁹⁹ Grekul, Krahn, and Odynak, “Sterilizing the Feeble-Minded,” 359.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 360.

¹⁰¹ McKinnon, “The American Eugenics Record Office,” 45.

different countries, connected by a network of doctors, patients, and loved ones.¹⁰² Doctors shared clinical information, loved ones wrote to patients, and emotional connections flowed across country borders.¹⁰³ The experiences of patients had a global effect, as much as we conceive of asylums as lonely, isolating institutions.

However, asylums failed to properly help patients. Starting in the 19th century, authorities viewed asylums as a revolutionary social practice. Their main concern was managing the “great inconvenience” of the impoverished disabled crowding prisons.¹⁰⁴ The upper class held anxiety surrounding the urban poor and unwashed masses.¹⁰⁵ The main theory behind asylums was to be an unpleasant refuge for the disabled “and a deterrent to the able-bodied poor.”¹⁰⁶ There was little attention paid to rehabilitating or helping people in need. When polite society could not manage the non-white disabled, they deported them. The British Columbian government sent sixty-five Chinese born psychiatric patients to Hong Kong on the Empress of Russia, an ocean-liner that set sail from Vancouver on February 9, 1935.¹⁰⁷ The authorities who ousted them viewed them as problematic for not being “productive, autonomous, white, and sane.”¹⁰⁸ Eugenics policy took many forms. From sterilizations to deportations, race, productivity, and disability were conflated in contemporary science. The historical forces of racism and eugenics medicalized and marginalized disabled bodies, denying them access to society.

¹⁰² Angela McCarthy, “Madness, Transnationalism, and Emotions in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century New Zealand,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Disability* edited by Michael Rembis, Catherine Kudlick, Kim E. Nielsen (Oxford University Press, 2018), 10.

¹⁰³ McCarthy, “Madness, Transnationalism, and Emotions,” 294-301.

¹⁰⁴ Thomas E. Brown, “The Origins of the Asylum in Upper Canada, 1830-1839: Towards an Interpretation,” *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 1, no. 1 (April 1984): 32-7.

¹⁰⁵ Brown, “The Origins of the Asylum in Upper Canada,” 38.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Menzies, “Race, Reason, and Regulation: British Columbia’s Mass Exile of Chinese ‘Lunatics’ Aboard the Empress of Russia” in *Regulating Lives: historical essays on the state, society, the individual, and the law* edited by Robert J. Menzies, John McLaren, Dorothy E. Chunn (UBC Press: 2002), 196.

¹⁰⁸ Menzies, “Race, Reason, and Regulation,” 197.

The start of the Cold War post-World War II shifted the conversation in the genre away from turn of the century scientific ideas. With the fear of communism came science fiction writing which highlighted anxieties surrounding infiltration from foreign influences.¹⁰⁹ However, I aim to highlight how foundational ableist ideas were to science fiction. Despite being a strong community, the science fiction fandom conceptualized disability in contemporary terms of medicalization, race, and personal tragedy. While the world healed after the Second World War, disabled activists formed communities and challenged the ableist status quo. As I have demonstrated, science fiction fans adopted the practice of sharing access to their fandom spaces with like-minded enthusiasts of science. However, this part of this chapter has mainly examined a wide swath of fans, emphasizing the ableist and disableist narratives present in the fan community. Next, I turn to how the disabled experience intersects with this sharing of access to the science fiction fandom space. How do disabled fans express their love of science fiction? How do they share in this space? To answer these questions, first, it is necessary to explore the long history of disability activism in the United States.

Disability activism in the science fiction community 1960-2022

The disability movement of the twentieth century was not the first example of disability activism. Disabled activism stretches as far back as the mid-19th century in industrial Britain.¹¹⁰ Disabled activists have fought for stronger legal protection, and more accessibility in society. Policies for the disabled in the twentieth century were founded on ableist definitions, marginalizing the disabled through faulty discourse and implementation. Policy often silenced

¹⁰⁹ Bould and Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction*, 82.

¹¹⁰ David M. Turner and Daniel Blackie, "Disability and Political Activism in Industrialising Britain, c. 1830–1850," *Social History* 47, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 117–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2022.2044202>.

the disabled, rendering them invisible.¹¹¹ Disabled activists have faced many obstacles in their fight for equality.

Starting in the mid-19th century, North American bureaucracies changed definitions of disability alongside evolving morality and politics.¹¹² Gender, race, and sexuality intertwined with ideas of disability. Historians have demonstrated that policy-makers weaponized this rhetoric to deny citizenship to marginalized people.¹¹³ Policy sought to remove inclusion, not provide it. Prior to the 1970s, the US did not offer any federal services for disabled students.¹¹⁴ Instead, international organizations expressing internationalist intentions worked with the United Nations for the sensory disabled. Additionally, the International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Development Disabilities (IASSIDD) and the International League of Societies for the Mentally Handicapped (today called Inclusion International) sought answers for the intellectually disabled.¹¹⁵ Nationally, the American context lacked policy to combat ableist discrimination.

American policy changed in the 1970s. In 1971, the United Nations published the Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons, and the Declaration on the Rights of the Disabled Person in 1975.¹¹⁶ American discourse on disability shifted. Richard Nixon signed the Rehabilitation Act in 1973.¹¹⁷ A colossal effort on the part of disabled activists precipitated

¹¹¹ Neil Dhingra and Joel Miller, “Dependent Rational Activists: Disability, Student Activism, and Special Education,” *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 28, no. 2 (2021): 111, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082919ar>.

¹¹² Dhingra and Miller, “Dependent Rational Activists,” 113.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Monika Baar, “Seeking Inclusion through Redefining Expertise: The Changing Spatial Contours of Disability Activism in the Long 1970s,” *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d’histoire* 29, no. 3 (May 4, 2022): 459, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2021.2019685>.

¹¹⁶ Baar, “Seeking Inclusion,” 454.

¹¹⁷ Emily Rose Gordon, “Wheels of Injustice: How Medical Schools Retained the Power to Discriminate Against Applicants in Wheelchairs in the Era of Disability Rights,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 77, no. 4 (November 13, 2022): 460, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhmas/jrac028>.

Nixon's signature. The disability movement emerged from a transnational impulse, where European and American activists argued that disability was not a tragedy suffered alone. Rather, it constituted "a collective identity of a marginalized community struggling for equality and full citizenship."¹¹⁸ Fundamentally, activists sought to challenge medical authority, instead advocating for the lived experience of the disabled for expertise. Disabled activists worked alongside other movements. They echoed the cries of the Youth Movement of 1968. The Peace Movement decried the needlessness of war in causing disability, bolstering the call for the protection of the disabled. Both the women's movement and the US Civil Rights movement also advocated for the powerless.¹¹⁹ The disability movement held its own, fighting for equality along intersectional lines. Globally, disabled activists worked in solidarity across transnational lines, crossing the Iron Curtain of the Cold War, being a site of contest between capitalist and socialist countries competing to save face on the global stage.¹²⁰

The disability movement sprung from a growing, shared consciousness. Independent living centres across the country provided resources for the disabled, although the first notable centre was in Berkeley, founded in 1972. Run by and for the disabled, they argued that disability expertise ought to be centred on the lived experience, not by political bias. They advocated to turn disability from something shameful into something admirable.¹²¹ A flashpoint for discrimination was in medical schools. Effectively, medical school admissions across the country denied acceptance for disabled students, citing a perceived inability to practice medicine.¹²² Disabled medical students demonstrated their capabilities in studying medicine, proving the

¹¹⁸ Baar, "Seeking Inclusion through Redefining Expertise," 453.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 454.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 461.

¹²¹ Ibid., 457-8.

¹²² Gordon, "Wheels of Injustice," 453.

universities wrong.¹²³ Many activists emerged from rehabilitation centres and summer camps, having solidified their identities for activist work.¹²⁴ When the Rehabilitation Act failed to live up to its promises, these activists protested.¹²⁵ Institutions, both local and federal, wrung their hands over the financial cost of implementing the Act. In 1977, activists staged sit-ins and protested in San Francisco and Washington D.C. It worked. Section 504, the key part of the Act, went into effect.¹²⁶ If a staffer had not slipped in Section 504, a few sentences solidifying support for the disabled, the Act would not have been as effective.¹²⁷ As Lindsey Patterson argues, the disability movement was truly a grassroots movement, emerging from these centres, camps, and living centres.¹²⁸ Lived experiences mattered.

After the successes of the 1970s, the legacy of the disability movement is far from perfect. Critics cited how the founders were often of privilege, being straight and white. Additionally, earlier activists tended to be wheelchair-using men, far from being a complete picture of the wide diversity within the disabled community. Scholars have argued that this lacking representation only reinforced stigmatization of other disabled people, such as the mentally disabled.¹²⁹ After all, the universal symbol of disability is a white figure using a wheelchair, despite the vast array of embodiments of disability. Still, disabled activists continued fighting in the 1980s on issues such as independent living and equal legal treatment.¹³⁰ In 1990, George H. W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act into law. However, the ADA did

¹²³Gordon, "Wheels of Injustice," 459.

¹²⁴ L. Patterson, "Points of Access: Rehabilitation Centers, Summer Camps, and Student Life in the Making of Disability Activism, 1960-1973," *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 2 (December 1, 2012): 473–99, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shs099>.

¹²⁵ Patterson, "Points of Access," 474.

¹²⁶ Gordon, "Wheels of Injustice," 460.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Patterson, "Points of Access," 474.

¹²⁹ Baar, "Seeking Inclusion through Redefining Expertise," 464.

¹³⁰ Gordon, "Wheels of Injustice," 468.

not bestow rights to the disabled overnight. As with every previous step forward, institutions pushed back. Universities, hospitals, and governments worked to pay the least amount of money to adhere to the law. The ADA's provisions only came to be in 1994.¹³¹ The ADA's friction in being applied signals a continuity in the history of disability present in this dissertation: legislation often encounters obstacles that prevent it from being fully useful for the disabled community.

The ADA is founded on ableist attitudes, just like policy a hundred years previous. Ostensibly, its goal is to eliminate ableist discrimination to include the disabled in the “mainstream of economic and social life.”¹³² However, the ADA found mixed success within its first five years. Only 41% of Americans and 40% of disabled persons knew of it and how it could help.¹³³ Arguably, the greatest failure of the ADA is pushing people to be employed. It promotes employment through anti-discrimination and accommodation to “help” the chronically unemployed. It contrasts with the idea of welfare. The makers of the ADA carefully crafted policy to promote endless work.¹³⁴ Absent is a consideration of whether everyone can or should work. There is no room for the necessarily unemployed. Additionally, its coverage is spotty. For mad people and those needing everyday assistance, the ADA only offers gaps.¹³⁵ Despite the tireless work of activists, American has yet to provide a cure for ableism. When fans like Marilyn started attending conventions in the late 1960s, there were few accessibility options for disabled fans.

¹³¹ Gordon, “Wheels of Injustice,” 468-9.

¹³² Jane West “Introduction,” in *Implementing The Americans With Disability Act* edited by Jane West (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), xv.

¹³³ West, “Introduction,” xviii-xix.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, xxv.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, xxx-xxxii.

Marilyn and Star Trek

Marilyn promptly recalls the premiere of *Star Trek*. “September the 8th, 1966, if you need to know,” she says. “My gosh, you know, *Star Trek* changed my life.”¹³⁶ As she graduated high school, she began a life-long journey into fandom, watching *Star Trek*’s premiere on television and experiencing one of her country’s most charged decades. Journalist Frye Gallard describes the 1960s as having “a sense of a steady unfolding of time, as if history were on a forced march, and the changes spread to every corner of our lives.”¹³⁷ Rock n’ roll sounded a rebel cry for the youth. Civil rights leaders Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. fought for equality. Meanwhile, Americans looked to the stars with the untold possibilities of space exploration. The 1960s inherited both a sense of unbounded hope, and a complacency from the 1950s.¹³⁸ Just in the year *Star Trek* premiered, civil rights activists coined the phrase “Black Power” during a march to Jackson, Mississippi.¹³⁹ In light of Malcolm X’s teachings, a nascent Black nationalism advocated for Black community building.¹⁴⁰ Betty Friedan founded NOW, the National Organization of Women, which fought for, among other things, equal pay, child care, and maternity leave.¹⁴¹ Ideas of gender radically changed with the “sexual revolution,” fundamentally shifting how America thought of female sexuality.¹⁴² Marilyn, like others sitting in front of their television sets, witnessed a shiny future in the 79 episodes of the original *Star Trek* series, a vision of tomorrow squarely informed by present dreams.

¹³⁶ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

¹³⁷ Frye Gallard, *A Hard Rain: America in the 1960s, Our Decade of Hope, Possibility, and Innocence Lost* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2018), xi.

¹³⁸ Gallard, “A Hard Rain,” xv.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 319-322.

¹⁴⁰ Russell Rickford, “‘We Can’t Grow Food on All This Concrete’: The Land Question, Agrarianism, and Black Nationalist Thought in the Late 1960s and 1970s,” *Journal of American History* 103, no. 4 (March 1, 2017): 956, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaw506>.

¹⁴¹ Gallard, “A Hard Rain,” 353-54.

¹⁴² Leslie Paris, “The Sexual Clock: Middle-Aged American Women and Sexual Vitality in the 1960s and 1970s,” *Journal of Social History* 53, no. 4 (June 1, 2020): 922–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shz046>.

Gene Roddenberry, the creator of *Star Trek*, pitched the show as a “wagon train” concept in space.¹⁴³ Roddenberry’s contribution to the genre was “defiant optimism.” He created a world where a viewer might want to inhabit, because it meant “Humanity is going to be okay.”¹⁴⁴ *Star Trek*’s ethos encapsulates the idea of “progress.” Roddenberry contended that the only way a show in the 1960s could have a minority in a position of power was if it was set in the far future.¹⁴⁵ Roddenberry had a vision of equality for the future, where minor differences would stop causing divisions.¹⁴⁶ The show resonated with many viewers.

However, not enough people watched initially. The studio cancelled the show, citing a lacklustre viewership. Only in syndication did the *Star Trek* fan base form.¹⁴⁷ Scholar Elizabeth Thomas argues that *Star Trek*’s audience truly formed after the original series was cancelled.¹⁴⁸ In fact, fans saved the original series only after a robust letter writing campaign in 1968.¹⁴⁹ A dedicated core of fans, along with later syndication, ensured that a wider audience would view *Star Trek*. It enamoured just enough people to become a global phenomenon.

The Electrical Eggs

After turning 19 in the late 1960s, Marilyn began participating in fandom. She often watched science fiction and horror on television with her father. She was not much of a reader, preferring television and film. Marilyn and her father were fond of the gruesome British Hammer Horror

¹⁴³ Michèle Barrett and Duncan Barrett, *Star Trek: The Human Frontier*, Second Edition (Routledge: London, 2017), 8.

¹⁴⁴ Barrett and Barrett, *Star Trek: The Human Frontier*, xxi.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴⁶ James F. Broderick, *The Literary Galaxy of Star Trek: An Analysis of References and Themes in the Television Series and Films* (McFarland & Company, Inc.: Jefferson, North Carolina, 2006), 119.

¹⁴⁷ Broderick, *The Literary Galaxy of Star Trek*, 1.

¹⁴⁸ Elizabeth Thomas, “Live Long and Prosper: How Fans Made *Star Trek* a Cultural Phenomenon,” in *Star Trek* edited by Bruce E. Dushel (Intellect Ltd.: Bristol, UK, and Chicago: 2013), 11.

¹⁴⁹ Bruce E. Dushel, “Introduction: The Exemplar of Fan Culture?” in *Star Trek* edited by Bruce E. Dushel (Intellect Ltd.: Bristol, UK, and Chicago: 2013), 7.

genre of films, spending long nights in front of the television, drinking hot chocolate. When Marilyn graduated high school, she read an announcement in the newspaper. “The fact is, you know, I got hooked on fandom right out of high school,” she recalls. The announcement advertised a science fiction fan meeting in Downtown Atlanta. Once a month, she attended, beginning her lifelong relationship with fandom.¹⁵⁰

She met her husband, Robert, in this circle. Robert was a big reader. “He brought all his books with him,” Marilyn describes living with her husband. Meanwhile, Marilyn brought all her videotapes to their home. She talks affectionately about her deceased husband, reflecting on many happy memories of sharing in fandom. Their wedding topped any fan affair. “It was a *Star Trek* wedding,” she tells me, grinning. “We had *Star Trek* dresses, uniforms” styled after costumes from *Star Trek: Wrath of Khan*. Their son was dressed as the cybernetically enhanced character Geordi. The costumes were handmade. “It was super dynamic,” she says.¹⁵¹

Marilyn and Robert attended many conventions, building a network of friends and colleagues passionate about science fiction. Robert initially introduced Marilyn to Samantha B. Jude. “I don’t know when they first met,” Marilyn says. “I don’t know why it never occurred to me to ask, but he just says I want you to meet somebody.”¹⁵² Samantha was a polio survivor. She used a scooter to move at cons. Beyond her affable rapport with friends, Samantha held strong ideals. “She was a force of nature,” describes Marcia Illingworth, one of her dearest friends. “When she was your friend, she was your friend. Lord help anybody who ever crossed you, ‘cause that little tiny polio-ridden body could carry gossip.” She drew a notable profile, with her flaming red hair, and her scooter.¹⁵³ Samantha had a bold vision for the disabled community in

¹⁵⁰ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

¹⁵¹ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

¹⁵² In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

¹⁵³ In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

fandom. She founded the first accessibility organization in fandom, predating the Americans with Disabilities Act. Those interviewed for this chapter participated in Samanda's organization. They all talk fondly and passionately about their time with the organization named The Electrical Eggs.

The name Electrical Eggs is an inside joke. Samanda once described her scooter as her "electrical legs" to a fan who asked. The fan misunderstood her, and thought she said "electrical eggs." Samanda kept it in mind when naming her organization. Marilyn remembers thinking the name was "kind of cute and catchy." Eggs members each had their own names. "We were considered carton members. Like, you know, egg cartons," Marilyn explains. Samanda was the egghead. Marcia was medeggal (she was a paramedic). Marilyn's maiden name was White, so they called her "egg white." Samanda called Robert "egg beater," so Marilyn and Robert's couple name was "meringue," as beating eggs is how to make meringue.¹⁵⁴ Samanda keenly had an aptitude for community building when founding her organization.

Born in 1952, Samanda lived a long life, proving her doctors wrong. She passed away in 2022, before I started this chapter. Before passing away, she explained on the record her life story. "When I was seven...I overheard my parents talking with the doctor," she wrote. "...and the doctor said, well, let's be realistic. No man is going to want to marry her, her body is twisted, it's distorted, it's ugly. She will never reach thirty, she will probably be on a body board by the time she would be in high school."¹⁵⁵ Despite the severity of her case, she worked hard "to achieve her goal of independence."¹⁵⁶ In college, she fell in love with science fiction, voraciously reading any book she could find. She soon found her community. She later wrote, "somebody

¹⁵⁴ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

¹⁵⁵ Mike Glyer, "Obituary: Samanda B Jeude (b.1952)," *Scientifiction* edited by John L. Coker III, Third Quarter, 2022.

¹⁵⁶ Glyer, "Obituary."

said, why don't you come to a con with us. OK, fine, I'll go to a con with you. What's to lose? This was back in the good old days when you could get in for five bucks....I think there were fifteen of us in the room. We walked into what was Rivercon I (1975)."¹⁵⁷

Samanda still lived with post-polio syndrome. "I got thrown into a [motorized] three-wheeler. And three weeks later we went to Rivercon"¹⁵⁸ Still, cons could be more accessible. She was not the only one to think that. In a discussion with Esther Breslau, another polio survivor, they "were really ticked off that Baltimore" was insufficient in terms of accessibility.¹⁵⁹ They brainstormed. In 1985, Samanda and Esther drew up guidelines for accessibility at conventions. They tested them at southern conventions, such as Chilicon and LoneStarCon. Additionally at the 1986 Worldcon, the big convention where the Hugos are awarded, they tested out accessibility services. They soon secured funding for an organization, which Samanda called The Electrical Eggs, after her anecdote explaining her three-wheeler. As someone told her on the suitability of the name: "Eggs are one of the strongest structures in nature, and yet it is very fragile. Perfect name for the organization."¹⁶⁰

Samanda also published about disability. In the 1986 Worldcon program book, she penned a guide, titled "They Only Handicap the Best Horses," for how to act towards disabled fans. "You say you've never met an 'alien' before, and you aren't sure how to react?" She wrote, "In a way, you have: the woman who shambles like something out of Lovecraft, folk with 'jitterbugging' eyes, the man who stares at your mouth. Normally, they're called 'Handicapped,' and they – we – have protocols as alien to 'normal' folks as the current fashions on Sirius 7."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Rivercon, an offshoot of DeepSouthCon, was a convention held in Louisville, Kentucky from 1975 to 2000. "Rivercon - Fancyclopedia 3," accessed May 1, 2023, <https://fancyclopedia.org/Rivercon>.

¹⁵⁹ Glycer, "Obituary."

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Samanda B. Jeude, "They Only Handicap the Best Horses," *Confederation: 44th World Science Fiction Convention*, August 28 – September 1, 1986, 78.

Samanda writes a profound declaration of cripp identity, a radical acceptance of the disabled experience in the trappings of science fiction. The “shambling” folk that Samanda described would fit right in with the negative depictions of aberrant bodies previously discussed in *Amazing Stories*. Samanda can clearly identify the ableism that has been present since the dawn of science fiction. Weird bodily motions are not the hallmark of an alien species; rather, they are the signifier of what Samanda would call “handicapped” experience. However, she flips the point of view to reside in the alien creatures that are disabled fans. In this way, rather than aberrant physicality or mentality characterizing something strange, Samanada situates the hero of the story with them. After all, her title explains her viewpoint: “They Only Handicap the Best Horses.” Rather than science curing the blind, or replacing amputated arms, the disabled are unique and important in their experience, contrasting with the eugenicist worldview of *Amazing Stories*.

She speaks to common sentiments still trotted out today. “Don’t treat us like idiots,” “if you want to help, offer,” and “don’t look away when you talk to us.” Mainly, though, she emphasized, “use the golden rule.”¹⁶² Wryly written, her article reveals a deep passion for her viewpoint. “Most important, keep the 11th Commandment: DON’T BE TOO SERIOUS around us. Our problems, our needs, are serious, but... There’s a time and place for dignity, and there’s a time and place for running amok, and we can run amok with the best of them. Ever skateboard on a motorcar? Wanna learn?”¹⁶³ Samanda spoke for disability rights when disability visibility was still being fought for.

Samanda founded The Electrical Eggs before the Americans with Disabilities Act was enacted into law in 1990. She drew up The Eggs’ charter in 1986. They wrote the handbook in

¹⁶² Jeude, “They Only Handicap the Best Horses,” 80.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 81.

1985, with a revision in 1989. The Electrical Eggs established a British chapter, spreading across the Atlantic in 1995. The British chapter debuted in Glasgow at Intersection. The Eggs are exceptional for being vanguards in disability activist history.

The carton of eggs

Samanda was not alone in making cons more accessible. Her husband Donald supported her efforts, my interviewees mentioned someone named Bill Francis (nicknamed Saint), not to mention the many UK fans who carried the Eggs banner across the Atlantic.¹⁶⁴ But Samanda's partner was Marcia. "Most of my life now is...trying to save cats' lives," Marcia tells me in a Tennessee twang. She rescues cats suffering from a harsh disease. In the 80s and 90s, Marcia oversaw The Electrical Eggs with Samanda. This involved organizing accessibility resources and registration at cons while also building community. She relates to me how important her work was with Eggs. "I've always been a 'think outside the box' kind of person," she tells me, identifying how integral she was for Eggs. Marcia now, as she was in the 80s, lives and breathes fandom. She met her husband that way, actually. They dated Transatlantic for five years, marrying in 1997. They met while volunteering for Eggs.¹⁶⁵

Marcia's father introduced her to science fiction. "My father was a chemist," she explains. "He had a PhD in physical chemistry." This special connection echoes Marilyn's relationship with her father, bonding over evening viewings of *Star Trek*. Science fiction was a family event for Marcia. Every week, her family watched *Star Trek* on the family television in her parents' room. When Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" premiered, the whole family saw it. When Marcia became well-connected in fandom, she introduced her father to

¹⁶⁴ In correspondence with Marcia Illingworth on December 2, 2024.

¹⁶⁵ In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

science fiction author James Hogan. He hoped that she did not ruin a Hogan book with the author's autograph.¹⁶⁶

“One day we're all going to be old. Because of that, we're all going to have some level of disability,” she tells me, wisely. At the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston, Texas, she acted as a delegate from Tennessee. While crossing the street, she slipped in a hole, breaking her ankle. After a night visit to the emergency room, she returned to the conference the next day on crutches. As she hobbled through the conference halls, she passed by a group of disabled women. She caught one saying, “See how fast you can become one of us.” Initially, Marcia brushed it off, but soon thought about it more. “And that's something people need to realize. There, but for the grace of God, at any time, though, any of us.” Marcia had disabled friends, too, while working as a fire department paramedic.¹⁶⁷

Her friendship with Samanda looms large in our conversation. As she talks about her, I can hear emotion and tenderness in her voice. “And we just clicked. Like sisters from another. I mean, we even look so much alike that people sometimes confused us if I was on a scooter.” Reflecting on her friendship with Samanda, Marcia speaks from the heart. “We all have flaws, but those of us who loved her learned to live with those and work around them. Just like we do with other people we love.”¹⁶⁸ Eggs centred on the deeply bonded relationships between two women whose lives intersected with disability in individual, yet shared ways. Together, Samanda, Marcia, Marilyn, and the rest accomplished making fan spaces more accessible.

“What else did you want to know? I get off on these tracks,” Marilyn asks me. She often sprinkles in personal anecdotes in her larger Eggs narrative. Something occurs to her, and she

¹⁶⁶ In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

¹⁶⁷ In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

¹⁶⁸ In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

boldly treks forward. “We were concerned that people who have disabilities have a darn hard time getting around conventions.” Eggs focused on several avenues for addressing inaccessibility. A con is often inaccessible under the right circumstances. Bathrooms might have narrow entryways. Or the dealers’ room is tight and difficult to move through. Marilyn insists “It’s the situations around them, the buildings are what handicap somebody...”¹⁶⁹ Eggs took a social model approach in addressing institutional ableism. Although the postmodern model of disability has critiqued aspects of the social model, addressing physical barriers in a convention hall or hotel is a direct way of addressing accessibility in a convention context.

Eggs mediated a wide definition of disability. Eggs provided scooter access for cons. They printed braille programs for the blind (although they only distributed them a few times, as the braille programs were thick and laborious to carry). They also covered pregnant women, seeing pregnancy as a temporary disability. Marilyn points out, pregnant people “needed accommodations.”¹⁷⁰ Marcia helped disseminate accessible programs. She also organized the renting of scooters and wheelchairs, both push and electric. Marcia noted how a non-disabled committee member fell at a con. Marcia organized a wheelchair for her to use.¹⁷¹ Someone needing accommodations would register with Eggs. Eggs’ registration services was necessary, especially for providing ASL interpreters. As Marilyn tells me, “that was unheard of back in 1988, even.” They also registered service animals, ensuring their qualifications.¹⁷²

Eggs also provided services to convention guests (such as authors, celebrities, actors, etc.). Guests, disabled and non-disabled, asked to become associate members of Eggs. Many authors voiced support. Eggs even produced t-shirts emblazoned with “I Support Electrical

¹⁶⁹ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

¹⁷⁰ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

¹⁷¹ In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

¹⁷² In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

Eggs,” which they printed and sold at fundraisers. Marcia regales me with stories of meeting celebrities. It is a who’s who of the sci-fi and fantasy world. She tells an amusing anecdote about writer and *Discworld* author Terry Pratchett. “Terry Pratchett was a friend,” she tells me, as if it is nothing special. In 1999 at the Melbourne World Science Fiction Convention, Marcia and Pratchett had tea together. After he left, Marcia realized that he had left behind his jacket. She grabbed it, frantically searching for him. She found him at, of all places, a bar across the street. Her son’s favourite picture of her is her with Hugo-award winning *American Gods* author Neil Gaiman. She listed many other authors, including George R. R. Martin, author of the epic *A Song of Ice and Fire*, with his then girlfriend (now wife).¹⁷³ Eggs had many friends. What is striking is how they were a taut thread weaved through different fandom communities.

As explored in this chapter, the disability rights movement began before Samanda founded Eggs. However, she pushed disability activism forward. Her lived experience counted. Samanda continued living with her disability. In July 2022, she passed away. In many ways, present day disability activism owes much to Samanda and her vision of a more accessible fandom. From those who talk about her, fandom is that much darker without her light. “It was the loss of the world when she passed,” Marcia tells me.¹⁷⁴ Samanda once explained conceiving of Eggs when she wrote to author Gordy Dickson. She thanked him for his books. He replied, “Never pay back in fandom, pay forward. Don’t thank me, thank the people who are going to come into your life you’re going to like...”¹⁷⁵ Eggs fit the bill. Hugo award-winning fan writer Mike Glycer, in his obituary for Samanda, says it best: “In the process of paying forward, a woman whose life doctors wrote off when she was seven has achieved status and prestige in her

¹⁷³ In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

¹⁷⁴ In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

¹⁷⁵ Glycer, “Obituary.”

science fiction community. In doing so, she has made life better for that community.”¹⁷⁶ He concludes by listing her appearances of honour and accolades. I caution us from seeing Samanda’s story as a disabled individual overcoming the tragedy of disability. Samanda struggled with her condition to the very end. What I hope to highlight is that her lived experience mattered greatly, positively changing a community. Samanda’s story is truly a disabled one, for all that entails.

As for Eggs I have talked to, life goes on, disabilities and all. Marcia celebrated her 25th wedding anniversary in August. Upon returning to fandom after a brief hiatus, she reflects on the challenges her community faces. “All the battles we had fought and solved back in the 80s and 90s, they were reinventing the wheel,” she tells me. “And fans told us they had learned the lesson and we weren’t needed anymore. And yet, here you are, solving all the problems that I helped solve 20 years ago.” Institutional fandom memory seems to be porous. The battles fought thirty years ago will no doubt be fought thirty years in the future. Marcia contracted a debilitating respiratory infection that spread to her gastro-intestinal system. She barely survived surgery. “Basically, I tell people all the time I was too damn stubborn,” she laughs, her voice booming on my laptop speakers. “There was a battle going on at the Pearly Gates.” She still regularly attends cons, often as a dealer. She elucidates, “It runs my convention habit.” In fact, she held a de facto family reunion at Worldcon, bringing her kids and grandkids. Throughout this call, she has shared with me her favourite fandom experiences. “I don’t care about autographs,” she tells me. “I care about memories. I love having pictures.” While we wrap up our conversation, she has her heart fully on display. “I pulled my first kid out of the mud at the bottom of the bayou when I was 12 years old, and I’ve been trying to save lives ever since.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Glycer, “Obituary.”

¹⁷⁷ In conversation with Marcia Illingworth on March 22, 2023.

Marilyn continues working for ASL interpreting services. The companies that she has worked for organize interpreters to go where they are needed, such as hospitals and colleges. She still volunteers for DragonCon. She worked as the on-site registration director, eventually volunteering as an ASL interpreter. On conventions, she says, “That’s what I like to do. That’s what gets me out of the house. Otherwise, I’d be sitting here.” She even cosplays. Her favourite costume is Captain Peggy Carter who she dresses as alongside other Avengers cosplayers. We often talked about *Star Trek* during our conversation, and how its promises have come to fruition. She remarks, “It just gave people hope...for the future.” She seems to be hopeful for what fandom faces today. Fandom seems to be moving in the right direction, thanks to stories like *Star Trek*. “But we get so much from *Star Trek*...Oh gee, that’s very heavy, isn’t it?” she comments. One of her favourite memories concerns a “mini-convention” her husband organized. In his hometown of Panama City, Florida, he gathered around 25 people for a backyard barbeque. She describes conventions, even this tiny one, as homecoming. “Fandom is all-encompassing,” she tells me. “It’s like you can go to conventions and you can be a person with a disability and you can...be around other people, not so much disabled, but just people in general and you can become friends with.” Our conversation winds down, and I report that I have pages of notes. “And you can tell people that you’re having a little mini convention right here,” she insists.¹⁷⁸

Disability is central to science fiction fandom. Starting in the 1920s, science fiction authors proposed ways technology would impact the human race’s relationship with disability. Around these works, fan communities formed, consisting of many disabled fans. Together, they shared in disabled experiences. It is time for science fiction scholars to utilize a disability lens to study their field. Similarly, disability historians ought to look through the lives of science fiction

¹⁷⁸ In conversation with Marilyn Teague on February 8, 2023.

fans for testamentary evidence of disability. From the start, science fiction fans had a specific understanding of the human body that reflected and informed contemporary understandings of disability. The *Star Trek* series only lightly considers disability, admittedly. In its shiny future, disabilities can be easily fixed or excluded. But it still spoke to the fans I talked to, and so did many other science fiction texts like it.

The Electrical Eggs was a remarkable organization at the nexus of science fiction and disability. Aside from ideas of genre, people and their intentions built this community. Samanda convinced others like Marilyn and Marcia to organize, making fandom more accessible. We still fight ableism today. However, we do not face uncharted territory like the Enterprise treks through. We know it thanks to people like Samanda. Samanda and her cohort expanded accessibility at conventions, thus sharing access to their space with other disabled fans. In this way, they practiced a form of disability activism in the context of fan communities. The history of the Eggs also highlights the importance of studying fan spaces, rather than solely focusing on the textual relationships fans have with the creators that they follow.

The story of disability in science fiction is not what a reader may find in the pages of writers like Isaac Asimov or Ray Bradbury. Instead, it is written by the disabled fans who read, create, and imagine communities on their own. I quote Samanda in her essay “They Only Handicap the Best Horses.” She says how a frustrating experience is people commenting on one’s disability, filling their ignorance with their own misplaced opinions. “It’s the sort of thing that could make you go crazy,” she wrote. “Luckily, most Handicapped people grow armor consisting of:...” She cites things like “a strong personality,” a “sense of humor,” and “imagination that can only take us out of this galaxy, away from this reality...into bodies that reflect who we can be...” Lastly, she mentions “the smug realization that **we**’ve come to grips

with, and conquered...ageing [emphasis in original].”¹⁷⁹ Despite decades of science fiction labelling disabled bodies as defective, disabled fans rose above such stereotypes and crafted their own narratives and relationships, using the genre that they loved so much.

Marilyn expresses her shock when I tell her I am more of a *Star Wars* guy. “You know, I don’t see too many famous people wanting to be in a *Star Wars* movie,” she tells me, smirking. I must concede. She continues with unbridled excitement: “*Star Trek* rocks, yeah?”

¹⁷⁹ Jeude, “They Only Handicap the Best Horses,” 79-80.

Chapter Two – Playing With Power, Confining With Shame: Video Game Journalists Write About (In)Accessibility.

In the early 1980s, a public health crisis almost halted the ascendant video game industry and an emerging video game fan culture. On November 9, 1982, US Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop spoke at the Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic in Pittsburgh. He warned against the dangers of video games. They could be “hazardous to the health of young people,” he said, as children were becoming addicted to gaming “body and soul.” He added that there was growing evidence that video games were harmful to the development of children’s mental and physical health. He admitted that scientific evidence was sparse, but he expected there to be some in the coming years.¹ Koop released a statement backtracking his earlier comments the following day. “This represented my purely personal judgement and was not based on any accumulated scientific evidence, nor does it represent the official view of the Public Health Service,” clarifies the statement. “My off-the-cuff comment was not part of any prepared remarks. Nothing in my remarks should be interpreted as implying that video games are per se violent in nature, or harmful to children.”² From its beginning, video game culture collided with medicalization.

Even though Koop backtracked, many others in America (and the rest of the world) echoed Koop’s sentiments about the physical and mental dangers of playing video games. Later, in the early 1990s, the issue came to a head in United States Senate hearings where the American government and public scrutinized violence in video games. Public opinion was not uniform. Some wanted to outright ban violent video games, while others had more nuanced takes on the

¹ “Surgeon General Sees Danger in Video Games,” *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1982, A16.

² Charles Everett Koop, *Clarification of remarks on video games and violence*, November 10, 1982, 1, <https://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/101584930X24>

matter, advocating for a rating system.³ Regardless, moralists and politicians angled to demonize children playing violent video games. I will return to these hearings to highlight the historical process of moralizing bodies playing video games and the responses to these events.

In this chapter, I seek to understand the historical connection between bodies and accessing video game culture through my oral interviews. Although relatively new, video game fan communities have a thriving and vocal segment of disabled gamers. Many disabled activists, academics, and journalists have written extensive accounts about their experiences playing video games while disabled. Their writing highlights a crossroads for video gaming. Processing power and technology have leapt far ahead, allowing for untold virtual possibilities. Yet, game companies are playing catch up to make their products universally accessible for all communities. The historical forces of ableism and marginalization so far present in this dissertation are a key obstacle in disabled fans' access to the joy and pleasure of the video game community.

Community is yet to be fully discussed within video game historiography. To use a prominent example, scholars have spent much attention on the *Assassin's Creed* series (a series that will become important later in this chapter). *Assassin's Creed* is a blockbuster video game series published by Ubisoft since 2007. It has spawned novels, films, and a whole franchise where characters live through genetic memories to access historical events and fight against an ancient conspiracy. Critics have praised it for its historical research and interactivity with reconstructions of the past. Scholars Thierry Karsenti and Simon Parent stress the importance of

³ "SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE HEARS TESTIMONY FROM SOFTWARE INDUSTRY AND OPPONENTS ON CONTENT OF VIDEO GAMES". CBS News Transcripts. December 10, 1993, Friday. <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SJK-M6K0-009C-B158-00000-00&context=1516831>.

the franchise in education, allowing students to experience history as a “dynamic process.”⁴ Similarly, scholar Lisa Gilbert argues that *Assassin’s Creed* is a site of inquiry that students can readily access the past, learning empathy for real and imagined historical actors.⁵ Scholars studying *Assassin’s Creed* have also credited the franchise with influencing cultural memory. Scholar Emil Lundedal Hammar in an examination of marginalized identities in *Assassin’s Creed: Freedom Cry* argues that digital games can affect cultural memory. In *Freedom Cry*, players play as a freed slave during the eighteenth-century transatlantic slave trade who fights to free those in bondage. Hammar elucidates how this “counter-hegemonic commemorative play” provides a catharsis and emphasizes the role of marginalized identities in the past and in our cultural memory.⁶ Scholar Christopher Leffler also dissects cultural memory, but in how *Assassin’s Creed: Unity* is purposefully anachronistic, highlighting how we choose to remember the past of Revolutionary Paris.⁷ I add to this flourishing historiography by arguing that games like *Assassin’s Creed* can also be studied in how they form community and give agency to marginalized identities.

I interviewed two disabled gaming journalists: Antonio I. Martinez and Grant Stoner. Both told me about their love for video games despite the community and industry offering little room for them. While they were in separate countries, and telling me their unique stories, I see similarities in how they talk about engaging with video game fan spaces. These similarities relate

⁴ Thierry Karsenti and Simon Parent, “Teaching History with the Video Game *Assassin’s Creed*: Effective Teaching Practices and Reported Learning,” *Review of Science, Mathematics, and ICT Education* 14 no. 1 (2020): 41.

⁵ Lisa Gilbert, “‘*Assassin’s Creed* Reminds Us That History Is Human Experience’: Students’ Senses of Empathy While Playing a Narrative Video Game,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 47, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2018.1560713>.

⁶ Emil Lundedal Hammar, “Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play: Marginalized Pasts and the Politics of Memory in the Digital Game *Assassin’s Creed: Freedom Cry*,” *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 372, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2016.1256622>.

⁷ Christopher Leffler, “Memory Games: History, Memory, and Anachronism in the Paris of *Assassin’s Creed Unity*,” *Contemporary French Civilization* 44, no. 1 (April 2019): 81, <https://doi.org/10.3828/cfc.2019.5>.

to safety and harm, themes present since the start of the history of video games, albeit from different groups with different agendas. Overall, the history of video games consists of a history of spaces for gaming that have been largely inaccessible to a wide segment of the gaming population. In their writings, Antonio and Grant examine questions of access in the gaming community. In these ways, both journalists practice disability activism in their community through writing better representation of the lived experiences of themselves, but also the disabled community as a whole.

I position Antonio and Grant's testimonies within the larger historical context of video games. I advocate that video game history is history. An examination of this history reveals that the video game fandom is inherently tied in with shaming bodies. All fandoms "other" aberrant bodies. As discussed in my previous chapter, the origins of science fiction fandom rest on writing ableist narratives that positioned disability as something to be fixed by science. However, video games originated within a culture that shamed video game players with health warnings and a moral panic. As video game fandom entered the new millennium, hegemonic video game fans adopted this shame and shifted it to anyone who was not a straight, cis, white, able-bodied man.

In the following section, I explore the history of access in video game culture. At its core, the history of video games consists of limiting access to marginalized bodies. Within this narrative, I talked to Antonio and Grant, two disabled men who counter gaming's inherent ableism with their measured words. Disabled activists within gaming claim a right to this space. Through telling me their stories, Antonio and Grant challenge hegemonic narratives that have existed in video game history since its beginning. I argue that disabled gamers are resisting long-standing ableist shame by building common community within the video game fandom. In the case of my interviewees, they accomplish this through journalism.

A Brief History of Shaming in Video Game History

Crusades against video game controversies

Video game history has typically focused on technological developments and industry history.

Playing games on computers stretches as far back as modern computers themselves. The first notable game was *Tennis For Two* in 1958, programmed on a machine designed for calculating missile trajectories.⁸ However, parallel to the technological development of video games is a history surrounding the culture and norms of gaming communities. When arcade spaces opened in the 1970s (initially with electromechanical machines like pinball, and later with video arcade games), they caused a stir. They disrupted traditional ideas of childhood. Parents, lawmakers, and other moralists initially held anxiety about arcades for how easily gamers inhabited a space where new cultural and economic values arose.⁹ Arcade spaces succeeded other coin-operated amusements that had facilitated gambling or peep shows, a connection moralists often made.¹⁰ Gaming scholar Carly A. Kocurek argues that moralists' concerns arose from anxieties surrounding an "emergent values system" where an individual's success at a technological skill was praised in the context of spending money on entertainment. During the post-boom period of the 1970s in America, a shift occurred in the workforce where technological labour force was emphasizing individual achievement versus collective accomplishment.¹¹ Many adults did not like that arcades allowed children to practice being workers in a de-industrializing economy.¹² Moralists attempted to move against arcades, but ultimately, at the Supreme Court level, judges

⁸ Richard Stanton, *A Brief History of Video Games: From Atari To Xbox One* (London: Robinson, 2015), 16-19.

⁹ Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015., xviii.

¹⁰ Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13-4.

¹² *Ibid.*, 33.

ruled in favour of the video game industry.¹³ Moralists concerns of upended traditional norms were in vain. Video game culture was here to stay.

Regardless, concerned parents and lawmakers continued crusading against gaming through the 1980s and 1990s. A concurrent debate took place on what was considered part of boyhood.¹⁴ This was particularly the case for violence. As video games became more realistic, interactive violence did as well. Moralists opposed games such as *Death Race*, where players run down pedestrians for points.¹⁵ However, controversy only strengthened the link between violence and video games through moralist rhetoric, further raising the profile of violent games.¹⁶ Moralists continued fighting arcades with restrictions such as zoning ordinances and code enforcement.¹⁷ In this way, they attempted to prohibit the spread of video game spaces.

Additionally, moralists crafted a rhetoric that cast video games as unhealthy, echoing Dr. Koop's sentiments at the start of this chapter. In 1993, *CBS This Morning* broadcasted an analysis on the health debate surrounding video games. Dr. Howard Torman stated that "With kids playing video games upwards of 21 hours a week, they're exercising less than previous generations. And as a result, aerobic fitness is down some 10 percent."¹⁸ A study in Britain, according to a report in 1993 from the *Sunday Mail*, stated that young video game players had higher average cholesterol levels due to sitting in front of the TV and a noticeable lack of

¹³ Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans*, 32.

¹⁴Ibid., xx-xxi.

¹⁵Ibid., 83.

¹⁶Ibid., 89.

¹⁷Ibid., 91.

¹⁸ "CHILDREN CAN DEVELOP HEALTH PROBLEMS FROM PLAYING VIDEO GAMES FOR TOO LONG". CBS News Transcripts. December 27, 1993, Monday. [https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SJK-M730-009C-B2FP-00000-00&context=1516831](https://advance.lexis-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SJK-M730-009C-B2FP-00000-00&context=1516831).

walking to school.¹⁹ Science writer Karen Klinger writing for United Press International reported on doctors citing “Nintendo epilepsy” and “Nintendinitis” as common issues for video game players.²⁰ These doctors and moralists focused their attention on the behaviour of children. In a *Guardian* article from 1993, Professor Cary Cooper from the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology stressed the importance of children’s behaviour. “The problem with video games is that they involved children more than television or films and this means there are more implications for their social behaviour,” Professor Cooper stated. “Playing these games can lead to anti-social behaviour, make children aggressive and affect their emotional stability.”²¹ This rhetoric did concern itself with the welfare of children, but it was entirely linked with bodily control. Video games made children fat, weaker, and anti-social.

The controversy gained widespread national coverage with senate hearings in the 1990s. U. S. senator Herbert Kohl of Wisconsin published a press release that condemned video games. At the same time, Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut held a press conference about violent video games. A week after, the U.S. Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs’ Subcommittee on Regulation and Government Information and the Judiciary Committee’s Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice met to deliberate on *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap*, two highly controversial games. Lieberman demonstrated the graphic violence of *Mortal Kombat* and the visual luridness

¹⁹ BOYD G. "VIDEO GAMES HEALTH HAZARD". SUNDAY MAIL (QLD). March 7, 1993 Sunday. <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:4B46-HKF0-01S8-G0NS-00000-00&context=1516831>.

²⁰ KAREN KLINGER, "Nintendo games pose health hazards," *United Press International*. May 16, 1990, Wednesday, BC cycle. <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SJD-NTX0-0038-G09F-00000-00&context=1516831>.

²¹ VIVEK CHAUDHARY, "YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE FIRING LINE; A battle for youngsters' minds, fought between a hedgehog and a plumber, could cause long-term damage," *The Guardian* (London). April 12, 1993. <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3TDH-26G0-006X-B04H-00000-00&context=1516831>.

of *Night Trap*. In the end, Sega pulled *Night Trap* off the market, and *Mortal Kombat* became a best seller.²² Rather than congress establishing a government rating system, leaders in the video game industry formed the Interactive Digital Software Association, which created the Entertainment Software Ratings Board.²³ A decades-long moralist campaign linked video games with something unsuitable for children, establishing a culture of shame for gamers. This shame was entrenched with the control for the health of young bodies. Moralists attempted to control what spaces were open to arcade gamers, and then attempted to control what gamer bodies interacted with. This shame was a historical process that coalesced into embodied resentment and entrenched identity. Within this context, a male enclave within gaming communities fought to preserve gaming as “hardcore” against diversification as an example of retrenchment, defining themselves in the face of opposition.²⁴

Early computer network culture – The WELL and early Internet

Meanwhile, computers were becoming more affordable and better suited for a personal desk. It is within this networked context that video game communities shifted to by the late 1990s. However, the history of network culture is key to understanding the interconnectedness of the video game online community (as well as the interconnectedness of the present). In early networked computing history, America’s counterculture conceived of computers and networks as utopian. They dreamed of a near future unburdened by post-war bureaucracy, with life lived holistically. At the centre of this movement was Stewart Brand. From the late 1960s to the late 1990s, Brand oversaw an early utopian network with the Whole Earth Catalogue and, later, the

²² J. C. Herz, *Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, And Rewired Our Minds* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 188-91.

²³ Herz, *Joystick Nation*, 191-2.

²⁴ Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans*, 196.

computer network WELL (World Earth ‘Lectronic Link).²⁵ Founded in 1968, the Whole Earth Catalogue contained any conceivable information needed to live in the counterculture world.²⁶ The WELL, the successor to the WEC, was a computer network that brought together many different communities in network forums.²⁷ Within both of these networks, the counterculture saw the world as beneficially interconnected.²⁸ In the 1990s, writers and proponents of WELL spoke of these new social networks as a way for individuals to find new identities, but also be a place of unity.²⁹ Often, supporters thought this would usher in a “egalitarian utopia.”³⁰ However, as the 1990s shifted into the 2000s, and more users of the Internet came online, these utopian hopes were seeming more distant. The promises of the WELL fell apart in the face of radicalized events that began online. However, the WELL was an integral first step into defining virtual space, a concept that is important in this chapter, but also the next with the introduction of online role-playing communities.

GamerGate and radicalization

On January 6, 2021, as congress was confirming President Joe Biden’s presidential victory against President Donald Trump, pro-Trump insurrectionists stormed America’s capital in Washington D.C. As President Biden responded, “At this hour our democracy is under unprecedented assault unlike anything we’ve seen in modern times...An assault on the citadel of liberty, the Capitol itself.”³¹ However, this was not a surprise to those who paid attention to the

²⁵ Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.

²⁶ Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 249.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 249.

³¹ “Capitol Riot: What Does a Deadly Day Mean for Trump’s Legacy?,” *BBC News*, January 7, 2021, sec. US Election 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2020-55567865>.

gaming community during the fall of 2014 that a far-right movement could wreak such destruction. For many in the gaming community, a previous campaign of violence was the antecedent for this evolution in the alt right movement. In the fall of 2014, “thousands of people in the game community began to systematically harass, heckle, threaten, and dox” feminist activists under the guise of holding game journalists to account for unethical conduct.³² These harassers coined their campaign as a hashtag on Twitter: #GamerGate. Although claiming to champion “ethics in gaming journalism,” truthfully #GamerGate supporters argued that game companies were “pandering” to minority groups (the main target being women in the game industry), rather than focusing on straight white men.³³ Ultimately, the decades long campaign to morally question gaming radicalized gamers as a sticking point for why they were oppressed.³⁴ The #GamerGate harassment campaign stretched across the industry, targeting even high-profile members. However, it began with a review that never even existed.

In August 2014, Eron Gjoni posted on the SomethingAwful web forum about his breakup with Zoë Quinn, an indie game designer who recently published a game called *Depression Quest*. The post alleged that Quinn received favourable reviews for the game through “intimate relationships” with game reviewers.³⁵ The forum moderators took down the post, but it was too late. Hundreds of irate gamers jumped on board, initiating a campaign of harassment, including rape and death threats, targeted at Quinn. As Quinn put it, “Your old life is gone, and your new one is stuck on repeat at the point where you become a target. For me, August 2014 will never

³² Aja Romano, “What We Still Haven’t Learned from Gamergate,” Vox, January 20, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2020/1/20/20808875/gamergate-lessons-cultural-impact-changes-harassment-laws>.

³³ Jessica O’Donnell, “Militant Meninism: The Militaristic Discourse of Gamergate and Men’s Rights Activism,” *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 5 (July 1, 2020): 655, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443719876624>.

³⁴ Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg, *Meme Wars: The Untold Story of the Online Battles Upending Democracy in America* (New York: Bloomsbury publishing, 2022), 186, Kobo.

³⁵ Adrienne Massanari, “#Gamergate and The Fappening: How Reddit’s Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures,” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 3 (March 1, 2017): 334, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815608807>.

end.”³⁶ In their 2017 memoir, *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight against Online Hate*, Quinn details what the early days of GamerGate felt like:

Shortly after I ended things, my ex posted a sprawling manifesto, just shy of 10,000 words, detailing the ways in which I was a whore on multiple websites dedicated to my industry...The post was immediately taken down for being wildly inappropriate, so he moved his masterpiece to the parts of the web populated by people who are recreational life-destroyers. It spread like wildfire. Thousands of people who had never heard of me before rallied around his banner and took up the crusade, latching on to me as a stand-in for any number of things they hated.³⁷

The harassment campaign was a nightmare that would not end. More than white women were targeted. Quinn also reveals how GamerGate targeted minoritized people, anyone critiquing the game industry, harassing them through techniques like doxing and death threats.³⁸ “GamerGate wasn’t really about video games at all,” Quinn wrote, “so much as it was a flash point for radicalized online hatred that had a long list of targets before, and after, my name was added to it.”³⁹ When it seemed that all hope was lost, Quinn realized that they had power. “I grieved for my old life, but grief is unsustainable...It was only when I stopped looking for the light at the end of the tunnel that I discovered the power to make my own,” they wrote.⁴⁰ Quinn launched the Crash Override Network in January 2015. The organization offered pro bono assistance to victims of online abuse and worked with tech platforms like Google and Twitter to better protect online users.⁴¹ Quinn’s activist efforts made an indelible mark on the gaming industry.

³⁶ Zoë Quinn, *Crash Override: How Gamergate (Nearly) Destroyed My Life, and How We Can Win the Fight Against Online Hate*, First edition (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017), 110.

³⁷ Quinn, *Crash Override*, 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 70-4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 122-3.

As the dust settled on GamerGate, the harassment may have abated, but GamerGaters did not vanish. They merely shifted into new communities. A key aspect of GamerGate was the weaponizing of memes. Online, there is a vast proliferation of communities. Within these groups, a common identity has been intensified through common narratives that are proliferated through memes, signalling membership into an in-group.⁴² Figures like Milo Yiannopoulos and Mike Cernovich coopted these narratives from GamerGate and led many from that movement into MAGA.⁴³

Although the January 6th insurrection was a vast coalition of different groups on the right, GamerGate's loose hash-tag organization reveals a continuity to the far right's attack on the capitol in addition to Trump's widespread support. The extremism present in the far right connects to radicalization in the gaming community, and, indeed, intersects and is, in some cases, the same. There is abundant hatred for anyone in the gaming community not cis, straight, white, non-disabled or male, based on anxiety surrounding a narrative of oppression. This narrative has roots in the early moralist campaigns against gaming that shamed children at the arcades. Oppression needs an origin story of being oppressed. However, shame in the video game community now has shifted to barring marginalized bodies from interacting with physical and virtual spaces, rather than stopping children from accessing arcade spaces. Shaming and video games are intertwined with a long history that continues today. The forces of shame echo the medicalization and marginalization present in much of disability history, as particularly evidenced by the previous chapter's exploration of science fiction's eugenicist perception of disability.

⁴² Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg, *Meme Wars*, 12.

⁴³Ibid., 614.

The video game accessibility journalists

Approaching an oral history of disability in the gaming community, I considered how to find and meet with potential interviewees. There were many possibilities. Within gaming, there are a multitude of online sub-communities. As much as the gaming community stretches back to the 1970s (as discussed above), it is undeniable that the gaming community has an online presence today. I intended to find my interviewees through their online connections, primarily social media.

Drawing on the micro-blogging site X (then called Twitter, despite its recent acquisition by Elon Musk), I sifted through hashtags, following various members of the community, until I began to get a sense of the overall landscape of the conversations. Participants in these online discussions included community activists, self-identified disabled streamers, and journalists. A few profiles stood out to me as having larger conversations of accessibility in the video game community. I sent out recruitment scripts to these individuals, waiting for a response. However, the only respondents were two journalists. I learned from my interviewees that their writing is inherently tied into their activism and community building. I organized online meeting times with each journalist and waited to hear about their stories. While I am aware that this recruitment process was somewhat unorthodox, as you will see, I was convinced that these interviewees offered insight into the currently evolving discussion surrounding access to space in video game fandom.

I once again use the first names of my interviewees to highlight the personal element to this research process. I aim to connect the story to the person. Their stories further reveal the longer historical forces of bigotry that impact the gaming community today.

Antonio

Decades before GamerGate, Antonio grew up in Spain during the 1980s in the aftermath of Franco's dictatorship. He dealt with ableism in a society that was catching up on human rights. As he explains to me, growing up disabled in Spain was unique. "I never thought of myself as disabled, because when you're a kid, you don't hear those words, you know," he says. "Especially, we are talking about, you know, the 80s in Spain." In e-mail correspondence, he explains it thusly: "Spain in the 1980s was behind on social advances, as it had moved from a dictatorship to a fully democratic government just a few years back."⁴⁴ During our interview, he explains it further. "Spain had been kind of on the back foot of advancement," he summarizes. "Because we had a dictatorship that kept us like 20 or 30 years behind the rest of Europe..." He does highlight how things have positively changed. "I mean, we have made like huge progress, but there's still room for improvement," he says.⁴⁵

Spain did not formally participate in the Second World War as a belligerent, although it was riven by the Spanish Civil War in the decade preceding the outbreak of the broader conflict. Spanish historians have noted how Spain's history during the twentieth century was not aberrant from the rest of Europe. Rather, the same forces of ideology and norms affecting Europe transformed Spanish society, culture, and economics.⁴⁶ Just as in the rest of Europe, fascism and communism contested the future of Spain. Military leader Francisco Franco established a dictatorship in Spain that lasted between 1939 and 1976. The Second Spanish Republic, which governed from 1931 to 1939, lost to Franco's fascist forces during the Spanish Civil War, lasting from 1936 to 1939. During his dictatorship, Franco's government enacted a policy of self-

⁴⁴ In correspondence with Antonio I. Martinez, December 8, 2024.

⁴⁵ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

⁴⁶ Julián Casanova and Carlos Gil Andrés, *Twentieth-Century Spain: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139061841>, 3.

sufficiency and isolationism, resulting in a closing of Spain from the rest of Europe and the world.⁴⁷ The Franco dictatorship opposed human rights. Forces supporting Franco's regime, such as the Spanish fascist party the Falange, and the Catholic Church, pushed back against international pressures to protect human rights.⁴⁸ Spain's marginalized population was in a dangerous position when Franco took power.

Before Franco, during the Republic, precarious as it was, Spain saw advancements for gender equality. Women gained the right to vote, contraceptives were widely available, and divorce laws sought to protect women. Conservative political groups resisted this change, citing feminism as a societal ill that would "only lead to social disorder and chaos."⁴⁹ Under Franco, conservatism drew a close connection with Catholic conceptions of ideal gender roles, considering the patriarchal organization of the family as necessary.⁵⁰ The Republic narrowly consolidated power, governing for only two years of stability. Franco, at the head of a military coup d'état in July 1936, weakened the fledgling republic. Despite the failure of the coup to grab power, it incited a war that ultimately resulted in the victory of fascism over the Republic.⁵¹

An ever-polarizing Spain fractured, not just between fascists and communists. Employers fought against workers, the Church sought control against the state, and the rest of the world watched anxiously on who would win. The Spanish Civil War is especially known for its dehumanizing violence, which included mass killings.⁵² Franco's forces sought the destruction of

⁴⁷ Margalida Miró et al., "Spanish Nursing under Franco: Reinvention, Modernization and Repression (1956–1976)," *Nursing Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (2012): 270, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1440-1800.2011.00565.x>

⁴⁸ Miró et al., "Spanish Nursing Under Franco," 271.

⁴⁹ Teresa María Ortega López and Núria Félez Castañé, "The Indelible Markers of Twentieth-Century Spanish Antifeminism," *Culture & History Digital Journal* 9, no. 1 (June 30, 2020): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3989/chdj.2020.008>.

⁵⁰ López and Castañé "The Indelible Markers of Twentieth-Century Spanish Antifeminism," 6.

⁵¹ Casanova and Gil Andrés, *Twentieth-Century Spain*, 157-8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 161.

any adversary at any cost.⁵³ Franco's armed forces took Spain from the Republic on April 1, 1939, holding power for almost forty years.⁵⁴

Franco died comfortably in his own bed in 1975. His legacy was a vacuum of power. Conflict arose in the last decades of his rule, splintering the once unified state.⁵⁵ A parliamentary monarchy took power in 1982, establishing humanitarian rights and freedoms after much uncertainty.⁵⁶ In the 1982 general election, the socialist party handily won. They expanded Spain's welfare state, but their government was rife with corruption scandals and an economic crisis in 1992.⁵⁷ At the close of the twentieth century, Spain was in a better place than where it started. It became democratic and a less violent country than it had been in the middle of century.⁵⁸ However, the path to strong human rights took time and stability. The scars of Franco's civil war are still felt to this day. When Antonio received his diagnosis in the 1980s, Spanish disability rights were behind the rest of the world. The long historical forces of ableism, disablism, racism, and sexism exist within Antonio's national context. These forces have a deep historical context, running through the past to the present.

Antonio has Spinal Muscular Atrophy Type 3. He explains to me that the degenerative illness weakens his muscles over time. "I started experiencing it when I was like three years old," he tells me. "And they diagnosed me with it. And I've been doing physical therapy since then because there's no cure or any kind of treatment for it."⁵⁹ Therapy merely slows down the illness' progress.

⁵³ Casanova and Gil Andrés, *Twentieth-Century Spain*, 168.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 270, 274.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 328.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁵⁹ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

Antonio recounts childhood memories with clarity. He tells me of the alienation that came with his disability in the schoolyard. He enjoyed school, achieving high grades, but he mentions the frustration of being unable to play soccer with friends. “I enjoyed making friends [at school],” he says. But when recess came, his friends would play soccer. “I cannot run, so I cannot play,” he tells me.⁶⁰ He would wait for his friends in a corner of the courtyard during recess.

Computer games offered an exciting proposition for Antonio. “When I discovered video games, and more specifically, computer games, I was completely, you know, it was a new beginning for me,” he tells me. Not only were games novel interactive experiences available at home, but Antonio also found that it could be a shared activity. He shares stories about playing computer games with friends. “Now I could invite friends to my house and now we could play games,” he tells me. Computer games in the 1980s have a reputation for taking a while to load. However, as frustrating as it was at the time for Antonio, he explains the benefits of the moments during load screens. “I think it really helped me,” he says. “Because that time, so to speak, when the game loads...it really helped me [make friends].”⁶¹ Antonio could chat and catch up with his friends during the awkward silences of loading screens. Antonio shared with his friends access to computer gaming, ensuring lifetime friendships and a lifelong passion for gaming. Antonio’s computer room was a space he shared with his friends out of joy and passion for gaming in much the same way as other fans in this dissertation share space with each other.

Antonio excellently illustrates how gaming is not solely a solitary activity. Gamers can be quite social. “So, the people that came to my home to play, some of them became my best

⁶⁰ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

⁶¹ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

friends,” he says, smiling. He cherishes these childhood memories. “Even up to today, you know, after 36 years, I’ve been playing games with them. . . . They are my family at this point,” he tells me. I remark on how my own friend groups stays in touch through our semi-regular session of co-op gaming while also being in each other’s wedding parties. Antonio agrees that this sort of relationship is special. “We are like brothers,” he explains. “Which is really nice with other adults.”⁶² Antonio might not have played soccer at recess, but he found his community. Playing computer games at home with his close friends was the first step into the larger video game community he now connects with.

In between gaming sessions, Antonio had physical therapy. He relates to me the difficulties of physical therapy at a young age. “When you are a small kid, and they tell you, okay, so you need to do like thirty minutes of physical therapy every day,” he tells me. “Well, you’re a kid, you’re like, well, that’s no fun.” As years passed, physical therapy grew more challenging. When Antonio’s mom asked his doctors if there were new treatments, they would reply that there was nothing new. “And you take it, and you’re like, fine. Just keep going,” he says. However, games offered empowerment. He explains to me the benefits of gaming for him. “When you’re playing games, you’re moving your arms, you’re moving your hands, and you’re doing exercise without realizing it,” Antonio tells me. When he was twelve or thirteen, his doctor expressed surprise that he had such strong control of his arms, “as it wasn’t common in boys at that age with the same condition.”⁶³ Antonio cites exercising with playing video games as the reason why he kept strength in his arms for such a long time.⁶⁴ Antonio’s passion for video

⁶² In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

⁶³ In correspondence with Antonio I. Martinez, December 8, 2024.

⁶⁴ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

gaming was not simply a way to past the time. Instead, it gave him agency over his limited mobility.

He stopped walking completely at 15. He solely relied on his wheelchair by this point. “I didn’t have the strength in my arms to move the wheelchair by myself,” he tells me. “I had lost my independence in some ways.” Acquiring a power wheel when he was in his early twenties changed this. He vividly explains to me arriving at the store with a prescription for a new power wheelchair. The saleswoman explained that he should expect to take time to get used to the controls. Antonio surprised her. “But the funny thing is that since I’ve been playing games for my life...the moment that I saw the wheelchair and I had this small stick to move, I was driving perfectly from the first moment.” The saleswoman initially did not believe that this was his first time using a power wheelchair. Antonio puts it simply to me: “You just practice, so that’s practice with video games.”⁶⁵ I learn that Antonio is a gamer through and through.

In his thirties, Antonio found game controls more difficult due to their increasing complexity. He was also losing his mobility. “Video games became harder, because, you know, they require more inputs and you need to make things in a more complex way,” he explains. “I couldn’t hold down buttons anymore.” He stopped playing certain games. “I felt bad, and frustrated, losing access to something that was important to me.” He sums up something that I know that I have also felt: “You don’t realize that’s not your fault, so in that I remember I was always thinking, oh, it’s the fault [of me].” He entered a depressive episode. He lost the confidence he once found in gaming. However, he acknowledges the larger issue. He tells me, “It

⁶⁵ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

was just that, you know, there was no awareness about the issue.”⁶⁶ Slowly, Antonio approached a recognition for the need of activism within video games.

At the start of this chapter, I mentioned 2017’s *Assassin’s Creed: Origins*. Antonio learned that his favourite series, *Assassin’s Creed*, now included expansive accessibility options. He realized that he could return to one of his favourite game series despite increasing physical difficulties. The 2017 *Assassin’s Creed* entry of the franchise included expanded accessibility options. *Origins* is set in Egypt during the reign of Cleopatra. “I love Egypt,” Antonio tells me. “The culture is, like, so fascinating.” Antonio found freedom in *Origins*. “I had everything that I wanted in an open world game. I could travel distances. I could ride a horse, could fight for justice,” he says. He stresses that last word.⁶⁷

Antonio entered activism while learning about *Origin’s* connection to accessibility. “It is how I found out that people were working for accessibility, for people like us and with people like us, you know, to make games better for everyone,” he explains to me. Antonio realized that he could find others who benefitted from accessibility in gaming. Yet, there were many online who did not realize that they could play games with the advent of accessibility features. “So, I tried creating a YouTube channel, [which] didn’t work out because I’m terrible at video editing,” he recounts.⁶⁸ He eventually stumbled upon CanIPlayThat.com. *Can I Play That?*, founded by Susan Banks and Courtney Craven in 2018, is a site that reviews games for accessibility. Its mandate is “to share stories that influence game updates, inform disabled players, educate and entertain players and developers, and provide a voice for one of the largest player bases in the

⁶⁶ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

⁶⁷ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023; In correspondence with Antonio I. Martinez, December 8, 2024.

⁶⁸ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

industry.”⁶⁹ Antonio finally found an online community for him. He pitched to them that he could write about motor accessibility for low mobility people. They agreed. “And I was very nervous,” he says. “I did fairly well, apparently,” as they asked him to be their mobility editor. They paid attention to what he was writing, he recalls. Antonio realized that “this is what I’ve been waiting all my life for.” With resolution, he says, “This is my calling.”⁷⁰ Through seeking accessibility, Antonio found a community of activist journalists.

Antonio discovered a community of other writers, all advocating for a more inclusive and accessible video game community. He learned that he was not alone. He has a wide circle of colleagues who specialize in different aspects of the wider aim of accessibility. I had just talked to one of them by the time of our conversation. When I mentioned that I talked to another journalist, Antonio quickly asked, “Stoner? ...Great guy.”⁷¹ A few days before, I had interviewed Grant Stoner, another voice in the gaming accessibility community.

Grant

Across the Atlantic in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, an American journalist also writes about accessibility and disability in gaming. Grant Stoner is an award-winning journalist writing about his experiences in gaming for news outlets like *IGN*, *Wired*, and *The Washington Post*. He has also written for *Can I Play That?*⁷² At the start of our Discord call, he explains to me his diagnosis. He lives with Spinal Muscular Atrophy Type 2. He has never not needed assistance, but he has found “ways to increase my independence through assistive tech and other means...” Grant’s diagnosis also consists of progressively weakening muscles, meaning that he has lost the

⁶⁹ “Can I Play That?,” Can I Play That?, accessed May 23, 2023, <https://caniplaythat.com/>.

⁷⁰ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

⁷¹ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

⁷² “Grant Stoner’s Profile | Freelance Journalist | Muck Rack,” accessed May 30, 2023, <https://muckrack.com/grant-stoner-1>.

ability to play certain games over time.⁷³ In a 2023 IGN article titled “Growing up and gaming with a disability,” Grant wrote about growing up with his diagnosis. “As a young child, I never had restrictions. Despite living with a neuromuscular disability – Spinal Muscular Atrophy Type II – the muscles in my hands and fingers were strong enough to allow me to play across a variety of consoles.”⁷⁴

During long hospital stays as a child, Grant brought his GameBoy with a Pokémon game. “When I was sick, because growing up I was hospitalized a lot, it was easiest for me to bring my GameBoy into the hospital, because at the time, I had the strength to hold my GameBoy and press the buttons,” he tells me.⁷⁵ He admits that he has played every Pokémon game in the franchise. In the IGN article, he writes how a turning point was the release of the Xbox 360 and *Call of Duty: World at War*. He met his closest friends playing the game’s “Nazi Zombies” mode. However, the Xbox 360 controller was difficult to use. His brother attached a popsicle stick to the back of the controller to allow Grant to use both triggers on the controller. “That simple modification of adding a popsicle stick was a lifeline when extensive menu and accessible design practices were still within their infancy,” he wrote.⁷⁶

Grant moved to PC gaming as his disability progressed. PC gaming allows for users to increase mouse sensitivity and create custom key-bindings, which was useful for Grant. While working for *Can I Play That?*, *The Last of Us Part II* released. The much anticipated follow up to game studio Naughty Dog’s *Last of Us* from 2013 announced widely praised accessibility features. However, Grant did not find it accessible. He could not play it, because it was exclusive

⁷³ In conversation with Grant Stoner, May 3, 2023.

⁷⁴ Grant Stoner, “Growing Up and Gaming with a Disability,” IGN, March 21, 2023, <https://www.ign.com/articles/growing-up-and-gaming-with-a-disability>.

⁷⁵ In conversation with Grant Stoner, May 3, 2023.

⁷⁶ Stoner, “Growing Up and Gaming with a Disability.”

to a system that he had moved away from. He wrote about his mixed feelings in an article. “I was frustrated at myself and the absence of first-party hardware compatibility with PlayStation systems. But through writing about my immeasurable disappointments, I was struck by the juxtaposition of my colleagues’ joy...This was a win for disabled players.” Ultimately, Grant cites the importance of a release like *The Last of Us Part II*. “Growing up I was the only prominently physically disabled child in school and at home,” he wrote about disability visibility as a child. “For me, Naughty Dog’s award-winning sequel reminded me that a win for some is still a win for all.”⁷⁷ Grant is one of the many journalists pushing the envelope for the accessibility narrative in gaming, making meaning on such a complex topic. Talking to him (and reading through his expansive journalist resumé), I realize his passion for the topic he has devoted his life to. He mentions to me that a difficulty with his job is advocating for disability rights in gaming. “You’re consistently pushing the narrative that accessibility is...important to all.”⁷⁸ Grant and Antonio (and other accessibility journalists) are key to expanding visibility of disability in the gaming community. In these ways, both journalists share access to their community to others disabled gamers.

Grant studied journalism at university. The inaccessibility of his chosen field of public history resulted in him practicing freelance journalism full time. We talk about our experiences struggling through academia with spotty or minimal accommodations. I mention the difficulties of getting proper accommodation accreditation while juggling a full course load. He echoes my sentiments and tells me that his desired field effectively “pushed” him out.⁷⁹ The administration was “resistant to major accommodations and changes” despite his professors advocating for

⁷⁷ Stoner, “Growing Up and Gaming with a Disability.”

⁷⁸ In conversation with Grant Stoner, May 3, 2023.

⁷⁹ In correspondence with Grant Stoner, December 9, 2024.

him.⁸⁰ This is a common story told across campuses in North America. Overwhelmingly, students lack proper accommodations, public spaces failing to provide adequate accessibility.

In *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*, disability scholar Jay Dolmage posits that there is a disconnect in higher learning institutions when it comes to accessibility and disability. Inherent to higher education is an “exceptionalism” that defines “a long history of exclusion” by defining itself against its supposed opposite: disability.⁸¹ Historically, the disabled have not been included as learners. Rather, they have been subjects of examination and study.⁸² Dolmage advocates for realizing that academia is fundamentally built on neoliberal ableism, founded “upon the bodies of disabled people,” and to build towards a more universal design of higher education to deconstruct “structural ableism.”⁸³ Eugenics, like in this dissertation’s first chapter, plays a part in this story. North American universities are founded on colonial science and eugenics – this historical process ought to be understood and not buried.⁸⁴ Dolmage points out that universities should be spending more to support disabled students – as he calculates, “a dean or assistant coach makes as much in a year as the average school spends on all students with disabilities.”⁸⁵ Steps are steep – literally and figuratively – for disabled students to access university.⁸⁶ In our discussion, Grant and I saw eye to eye on many topics, but I felt even closer to him after learning that he struggled to find access to his academic community. Both him and I, and many others, exist in a precarious position in academia.

⁸⁰ In conversation with Grant Stoner, May 3, 2023; in correspondence with Grant Stoner, December 9, 2024.

⁸¹ Jay Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*, Disability and Higher Education (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/102763180>, 3.

⁸² Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 4. Dolmage makes a thought-provoking connection by drawing a relationship between the university and the asylum, another place of bodily control of disabled bodies.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 10, 56.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

Grant left graduate school with a mandate to write video game journalism. He tells me lessons he has learned being in the industry. “With the game industry also,” he says, “I learned that if you can show people tangible results of why this coverage is important and why it matters, you’re more likely to get people to respect and even want to use it for future coverage attempts.” Any story might intersect with accessibility, but it must be relevant to current events, he explains. “But if there’s a new game coming out and [it] somehow relates to maybe the progress of the studio within those five years, I can tie it and demonstrate how accessibility is evolving.”⁸⁷ He has been writing since 2019. In the years he has been writing journalism, his expertise on the issue flows through our conversation. He has passion for the topic and a keen eye on its development, much like Antonio.

Grant also expresses his passion for Pokémon. In an article for Kotaku titled “Pokémon gets me through it,” Grant writes a love letter to the almost thirty-year-old franchise. He recounts encountering Pokémon when he was three years old, receiving a hand-me-down Pokémon card from his older brother. “Staring at the Machop in my hands,” he wrote, “I could not imagine how a single card would be the catalyst for my obsession with and adoration of Pokémon.”⁸⁸ As mentioned previously, Pokémon kept him busy during long hospital stays as a child. “So, the Pokémon series is really near and dear in my heart,” he tells me. “It’s the series I bonded with when I was sick...”⁸⁹ In the article, he writes how he escaped being a patient in a hospital room, instead becoming “a *Pokémon* trainer on a quest to become the very best.”⁹⁰ Pokémon is not simply a happy memory. It is part of his identity. “Even now, as I write my articles, I’m

⁸⁷ In conversation with Grant Stoner, May 3, 2023.

⁸⁸ Machop is a small, grey Pokémon with a striking three row mohawk on its head. Although small, it evolves into the much more imposing fighting Pokémon Machoke, and then into the four armed martial artist Machop. Grant Stoner, “Pokémon Gets Me Through It,” Kotaku, April 6, 2021, <https://kotaku.com/pokemon-gets-me-through-it-1846627178>.

⁸⁹ In conversation with Grant Stoner, May 3, 2023.

⁹⁰ Stoner, “Pokémon Gets Me Through It.”

surrounded by *Pokémon* posters, statues, and plushies that adorn my shelves and walls, acting as a constant reminder, I will always have my Pocket Monsters to keep me comforted,” he wrote.⁹¹ His Twitter profile picture is a cartoon depiction of himself surrounded by his favourite Pokémon. Grad school failed to be a space for Grant. However, the Pokémon fan community is a space where he can express himself freely.

Grant joined an online Pokémon community on a fan site called serebii.net when he was growing up. The website is still around, posting news and content from newly released Pokémon games.⁹² The home page from 2004, around when Grant would have been online, is similar to what it is today. On the website banner, cartoon kids stand with brightly coloured Pokémon (including franchise mascot Pikachu wearing a captain’s hat). In the centre column of the page, news posts update the reader on recent developments in the Pokémon series. Links to an extensive database and forums line the left side of the page.⁹³ A similar layout and colour scheme is present on the Wayback Machine’s archived site for 2004 (albeit with more contemporary Pokémon and characters like Ash Ketchum in the banner). It is welcoming to new Pokémon fans. The site contains episode guides for the anime, lore databases, and general information for the games.⁹⁴ Passionate fans constructed the site, sharing access to a space for Pokémon fans of all types.

The forums are also extensive. Under a banner that reads “The place for everyone,” users can click on a range of topics, not limited to Pokémon. A website traffic counter reveals some interesting statistics. The most users ever on the forum site at once was 233 on April 3rd, 2004.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² “Serebii.Net - Where Legends Come To Life,” accessed June 26, 2023, <https://serebii.net/>.

⁹³ “Serebii.Net - Where Legends Come To Life.”

⁹⁴ “Serebii.Net - Where Legends Come To Life!,” April 9, 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20040409072716/http://serebii.net/index2.shtml>.

By April 9, 2004 (the date of the capture), there were 3,992 threads, 83,764 posts, and 2,227 users in total.⁹⁵ Members of the community supported each other. The site hosted fan art and fan fiction, including stickied threads on advice for aspiring writers.⁹⁶ In this virtual space, Pokémon fans share access with each other, supporting each other in their enjoyment of the franchise. Grant's nostalgia for talking to Pokémon fans comes through in our conversation. From a young age, he encountered a community in his fandom. Eventually, in his career, he carries on the banner for fellow disabled video game fans.

Both Antonio and Grant have told me how they belong to a much wider community. They are gamers who write about their experiences. Through their writing, they are adding to this sense of community through their own words in their professional careers. In this way, they are countering the inaccessible elements that would seek to bar them access in certain spaces (whether that be graduate school or a Pokémon fan forum). They have related to me the state of accessibility in gaming is getting better, but still has a long way to go to be accessible to everyone possible. The historical continuities of ableism, medicalization, and racism persist in the wider video game community, unfortunately.

(In)Accessibility in the Gaming Community

One argument of this chapter is to encourage other games scholars to realize the importance of access, accessibility, and disability within the gaming and the wider community. Gaming is a medium like any other, and many types of bodies interact with it. It is time for scholars (especially historians) to chart that history for us to better understand how bodies interact with

⁹⁵ "Serebii.Net Forums - Powered by VBulletin," April 6, 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20040406080654/http://www.serebiiforums.com/newforums/>.

⁹⁶ "Fan Fiction - Serebii.Net Forums," August 10, 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060810214058/http://www.serebiiforums.com/forumdisplay.php?s=&forumid=32>.

media. Media scholars are discussing accessibility and technology. Media scholar Bill Kirkpatrick examined the disabled in the 1920s who were isolated and how radio attempted to be inclusive towards them. However, Kirkpatrick argues that the rhetoric surrounding radio “healing” the “shut-ins” only reinforced stereotypes.⁹⁷ Media scholar Toby Miller argues that manufacturing and disposing of media (like televisions, computers, etc.) in countries like Mexico disables the work force.⁹⁸ Media scholar Mack Hagood analyzed tinnitus as a “phantom disability.” Hagood examines how media can “diagnose, treat, and advocate for human bodies.”⁹⁹ They advocate for having a broader definition of media in accessibility to include more media in the discussion.¹⁰⁰ Scholars also analyze accessibility culturally. Media scholar Elizabeth Ellcessor argues that “cultural accessibility supports the formation of new forms of disability identity and can be used to further develop civic identities and art within the public sphere.”¹⁰¹ Ellcessor advocates for understanding accessibility not just in technological terms, but in how culture informs access to production and representation.¹⁰² These scholars have made necessary inroads to discussing the relationship between media and accessibility, but there is much more scholarship needed on the topic.

These themes are apparent within the video game community today. As discussed, Antonio and Grant have illustrated how there is disablism inherent in rhetoric surrounding video games and disabled gamers. There is exclusion in gaming towards bodies not deemed “able” to

⁹⁷ Bill Kirkpatrick, “‘A Blessed Boon’: Radio, Disability, Governmentality and the Discourse of the ‘Shut-in’, 1920-1930,” in *Disability Media Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 333-344.

⁹⁸ Toby Miller, “The Price of Popular Media Is Paid By the Effluent Citizen,” in *Disability Media Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 302-304.

⁹⁹ Mack Hagood, “Disability and Biomediation: Tinnitus as Phantom Disability,” in *Disability Media Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 312.

¹⁰⁰ Hagood, “Disability and Biomediation,” 319.

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Ellcessor, “Kickstarting Community: Disability, Access, and Participation in My Gimp Life,” in *Disability Media Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 32.

¹⁰² Ellcessor, “Kickstarting Community,” 34.

pick up a controller and play games. However, they have also told me the ways they have interfaced with different technologies to expand their access to games they have played. As Antonio mentioned, his skills with a controller allowed him to pick up controls of his power wheelchair faster than if he had no video game experience. In that sense, the interface of the game controller expanded access to the way Antonio mobilized once he had the power wheelchair. For Grant, identifying as a Pokémon fan opened doors for him to participate in a fan community over the Internet.

Grant and Antonio’s journalism is a showcase of how gaming is getting moderately better in terms of accessibility. In an interview for Inverse, Grant discussed accessibility in the game industry with David Tisserand, Ubisoft’s Director of Accessibility. Within the past couple of decades, designers have created accessibility technology for disabled players. Beginning with Nintendo’s first hands-free controller for the NES in 1986, to industry adoption of closed-captioning and audio descriptions, and button mapping, assistive technology in gaming began during gaming’s early history.¹⁰³ “Today, it’s not uncommon to hear developers throughout the industry say things like, ‘Accessible design is just good design,’” Grant commented.¹⁰⁴ Developers are seeing accessibility as something integral. Tisserand, Grant mentioned, was one of the game developers at the forefront of this push. Tisserand mentioned in the interview that raising awareness for accessibility (if not just at Ubisoft) “is not necessary anymore.”¹⁰⁵ Tisserand’s comment contrasts with the regular ableism that disabled gamers face, but the sentiment remains that accessibility is a now common design consideration among game

¹⁰³ “History of Adaptive Tech,” *The AbleGamers Charity* (blog), accessed October 25, 2023, <https://ablegamers.org/history-of-accessibility-in-gaming/>.

¹⁰⁴ “5 Years Ago, a Humble Ubisoft Feature Changed Video Games Forever,” Inverse, January 2, 2023, <https://www.inverse.com/gaming/ubisoft-accessibility-david-tisserand-interview>.

¹⁰⁵ “5 Years Ago, a Humble Ubisoft Feature Changed Video Games Forever.”

designers. Tisserand's career in accessibility started in 2008 as a user researcher for PlayStation, eventually landing at Ubisoft in 2014. Under Tisserand, one of Antonio's favourite games mentioned earlier, *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, launched in 2017 with adjustable subtitle sizes, customizable subtitle backgrounds, and indicators of who was speaking on screen. This was unheard of for a AAA game at the time.¹⁰⁶ Ubisoft also makes a concerted effort to talk to disabled fans. They pre-emptively share accessibility details before the release of a game. Their PR team talks with members of the community, additionally.¹⁰⁷ Universal design is fundamental to designing games at Ubisoft, Tisserand mentioned.¹⁰⁸ Ubisoft's efforts show promising results for accessibility in gaming.

Ubisoft is not the only studio implementing these measures. In 2023, Sony announced an accessible controller for the PlayStation 5 called the PS5 Access Controller. In an article, Grant commented, "The Access Controller is what I've been wanting, and quite frankly needing from a studio that actively shut physically disabled players like me out for years."¹⁰⁹ The PS5 Access Controller is highly customizable, designed for different needs. It includes features like an adjustable control stick length, and swappable buttons.¹¹⁰ Game developers are also expanding their purview of who needs features. For example, they are considering blind and Deaf gamers. The newest edition of Forza Motorsports will include a Blind Driving Assist that offers audio cues and steering assists. Additionally, the newly released horror game Dead Space includes a content warning option that removes potentially upsetting content like the mention of suicide in

¹⁰⁶ "5 Years Ago, a Humble Ubisoft Feature Changed Video Games Forever."

¹⁰⁷ "5 Years Ago, a Humble Ubisoft Feature Changed Video Games Forever."

¹⁰⁸ "5 Years Ago, a Humble Ubisoft Feature Changed Video Games Forever."

¹⁰⁹ Grant Stoner, "The Five Accessibility Successes of 2023 So Far," IGN, May 24, 2023, <https://www.ign.com/articles/the-five-accessibility-successes-of-2023-so-far>.

¹¹⁰ "Access Controller | A Customizable, Adaptive Controller Kit for PS5," PlayStation, accessed June 27, 2023, <https://www.playstation.com/en-ca/accessories/access-controller/>.

gaming content.¹¹¹ In one of Antonio's articles titled "Communication is Key," he wrote on the importance of expanding access to games. "The sense of joining together to progress through obstacles, beating challenges and finally the sentiment of achieving something great alongside others is exhilarating," he wrote. "Humans are a social species, it is in our nature."¹¹² Slowly, activist and accessibility proponents are working to a more accessible gaming community.

Although writing pieces on how accessibility is expanding, both Grant and Antonio have explained to me the ableism present in gaming. Progress co-exists with systems of oppression. Antonio explains to me how his beloved *Assassin's Creed* franchise still has inaccessible titles. Before exploring Egypt in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, he played *Assassin's Creed: Unity*. Released in 2014, *Unity* takes place during the French Revolution. Antonio mentions that some members of the community consider *Unity* superior for its more complex movement mechanics. Antonio, however, found it more difficult to control. He tells me he did not get far in the game before shelving it. "I went to the tutorial that you had to climb a place and they tell you how to go down..." he tells me. He only found that his character would fall. "I was like, okay, this is dumb," he says. Something that should have taken ten minutes of gameplay took Antonio a half hour. "I failed all the time because the controls were not right for me," he tells me.¹¹³ *Unity* failed being accessible media for many disabled bodies, leaving them behind.

Antonio elucidates that his mobility issues impact many aspects of controlling a game. Typing in a text chat is laborious. This became a problem while playing the online multiplayer card game *Yu-Gi-Oh*. He explains the nuances of the game. The strategy of the game relies on anticipating your opponent and countering them. Aside from the strategy, Antonio became

¹¹¹ Stoner, "The Five Accessibility Successes of 2023 So Far."

¹¹² Antonio Martinez, "Communication Is Key - Game Accessibility Nexus," May 31, 2020, <https://www.gameaccessibilitynexus.com/blog/2020/05/31/communication-is-key/>.

¹¹³ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

engrossed in talking to people from all over the world. “I made friends with them also, and some of those friends like last ten years or more, you know,” he tells me. However, communicating in game consisted of text chat. He often had to take breaks to rest his hands for up to an hour, watching everyone else communicate. “It felt like someone was like, covering your mouth,” he says. He took a break from the game for six months. When he logged back in, his friends thought that something had gone wrong. “They said you were dead,” Antonio says, quoting his fellow players. “They said that you would have never quit this game,” he recalls his friends saying.¹¹⁴ The inaccessibility of communicating in this game alienated Antonio from his friend group. He lost access to this space. Text communication proved only functional for a certain kind of body. Antonio found it laborious, ultimately shutting him out from the conversation, silencing him.

Antonio found a place in journalism. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, he participated in an event for disabled gamers and journalists to demo gaming remotely. “It was amazing,” he recalls. He had access to assistance during the entire time playing the game, lasting for a few hours. Eventually, he tried the multiplayer aspect of the game. He connected with a player from Portugal. Antonio impresses how refreshing this event was for him. “We were treated exactly the same as any other journalist,” he says. “There was no distinction.” They offered an expansive list of accommodations, including interpreters, and the ability to rest while someone took control of the game for Antonio. “That was extremely empowering,” he recalls about the accommodations. “This is exactly how it should feel for anyone to be part of the community.”¹¹⁵ Antonio makes something clear. I see how game developers and companies are slowly embracing accessibility that stand in contrast to the ableism and disablism in the gaming community.

¹¹⁴ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

¹¹⁵ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

Despite these policies, Antonio tells me of the ableism he has encountered in the community. Journalists like Antonio and Grant, although writing expansively about accessibility, still face ableism within their community. Antonio mentions that disclosing a disability puts “a target on your back” when playing multiplayer games. He explains that ableist gamers see the opportunity to “make fun” and “be toxic...” He tells me an anecdote of when he introduced a friend to the multiplayer zombie game *Left 4 Dead 2*. His friend needed the boost, because he was having a difficult time. Antonio taught him how to play the game, even gifting him a copy. Eventually, though, Antonio realized that he was playing the game with a group of people without Antonio. “He would never invite me,” Antonio says. Even when Antonio tried to join the game’s lobby, they voted to kick him out. Antonio had merely asked to have some extra time to rest his hands. They justified their reasoning that they did not want “any dead weight.” His friend, also in the lobby, remained silent, not advocating for Antonio. Antonio succinctly puts it: “You have to be very careful with who you disclose your disability [to].”¹¹⁶ Antonio and Grant are on the front lines advocating for accessibility in gaming. However, there is a toxic cultural attitude within the larger community that puts up resistance to change.

Physical barriers are also still an obstacle. I ask Grant if he has ever been to a gaming convention. I think of The Electrical Eggs making science fiction conventions more accessible from the previous chapter. He explains to me that he has never gone due to travelling. “I’m probably going to surprise you,” he tells me, “but most of the gaming conventions are either in LA, New York, or Europe, okay? And because travelling is travelling, I’ve never been to them.”¹¹⁷ When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down in-person events, Grant could attend a fair

¹¹⁶ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

¹¹⁷ In conversation with Grant Stoner, May 3, 2023. As of writing this in 2024, Grant has been able to attend January 2024’s *Games Done Quick* charity fundraiser in his hometown.

amount of gaming conventions due to their shifting to online platforms. However, now that restrictions have lessened, events are moving back to in-person. Grant has lost access to gaming conventions. Grant and I can think of one gaming community event that adopted and maintained a hybrid model for events (and it seems like this will be their standard for the near future).¹¹⁸ Otherwise, many gamers have lost access to big community events at the close of the COVID-19 pandemic. San Diego’s behemoth Comic Con even has struggled to implement virtual options, with the importance of exclusivity in the media industry.¹¹⁹

Both Antonio and Grant have received death threats. Antonio reached out to a developer on Twitter to ask if there would be accessibility features to help with mechanics like aiming. “One random Twitter guy,” as Antonio puts it, wished him to be dead. Antonio explains their mindset. According to these ableist trolls on Twitter, accessibility features are “ruining” games for “proper” gamers (who, by implication, are non-disabled). They harass and abuse disabled gamers like Antonio. “He wished my death,” Antonio says, “and that all of disabled people, just because that we are ruining the game for them.”¹²⁰ Whether it be women “ruining” games, or the disabled, hateful trolls like to blame the marginalized, shaming aberrant bodies. Grant has written reviews critical of games for lack of accessibility features, which trolls have responded to with death threats.¹²¹ These experiences highlight that gaming has problems with ableism, just as it does with misogyny, racism and queerphobia. It is no coincidence that ableist trolls use similar rhetoric and tactics as misogynist trolls who have carried the banner of hate post-GamerGate.

¹¹⁸ *Games Done Quick* is a semi-annual charity video game marathon. They have raised money for Doctors Without Borders and Prevent Cancer Foundation (they are actually the largest fundraising event for both of these charities). As of writing, their most recent marathon raised \$2,267,932.67 for Doctors Without Borders. “Games Done Quick,” *Games Done Quick*, accessed June 30, 2023, <https://gamesdonequick.com/>.

¹¹⁹ Erin Hanna, “The limits of Comic-Con’s exclusivity,” *Transformative Works & Cultures* 38 (2022), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/2321>.

¹²⁰ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

¹²¹ In conversation with Grant Stoner, May 3, 2023.

Gaming has a serious problem with the abuse of marginalized groups, in this way being part of a much larger continuity of bigotry present in this dissertation, as I will continue to demonstrate.

The future of gaming and accessibility

I am curious to ask these two journalists what challenges the community faces as we make our way through this decade. They both have a list of areas where the industry and community can improve. According to Antonio, game developers need to develop strategies to make games more accessible. He cites platform locking – where a game is solely on one platform, making it inaccessible to gamers who only use a different platform – as inaccessible. “We also need to make sure that people have the possibility to use any device that they want,” he tells me. The PlayStation Access controller, for example, will foster better accessibility, but only for gamers playing “on PlayStation or PC, and with limitations on the PC platform.”¹²² He tells me, “People want to play games wherever they feel more comfortable...It’s not about brand.” When a company markets a game as “exclusive” to platform, Antonio points out that “You are excluding people.”¹²³ Gamers, regardless of ability, have shifting and evolving needs, and the game industry should support that.

Antonio also stresses the importance of accessible communication in games. People communicate digitally in a variety of forms. He recalls an opportunity he had to review a game with colleagues with different disabilities. “One friend had low mobility, while another was Deaf, and a third one was a legally blind/low vision person.”¹²⁴ They communicated with each other, because the game offered text chat, voice chat, and text to speech. “That was amazing,

¹²² In correspondence with Antonio I. Martinez, December 8, 2024.

¹²³ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

¹²⁴ In correspondence with Antonio I. Martinez, December 8, 2024.

because we work[ed] as a team,” he recalls. “We were having fluid communication, there was not that barrier thanks to having features that used text, voice, and visuals.”¹²⁵ He underlines the importance of discussing these issues. “In that order, we need to start having the conversation of talking about accessibility openly...”¹²⁶ Expanding gaming culture’s capacity to have open conversations is integral to expand accessibility. The work of Antonio and Grant is doing just this.

Antonio mentions the importance of lived experience in this conversation. Antonio advocates for more disabled gamers being play testers, and generally more central to the game design process. “Only these people have that experience,” he says. He uses an analogy: “if you’re going to write an article about discrimination against women, are you going to invite ten guys to tell you about that? It makes no sense.”¹²⁷ Instead, as he puts it, “ten women who [give] you exactly what it means to be discriminated as a woman. That’s how it works.” Disabled play testers also will make disability more visible in society. “We need to open and learn that the term disabled is not negative and it’s not stigmatizing,” Antonio passionately explains. “We have the experience and if we get that knowledge, they’re going to be much more valuable...you know, they have the sensitivity there, because they have been dealing with it all their lives.” Lived experience matters, according to activists like Antonio. “We need to educate people,” he tells me. “Education is fundamental from the first stages of the player, and we need to do more to make sure that we have a safe space. So, they don’t have to face bullying, you know?” Antonio says eloquently.¹²⁸ Yet, the difficulty of accomplishing all of this is not lost on either of us. Still, this

¹²⁵ In correspondence with Antonio I. Martinez, December 8, 2024.

¹²⁶ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023.

¹²⁷ In correspondence with Antonio I. Martinez, December 8, 2024.

¹²⁸ In conversation with Antonio I. Martinez, May 5, 2023; In correspondence with Antonio I. Martinez, December 8, 2024.

very conversation we are having is exactly what needs to happen over and over again from actors across the community.

Grant mentions the many toxic elements in the gaming community as a challenge. “The gaming industry still has a massive problem,” he explains. “With racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia. Yeah, it’s still very unsafe for a lot of marginalized people.” There are no immediate solutions for these systemic problems. “Because currently all of creators, journalists, even consumers, are consistently pushed out of this space,” he says. “And until the gaming industry really accepts and acknowledges that it has a problem with these issues, it can’t really create better spaces and more inclusive spaces for other players...” We discuss GamerGate and the long shadow of its legacy. Curious, I ask if things are better than they were in 2014. “They’re different,” he says. “They’re not better, they’re not worse. There’s new issues coming up, but there’s also some issues that have been resolved.” There is a weighty silence on our Discord call as we contemplate the future of the gaming community.¹²⁹

Toxicity also exists within the disabled community. By no means are disabled gamers united as a monolithic group. Grant tells me how disabled gamers fight each other, gatekeeping who gets to call themselves disabled. Grant explains that some cite others as “not being disabled enough” to warrant calling themselves disabled. I think on how my own disability is invisible and is being adequately managed by medication currently, stopping any visible symptoms from appearing. I also consider the privileges that these things offer. “It’s really hard to advocate,” he says, “for the greater community at the moment.” He shares his hopes for the future: “You can’t say someone isn’t disabled just because they don’t fit your definition. And so I really wish people

¹²⁹ In conversation with Grant Stoner, May 3, 2023.

would expand their understandings and work together to find their solutions.”¹³⁰ I realize that there are very few solutions without our community having open conversations.

Although there are challenges, Grant and Antonio’s work has raised the profile of disability in the gaming community. Disabled gamers exist within this fandom, previously ignored in the larger scholarship about the community. Writing, however, is one endeavour to combat inaccessibility. As both noted in our conversations, consulting disabled gamers for game development will help better utilize evolving assistive technology. Cultural accessibility is also a key part of the strategy to make gaming more accessible. Grant and Antonio continue to push the conversation forward.

Grant and Antonio, when they share stories of playing games as children, commit a revolutionary act. They add to the wider story of disability, fighting against erasure and silencing. Stories about gaming are just one more way to accomplish that. Despite the rampant systemic hatred in the gaming community, they continue to practice fandom and expand accessibility for other disabled fans. Antonio and Grant are fans who share access to their community through writing about their experiences, boldly in defiance of the bigoted sources who wish to silence them. Rather than advocating for better access of physical spaces (like The Eggs from the previous chapter), these writers seek to bring others into the conversation within a much larger cultural space. In other words, they aim to change the pervading culture surrounding video game fandom through their writings.

Not enough of fan studies focuses on the professionalization of fan activity. The discipline began by focusing on “amateurism” practices like fan fiction. However, as global fandoms have developed, and fans have incorporated their fan identity into their everyday life,

¹³⁰ In conversation with Grant Stoner, May 3, 2023.

fans have found ways to make money off their fan content. They make their living off it. Grant and Antonio are excellent examples who can raise the profile of fan studies by showing how fandom intersects with everyday life, with particular mention to “everyday” things like professionalization and careers. Again, I highlight how fan scholars should study how fans construct and embody their own spaces, rather than focusing how fans relate to the text of a creator that they follow.

Additionally, not enough of critical disability studies examines the role of disabled journalists in increasing accessibility for the wider community. Disability historians should use more journalism written from a disabled perspective, even with the difficulties that that source base may have. Stories matter. For myself, it was refreshing to talk with Grant and Antonio and to read their insightful work. Representation matters. Whether it be memoir, performance, or journalism, writing about the disabled experience builds community and collective identity. It expands accessibility culturally and opens the means to write, create, and read. Visibility matters.

Antonio and Grant have a clear sense of what needs to be done. “Somewhere, and we need to be like, okay, we understand that as if it’s a marathon, not a sprint. You don’t need to rush, but be aware that the clock is ticking for a lot of people, right? And the more we wait, the more it’s going to take for them to be able to go back into gaming and more people are going to be missing on opportunities...” Antonio’s passion should be noted. Between journalists and game developers, things are getting better. However, the forces against them are present and not going anywhere. They evolve as I write this. Oppressive systems like transphobia, misogyny, and ableism are intertwined, and this is no different in the gaming community. The gaming community still needs to combat these cultural problems within the community that bar access to hundreds of thousands of marginalized fans.

At the start of this chapter, I charted the history of shaming in the video game community. It began with the establishment of arcades where concerned parents and politicians attempted to shame young gamers through a moral panic and health crisis to limit access to video game spaces. This shaming only created a narrative of oppression. As gaming culture evolved, and gamers grew up, an idea of what a gamer is has emerged. It was overwhelmingly cis, straight, white, non-disabled and male. This segment of the community adopted the tactics of shaming to police gaming spaces, barring anyone not like them from participating. Antonio experienced shaming playing online games. Both Antonio and Grant have received death threats. There are many actors actively pushing them out of gaming spaces (in addition to systemic barriers like travelling across the country). Shaming and policing bodies is everywhere in the gaming community.

However, disabled gamers like Antonio and Grant have resisted these forces by building a common community in gaming spaces. Antonio proudly tells me in an email at the end of 2024 that he has been nominated for two awards from the Game Accessibility Conference, representing the recognition that he has received in the gaming accessibility space from other experts like him.¹³¹ Even outside of this activist space, Antonio and Grant have shared their fandoms with others. Antonio's friends did not shame him as they played computer games back in the 1980s, sharing in that space. Grant found acceptance in online Pokémon communities. The gaming community contains multitudes, being both accessible and inaccessible. Gaming history is still being written. Antonio and Grant are two of its authors.

¹³¹ In correspondence with Antonio I. Martinez, December 8, 2024.

Chapter Three: Coming Together for the Werewolves, Sticking Around For Each Other: Fan Creative Praxis in Online Role-playing Game Communities

Introduction

“I was the kind of person who, whenever I would go to one of my eye doctors when I was a kid, he’d usually have three to four, sometimes five, students or interns in the room, and I wouldn’t care,” Greg Botting tells me from his home in Michigan. He has been completely blind since a young age. “If my eyes can help you in your student endeavours or whatever, go ahead and use them. I don’t care,” he explains. Greg enthusiastically shares his opinions. “Honestly, I find the most annoying people the ones who want to pray for me to get my vision back,” he says. “Those piss me off to no end. Anyway, where were we?” We talk on Zoom to discuss his participation in an online role-playing community, but we stray to family and fandom, and his education as a blind student. Half-way through our hour interview he states: “I’ll talk your ear off.”¹

Greg is one of three online role-players I talked to for this chapter. It is important for me to refer to Greg and my interviewees by their first names, as the process of interviewing for an oral history is founded on my relationship with my interviewee. In this chapter, as a result of what I learned through these interviews, I argue that online role-playing communities are spaces to connect with like-minded individuals through original creation, not necessarily textual poaching. What I mean by this is fans do more than just build off established content, like *Star Trek* or the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Fans create original narratives, characters, and communities. I advocate for fan studies scholars to examine how fans construct their own spaces through relationships, not necessarily through relating to texts. Disabled members of these

¹ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

communities share access to these spaces to foster supportive relationships and communities with other like-minded fans to overcome historical structures of marginalization.

Disability in online communities is an emerging topic in the history of the Internet. Scholars have examined online platforms and virtual communities for disabled users. Critical disability scholars Katie Ellis and Mike Kent argue that social prejudices are reproduced in digital worlds.² Fans are early adopters of online platforms, but disabled fans are often marginalized in these contexts. Elizabeth Ellcessor argues that disability online “emerg[es] at the intersections of embodiment, material and technological structures, cultural norms, and community practices.”³ Disabled fans find it easier to claim a disabled identity within a fan community, but it is harder to ascertain how fans embrace technology and culture to construct a disabled experience within a community.⁴ As Ellcessor demonstrates, these technologies are produced “with dominant cultural ideologies, technological practices, and economic structures.”⁵ Norms shape technology. Despite norms and regulations creating inaccessible technology, disabled Internet users have formed communities since the early Internet, especially with the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1991. Disabled Internet users found community in platforms like Usenet, mailing lists, and multi-platform communities like Gimp Girl Community during the 1990s.⁶ The intersection of fan disability and technology contains connections with embodiment, culture, and norms.

Using the case study of virtual communities, I broaden our definition of disabled fan identity. I explore what fans achieve when outside of an established fandom that poaches texts.

² Katie Ellis and Mike Kent, *Disability and New Media* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 2.

³ Elizabeth Ellcessor, “Accessing Fan Cultures: Disability, Digital Media, and Dreamwidth,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 202.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

What texts do fans write on their own? What communities do they form? Building from my previous chapters, what spaces do they provide access? Online role-playing game communities contain fans who form a community of like-minded people. Disabled role-players connect through a common identity. I quote M. Child in defining identity: “Identity here is used in the sense of a person’s conceptualisation of self; the ways in which subjectively people perceive or experience themselves as individuals.”⁷ For disabled fans, the virtual spaces they create, such as role-playing game communities, are integral to finding individuals with common intersecting identities.

Some neurodivergent folks feel that they communicate better in role-playing games than in everyday life. Greg is starting the process for an Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis.⁸ My other interviewees mentioned that they are on the spectrum.⁹ In one 2024 study, the usual challenges of communication were negated in a Massively Multiplayer Online environment for neurodivergent gamers.¹⁰ The researchers found that “The virtual environment, along with various interaction options, creates a ‘safe’ opportunity for social risk taking and supports increased levels of engagement and social interaction when compared to social interaction by the same participants in real-world environment.”¹¹ They concluded, “Virtual environments can assist individuals with social communication challenges in circumventing social barriers and developing meaningful relationships.”¹² In a previous study, the researchers found that virtual

⁷ Anna Peachey and Mark Childs, eds., *Reinventing Ourselves: Contemporary Concepts of Identity in Virtual Worlds*, Springer Series in Immersive Environments (London: Springer London, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-85729-361-9>, 14.

⁸ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

⁹ In conversation with Dakota King on December 12, 2023; In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

¹⁰ Jennifer Gallup and Christine Duff, “An Exploration of Friendships and Socialization for Adolescents with Autism Engaged in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG),” *Educating and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities* 51 no. 3 (2024): 223-4.

¹¹ Gallup and Duff, “An Exploration of Friendships,” 226.

¹² Gallup and Duff, “An Exploration of Friendships,” 235.

environments remove difficulties for neurodivergent players to communicate. A virtual environment became a community of friends.¹³ Therefore, access to these virtual spaces is critical for neurodivergent and disabled Internet users. In this way, disability activism in these communities involve making space for neurodivergent and disabled users.

Role-playing creates access to spaces. Although not virtual, live action role-playing (LARPing) demonstrates how role-playing is transformative. In 2015, a study of neurodivergent LARPer emphasized how the lived experiences of autism also formed cultural spaces, which conversely facilitate members in communication.¹⁴ In this case, “impairments” were assets in their role-playing community. Role-players formed important relationships. “A common refrain was ‘I came for the game, but stayed for the community,’” quotes the author of the study.¹⁵ Relational bonds maintained their community, not the game. This theme is apparent in my interviews, as I will explore below. Elizabeth Ellcessor argues that cultural accessibility is integral to technological accessibility. In this case, access and fan participation “facilitate one another.”¹⁶ Shared role-playing participation creates access to spaces (both online and offline), facilitating accessibility for disabled role-players.

Discussing with my interviewees, I realized how role-playing games exceed beyond fandom. Greg’s community, a science fiction role-playing game, may borrow from the genre of science fiction, but ultimately becomes something beyond “textual poaching.” Fan scholar Henry Jenkins describes fans as “textual poachers.” Fans, as poachers, take ownership of other people’s

¹³ Jennifer Gallup et al., “The Potential of Virtual Environments to Support Soft-Skill Acquisition for Individuals with Autism,” *The Qualitative Report*, (September 27, 2017): 2511, 2524, <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2017.2973>.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Fein, “Making Meaningful Worlds: Role-Playing Subcultures and the Autism Spectrum,” *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 39, no. 2 (June 1, 2015): 300, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-015-9443-x>.

¹⁵ Fein, “Making Meaningful Worlds,” 312.

¹⁶ Ellcessor, “Accessing Fan Cultures,” 208-9.

established property in a metaphorical sense.¹⁷ For example, through participatory culture, fans take a property like *Star Trek* with no gay overtones, and write Kirk/Spock slash fiction, thus making it their own.¹⁸

Greg and his role-playing community may borrow from genres such as science fiction, but community members all contribute their identity to make something new. Identity in online communities is “collaboratively constructed” in discourse and practice among players and technology.¹⁹ Fan role-players form communities inspired by fandoms, but they stay for each other. Benefits for marginalized people arise from virtual interactions, leading to a difference in “how they perceive and are perceived by others...”²⁰ This community of disabled role-players is largely positive because of how power is formed. Ultimately, “power is relational,” and relationships therefore construct communities.²¹ Important are the relationships made along the way, rather than the texts that role-players poach. This is evidenced by the fans I talked to who participate in online role-playing games. These communities persist on fan invention, crafting networks of intertwined identities telling common stories. In this case, fan identity is generative, not iterative. Fans form communities of collective storytelling out of the pleasure and joy of

¹⁷Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Twentieth Anniversary (New York: Routledge, 2013), 32.

¹⁸Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 32. Jenkins’ work is foundational to the discipline of fan studies, and many scholars still refer to his arguments. Google Scholar lists Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* as being cited by 10,929 scholarly works. “textual poachers – Google Scholar,” https://scholar.google.ca/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=textual+poachers&btnG=, accessed September 20, 2024.

¹⁹Diane Carr, “Constructing Disability in Online Worlds; Conceptualizing Disability in Online Research,” in *Reinventing Ourselves: Contemporary Concepts of Identity in Virtual Worlds*, ed. Anna Peachey and Mark Childs, 177-90 (London: Springer London, 2011), 188.

²⁰Jon Cabiria, “Virtual Worlds and Identity Exploration for Marginalised People,” in *Reinventing Ourselves: Contemporary Concepts of Identity in Virtual Worlds*, ed. Anne Peachey and Mark Childs (London: Springer London, 2011), 301.

²¹Michael J. Prince, “Reconsidering Knowledge and Power: Reflections on Disability Communities and Disability Studies in Canada,” *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016): 3, <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v5i2.271>.

writing about their favourite genres, creating new works that exceed the inspiring source material.

Greg, Blindness, and *Miriani*

“I didn’t have to worry about a lot,” Greg says about his upbringing. He points out his privilege, despite encountering obstacles. Born 16 weeks early in 1994, he has retinopathy of pre-maturity. He has a wide understanding of blindness history in America where he lives in Michigan. He explains to me that, when attending college, the state of Michigan provided assistive technology for blind students, something that is exceptional the history of the United States.²² However, for now, Greg is eager to talk about his early fandoms. “When I was a kid, we did a *Lord of the Rings* Christmas, one year,” he says. “We did a kind of a diorama of different places in Middle Earth in the entryway.” Themed food accompanied the decorations. “Like, I’m not kidding you, we had Baradûr coffee and Mount Doom cocoa.” His parents bonded over *Lord of the Rings*, marrying in 1984. “They read the books to each other in bed,” he says. “I know, it’s adorable.” When Greg was six, his mother read the books to him. “I didn’t really understand half of it, but it didn’t matter to me. And then I read them on my own when I was in 6th grade in Braille.” In 2000 or 2001, Greg underwent a surgery for his eyes. At night, he laid on his stomach after the surgery. “My mom sat beside my hospital bed with a tape player and played the first year Harry Potter books for me all night on cassette.” He also mentions long road trips with his family in the car playing books on tape.²³ Fandom was a shared family activity for Greg.

²² In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

²³ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

Two interconnecting themes emerge from our discussion regarding Greg’s life and identity: he is a fierce advocate for his disability, and he is passionate about writing and creativity. In this section, I argue that advocacy and fandom are fundamentally interconnected for Greg. Greg fosters relationships with his cohort through his writing and activism. In this way, Greg practices disability activism within his online communities and abroad. As I will soon explore, Greg seeks common interests with family, partners, and friends across the English-speaking Internet to create community. Through these pursuits, he is part of a much larger group of fans who create their own stories based on their own experiences. In these creative endeavours, Greg and others like him share access to spaces of like-minded fans and creators through communal writing.

Two fan spaces Greg belongs to are *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. His parents gifted him the novelization of *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* on cassette. “It was a birthday present,” he explains. They celebrated his birthday while in Florida. While wearing headphones, he listened to the novel on the 20-hour drive back home. He explains his opinions on the new Disney trilogy but shifts to his most treasured fandom: “But I think the biggest one for me and what’s had the most impact is *Star Trek*.”²⁴ Much like my interviewees from my first chapter, Greg found *Star Trek* socially. Greg discovered *Star Trek* at blindness summer camp at the age of 10 or 11. An older camper shared the cassette of the novelization of the *First Contact* film with him. They listened to the tapes together. “*Star Trek* just became a really big part of my,” he says, stopping to rephrase. “A really big part of my life,” he finishes. “It came at the exact time when I was really starting to develop deep morality. It’s shaped a lot of how I view the world,

²⁴ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

honestly.”²⁵ Much like my discussions with Marilyn in the first chapter, *Star Trek* fans have a unique perspective in the world. Not only are many of them sci-fi nerds, but they are connected to the idea that *Star Trek* has a humanitarian vision of the future. While Greg is a fan both of *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, it is the latter which fundamentally influences his morality and ethics.

Greg provides his unique perspective on the intersectional nature of identity. He is keenly aware of the politics of blindness and disability. “I have minimal light perception out of my left eye,” he says. His right eye’s “optic nerve is fried.” He emphatically states, “There’s no viable treatment, and I wouldn’t take it if there was, frankly. I’m comfortable with at least that aspect.” Last April, he was diagnosed with epilepsy. He confides that he lives with depression and anxiety. Greg also suspects that he might have autism, but he is not completely sure.²⁶ He shares a common experience: living with intersecting disabilities. For myself, I know what it is like for multiple diagnoses to coincide. Greg addresses this nuance in our conversation. “The biggest issue of late has been coming to the conclusion and dealing with the fact that I have multiple disabilities.” Not only that, he is also bisexual. “How do I make all those identities work? And how are they all expressed? And how do they all come together to make up a whole person? That’s been something I’ve been thinking about a lot,” he says.²⁷ I often think these thoughts, too. Greg’s lived experience reveals how integral an intersectional lens is when studying disability. An intersectional analysis reveals that disabled persons are rarely stereotypes or two-dimensional, having a wide range of identity and experiences.

Greg also explains the realities of using technology while blind. He outlines his assistive technology and the struggle to find accessible multimedia. In addition to using Braille, he utilizes

²⁵ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

²⁶ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

²⁷ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

“a laptop with JAWS, which is a screen reading program.” However, interfacing with Web 2.0 is not always seamless. Just before our call, Gmail’s interface had changed, making it difficult for Greg to find our Zoom link.²⁸ Web 2.0 proponents claim that it is more widely “accessible,” but its multimedia nature has displaced the commonness of accessible HTML, meaning many disabled users are cut out. This is a form of disablement, when new technology does not include access to accessible technology like the screen reader that Greg uses.²⁹ Greg explains that the state of assistive technology on the Web is a microcosm of the much larger history of accessibility for the blind in America.

Greg’s explanation of the blind experience in his country connects with a much wider history of intersectionality and activism. Much of American blindness history has focused on white history, but during slavery slaveholders took careful note of the disabilities of slaves and how they affected market value. Despite white slaveholder claims of “protecting” disabled slaves, they often “failed to uphold their end of the paternalistic bargain.”³⁰ In an 1850 census including slaveholding states, there were almost 1,400 cases of blindness among slaves.³¹ Historically, many Deaf and blind African Americans attended residential schools, highlighting the intersections between disability and the Black lived experience. Although only one quarter of Deaf residential schools also schooled blind students, “nearly half of those were schools for African Americans.” As G. Jasper Conner highlights in their article, there still needs to be more scholarship on blind sign language users, especially in the context of Black Deaf and blind

²⁸ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

²⁹ Ellis and Kent, *Disability and New Media*, 5.

³⁰ Jeff Forret, “‘Deaf & Dumb, Blind, Insane, or Idiotic’: The Census, Slaves, and Disability in the Late Antebellum South,” *Journal of Southern History* 82, no. 3 (August 2016): 548.

³¹ Forret, “Deaf & Dumb, Blind, Insane, or Idiotic,” 512.

schools.³² The history of the American blind is inherently intersectional, especially along racial lines.

In the 1940s, blind activists formed the National Federation of the Blind to fight the paternalism of the New Deal in America. During America's Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt founded American federal policy of wide spending and lending to pull American citizens out of financial direness. The New Deal had a wide mandate, consisting of many programs with targeted aims, such as constructing public works.³³ These policies persist to the present day in various forms.³⁴ As discussed in my first chapter, disabled activists organized independent living communities in the 1970s, eventually fighting for equal access to spaces. However, in the 1940s, blind activists formed The National Federation of the Blind (NFB). They sought equal treatment in America.³⁵ The social movement of the blind formed in the same context as other social action, such as the opposition to Jim Crow laws, emerging due to similar intersectional oppressions.³⁶ The key issue for the NFB consisted of securing individual rights under the Social Security Act of 1939-1950. The policies of the SSA relegated the blind to be under the care of those in the social work profession, rather than having control over their own economic destiny.³⁷ Many blind workers had proven their competency in labour. However,

³² G. Jasper Conner, "Blind and Deaf Together: Cross-Disability Community at Virginia's Residential School for Black Disabled Youth," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (December 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v43i1.9647>.

³³ Price Fishback, "How Successful Was the New Deal? The Microeconomic Impact of New Deal Spending and Lending Policies in the 1930s," *Journal of Economic Literature* 55, no. 4 (December 1, 2017): 1436, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.20161054>.

³⁴ Fishback, "How Successful Was the New Deal?," 1478.

³⁵ Jennifer L. Erkulwater, "Constructive Welfare: The Social Security Act, the Blind, and the Origins of Political Identity among People with Disabilities, 1935-1950," *Studies in American Political Development* 33, no. 1 (April 2019): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0898588X18000172>.

³⁶ F. Kornbluh, "Disability, Antiprofessionalism, and Civil Rights: The National Federation of the Blind and the 'Right to Organize' in the 1950s," *Journal of American History* 97, no. 4 (March 1, 2011): 1026, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaq123>.

³⁷ Erkulwater, "Constructive Welfare," 110.

stereotypes influenced blind organizations to put blind workers in menial work.³⁸ Blind organizations argued that they knew best for the blind, claiming a “monopoly on knowledge about blindness.”³⁹ The NFB gathered the blind under a common agenda fighting for participation in politics.⁴⁰ The NFB attacked the government’s “authoritarian arrogance” in blocking financial grants to the blind and disabled.⁴¹ The NFB sought better access to wider society for the blind, advocating for a world where students like Greg could attend school with suitable accommodations.

The NFB sought to give independence to blind workers and argued that the government and the SSA promoted paternalism: a public assistance program that dependents could never leave. Instead, they sought flat grants and for the working poor to maintain earnings while being on public assistance. The NFB criticized the New Deal’s erasure of lived differences.⁴² The NFB aimed to enshrine blind workers within the economy, rather than relegating them to poverty and unemployment.⁴³ They advocated for rehabilitation where blind workers could work and live independently, rather than being trapped on welfare.⁴⁴ They pushed for collective bargaining in a system that paternalistically positioned blind workers as beneath the non-disabled worker.⁴⁵ Within the larger blind advocacy crowd, the NFB was the only group run by the blind for the blind. They distinguished themselves from these other groups.⁴⁶ The NFB sought policy that

³⁸ Amy Lane, “Breaking through the Invisible Prison,” *Interface: A Journal on Social Movements* 5 (2013): 145.

³⁹ Lane, “Breaking through the Invisible Prison,” 146.

⁴⁰ Erkulwater, “Constructive Welfare,” 111.

⁴¹ Kornbluh, “Disability, Antiprofessionalism, and Civil Rights,” 1027.

⁴² Erkulwater, “Constructive Welfare,” 111.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁴⁵ Kornbluh, “Disability, Antiprofessionalism, and Civil Rights,” 1034.

⁴⁶ Erkulwater, “Constructive Welfare,” 126.

respected the agency and livelihood of the blind, echoing the continuity in disability history of activism led by the disabled.

The NFB finally got the attention of Congress in March 1959. Congress held hearings to determine whether the blind had a “right to organize.”⁴⁷ NFB leaders demonstrated to congress that disabled people should not have special treatment; instead, the disabled wanted the right to work like anyone else.⁴⁸ However, the activists prioritized the rights of white men in skilled labour.⁴⁹ They paid little attention to racialized or female workers. After initial success at the hearings, movement in congress slowed down, partially due to the lack of attention from Senator John F. Kennedy who had previously given support to the NFB.⁵⁰ An unfavourable political climate emphasizing professionalism at the expense of lived experience proved a difficult obstacle for the NFB.⁵¹ Despite their setbacks, the NFB proved prescient. They promoted a shared identity surrounding the blind experience that could compete with other intersections of identity, such as class and race.⁵² The NFB advanced common discourse concerning disability and labour. As the U.S. welfare state evolved, this discussion brought forth wider concerns about disability into broader discussions.⁵³ In the 1970s, wheelchair-using activists found common cause with the established blind activism movement.⁵⁴ Although the NFB did not achieve all goals, they established a long tradition of disability activism. Greg carries forward this banner of activism today.

⁴⁷ Kornbluh, “Disability, Antiprofessionalism, and Civil Rights,” 1038.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 1041.

⁴⁹ Kornbluh, “Disability, Antiprofessionalism, and Civil Rights,” 1041.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1043.

⁵¹ Lane, “Breaking through the Invisible Prison,” 155.

⁵² Erkulwater, “Constructive Welfare,” 134.

⁵³ Kornbluh, “Disability, Antiprofessionalism, and Civil Rights,” 1028.

⁵⁴ Erkulwater, “Constructive Welfare,” 134.

And yet Greg talks about the challenges his cohort faces, today. He cites expensive assistive tech as a common inaccessibility for blind people. “Prices get in the way,” he says. “I was lucky in that I attended a K-12 district...I was basically the only blind person in the district, or at least totally blind person. And they were willing to get me what I needed.” His school was built prior to the ADA, meaning there was no Braille signage. However, the school updated the signage. This also happened at his college. After graduating high school in 2012, he attended Alma College in 2016.⁵⁵ Blind students have access to accommodations, although there are many obstacles in the way of using them. Blind students entering university employ Disability Students Services for a better educational experience. Although there are many challenges that blind students encounter, aspects such as accommodations and community improve conditions of success.⁵⁶ Greg expresses fond memories while mentioning accommodation from his college. However, it should also be noted that blind students experience “dual expectations,” where professors and students hold them to a higher standard, expecting them to prove that they are capable in an academic setting.⁵⁷ Barriers can be cultural and social, not just technological. Greg and his blind cohort experience the expensiveness of technology, but also find access to spaces like schools, much in line with the mandate and struggles of the NFB in decades previously.

Greg found the opportunity to write about fandom at Alma College. Before finishing school, he wrote about Tolkien, and *Star Trek*. He turned to fandom after the end of a relationship. He called it “retail therapy” when purchasing a boxed set of the *Star Trek* series. Fortunately, though, he mentions that his current girlfriend engages with his fandoms. “It was a combination of convincing and she just sort of was like, alright, if I get to show you my shows,

⁵⁵ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

⁵⁶ Ricky Scott, “Undergraduate Educational Experiences: The Academic Success of College Students with Blindness and Visual Impairments” (Dissertation, Raleigh, North Carolina, North Carolina State University, 2009), n.p.

⁵⁷ Scott, "Undergraduate Educational Experiences," 141.

then we're going to watch your shows," he says.⁵⁸ Greg shares his fandom with loved ones, just like others I have interviewed. Marilyn and Marcia from the first chapter, just as examples, have told me their deep emotional connection to other *Star Trek* fans. Greg and his girlfriend share access to their fandom spaces. Fan spaces, after all, are often founded on such relationships along common interests. Fans share access to their relational spaces.

Greg and his girlfriend share their fandoms through fan fiction. "I think because of my English major background, I have a deep appreciation for the written word," he says. His girlfriend shared with him the TV shows *Gilmore Girls*, and *Criminal Minds*. "She loves [*Gilmore Girls*]," he expresses. "She introduced it to me. I love it now." His candor is contagious. He admits, "she's got me into things that I wouldn't have gotten into otherwise." Regardless, he says about the fan fiction, "I called them adorable, because they kind of are, and I don't care that I'm really sounding gay right now, stereotypically anyway." He reveals to me his big plans for his current fan fiction project. "As a present for either Valentine's Day or birthday, I don't know which," he is writing a Harry Potter Panyo crossover for his girlfriend.⁵⁹ This personalized fan fiction echoes Marilyn's *Star Trek* wedding, sharing a special life moment with loved ones through fandom. "Are there a couple of episodes [of *Star Trek*] I refuse to watch? Sure," he says. "Am I gonna watch them with my girlfriend, anyway? Yes. Mh-hmm."⁶⁰ As much as Greg appreciates the written word as a reader, he also is an accomplished writer in his own right, crafting stories for his girlfriend.

Greg participates in communal storytelling on the Internet. I initially recruited Greg from the science fiction Multi-User Dungeon called *Miriani*. In it, players create their own science

⁵⁸ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

⁵⁹ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

⁶⁰ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

fiction stories, interacting with each other in battles, cooperation, and space-faring. “It’s all text-based,” Greg explains. “So you input your commands on a computer keyboard. And the game responds to those commands.” During the Covid-19 pandemic, “it was an escapism thing for me.” There are many blind players in the community. “A lot of them have, I would say, just from my interactions with them, a lot of mental things going on,” he says. Despite stating that the world building is just “okay,” he says that it is quite “a time suck.” However, more than anything, I suspect that Greg keeps coming back for his community. He says, “It’s helping with me with coping.” I ask him if he has any favourite memories from the game. He simply states, “It’s more a sense of camaraderie.” He did not relate any story beats when asked, but explained how the other players make him feel while in a shared space.⁶¹ Although he does not relate any specific instances of portraying his disability, I argue that this communal writing is a form of disability activism. As I have demonstrated so far in this dissertation, the disabled community experiences isolation from society in the form of stigma, societal obstacles, and systemic ableism. Greg and his blind cohort practice disability activism in their fan space through finding camaraderie and community during the isolation of Covid-19. The theme of disability and isolation is also a key them in my next chapter.

A Multi-User Dungeon like *Miriani*, where Greg writes stories with his blind cohort, is a virtual environment where users author an interconnecting grand narrative. Multi-User Dungeons (commonly abbreviated as MUDs) have existed since the 1970s on computer networks. A MUD is not about winning, but rather focuses on interactions between players. Frank Schaap’s study of MUDs defines the program as a “text-based environment, where multiple users meet, converse,

⁶¹ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

and interact in the semi-fictitious surroundings of their virtual world.”⁶² A user connects to a MUD through a command prompt on their personal computer.⁶³ MUDs can employ graphical features, but usually use text.⁶⁴ The program will describe a “table” should the player call upon it in a command. The program will also describe the character doing a particular action like “jumping” should the player call the function. Within the MUD, programmers have instituted a database of information that players can draw upon for their game.⁶⁵ Sherry Turkle argues that “MUDs are a new form of collaboratively written literature. MUD players are MUD authors.”⁶⁶ Schaap elaborates further, writing, “Eventually, role-playing is what it is all about. It is both the substance and the goal of the game.”⁶⁷ Essentially, MUDs are a platform for users to build interconnecting narratives with each other. MUD users are more than just players. They are authors, troubling the dichotomy of fan / author that has so prevailed in fan studies. MUD users tell their own original stories, where their favourite fiction is a source of inspiration, not something to merely copy.

MUDs owe their lineage to *Dungeons and Dragons*. In the 1970s, *Dungeons and Dragons*, the most popular pen and paper role-playing game of all time, became a phenomenon in gaming culture.⁶⁸ In D&D, a game master (known as a Dungeon Master) creates a scenario for other players to role-play. They create enemy encounters, puzzles, maps, and anything conceivably else the players will need to role-play.⁶⁹ When programmers took to computer

⁶² Frank Schaap, *The Words That Took Us There: Ethnography in a Virtual Reality* (Amsterdam: Aksant Academic Publishers, 2002), 2.

⁶³ Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 11.

⁶⁴ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 11.

⁶⁵ Schaap, *The Words That Took Us There*, 22-4.

⁶⁶ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 11.

⁶⁷ Schaap, *The Words That Took Us There*, 81.

⁶⁸ Turkle, *Life on the Screen*, 180.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

networks for virtual world building, they kept “dungeon” to mean a virtual environment.⁷⁰ An early computer network was the PLATO computer network. In the 1960s, the PLATO project developed as a computer network system for educational purposes. It achieved that, in addition to being a vibrant computer culture and community.⁷¹ Meanwhile, programmers developed games on the network.⁷² In either 1974 or 1975, John Daleske created “Dungeon,” a game that could host multiple users. Daleske asserts that this was PLATO’s first MUD. The game floundered for being too complicated.⁷³ In 1977, Jim Schwaizer wrote Oubliette, another MUD that displayed a maze.⁷⁴ Despite the low tech, MUDs on the PLATO network took hold of players’ imaginations due to what game designer Will Wright calls the “possibility space,” the game’s interactive nature allowing for endless possibilities.⁷⁵ Friends Andrew Shapiro, Bruce Maggs, and David Sides developed an ambitious MUD called *Avatar*, publishing it in 1979-80. Administrators were necessary to run the complicated game.⁷⁶ Since then, hundreds of MUDs have hosted an endless amount of role-playing among players all over the world. Greg belongs to, and explains to me, the MUD called *Miriani*.

Miriani MUD users collectively author a unique story, rather than world building in a pre-existing property, like *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*. *Miriani* users role-play as spaceship pilots. However, it is entirely up to the player how they live. They may run errands as a straight-laced contractor, or turn to a life of piracy. A player may think of any way to role-play the life of an

⁷⁰Ibid., 180.

⁷¹ Brian Dear, *The Friendly Orange Glow: The Untold Story of the Rise of Cyberculture*, First Vintage Books Edition (New York: Vintage Books ; a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2018), xiv.

⁷² Dear, *The Friendly Orange Glow*, 297-8.

⁷³ Dear, *The Friendly Orange Glow*, 297.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 298.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 299.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 301-2.

interstellar explorer.⁷⁷ The *Miriani* website hosts a “galactic news archive” of current events in the game. The list reads like a CNN news feed in the distant future. A “Desolean Daily” article from January 2nd, 2369 detailed resistance to occupation on a moon: “Pilots and civilians alike have been thrown into a state of chaos these past months as one of the most critical locations for obtaining armaments was seized by the Ontanka.”⁷⁸ The Ontanka are a hostile faction within the universe of *Miriani*.⁷⁹ The author of the article draws on oral sources. “Was I scared?” says one source. “Of course I was. Who wouldn’t be. What kept me going day by day was the knowledge that somebody was trying to come to my aid....”⁸⁰ *Miriani* battles span space sectors, involving many users fighting. “Multiple battlecruisers, Krenelian allies, and High Guard strike forces were deployed in waves against the tactically superior Ontanka numbers,” says an article from March 3rd, 2365. “After six hours of prolonged engagements, sector twelve was finally cleared of all hostile Ontanka.”⁸¹ Collectively, the *Miriani* roleplayers have constructed a world with a unique history and culture. The war-like Ontanka evoke the belligerent Klingon race of *Star Trek*. However, the dozens of *Miriani* players collectively create something of their own founded on their unique experiences role-playing. “The Invasion of the Twelfth” reads like war journalism. “We were in for a fight, we just wanted to minimize the number of casualties,” one quoted source says.⁸² These players lived these historical episodes, creating something much larger than the genre that they imitate. Reading these fictional press releases, I cannot but help envision a beleaguered defence force on the other side of the galaxy fighting a tactically superior

⁷⁷ “Miriani,” accessed February 5, 2024, <https://www.toastsoft.net/>.

⁷⁸ “Miriani,” accessed March 18, 2024, https://miriani.toastsoft.net/galactic_news/1.

⁷⁹ “Miriani,” accessed March 18, 2024, https://miriani.toastsoft.net/galactic_news/12.

⁸⁰ “Miriani,” accessed March 18, 2024, https://miriani.toastsoft.net/galactic_news/1.

⁸¹ “Miriani,” accessed March 18, 2024, https://miriani.toastsoft.net/galactic_news/11.

⁸² “Miriani,” accessed March 18, 2024, https://miriani.toastsoft.net/galactic_news/11.

foe. Science fiction fans like Greg accomplish building this virtual world out of a love of the genre.

A *Miriani* transcript may be derivative of the larger genre of science fiction, but each user provides something of their own to make up a larger whole. In one transcript, a confederation meets with an insectoid alien. They discuss where to settle the alien's race. Their discussion explores the nuances of alliances and geopolitics. A character named Alexander Voltrace interjects midway through the meeting: "let me be blunt though. From what I've heard from the different representatives [sic] it seems AIE is very hesitant to agree to this at all," he says. The text describes "A large bioluminescent insectoid creature's head pops out from beneath its wing." After some back and forth, the alien speaks, "We would accept a joint space structure. However, we do ask that we be allowed to construct the facility. We have experience in biomechanical technologies and could construct it much more rapidly than you, who lacks understanding of our biological processes." The character Caiden Shadowblade admits, "we will not get anywhere without taking risks..." Politics between factions are complicated, however. J. T. Harkness points out that "the commonwealth are very ill represented [sic], far as I can tell only two other alliance members are present in our lounge watching this feed..." Caiden Shadowblade turns to Harkness, saying, "if they dont care [sic] enough to show, they dont [sic] want a say..."⁸³

As much as *Miriani* players reference science fiction tropes, this scene (in addition to the press releases) reveal a new science fiction story. Rather than single authorship telling a cohesive story, MUDs like *Miriani* employ decentralized authorship. According to Henry Jenkins, fans textual poaching a story create something of their own when writing fan fiction or cosplaying. However, this new articulation in the genre of science fiction with dozens of authors exceeds a

⁸³ "Miriani - Praelor Krenelia Talks," accessed February 5, 2024, https://www.toastsoft.net/krenelia_talks.html.

simple definition of textual poaching. *Miriani* players like Greg may have been inspired by properties like *Star Trek*, but these fans create their own texts that go out of bounds of the typical author / fan dichotomy. Fans generate original texts in communities like *Miriani*. These fans of properties like *Star Trek* or *Firefly* do not simply participate in this culture. They are the culture. The collective authorship of MUD users disrupts the traditional dichotomy of author / fan.

Greg participates in two different, yet long, intersecting traditions: blind activism and fan creativity. Since contesting Roosevelt's New Deal, blind activists have advocated and fought for blind agency and autonomy in terms of economics and society. Greg has benefitted from these efforts, attending higher education with necessary assistive technology. Becoming an English major in this accessible context, he has devoted his life to writing, expansively creating fan fiction and participating in the decentralized authorship of role-playing games like *Miriani*. This MUD belongs to a much longer history of emerging technologies in the form of networks like PLATO. *Miriani*, I argue, is a space like any other in society. Greg finds common cause with other creative fans who seek to build something together in the programming of a MUD like *Miriani*. He finds easy access in a space constructed by other science fiction fans like him (many who share his disabled experience) to create new science fiction stories. Additionally, although Greg does not relate specific instances of portraying his disability in *Miriani*, he does reveal that he and his blind cohort find that creative writing combats isolation, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their creative writing is a form of escapism. As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, isolation is a key theme for disabled fans, particularly when they seek out spaces to belong in. Fighting isolation through fan community, I argue in this chapter and the next, is an important form of disability activism, and therefore an aspect of the activist tradition present in this dissertation.

Werewolves Who Fight Stigma

Worlds different from intergalactic warfare is the *'Souls Assemblage*, a play-by-post role-playing game set in a post-apocalyptic world where werewolves reign. A modern play-by-post role-playing game has players role-play on Internet forums and message boards. Players take turns describing their character's actions to other players via text posts, typically with a Game Master mediating the discussion threads.⁸⁴ The *'Souls* players I talked to divulge their access to spaces in their personal and virtual lives, much like Greg. Although *'Souls* and *Miriani* are on different platforms, they share player bases of passionate fans eager to tell their own stories. Through writing original stories, they create spaces for each other. Despite my interviewees all describing inaccessible physical spaces in their lives, they create virtual spaces through their role-play writing that are accessible to fans just like them. In this section, I explore the *'Souls* role-playing community and how disabled members seek like-mindedness through collective storytelling.

I first talked to a member of this community right at the end of the 2023 school year. After some troubleshooting, I connect with Dakota King, a player of *'Souls*, over Zoom. They explain their current screen name, "Eage." "I've had many pseudonyms throughout the years, you know, like as a kid I used to have 'heartbreaker,' because I was edgy," they say. "But 'Eage' is the most recent one I've gone through a lot in the past few years, like especially in fandom spaces and in the role-playing community. So, it's...it has...it holds a lot of significance." "Eage" is short for "Eagerfriend." A screen name is rarely an afterthought. "To carve out your own identity and your own place in the 'world', because no one...can force you to go by your birth name," they say. "You can choose whatever name you want." Identity is an important theme

⁸⁴ "Play-by-Post Games," TV Tropes, accessed April 23, 2024, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PlayByPostGames>.

in our conversation.⁸⁵ Intersecting identity is a key continuity throughout this dissertation, from Marilyn expressing a desire for an Uhura prosthetic leg to Antonio and Grant identifying as gamers. Dakota reveals how a screenname is integral for expressing one's complex identity online.

Disability has been a constant presence in Dakota's life. "In hindsight, I've been disabled my entire life," they tell me. "For starters, I have a myriad of mental disorders. I have autism, which isn't really a mental disorder, but you know...the stigma on autism," they say. They also mention that they are diagnosed with bipolar disorder. "And depression, and anxiety, and paranoia," they say. "And there's a lot. And then I have my chronic pain." Dakota's other diagnosis is fibromyalgia. "It is truly hell...There's nothing wrong with people who are disabled, but in my own experience it is the worst." Dakota wanted to be an electrician, but their chronic pain stopped them from attending trade school. Their hands are injured, making it difficult to write in their fandoms. "That's the thing about fibro. It's everywhere, unfortunately," they say. Dakota used to write extensively, but that has become difficult.⁸⁶ Much like Greg, Dakota has intersecting diagnoses, revealing how identities are intersectional and rarely two-dimensional.

Dakota's fibromyalgia creates barriers in their life. Fibromyalgia is a disease that causes chronic pain. It encapsulates chronic symptoms, including pain throughout the body, tiredness and depression.⁸⁷ Chronic pain has a long history of documentation, since ancient times, but Sir William Gowers, a British neurologist, defined "fibrositis," a precursor to the modern diagnosis, in 1904.⁸⁸ In the nineteenth century, professionals defined this condition as a form of

⁸⁵ In conversation with Dakota King on December 12, 2023.

⁸⁶ In conversation with Dakota King on December 12, 2023.

⁸⁷ Kevin P. White and Manfred Harth, "Classification, Epidemiology, and Natural History of Fibromyalgia," *Current Pain and Headache Reports* 5, no. 4 (August 2001): 320, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11916-001-0021-2>.

⁸⁸ F. Fatma Inanici and Muhammad B. Yunus, "History of Fibromyalgia: Past to Present," *Current Pain and Headache Reports* 8, no. 5 (October 2004): 370, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11916-996-0010-6>.

“hysteria.”⁸⁹ Fibrositis diagnoses increased after World War II veterans suffered from chronic pain, heightening the disability’s profile.⁹⁰ Fibromyalgia’s history has been one of debate. Professionals have argued whether it is a form of rheumatism, a neurological condition, or connected to mental health.⁹¹ According to Karen Engle, someone living with fibromyalgia, “Chronic pain is heavy, but not exclusively so; there are moments of lightness and humour within the grind.”⁹² Engle writes, “I think of this quality of ongoingness and metamorphosis as the chronic tense.”⁹³ Fibromyalgia is a continuity throughout history, yet still only just being understood.

Dakota accepts that “fybro,” their nickname for it, is part of their life. “I know that there’s nothing going to change,” they say. “I just have to learn to adapt and work through it.” Dakota finds it hard to keep a job. Flare ups stop them from working, which results in changing jobs or experiencing unemployment. “I’m in the beginning stages of learning to deal with it,” they say. “So, it’s really hard for me right now, and I can’t really rely...on others. It’s like I don’t know how to ask them for help of like, how do you deal with this?” They confide in me that crying helps. “I’m learning to deal with it, and that’s all I can really do, but...there is a lot of grief with the process,” they say. “I fucking hate this. It sucks. Yep, yeah.” I share my struggles with my painful symptoms. We agree that our experiences are valid.⁹⁴ Dakota’s experiences with fibromyalgia reveal the complicated nature of living with chronic illness.

⁸⁹ Roie Tzadok, “Fibromyalgia: Classification, Criteria, and Diagnosis—What Is Fibromyalgia?,” in *Fibromyalgia Syndrome*, ed. Jacob N. Ablin and Yehuda Shoenfeld (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 84, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78638-0_8.

⁹⁰ Inanici and Yunus, “History of Fibromyalgia,” 374.

⁹¹ Tzadok, “Fibromyalgia,” 83.

⁹² Karen Engle, *Chronic Conditions* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023), 12.

⁹³ Engle, *Chronic Conditions*, 14.

⁹⁴ In conversation with Dakota King on December 12, 2023.

Dakota is also neurodivergent, which has a long history of associated stigma from practitioners. “I got the whole laundry list,” Dakota explains to me. “I never realized I had autism until I left school, because...school provided a really nice schedule for me...” They also have ADHD.⁹⁵ Neurodivergence is a relatively new concept for something that conceivably has existed for all of humanity’s history. Medical records begin to document cases that we might identify as on the autism spectrum in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁹⁶ Victorian physicians, influenced by Social Darwinism, inflicted stigma on aberrant body/minds, leading to the establishment of asylums and Freudian psychology to “prevent criminal behaviour...”⁹⁷ In 1920, Dr. Lightner Witmer published the first case study on a “psychotic child,” detailing characteristics later ascribed under the label of autism spectrum disorder.⁹⁸ In this period, these individuals who would be identified as on the spectrum today were snatched by the “Great Confinement,” Michel Foucault’s conception of the process of labelling and exiling disabled bodies.⁹⁹ Meanwhile in the United States, doctors, politicians, and those in power practiced eugenics on physically and intellectually disabled children, as has been previously explored in my first chapter. Dr. Hans Asperger, the namesake of Asperger Syndrome, firmly advocated for eugenics that would lead to a “master race.”¹⁰⁰ The early history of autism spectrum disorder contextualizes a present reality of stigma for the neurodivergent.

Psychologists codified our understanding of the autism spectrum. Professionals studied autism based on case studies, emphasizing that impairments of autism were self-imposed and not

⁹⁵ In conversation with Dakota King on December 12, 2023.

⁹⁶ Adam Feinstein, *A History of Autism: Conversations with the Pioneers* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 3-4.

⁹⁷ Mitzi Waltz, *Autism: A Social and Medical History* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-31015-7>, 35-6.

⁹⁸ Feinstein, *A History of Autism*, 6-7.

⁹⁹ Waltz, *Autism*, 43.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

biological.¹⁰¹ They created a dichotomy where either someone with autism is liberated through rehabilitation or is institutionalized. Either way, the narrative reinforces a medical model of disability, underscoring that autism needs to be cured or hidden away from society.¹⁰²

Professionals are still unclear about the cause of the disorder.¹⁰³ Most work on autism spectrum disorder lacks authorship from those with the lived experience. Dakota's testimony reveals volumes about the complexities of neurodivergence. Even today, neurodivergent folks like Dakota encounter stigma predicated on a historical continuity of medical misunderstanding.

Autistic activists are changing the narrative surrounding their diagnosis.¹⁰⁴ These activists are akin to The Electrical Eggs and the video game journalists previously mentioned, part of a larger disability rights movement.¹⁰⁵ These activists face current eugenics present in biomedical research that seeks to displace, silence, or erase them.¹⁰⁶ For Dakota, an added obstacle being out of the common routine of school is the scheduling of everyday adult life. Society lacks accommodations for neurodivergent folks who need space and time to figure out their days. "I don't know how to replicate it in my day-to-day life," they say. "So I find myself really missing high school and college, even though I know that if I were to go back now, I would be like this sucks. This is hell. Because, uh, my disabilities are worse now."¹⁰⁷ Dakota's diagnoses compound each other as society's stigmas intersect, barring Dakota from accessing spaces, such as school and work.

¹⁰¹Waltz, *Autism*, 59.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, vi.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁰⁷ In conversation with Dakota King on December 12, 2023.

Dakota is far more excited to talk about fandom. Their joy of fandom directly contrasts the pain of their fibro experiences, revealing the importance of fandom as pleasure for disabled fans. They have found self-improvement and satisfaction through fan writing. “I get to talk about my cringe, okay?” they ask. “Yes, that is what this dissertation is,” I reply. “Please talk about your cringe.” “Cringe” is a term often used in the context of fandom to describe an embarrassing fan act in a disparaging tone. It reflects the physical act of cringing away from something upsetting or disgusting.¹⁰⁸ However, Dakota here embraces the enjoyable “camp” that is part of something often described as “cringe.” Dakota is animated when listing their fandoms. They mention *Mystery Skulls Animated* (MSA; a flash animation series), *Hetalia* (an anime about the Axis powers during World War II), and *Danganronpa* (a video game series reminiscent of *Battle Royale*). “It was one of my main hyper fixations,” they say about the last one. “I mostly was just a consumer of fandom...but that all changed with MSA. With MSA, I hyper-fixated so hard that I made like 90 works for Archive of Our Own for that specific fandom all within like a year or so, maybe two years...” They also participated in discord servers. “It’s difficult to talk about,” they explain, “because it’s the first fandom I officially was like a creator in sure, but it’s also the first one I experienced drama in and like got trauma from.” They characterize the trauma coming from a “teen thing...where, like, they have explosive relationships.” One fellow fan became an important connection for Dakota. “One [friend] in particular taught me how to be a better person, essentially, like there was never, never anything like wrong with me. I wasn’t a bad person...I hadn’t emotionally matured of course,” they explain. “And being around this person helped me emotionally mature and bring you to a point where I’m more active in my mental health...So I started...journaling to both fall in love with writing again and also to take control of

¹⁰⁸ Marie Ungar, “Notes on Cringe,” ASAP Journal, Cluster: Experimental Criticism, January 30, 2023, <https://asapjournal.com/node/experimental-criticism-3-notes-on-cringe-marie-ungar/>.

my own emotional issues...”¹⁰⁹ Much like Grant and Antonio from the previous chapter, writing is a powerful force for Dakota. Writing connects Dakota to their community, revealing how fans share access to their relational spaces with creativity.

Speaking of fandom writing, Dakota explains ‘*Souls*, the play-by-post forum RPG that I contacted. ‘*Souls* is an example of fans creating a non-fandom, revealing what fans get up to outside of “traditional” fan communities. When I asked my final interviewee, Juni Cantu, for this chapter, they disagreed that ‘*Souls* is a “fandom.” “I just want to be perfectly clear,” Juni explains from their home in California. They distinguish ‘*Souls* as not a fandom role-playing game, but a role-playing game on its own.¹¹⁰ Juni explains that ‘*Souls* is an original universe, unlike writing fan fiction for a pre-established story, like the *Twilight* saga. I effectively followed fans into a non-fandom. Still, as I dug through the ‘*Souls* forums, I found interesting connections to Greg’s MUD, *Miriani*. In both cases, fans of pre-existing fandoms find like-minded people and create new communities and new stories. I discovered what fans accomplish outside of fandoms.

In ‘*Souls*, players generally role-play as various canine species (e.g. dogs, wolves, coyotes, etc.) capable of transforming into “Luperci.”¹¹¹ Luperci are one of three forms that characters can transfigure into. In this alternate history, a pandemic wiped out humanity. However, infecting the genus *Canis*, the virus caused a mutation allowing for canines a bipedal form. This is ‘*Souls* version of “werewolves.” Since humanity’s collapse, canine species have constructed their own societies through their Luperci form.¹¹² The game’s lore is expansive. The

¹⁰⁹ In conversation with Dakota King on December 12, 2023.

¹¹⁰ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

¹¹¹ “Basics - ‘Souls Comprehensive Roleplay Guide,” accessed January 12, 2014, <https://rpgguide.soulsrpg.com/roleplaying/basics/>.

¹¹² “Luperci Basics - ‘Souls Comprehensive Roleplay Guide,” accessed January 12, 2014, <https://rpgguide.soulsrpg.com/luperci/basics/>.

creators considered many hypotheticals. Pack dynamics, canine species biology, and even how to roleplay puppies are part of the ‘Souls guide.’¹¹³ The game is played by turn in forum threads. In this way, it lacks the programming capabilities of a MUD. Scenes take place between players, but sometimes a solo scene gives insight into a character’s internal arc. The larger ‘Souls narrative exists in “liquid time.” It is always the present date. However, the concept allows players to roleplay throughout multiple threads at once.¹¹⁴ The creators and players have crafted a well-defined virtual space on their forums.

Briefly, I will explore two threads role-playing a funeral ceremony, as they showcase depictions of grief and trauma, two common themes in disability. The scenes depict a pyre ceremony for remembering lost loved ones. In one, a character named Petrichor stands in front of a burning pyre beside his companion, Battle. Battle confides in him the trauma associated with bandits killing her family. Petrichor insists that she should not feel guilty. He “offer[s] physical support,” holding her up. The player describes Battle’s trauma as something experienced in the body. “The pain was clear in Battle’s voice even though this wound was years old,” they wrote. “Things like this never really went away; they just sort of scarred over, and sometimes the pain resurfaced.”¹¹⁵ Evocative, this scene also has a keen understanding of the connection between disability (a wound) and trauma (grief and survivor’s guilt). There is also insight into how support from loved ones is key to healing. Although I did not interview this post’s author to confirm their experiences, the post’s candor towards living with trauma indicates that they might

¹¹³ “06. Active Pack Summary,” accessed January 3, 2024, [https://soulsrpg.com/forum/showthread.php?tid=36](https://soulsrpg.com/forum/showthread.php?tid=36;).; “Species - ‘Souls Comprehensive Roleplay Guide,” accessed December 18, 2013, <https://rpguide.soulsrpg.com/character/species/>.; “Puppies - ‘Souls Comprehensive Roleplay Guide,” accessed January 12, 2014, <https://rpguide.soulsrpg.com/behavior/puppies/>.

¹¹⁴ “Basics - ‘Souls Comprehensive Roleplay Guide.”

¹¹⁵ “We Will Remember Always, like the Sky Remembers the Stars,” accessed February 5, 2024, <https://soulsrpg.com/forum/showthread.php?tid=58170>.

have first-hand experience. They are expressing (indeed, sharing) experiences of trauma to their wider community through storytelling.

'Souls players role-play supporting each other in character. In another vignette, Aster reflects on how they have yet to lose someone. They join mourners by the pyres. “I don’t know your loved one, but I offer a flower from the warm months of summer—it’s still got the sunshine baked in,” they say to someone. “Please take one if you think it would be appreciated.” The strong sense of community both Dakota and Juni tell me is reflected in the role-playing in the game. Supporting each other is a key component to role-playing about werewolves in a post-apocalyptic world. These threads reveal a deeply connected community eager to create new stories exploring themes common in disability. Juni explains, “We are creating our own stories and our own characters, and...it’s all in our world that we create.” They say, “I think the especially interesting thing about *'Souls* is that it’s got a very common theme...throughout fiction in general.”¹¹⁶ As Juni explains to me below, they have even role-played a character with epilepsy, describing the experience of having an episode. Although not always directly discussing disability, the lived experiences of these role-players filter into their role-playing, reflecting their experiences with disability. Much like Greg, Dakota and Juni are creative writers who combat isolation through telling stories about the human experience. In the case of these scenes by other authors, trauma and grief are the themes. Overall, Dakota and Juni (through their testimonies) and these scenes reveal that the players of *'Souls* seek to build community through their experiences, thus combatting isolation, just like Greg and his *Miriani* players. However, the disabled lived experience is present in these narratives, as I will demonstrate below.

¹¹⁶ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

Juni is no different than their fellow *'Souls* players (like Dakota), or Greg and his science fiction role-playing. Juni has participated in several role-playing communities since their youth. "I've always been a very avid reader and writer," they tell me. "And I actually kind of stumbled into role-playing by accident." At ten years-old, they participated in the *Warrior Cats* fandom. However, it took time to find the right community. "There are a lot of forums that can be quite toxic, so it's hard to find, but once you do find a community," they say. "That's why I really enjoy *'Souls*. It's got a lot of really bright and passionate people that are also super accepting." They conclude with something I find true, as well: "Once you find people that are great, you just gotta, you gotta stick with them." They talk about good and bad vibes in online communities. "Like, I want to be excited every time I open up Discord, like 'ohh,' I'm gonna go check in on my friends." Juni and Dakota have introduced me to a welcoming community of like-minded individuals who enjoy role-playing as canids. Juni's passion is infectious.¹¹⁷ I understand why they return to their virtual werewolf space. They choose to share this fan space through relationships.

Juni, like other fans, eagerly shares their passions with anyone who will listen. "*Percy Jackson*, and *Harry Potter*, and what else? Ohh, *Game of Thrones*," they list. We commiserate over the series finale of the latter. "I was obsessed with *Ender's Game* throughout all of my childhood," they explain. They are currently re-reading the series. They are also "really obsessed" with Kim Stanley Robinson's science fiction stories.¹¹⁸ Juni's passion for stories echoes what both Greg and Dakota have told me for this chapter.

¹¹⁷ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

¹¹⁸ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

Like my other interviewees, Juni has intersecting diagnoses. “I have epilepsy and I am also autistic,” they tell me. “I don’t really consider my autism, it’s not like to an extreme where I would consider myself disabled. But I am obviously not neurotypical.” Based on experiences, they explain that many role-players are neurodivergent. “It can be quite easy to find like-minded people...I think. It really depends on the community that you go to.”¹¹⁹ Like-mindedness is a theme in my interviews of role-players. However, Juni’s experiences with their epilepsy exists within a much larger historical context of medicine and embodiment.

Epilepsy is a complex disease described since ancient times. Science is slowly understanding epilepsy based on pathology and lived experience.¹²⁰ However, defining causes can be elusive, as a person’s epilepsy might have several causes.¹²¹ Historically, people understood epilepsy as possession by an evil spirit.¹²² As far back as Ancient Mesopotamia, writers have described epilepsy.¹²³ Hippocrates was the first doctor on record to ascribe epilepsy’s cause to the brain.¹²⁴ During the twentieth century, scientists codified our modern understanding of epilepsy. The forces influencing the formation of these ideas have been, among others, the rise of science.¹²⁵

However, stigma has always followed people with epilepsy. In modernity, society stigmatized epilepsy patients, often connecting it with immorality.¹²⁶ Eugenacist policies

¹¹⁹ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

¹²⁰ Christian M Kaculini, Amelia J Tate-Looney, and Ali Seifi, “The History of Epilepsy: From Ancient Mystery to Modern Misconception,” *Cureus* 13 no. 3, (March 17, 2021), 1 <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.13953>.

¹²¹ Simon D. Shorvon, *The Idea of Epilepsy: A Medical and Social History of Epilepsy in the Modern Era (1860-2020)* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 606.

¹²² Waltz, *Autism*, 14.

¹²³ Kaculini, Tate-Looney, and Seifi, “The History of Epilepsy,” 1.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹²⁵ Shorvon, *The Idea of Epilepsy*, 587.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 622.

advocated legislation for “methods for containment, control and segregation.”¹²⁷ Present society places unfair restrictions and stigmas on those with epilepsy, denying them insurance or jobs. Employers will overlook or fire workers with epilepsy out of stigma.¹²⁸ As Kaculini, Tate-Looney, and Seifi argue, “Societal knowledge and perception of epilepsy have been directly correlated to the successful treatment of epilepsy.”¹²⁹ Stigma towards epilepsy is not just an attitude of the past, and it perpetuates a historical continuity of ableism.

Juni is acutely aware of the ableism they encounter. We discuss the importance of universal design in fighting stigma. “Universal design is such a wonderful and cool concept to me,” they tell me. Juni expresses a common sentiment among the disability rights movement. “I wish...designers, everyone, [were] forced to live in other people’s shoes more often. It isn’t going to kill anyone,” they say. They tell me about frustrations about attending a concert. “So, I recently went to a concert, a Little Dragon concert in San Diego, at the House of Blues,” they explain. “Spent maybe a third of the time covering my face like this,” they say. They raise their hands to hide their face. “Because the strobe lights during those times were so...intense isn’t right word....There’s like this, like perfect intersection where it gets to be too much.” They elaborate that the strobe lights did not trigger their epilepsy, as light is not triggering for their seizures. “It’s my autism that makes strobe lights just really bad.”¹³⁰ Although this concert is not quite the same as the ‘Souls Assemblage as a fan space, it does contain a neurodivergent fan of the band experiencing a space that is not accessible to them due to harsh lighting conditions. Universal design practices that are neurodivergent friendly can provide access to public fan spaces, like Juni’s concert. In this way, a space is constructed through the bodies experiencing it.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 590.

¹²⁸ Kaculini, Tate-Looney, and Seifi, “The History of Epilepsy,” 4.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹³⁰ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

Juni's major concern currently is finding work. However, they are finding it difficult due to ableist stigma surround epilepsy. They are a recent grad from UC Santa Cruz with a degree in ecology and evolutionary biology. Despite much support from those in the academy, they have only been receiving rejection letters. "I'm applying for jobs, especially government jobs, that I've actually recently stopped applying for..." Employers rejected their applications because they do not have a driver's license. They explain that their application was never "getting seen by a human being" due to this technicality.¹³¹

This hurdle is despite their exemplar career at school and related work. "Do you know what a seed lab is?" they ask me. I confess my ignorance. They explain that a seed lab is "a genetic bank of material" for native seed storage. The goal is to protect seeds from extinction. At UC Santa Cruz' arboretum, Juni found a job out of freshman year at the new seed lab. They later explain how they want "to combat climate change," explaining their career focus on ecology and botany. Their job at the seed lab consisted of teaching student workers "to process seeds," often taking on "grunt work" while salaried employees were out of office. As important as this job was for them, they faced discrimination. Their boss let them go after asking about their spring break plans. "Basically, [he like] demoted me," they explain, due to epileptic episodes. Juni had plans to spend the break with their family rather than working. However, even though they were giving standard notification for vacation time, their boss cited previous accountability issues. "He'd never given me any warnings," they say. "Like no behaviour problems ever." When they asked for clarification, their boss replied, "you're a really unreliable employee." Juni only had missed two days in the past year. In both cases, they had had seizures the previous day. Their boss disliked not being given notice before their seizures, effectively. After inquiries, the result was

¹³¹ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

Juni transferring to a different department as a sort of “teacher.”¹³² Still, Juni’s difficulties in maintaining employment is part of a larger story for people with epilepsy.

Our discussion moves to the intersections of disability, fandom, and academia. Juni and I consider how we are both drawn to academia. We share an interest in working in that field. “I’ve been volunteering in labs, I’ve been doing internships and fellowships,” they tell me. “Doing research, just really with the goal of going into academia.” They briefly pause. “But it’s hard, and this is all in spite of being fully aware of how fucked up it is.” I think of my previous interviewee Grant’s barriers in accessing graduate school now finding success as a freelance journalist. “I’m getting a sense that it might be an overall theme of my dissertation, somehow,” I say in response to this conjunction of disability, fandom, and academia. “I guess a lot of fans just go into academia,” I reason.¹³³ As explored in the previous chapter, the academy has a long history of studying the disabled at their expense. Yet, myself, and many others, fight for access in academic spaces.

Juni instead seeks recognition through role-playing their disability to their friends. Aside from academia, Juni is a prolific role-playing writer. They put it simply: “I like working with...my friends to tell those stories.” They share their disability with their online friends. They role-played a character with epilepsy. “I’ve written out her seizures, uhm, most, many many times,” they tell me. They explain how the depiction is accurate. “And everyone’s like, just terri[fied],” they say. “But to me, I’ve had like well over a hundred seizures....Literally countless.” They further explain their experiences with seizures. Sometimes, they can be “awake during the seizure, and how I describe it is you have two bodies at any given point in time.” This

¹³² In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

¹³³ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

has sparked a lot of deep thinking about things like consciousness. “You can’t understand it unless you’ve experience it, and it’s triggered a lot of conversations with myself and others.” There is something poignant about Juni telling their experiences to friends in role-playing communities. Although their reaction might be “terri[fied],” Juni felt comfortable enough to share a profound aspect of their life.¹³⁴ They seek an audience for their experiences. They want to find a community who accepts them. I advocate that the participation in this space is a form of disability activism, as role-players like Juni and Dakota have the opportunity to share their experiences and find acceptance from like-minded fans in contrast with the ableist barriers they encounter on a daily basis.

Both Dakota and Juni testify to their struggles with ableism in physical spaces, such as school and work. Despite having different lived experiences with their intersecting disabilities and experiences, they both seek out like-minded people on the Internet. For both, writing and role-playing with other fans creates access to new spaces where they are accepted. They were initially interested in role-playing werewolves, but they ultimately keep sharing in that community because it is somewhere that they can access safely. Greg inhabits virtual space in the same way in his science fiction role-playing game. All three expand access for fellow fans through writing, building imagined worlds that others can also contribute to. In this way, fan relationships weave together online communities like *Souls* and *Miriani*. My interviewees, through their role-playing, build communities to fight the marginalization of the real world.

¹³⁴ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

Fan Communities Founded on Relationships

Disabled Internet users have formed online communities since the beginning of the World Wide Web, as previously discussed in this chapter. There have been changes in assistive technology that allow users to better access the Internet, like the ones Greg mentioned earlier. However, much like his trouble in accessing our Zoom call, physical barriers are replicated virtually, and vice versa. A lack of accessibility associated with Web 2.0 means that web developers do not always have disabled users in mind. Often, they simply do not ask them for their input, instead relying on their own expertise.¹³⁵ However, despite these restrictions to virtual space, my interviewees found online communities using tech that works for them. Overall for my interviewees, despite barriers in their lives, they created access through building relationships founded on creativity.

Despite talking to three fans from across the United States, their stories embody themes that I also experience. We seek community with like-minded people. Juni and Dakota's current community is *'Souls*. In our interview, Dakota describes *'Souls* to me. "The main focus of the game is interaction, writing, and role-playing," they say. Someone from their MSA community introduced them to *'Souls*. "I kind of wanna find a community in that regard," they recall. "You know, I wanna roleplay werewolves. I like that. Heck yeah," they tell me. Reflecting on their relationships, Dakota explains, "We're all intermingled and...interwoven. So when there is an issue with, like our own disabilities and things that are stopping us from actually doing *'Souls*, we talk to each other about it." Access is flexible in the *'Souls* community. This is especially the case for situations when "you have limited spoons," they say, in reference to someone's energy

¹³⁵ As argued in this presentation, tech developers often employ "empathy" to develop assistive tech, rather than asking for disabled user input based on lived experience. Cynthia L. Bennett and Daniela K. Rosner, "The Promise of Empathy: Design, Disability, and Knowing the 'Other,'" in *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (CHI '19: CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Glasgow Scotland Uk: ACM, 2019), 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3290605.3300528>.

capacity. Their community talks about “our own disabilities,” despite how other communities often bar that kind of disclosure. This is a space welcoming to disabled fans. “The fandom, I’d say, bridges us together, like we come together for the werewolves, but then we stick around for each other,” they say. I scrawl that quote in my notebook.¹³⁶

Greg shares his role-playing spaces with dear friends. “You meet folks from all over the world,” he says. “And most of them, by and large, are lovely, supportive people.” Greg’s online friends share common ground. “Even the ones you don’t politically, you don’t agree with? Like, legit. There’s a woman I have worked with on a couple of different groups who voted for Brexit.” He admits that if he were living in the UK that he would have voted for Scottish independence within the larger Brexit conversation. “So, even though we don’t, we fundamentally differ politically...we can still be friends, because we’ve worked in these groups together.” Greg has another friend in the UK. “I need to catch up with this one guy, too. I met him on the first group I was part of. He’s a really nice guy,” he explains. Greg aims to bring him into one of his other online groups. “He is an absolutely wonderful human being. He’s a bus driver, and I think [in] one of the London suburbs. Poor guy just lost his wife. He’s got two young kids.” Greg admits that he would consider inviting this player to his wedding, despite never having met in person.¹³⁷ Greg actively shares his role-playing spaces with dear friends.

In the previous chapters, and this chapter, my interviewees have stressed the importance of their relationships and the spaces that these relationships constitute. Although Juni is not as explicit about their connections to other fans, they do highlight the importance of relationships in the life of a fan. Their family’s support is crucial. “I know I’m incredibly fortunate to have the

¹³⁶ In conversation with Dakota King on December 12, 2023.

¹³⁷ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

family that I do have,” they tell me. “My family is, uh, very queer....And also like, very accepting.” They may struggle at times, but what is important is their support. “We’re human,” Juni simply states.¹³⁸ A key theme of this chapter is the importance of relationships and community for disabled fans. To be a fan is simply not just to participate in a culture. Rather, relational ties bind fandoms and larger communities of fans. Disabled fans seek support, even outside of traditional fandoms. I advocate for fan studies to explore how fans engage with their wider communities, not just within fandom.

The realities of virtual online spaces and platforms present challenges for fan communities. Both Dakota and Juni regret losing friendships in their community.¹³⁹ Dakota tells me, “No one has energy and times have changed in the Internet sphere, and it’s been really challenging, especially for the older members...It feels like the community of fandom has slipped, in a way.” They say that social media discourages deep engagement (instead, emphasizing interactions through “liking” posts). “Big companies want to make things [more] profitable,” they say. Additionally, Internet users are just angrier. “People are getting shorter-tempered and angrier with each other as things travel on to more of a consumer method of interaction instead of a community-based interaction.” We seem to exhaust our conversation by this point, ending on a heavy note. “I don’t have anything else, I don’t think,” they say. “I’m more just hop[ing] you’re having a good day.”¹⁴⁰ Virtual Internet spaces present problems for fan communities, much like their physical space counterparts. All spaces differ in how bodies access them.

¹³⁸ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

¹³⁹ In conversation with Dakota King on December 12, 2023; In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

¹⁴⁰ In conversation with Dakota King on December 12, 2023.

When I ask Juni about challenges in their communities, they present a similar answer. “So...like literally this second, one of the biggest problems that our community is facing is member inactivity.” They admit that it is no one’s fault. They cite how difficult life has been in the past few years. Even Juni took a sabbatical from the game for their senior year. They mention burnout from month-long writing sessions. “But after my plot was over,” they explain, “I got super burned out.” They then went off to do their fellowship.¹⁴¹ Dakota and Juni highlight, by mentioning how their communities are threatened in multiple ways, how important these communal ties are to fans.

Despite being aware of barriers, these fans share access to their spaces with like-minded people. They are community builders. Greg wants to go into social work. “I think how we change [systemic issues] is getting good policy...and good people on the grounds, which is why I’m hoping to go into policy,” he explains. He echoes a lot of my thinking. “Blindness, disability in general, even LGBTQ to some extent, normalization and education is critical,” he says. “That’s one reason I invite questions about my disability.”¹⁴² Juni is also cognizant of society’s barriers. They express frustration with the system’s ableist hiring practices. “You think about it too much, drives you up the wall. You’ll go insane,” they say. My interviewees all have an acute understanding of the systemic oppression disabled individuals face due to their lived experiences. “Well, you can’t do everything you know,” Juni says. “Can’t fix the world. Which is so frustrating....Especially when you’re...one of the people who is suffering.”¹⁴³ Still, each fan I talked to, and their fellow fans, share in and provide access to communities of like-minded fans. My interviewees experience ableism in society. However, in their own ways they craft

¹⁴¹ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

¹⁴² In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

¹⁴³ In conversation with Juni on December 14, 2023.

communities in virtual and non-virtual realms. Fortunately, while in the process of finishing this dissertation, Juni lets me know that they have found employment in their field with management that is understanding of their situation.¹⁴⁴ Juni has found access to their scientific community, a parallel to their work on the ‘Souls forum. Additionally, Dakota informs me in a subsequent email that they have since found an office job that they have held for a year. However, they often must sacrifice their self-care for their long commute to and from work. They also have an updated diagnosis: undifferentiated connective tissue disorder.¹⁴⁵ For the ‘Souls players I talked to, life continues on in a positive trajectory, even if there are obstacles.

Conclusion

My interviewees may have begun by poaching texts like *Warrior Cats*, and *Star Trek*, but they eventually helped build communities that tell unique, decentralized stories that trouble the author / fan paradigm. As I wrote this chapter, a guiding question was “what do fans do outside of ‘traditional’ fandoms?” After all, ‘*Souls* and *Miriani* are “original” worlds, collectively authored by a community, and not by a novelist or filmmaker from a major studio. Still, from my conversations, they are made up of *Star Trek*, *Warrior Cats* fans, among many others. Peering into these communities, I realize that fans are creative forces themselves, capable of building worlds that far exceed the depth and richness of stories that they are inspired by. However, I want to emphasize the *communities* that they build, not just the *texts* that they create. Fans create communities along the lines of identity, seeking like-mindedness. Therefore, for the disabled fans that I talked to, their lived experiences with disability impacts who they commune with, who they share access with. Ultimately, they do not just seek fans with similar fan interests. They also

¹⁴⁴ In correspondence with Juni, December 2, 2024.

¹⁴⁵ In correspondence with Dakota King, March 5, 2025.

seek fans with similar body/minds. Whether it is Juni writing from the POV of a wolf having a seizure, or Greg playing with other blind role-players on *Miriani*, these disabled fans reach out across the Internet to express who they are, and, ultimately, find acceptance and a community who can share in their lived experience. Role-players write stories about their lived experiences for their community to empathise with. Fan interests brought these role-players together, but they stayed for the friends they made along the way.

As we wrap up our call, Greg tells me that there are some role-players that he needs to catch up with after we end the call. “I think I’m going to join another one,” he says about role-playing communities. “It gives me an outlet for my writing.” He also told me that he and his girlfriend are going to read a Braille book together, the same copy of *Wrinkle in Time* that he was given twenty years ago as a kid. “I’m definitely going to read that to her in Braille. She’s never read it. So I’m really looking forward to reading that to her,” he tells me. Disabled fans share their fandoms with those they greatly value. “I’m being an ambassador for blindness,” he says about his life. “Feel free to use that.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ In conversation with Greg Botting on January 11, 2024.

Chapter Four: Finding Inclusion at the Rogers Centre: Ontario's Social Assistance, and Sports Fandom

“I’m working on a piece this week about somebody who was considering MAiD and is no longer, thankfully,” Meagan Gillmore tells me from her home in Ottawa. Meagan is a journalist whose career has focused on disability related issues, such as the Ontario Disability Support Program. However, MAiD, Medical Assistance in Dying, is often a concern for her interviewees. “How do we explain as a reporter, like, yeah, call this phone number. Like there’s a phone number issued by the government to help you get this,” she says. For the disabled in Ontario, it is easier to find information on ending their lives than living with their disabilities, she explains. “Good luck trying to get through to anyone who’s going to give you a support to, like, live your life,” she says. Meagan and I swap stories of living on the Ontario Disability Support Program during our Zoom call. “I don’t know if there’s been as much attention to just the mental health consequence of living on ODSP, the challenge of having to make your life fit into the narrative that you were told to make it fit into for government forms,” she says. “That’s still how I feel every time I have to fill out the form and that’s like, list all the terrible things.” Meagan was born with retinopathy of prematurity (also the diagnosis of Greg Botting from the previous chapter). “I’ve been legally blind from birth,” she tells me. “I think that we have the best of the visual impairments, but I’m a little biased.”¹

In this chapter, I explore the intersection of disability and sports fandom in the context of Ontario, Canada. Once again, I draw upon Steven High’s concept of oral history as “sharing authority,” and choose to refer to my interviewees as their first name to reveal the personal nature of collaborating on an oral history together. Additionally, using an interviewee’s first

¹ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

name humanizes them, a radical departure from how experts have discussed disabled individuals in the past, often referencing them as a number or outright leaving their name out. For her part, Meagan shares with me stories of spectating Toronto Blue Jays games and growing up in Brantford, the hometown of hockey hero Wayne Gretzky. She has a deep connection to her home province of Ontario, especially as a follower of local sports. However, she also relates to me the difficulties of being disabled in a province with an under-funded, over-politicized social assistance system. In this chapter, drawing on this interview and the historical evolution of social assistance in Ontario, I argue that we can understand fan space as “local,” among the other ways examined in this dissertation, such as physical convention centre buildings or online chat rooms. I examine how Meagan’s fan identity is constituted within the confines of the province of Ontario through her relationships with those in her local community as they spectate local sports. I argue that although Ontario’s social assistance system perpetuates the legacy of institutionalization through isolating disabled bodies. Meagan regardless finds access to local space through a common connection with family, friends, and fellow fans within the sports fan community. She has successfully found opportunities to participate in local sports fandom, revealing the potential for other disabled fans in Ontario to find inclusion rather than exclusion. The joy she finds in following the Blue Jays, for example, is essential for her to be connected to her community, despite local provincial political decisions isolating and marginalizing the disabled community. Additionally, I examine sports fan identity, as sports fandom is an understudied topic in fan studies. The leading journal in the field, *Transformative Works and Culture*, is only now putting together a special issue on sports fandom.²

² “Sports Fandom (3/15/2025; 1/1/2024),” <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/announcement/view/133>, accessed July 22, 2024.

The History of Social Assistance in Ontario: 1870-2019

Before discussing Meagan's fan identity, I will explore the history of social assistance in Ontario.

Mainly, I will discuss the recent history of the Ontario Disability Support Program, and not the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disability Act* established in 2005.³ Disability legislation can take multiple forms, such as ODSP's providing services such as income support and employment training, and the AODA's focus on expanding accessibility in public places through compliance with concepts of universal design. ODSP offers monthly allowances for disabled individuals to pay for living expenses, primarily food and rent. It also covers health costs, such as prescription drugs. As of writing in August 2024, ODSP recipients generally receive \$1,368 a month "for basic needs and shelter" for single people.⁴ The AODA, however, legislates public spaces for their compliance with standards along the lines of universal design. According to the guide for the AODA, "The purpose of the AODA is to develop, implement and enforce standards for accessibility related to goods, services, facilities, employment, accommodation and buildings. The target date for reaching the goal is no later than January 1, 2025."⁵ Fundamentally, the AODA takes a social model of disability, advocating for the removal of "barriers" from disabled individuals participating in public life.⁶

I focus on social assistance rather than accessibility law for several reasons. For one, Meagan and I did not discuss the AODA. Instead, our time focused on her experiences navigating ODSP. The AODA is not as relevant to her life experiences as ODSP. Additionally, I will explore a dimension of disability that I have yet to adequately discuss in this dissertation:

³ "Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005, S.O. 2005, c. 11," <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/05a11>, accessed June 25, 2024.

⁴ "Ontario Disability Support Program | Ontario.Ca," accessed August 14, 2024, <http://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-disability-support-program>.

⁵ "Guide to the Act," *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)* (blog), accessed July 22, 2024, <https://www.aoda.ca/guide-to-the-act/>.

⁶ "Guide to the Act."

social assistance. My first chapter of disability at fan conventions dealt with accessibility in physical buildings (what the AODA oversees in Ontario). A major theme of my first chapter centred on how disabled activists removed barriers to provide access to fan spaces in convention centres. For this chapter, however, I argue that disability policy through ODSP has been isolating and not inclusive, rather than being a force of equality. Meagan's time on ODSP has shaped her life and journalism career. Yet, she has still found opportunities to access local spaces, namely Ontario sports fandoms.

Social assistance, in this case ODSP, is an indicator of how a government provides inclusion for disabled individuals. I contextualize my discussion of social assistance with social historian Alvin Finkel's definition: social assistance is "the set of non-market decisions, public and private, that determine the distribution of wealth to individuals and families and the degree of availability of human services to all members of society."⁷ In the context of Ontario, social assistance has a long history of offering support for the disabled community. However, rather than providing opportunities for the disabled, ODSP began as a measure to curb welfare use, as I will demonstrate.

Ontario's support for the disabled has been problematic. The history of Ontario's social assistance is challenging to write. Historically, North American society has not deemed the disabled to be worthy of record. It views disability as something "messy" that troubles traditional ideas.⁸ Before ODSP, Ontario's social assistance was a patchwork of institutions and organizations. In 1872, the Ontario Institution for the Education of the Blind opened in

⁷ Alvin Finkel, *Social Policy and Practice in Canada: A History* (Waterloo, Ont: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2006), 3.

⁸ Nancy Hansen, "Uncovering Disability History," in *Untold Stories: A Canadian Disability History Reader*, ed. Nancy Hansen, Roy Hanes, and Diane Driedger (Canadian Scholars: Toronto, 2018), 40-1.

Brantford, for example.⁹ Social movements also cared for the disabled. In the early 1920s, The Rotary Club movement aided disabled children.¹⁰ However, disabled people were never fully integrated into North American society. Employers medicalized disabled bodies, situating disabled employees as an expense.¹¹ The disabled, without many options, relied on non-disabled members of society through institutions like charity organizations or forms of income support.¹² Ontario's social assistance system's founding model was charity.

The concept of charity evolved from the same historical processes that created the residential school system. In the modern era, upper middle-class reformists established centralized institutions for the intellectually disabled alongside residential schools for Indigenous children. Reformers believed that they could better their residents.¹³ Capitalism encouraged the upper class to justify their subjugation under a guise of moral care.¹⁴ As scholars Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux argue, the poor have been “socially constructed and characterized often as ‘undeserving’ of social assistance,” which reveals a history that stretches back to the 1830s in Canada.¹⁵ Proponents of institutions claimed that the intellectually disabled were the reason for institutions. However, according to disability historian Madeline Burghardt, based on Michel Foucault's concept of “biopower,” institutions were sites that created the deviance that

⁹ Vanessa Warne, “‘Blindness Clears the Way’: E. B. F. Robinson's *The True Sphere of the Blind* (1896),” in *Untold Stories: A Canadian Disability History Reader*, ed. Nancy Hansen, Roy Hanes, and Diane Driedger (Canadian Scholars: Toronto, 2018), 3.

¹⁰ Roy Hanes, “Service Clubs and the Emergence of Societies for Crippled Children in Canada: The Rise of the Ontario Society For Crippled Children, 1920-1940,” in *Untold Stories: A Canadian Disability History Reader*, ed. Nancy Hansen, Roy Hanes, and Diane Driedger (Canadian Scholars: Toronto, 2018), 148.

¹¹ Dustin Galer, “Building an Accessible House of Labour: Work, Disability Rights, and the Canadian Labour Movement,” in *Untold Stories: A Canadian Disability History Reader*, ed. Nancy Hansen, Roy Hanes, and Diane Driedger (Canadian Scholars: Toronto, 2018), 270.

¹² Galer, “Building an Accessible House of Labour,” 269.

¹³ Madeline C. Burghardt, *Broken: institutions, families, and the construction of intellectual disability*, (Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018), 16-18.

¹⁴ Burghardt, *Broken*, 19.

¹⁵ Bryan D. Palmer and Gaétan Héroux, *Toronto's Poor: A Rebellious History*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 3.

they claimed to solve. Institutional practitioners watched and diagnosed marginalized bodies, thereby creating deviance.¹⁶ Institutions kept the disabled out of the workforce due to their “aberrance.” However, within the walls of the institution, patients paradoxically produced menial labour under the presumption that this unpaid labour was a form of treatment.¹⁷ The Ontario government sequestered, exploited, and marginalized disabled people within these institutions.

Outside of the institution, disabled veterans from the First World War pushed for their government to support them after serving their country through activist work such as creating the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.¹⁸ During the 1920s, blind veterans, among the many other disabled returned soldiers, were marginalized in the workforce to work demeaning, menial jobs, much like the American blind community discussed in chapter three. In response, these veterans organized to become powerful advocates for equality in the workforce.¹⁹ Disabled veterans worked with disabled civilians for change. After the Second World War, the federal government established the Veterans Charter, policy that presaged Canada’s forming welfare state in the post-war boom. These laws focused on the needs of disabled veterans and their pensions.²⁰ The work of veterans of both World Wars pushed Canada towards a welfare state that aimed to provide for its marginalized citizens in line with the activist work of the Independent Living movement founded in the United States in the 1970s previously discussed in chapter one.

Canada could accommodate a welfare state in the post-war economic boom, but the economic crises of the 1970s would end a culture of government spending. Effectively, the Keynesian system of government spending only offset the continual crises of capitalism.²¹

¹⁶ Burghardt, *Broken*, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ Serge Marc Durflinger, *Veterans with a Vision* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), <https://books.scholarsportal.info/en/read?id=/ebooks/ebooks3/upress/2013-08-25/1/9780774818575>, 2-3.

¹⁹ Durflinger, *Veterans with a Vision*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 220.

²¹ Palmer and Héroux, *Toronto’s Poor*, 250.

Between the 1940s and 1970s, a strong Canadian economy allowed governments to provide robust social assistance while also providing lower taxes for the wealthy, bolstering policies for government spending.²² As the economy faltered in the 1970s, conservatives pushed back against these spending policies, misaligning the government spending with a struggling economy, instead advocating for a return to “liberal” market ideas where the government would spend less on social assistance to shore up on economic losses.²³ A key crisis was the November 1973 OPEC “oil shock” that shook faith in capitalism.²⁴ The poor felt the brunt of this economic crisis with diminishing wages, unprotected jobs, and an attack from politicians.²⁵

During the 1980s, neo-liberal thinking became popular in Canada’s major political parties. The Reform Party and the Progressive Conservative Party advocated for neo-liberal economic reform, making it popular for other parties to adopt. Later, as the Conservative Party of Canada united right-wing parties in 2004, the Tories made neo-liberal policies a key theme in their rhetoric and policy.²⁶ This continuity began with the work of conservative politicians like Brian Mulroney. Beginning at the federal level, Mulroney’s 1984 Conservative victory over Liberal rule meant the end of further increases to spending on social assistance.²⁷ As I will demonstrate with the work of Premier Mike Harris, this trickled down to the provincial level. Mulroney altered the Canadian Assistance Plan that governed splitting social assistance cuts between the federal and provincial levels.²⁸ Cuts to spending on social assistance were here to stay in a Canadian context starting in the 1980s.

²² Finkel, *Social Policy and Practice in Canada*, 281.

²³ *Ibid.*, 281.

²⁴ Palmer, Héroux, *Toronto’s Poor*, 282.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

²⁶ Finkel, *Social Policy and Practice in Canada*, 285.

²⁷ Palmer, Héroux, *Toronto’s Poor*, 292-3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 295.

Ontario elected an NDP government out of frustration of neo-liberal policies in 1990. Yet, the NDP maintained the status quo of fighting inflation rather than supporting social assistance.²⁹ In light of the cost-cutting to stave off economic downturns, Bob Rae attempted to crack down on welfare fraud and encourage welfare recipients to work, paving the way for Harris.³⁰ Meanwhile, the previous decade had seen more of Ontario's unemployed slip into poverty.³¹ During the 1995 Ontario provincial election, opponents of the incumbent Premier Bob Rae noted his failure to reform welfare. The Liberal party outlined a two-tier welfare system: workers could return to the workforce on welfare or the disabled could live on income support.³² Similarly, the Tories advocated for getting the unemployed back to work through "workfare."³³ Bob Rae's New Democrats had been scrambling to reform social assistance in Ontario.³⁴ While politicians tested policy in public opinion, a crisis was occurring. Ontario's social assistance was failing people. Almost six months before the Progressive Conservative election victory in 1995, a tragedy occurred in Hamilton, Ontario. The mother of a teenager with cerebral palsy, Cathy Wilkieson, had attempted multiple times to receive additional funds from the government to pay for her son's intervenor.³⁵ Wilkieson felt hopeless. On December 5, 1994, officials found her and her son dead in her garage from carbon monoxide poisoning.³⁶ Many, like Wilkieson, encountered untenable situations while politicians bantered about welfare policy.

²⁹ Finkel, *Social Policy and Practice in Canada*, 291.

³⁰ Palmer, Héroux, *Toronto's Poor*, 296-7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 305.

³² Colin Leslie, "McLeod predicts \$1 billion saving in welfare plan," *Toronto Star*, May 22, 1995, Final Edition, A9.

³³ Randall Denley, "Workfare? For Grits and Tories, doesn't workfare is more like it," *Ottawa Citizen*, June 1, 1995, Final Edition, B1.

³⁴ "Queen's Park offers some welcome relief," *The Record (Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario)*, February 3, 1995, Final Edition, A8.

³⁵ Peter Edwards, "Inquest called into murder-suicide of mother, disabled son," *The Gazette (Montreal / Quebec)*, December 8, 1994, Final Edition, B1.

³⁶ Shari Darling, "Needing to go that extra mile: Helping families of disabled youngsters from falling through society's cracks," *The Toronto Star*, March 2, 1995, Final Edition, B11.

Harris rode his “Common Sense Revolution” to power in the 1995 Ontario election, campaigning on fixing Ontario’s finances. Harris’ “Common Sense Revolution” proposed to dramatically cut government spending, having the government be accountable to taxpayers.³⁷ However, advocates for stronger social assistance sounded alarms about Harris’ austerity policies. “The push toward decentralization threatens to weaken [social program] even further,” wrote *The Ottawa Citizen*.³⁸ An early reform of Harris to social assistance consisted of changing definitions of disability. In a memo from June 26, 1996, PC politicians demonstrated willingness to change definitions of disability for changing social assistance eligibility.³⁹ Effectively, their actions disqualified thousands from further claiming disability, as I will show.

Meanwhile, poverty worsened. The Canadian Council on Social Development reported in March, 1997 that “more than half a million Canadian families relied on public income supports to keep them above the poverty line in 1994” due to the recession.⁴⁰ Another critic of cuts to welfare claimed that “workfare” was another Conservative aim to punish the poor, writing, “The narrow workfare concept in the form of compulsory community service for no pay is a bad idea – and will soon become a poor law in Ontario where workfare was a central promise of the Conservative election platform.”⁴¹ Homelessness was also a concerning crisis. In the middle of the 1990s, “the numbers of men and women living on Toronto’s streets increase[d] by 43 percent

³⁷ Alister Campbell, “Alister Campbell: Mike Harris transformed Ontario with his ‘Common Sense Revolution,’” *National Post*, December 15, 2023, Web Edition, NP Comment.

³⁸ Ken Battle and Sherri Torjman, “Save our social safety net: Strong social policy essential for a strong Canada,” *Ottawa Citizen*, November 22, 1995, Final Edition, A13.

³⁹ Wendy McCann, “AM-Disabled-Feeds; Disabled could find getting benefits tougher in Ontario,” *Canadian Press*, October 2, 1996, Quebec-Ontario Regional General News.

⁴⁰ Marty Logan, “AM-Poor-Get-Poorer; Poverty trap getting deeper, study finds,” *Canadian Press*, March 16, 1997, National general news.

⁴¹ Sherri Torjman, “Workfare: A very Poor Law indeed: A guilty-until-proven-innocent approach is hardly the best route to welfare reform,” *Ottawa Citizen*, May 30, 1996, Final Edition, A11.

in nine months.”⁴² Harris’ reform of social assistance, particularly redefining eligibility, caused concern for advocates and the disabled.

The Conservative plan consisted of creating two tiers for welfare: a workfare program called Ontario Works, and an income support for the disabled called the Ontario Disability Support Program (initially called the Independent Support Plan).⁴³ The *Canadian Press* reported that “The revised system aims to make it easier for the disabled to enter the workforce by, among other things, allowing them back on benefits rapidly if a job doesn’t work out.” A highlight of the program was to get the disabled into the workforce.⁴⁴ Lobby groups pointed out flaws in the system. Scott Seilor of the Income Maintenance Group argued that the tightening of eligibility would harm those who needed support: “The potential here is that people will die because they will be left out on the street.”⁴⁵ Regardless of concerns, the PC legislature passed the *Social Assistance Reform Act* in November 1997. *The Record* reported that “[Bill 142] also brings in harsh measures against those convicted of welfare fraud and will give welfare workers more power.”⁴⁶ ODSP and OW formed to get the disabled and unemployed back to work, punishing anyone who might unrightly use the system.

ODSP officially began in 1998. Soon after, a social worker from Parkdale Community Legal Services stated, “Not one day goes by that I don’t get a suicidal caller...A significant proportion right now are individuals who have been cut off family benefits and feel like their life

⁴² Palmer, Héroux, *Toronto’s Poor*, 330.

⁴³ “PM-Ont-Welfare-Overhaul; TOR OUT; ; Ontario set to overhaul welfare,” *Canadian Press*, May 9, 1997, Quebec-Ontario Regional General News.

⁴⁴ Tom Blackwell, “AM-Disabled-Welfare, Bgt; Budget; Groups happy but cautious over new disabled benefits,” *Canadian Press*, June 5, 1997, Quebec-Ontario Regional General News.

⁴⁵ Tom Blackwell, “AM-Disabled-Welfare; New plan will exclude many disabled from benefits: advocate,” *The Canadian Press*, June 5, 1997, Quebec-Ontario regional general news.

⁴⁶ Dan Nolan, “Welfare reform passes 67-35,” *Record (Kitchener-Waterloo)*, November 26, 1997, Final Edition A5.

is in limbo.”⁴⁷ A professor from Wilfrid Laurier University echoed this uncertainty. Particularly under Mike Harris, Professor Peter Dunn stated, the disabled were being marginalized from cuts, particularly noting economic disparity in Northern Ontario and the cutting of transit programs for physically disabled recipients.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, as ODSP rolled out, more disabled people were cut from support. *The Toronto Star* interviewed an amputee rejected from the new social program: “A government person said to me: ‘You know, you’re not really disabled. Your situation is just temporary,’” he stated.⁴⁹ The introduction of ODSP disqualified as many people from support as possible. Rather than being empowering, ODSP limited access to support, thus creating a tenuous local space for those either too disabled to be included in the workforce, and those not disabled enough to rightly ask for help from their community.

The Harris government also implemented reading and math tests for ODSP applicants. “When you can read, when you write, when you can do basic math, you can free yourself from basic welfare dependency and you can be proud about getting a job,” Premier Harris stated in Cambridge on June 11, 2001.⁵⁰ However, advocates who taught reading and writing argued that forcing welfare recipients to attend voluntary courses is ineffective.⁵¹ Additionally, the strategy to kick off as many people from welfare included mandatory drug tests. Social Services Minister John Baird stated with the introduction of the policy in November, 2000 that the government refused to have recipients “shooting their welfare cheques up their arms.”⁵² Later in August 2001, Baird was quoted in *The New York Times*: “If someone has a problem with literacy or

⁴⁷ Barbara Turnbull, “Fragile population left in limbo: Support program for the disabled kicks in June 1, but nothing is in place,” *Toronto Star*, May 19, 1998, Metro Edition, A17.

⁴⁸ Luisa D’amato, “Disabled are losing ground to government cuts, prof says,” *Record (Kitchener-Waterloo)*, November 11, 1998, Final Edition, B2.

⁴⁹ Patricia Orwen, “Disabled workers cut off by new benefits,” *Toronto Star*, December 4, 1999, Edition 1, News.

⁵⁰ “Plan to test welfare recipients worries literacy advocates,” *Cambridge Reporter*, June 12, 2001, A6.

⁵¹ “Plan to test welfare recipients worries literacy advocates,” A6

⁵² Theresa Boyle, “Welfare drug test plan sets off storm,” *Toronto Star*, November 15, 2000, Edition 1, News.

addiction and refuses to get help, I don't know what else Ontario can do for them."⁵³ A few months later in October, Baird celebrated his ministry's success at kicking off welfare recipients. Since June 1995, the Harris government had removed 601,544 workers off assistance and into the job market. "This is a significant milestone in Ontario's history...So many families have turned their lives around, that it would take full attendance at the Air Canada Centre for 32 hockey games to match the number of people who have escaped welfare dependency since we first took office," Baird proclaimed.⁵⁴ Harris capitalized on the gains made through denying social assistance recipients from income that they once had.

Income inequality worsened in the early 2000s. On June 15, 2000, anti-poverty activists clashed with police at Queen's Park, marching on the legislation with demands for the provincial government.⁵⁵ According to *The Ottawa Citizen*, the Harris government cut social assistance rates close to 22 per cent, but the cost of living had increased 13% by 2002. This forced many ODSP recipients to use the portion of their income assigned to food to pay for rising rent costs.⁵⁶ In April 2002, Harris' successor Ernie Eves assigned Brenda Elliot to administer the Ministry of Community and Social Services.⁵⁷ The previous social services minister and his staff had racked up "an average of \$930.95 a month of public money on food and drink," roughly what an ODSP recipient survived on monthly.⁵⁸ While Eves shuffled his cabinet, and ministers spent lavishly, the disabled poor continued dying while on, or waiting for, assistance. Previously in 2002, a disabled man on ODSP died in his apartment after a fire. His sister stated, "Social services, all

⁵³ Anthony DePalma, "Ontario's New Welfare Rule: Be Literate and Drug Free," *New York Times*, Late Edition – Final, August 9, 2001, 3.

⁵⁴ "Harris Government celebrates 600,000 people moving off welfare," *Canada NewsWire*, October 26, 2001, Financial news.

⁵⁵ Palmer and Héroux, *Toronto's Poor*, 362-369.

⁵⁶ David Reeley, "Poor using food money to pay rent," *Ottawa Citizen*, February 11, 2002, Final Edition, CITY.

⁵⁷ Helen Henderson, "Let's hope Brenda Elliott tackles disability programme," *Guelph Mercury*, April 20, 2002, Final Edition, A9.

⁵⁸ Henderson, "Let's Hope Brenda Elliott tackles disability programme," A9.

combined, caused his illness and caused his death. They failed him.”⁵⁹ ODSP failed to help people in need. The PC government continued their war on the poor. Minister Elliott callously criticized a full Toronto homeless shelter for being too much like a “Holiday Inn” while on record.⁶⁰ As the Tory government sat in Queen’s Park in the new millennium, income inequality was worsening, exacerbating an already defunded social safety net.

The Tory government focused on preventing fraud in ODSP. They banned anyone found guilty of defrauding ODSP from ever receiving benefits starting in April, 2000.⁶¹ Appealing a rejection consisted of applying to the Social Benefits Tribunal. Around half of denied applicants appealed to the tribunal, beginning in 1998.⁶² Just in 2001, there were 8,249 appeals, consisting of the 67% reaching the tribunal.⁶³ This constant battle to prove one’s disability created a hostile environment to navigate. In an interview in *The Toronto Star*, a mother and student confided that “I’ve thought about suicide every day for the last 20 years,” especially when confronting “the calculated harshness of the Ontario Disability Support Program.”⁶⁴ In 2003 the Tories under Ernie Eves put forward The Road Ahead policy to update ODSP. However, it emphasized preventing fraud.⁶⁵ To better fund a crumbling system, Eves’ government sought to provide savings through policing its recipients and applicants, reflecting a persistent neo-liberal ideology that limited spending.

⁵⁹ Ross Longbottom, “Man on disability found dead in apartment fire,” *Hamilton Spectator*, January 22, 2002, Final Edition, A05.

⁶⁰ “Sensitivity training needed,” *Guelph Mercury*, May 28, 2002, Final Edition, A8.

⁶¹ “City releases report: Update on province’s zero tolerance policy for social assistance fraud,” *Canada NewsWire*, September 6, 2002, Domestic news.

⁶² Helen Henderson, “Group exposes flaws of support program,” *Toronto Star*, November 16, 2002, Ontario Edition, Life.

⁶³ Henderson, “Group exposes flaws of support program,” Life.

⁶⁴ Michele Landsberg, “Agency harasses disabled instead of helping them,” *Toronto Star*, January 18, 2003, Ontario Edition, Life.

⁶⁵ “Eves cracks down on welfare fraud – invests in children,” *Canada NewsWire*, June 11, 2003, Domestic news.

Premier Eves' new policy was in the context of an upcoming provincial election. On July, 18, 2003, Elliott promised an additional \$56 million for the intellectually disabled and their families.⁶⁶ He promised a further \$68 million for ODSP.⁶⁷ In the midst of these election promises, ODSP recipients continued to suffer under Harris' existing policies. The Homelessness Initiative Campaign for Adequate Welfare published a report on September 10, 2003, showing how the Progressive Conservative's cuts to social assistance had "a devastating impact on individuals and families..." on ODSP and OW.⁶⁸ In September, the *Toronto Star* reported on a movement emerging calling for justice for a pregnant woman who died from suicide after being banned from ODSP.⁶⁹ Although the woman passed away in 2001, her case represented a much larger crisis. "None of the parties want to touch welfare issues in this election," said an organizer of the woman's vigil. Without increasing income assistance, "I don't think there will be much of a social safety net left in Ontario," she said.⁷⁰ While politicians campaigned for election, the unfair social assistance system remained.

The Liberals, led by Dalton McGuinty, defeated the PCs in the election held on October 3, 2003.⁷¹ McGuinty promised to index income support to the cost of living.⁷² However, in the March after being elected, McGuinty cancelled a 2.7% pay hike for MPPs, but this also meant that reneging on an increase to the ODSP income support was on the table, seeing as both were

⁶⁶ "Eve government invests \$1 billion to help people with developmental disabilities," *Canada NewsWire*, July 18, 2003, Domestic news.

⁶⁷ April Lindgren, "Tab for Tory promises? Eves 'couldn't tell you': Hours later, Premier puts costs at \$685M in first year," *National Post (Canada)*, September 9, 2003, Ottawa Edition, A6.

⁶⁸ Mark Williams, "Losing the battle against poverty; Report finds that Hamilton's poor are much worse off now than they were when the Tories took office in 1995," *Hamilton Spectator*, September 10, 2003, Final Edition, A13.

⁶⁹ Laurie Monsebraaten, "The battle for compassion," *Toronto Star*, September 29, 2003, Ontario Edition, A06.

⁷⁰ Monsebraaten, "The battle for compassion," A06.

⁷¹ Alexander Panetta, "Federal Liberals celebrate Ontario election, see new provincial relations," *Canadian Press*, October 3, 2003, General and national news.

⁷² "People with mental illness look forward to changes from McGuinty government," *Canada NewsWire*, October 3, 2003, Domestic news.

supposed to have raises tied to inflation.⁷³ If MPPs could not justify a raise in line with inflation, there was no hope for the disabled on income support. McGuinty stalled on his promises to increase the income support, resulting in activists walking across southern Ontario, arriving at Queen's Park on April 29, 2004 to protest his policies.⁷⁴ Finally, in May 2004, McGuinty's government presented its budget. After nine years, the Ontario government intended to raise social assistance rates, 2% to be exact. This would cost McGuinty's government, currently in a deficit, \$56 million.⁷⁵ This increase translated into a raise of \$18.60 for a single person on ODSP, something critics protested as inadequate.⁷⁶ Ultimately, McGuinty's budgeted increase for social assistance could not escape the deficit. The PC's claimed that their budget had been balanced while leaving office, but a provincial auditor showed that the 2003 to 2004 year would have a deficit of \$5.6 billion.⁷⁷ Despite the good intentions of the Liberal government, choices made by the previous government limited their options.

The Liberals struggled in the wake of the PC government. ODSP's computer system, a Tory implementation, crashed. The \$500 million digital program failed to calculate the increase to income support for at least 670,000 recipients. Provincial Auditor Jim McCarter demonstrated that the computer system by Accenture, a private firm, was defective.⁷⁸ The lived reality for many ODSP recipients was increased tribulation. A lawyer from the Windsor/Essex Bilingual Legal Clinic stated, "More of them will have to use the food bank for longer."⁷⁹ Through 2005

⁷³ Helen Henderson, "MPPs' loss also loss for disabled," *Toronto Star*, March 27, 2004, Ontario Edition, L05.

⁷⁴ Meredith Macleod, "A march for dignity; People struggling on disability payments look for help," *Hamilton Spectator*, April 29, 2004, Final Edition, A07.

⁷⁵ April Lindgren, "McGuinty to raise welfare rates by 2%: If approved, hike will be first increase in nine years," *National Post (Canada)*, May 13, 2004, Toronto Edition, A4.

⁷⁶ Lindgren, "McGuinty to raise welfare rates by 2%," A4.

⁷⁷ April Lindgren, "Ontario poor, disabled to get more funding: McGuinty says he's fulfilling promise: critics dismiss it as 'chump change,'" *Ottawa Citizen*, May 13, 2004, Final Edition, A3.

⁷⁸ Richard Brennan and Robert Benzie, "670,000 welfare, disability recipients can't get 3% hike Might take until next March before computer system fixed," *Toronto Star*, July 6, 2004, A01.

⁷⁹ Kelly Patrick, "Disability snafu irks recipients," *Windsor Star*, July 9, 2004, Final Edition, A3.

and 2006, many applicants died waiting to be accepted.⁸⁰ The Liberals struggled to fix social assistance, perpetuating major obstacles that prevented the disabled from receiving support and inclusion from their provincial community.

The Liberals failed to change course. Caseworkers for ODSP began protesting. As of February 2008, caseworkers oversaw “an average of 530 cases.” The union for caseworkers listed an additional \$60 million needed in the next budget for ODSP to balance worker caseload closer to the national average of 250 per worker. An ODSP steward at the Woodstock office stated, “There are days when I just want to cry.”⁸¹ Meanwhile, with the Great Recession beginning in 2008, Ontario’s impoverished continued suffering under worsening economic conditions.⁸² Unemployment was expected to reach 10% by 2010.⁸³ In Hamilton alone, ODSP, OW, and other social assistances claimed just under 30,000 cases in September. According to the *Hamilton Spectator*, “The 2010 caseload average is the highest it has been since 2000.”⁸⁴ The economic crisis proved difficult for the Liberals under McGuinty.

Social assistance was a key topic in the lead up to the 2011 election. At a debate in Guelph, Liberal MPP Liz Sandals emphasized her government’s focus on poverty, while Conservative candidate Greg Schirk promised to update his party’s “poverty strategy.” The NDP candidate James Gordon also stated his party would raise OW and ODSP.⁸⁵ Indeed, McGuinty later revealed vague plans to improve social assistance: “I think one of the most exciting opportunities before us – and I have not talked about this publicly yet – is the transformation of

⁸⁰ “TORONTO A study says an Ontario program to help disabled people fails miserably to address the needs of the homeless,” *Broadcast News*, June 20, 2006, Quebec-Ontario Regional News.

⁸¹ “OPSEU to stage ODSP information pickets across Ontario on March 4, ‘Day of Action,’” *Canadian Corporate Newswire*, February 27, 2008.

⁸² “How the Great Recession helped shape politics in the 2010s,” *Hamilton Spectator*, December 28, 2019, 0.

⁸³ “Five benchmarks for social assistance,” *Toronto Star*, October 27, 2009, A19.

⁸⁴ Denise Davy, “Citys social assistance cases hit record,” *thespec.com*, October 29, 2010, First Edition, A3.

⁸⁵ Joanne Shuttleworth, “Provincial election candidates have differing views on poverty fix Election 2011 – Correction Appended,” *Guelph Mercury*, September 21, 2011, Final Edition, A3.

our social supports.”⁸⁶ A few weeks after this interview, his government froze an increase to social assistance, a compromise with the NDP to maintain his minority government.⁸⁷ The alternative was to cut social assistance in the next budget, policy that the NDP forcefully protested. With NDP support, McGuinty maintained his government by not cutting ODSP further. Meanwhile, ODSP recipients struggled to find dentists, and accessible transportation.⁸⁸ Despite poverty being on the campaign agenda, McGuinty’s alliance with NDP’s Andrea Horwath maintained the status quo for those on ODSP and OW. Overall, the parties of Ontario perpetuated using ODSP as a debate topic to win votes, not as something to update or fix.

In 2012, McGuinty resigned, paving the way for his Liberal successor, Kathleen Wynne.⁸⁹ Wynne promised social assistance reform.⁹⁰ On May 1st, 2013, Wynne released her provincial budget. Once again, social assistance reform yielded for balancing the budget, sticking to a 1% increase of ODSP. Carol Goar, a pioneering journalist of *The Toronto Star* on the subject of disability issues, commented, “Wynne, who aspired to be Ontario’s ‘social justice premier.’ She had to settle for tinkering with the status quo.”⁹¹ An opinion piece from *The Toronto Star* expressed frustration on Wynne’s policy. While at the Women’s Leadership Summit in the fall of 2013, the writer explained confronting Wynne. “In response to her statement that Ontario is an inclusive province, that I was one of about 700,000 people who are excluded on a daily basis because of poverty. Boy, did that statement scare her. She turned white, her mouth fell open, then

⁸⁶ Thomas Saras, “These are tough times: McGuinty,” *South Asian Focus*, March 13, 2012, Final Edition, 1.

⁸⁷ Lee Greenberg, “McGuinty freezes social assistance level, scales back child benefit gain,” *Canwest News Service*, March 25, 2012.

⁸⁸ Orlena Broomes, “On ODSP, struggling to find a dentist,” *Barrie Advance*, Final Edition, June 11, 2012, 1.; L. H. Tiffany Hsieh, “Wheelchair users pay more for taxis,” *Aurora/Newmarker Banner*, July 26, 2012, Final Edition, 1.

⁸⁹ Canadian Press, “Reaction to Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty’s resignation,” *Canadian Press*, October 15, 2012, National, Ontario.

⁹⁰ Laurie Monsebraaten, “A way to leave welfare behind; If she could keep more earnings, it would help single mom transition to a full-time job,” *Toronto Star*, February 4, 2013, A3.

⁹¹ Carol Goar, “Ontario takes a pass on real welfare reform,” *Toronto Star*, May 6, 2013, A13; Toronto Star, “Users,” Toronto Star, April 14, 2020, <https://www.thestar.com/users/profile/carol%20goar/>, accessed October 21, 2024.

she took back her microphone and mentioned the huge increase of 1 per cent most years...”⁹²
Despite good intentions, Wynne struggled to maintain a mandate of social justice..

Wynne’s “magic bullet to end poverty” was a trial run for basic income across the province.⁹³ This included a monthly payment of \$1,320 per single person (disabled recipients would receive another \$500 per month). Wynne proposed replacing the failing social assistance programs with a basic income.⁹⁴ There was great interest for the pilot project. More than 24,000 commenters posted their thoughts online on the topic.⁹⁵ Activists showed their support for the basic income project at meetings in Smith Falls and Cobourg.⁹⁶ The Elgin County community expressed support for the program to start in St. Thomas.⁹⁷ A replacement for Ontario’s shaky social assistance surfaced.

Despite momentum for a basic income, Wynne’s defeat in the 2018 election stopped her aims for better social assistance. The new leader of the PCs, Doug Ford, was sworn in as premier on June 29, 2018, after defeating Wynne’s Liberals at the polls.⁹⁸ In July 2018, the Progressive Conservative government announced that they would cut a scheduled increase to ODSP income assistance. Additionally, they planned to cancel the basic income project begun by the Liberals.⁹⁹ On campaign, Ford had promised to maintain the Liberals’ course for social assistance, according

⁹² “Leaders do not listen to the poor,” *Toronto Star*, June 10, 2014, Opinion.

⁹³ Laurie Monsebraaten, “Provincial adviser proposes ‘basic income’; Ontario poised to become ground zero for testing of anti-poverty measure,” *Toronto Star*, November 4, 2016, A4.

⁹⁴ Monsebraaten, “Provincial adviser proposes ‘basic income,’” A4.

⁹⁵ Elliot Ferguson, “Basic income part of poverty debate,” *Kingston Whig-Standard*, January 10, 2017, Final Edition, A3.

⁹⁶ “Local health unit advocates for basic guaranteed income in Smith Falls,” *Smiths Falls Record News*, January 10, 2017, Final Edition, 1; Valerie Macdonald, “Support shown for basic guaranteed income,” *Northumberland Today.com*, January 16, 2017, Final Edition, A3.

⁹⁷ Jennifer Bieman, “Ready and willing; St. Thomas wants to be a test site for Ontario’s Basic Income pilot,” *Times-Journal (St. Thomas)*, January 31, 2017, Final Edition, A3.

⁹⁸ Merella Fernandez, “Doug Ford,” *CTV Television*, June 29, 2018.

⁹⁹ “Reevelly: Ontario government cuts welfare hike in half, ends basic-income trial,” *Postmedia Breaking News*, July 31, 2018, Local news.

to a spokesperson for Ford during the election.¹⁰⁰ The Children, Community, and Social Services Minister, Lisa MacLeod, claimed that this was “fake news” in response.¹⁰¹ Activists for basic income and those who had been recipients of the pilot project protested. In Lindsay on August 7, around one hundred protesters gathered at Lindsey Memorial Park, chanting “Bring back basic income,” while decrying Ford’s promise of “buck-a-beer.”¹⁰² Despite the controversy surrounding social assistance reform, the Ford government made it clear that the Liberals’ efforts were over.

As 2018 concluded, Ford ended social assistance reform. The Ford government made good on their promise to only increase income support by 1.5% and end the basic income program. Additionally, it ended reform for claw backs.¹⁰³ Meanwhile, ODSP recipients continued to suffer. In October food banks in Toronto reported 914,470 visits between 2017 and 2018. In Scarborough, there was an 86% increase of use since 2008. 68% of visitors were social assistance recipients.¹⁰⁴ In 2019, Theresa Kavanagh, a city councillor from Ottawa, compared the current state of social assistance to the dystopian series *The Hunger Games*. “We need to understand the value of all these programs that support those in need...It should not be a Hunger Games of which services can get funding now and which does not,” she wrote.¹⁰⁵ For those needing social assistance, Ford’s policies were a capstone for a legacy of Ontario shortchanging the social safety net to shore up the budget and for political points.

¹⁰⁰ Rob Ferguson, “‘We did not break a promise,’ MacLeod says; Welfare minister invokes ‘fake news’ about call to end basic income project,” *Toronto Star*, August 3, 2018, A8.

¹⁰¹ Ferguson, “‘We did not break a promise,’” A8.

¹⁰² Mary Riley, “Lindsay rally blasts basic income cuts; Doug Ford’s government announced it will scrap the pilot program,” *Toronto Star*, August 8, 2018, A4.

¹⁰³ “Ontario government scraps basic income pilot project, limits welfare increase to 1.5 per cent,” *Hamilton Spectator*, December 13, 2018, 0.

¹⁰⁴ Laurie Monsebraaten, “Food bank urges Ford government to tackle ‘hunger crisis,’” *thestar.com*, October 31, 2018, News.

¹⁰⁵ Theresa Kavanagh, “Kavanagh: Don’t turn funding of basic services into The Hunger Games,” *Postmedia Breaking News*, June 16, 2019, Web Edition, Columnists.

This is the social assistance system that Meagan and I (and hundreds of thousands of others) have experienced. Ultimately, it does not serve those who need it most. ODSP and OW existed in Ontario's politics to be viable programs to cut, and a convenient excuse to criticize the party currently administering them. This system began under Mike Harris in the 1990s, but continues to the present day, revealing a history of continuity, not of improvement or change. Based on Ontario's governance of social assistance, Ontario as a governing entity does not provide enough support for the disabled in Ontario. Ontario may have closed the last institution in 2009, but the legacy of isolating and marginalizing the disabled continues through programs like ODSP.¹⁰⁶ ODSP, in other words, fails to provide access to the disabled for the wider Ontario community. ODSP isolates, rather than includes, despite the emphasis on getting the disabled back to work in the community. ODSP medicalizes bodies, forcing them into a difficult dichotomy: either live in isolating poverty or be unsupported. There is no consideration for universal design, like there is with the AODA, where accommodations can be made to include the disabled in society. Instead, someone is either tragically disabled or not disabled enough for proper support.

Social assistance as workfare in Ontario has been continually criticized for failing the marginalized. A 2017 study of Ontario Works recipients revealed how more time is focused on being eligible rather than being employment ready through features such as job training.¹⁰⁷ As social policy analyst Patricia M. Evans has noted, better avenues for supporting the poor do not include workfare programs, but rather through increasing the minimum wage and other

¹⁰⁶ Burghardt, *Broken institutions*, 3.

¹⁰⁷ Sarah Pennisi and Stephanie Baker Collins, "Workfare under Ontario Works: Making Sense of Jobless Work," *Social Policy & Administration* 51, no. 7 (December 2017): 1311, <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12271>.

endeavours outside of the social assistance system.¹⁰⁸ A study of London, Ontario youth highlights how neoliberal policies of social assistance only encourage the marginalized to survive and “mak[e] do” rather than seek out underpaying work.¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, the neoliberal conception of social assistance fails the marginalized and disabled. It has distinct roots in the history of Canada.

The Present State of ODSP: Meagan’s Experiences

Meagan and I discuss our experiences on ODSP. Her testimony reveals to me that, despite decades of Ontario’s social assistance isolating, marginalizing the disabled, and barring access to local spaces, disabled individuals navigating this system still have agency. “I think it actually can be helpful if you’re researching ODSP...to know how old [they were] when they got onto it,” she explains about recipients. Before ODSP, Meagan’s parents received the Assistance for Children with Severe Disabilities Program, financial assistance for families with disabled children. At 18, Meagan transferred from that to ODSP. She emphasizes that she was already in the system, but a previously healthy and productive adult having to use ODSP is also a tough experience. Both have their challenges. “How dare you become an adult and then you realize this is what the government thinks I’m capable of,” she says. “It was like this feeling of betrayal...but I was taught I was just going to go to school and get a job. We were all, like, taught to have the same expectations as everybody else. And then, actually, jokes on you, right? There’s this.” ODSP and OW are desperate last options when there are no other options available. For Meagan and many others, this is the only option. “Like I was...filling out my

¹⁰⁸ Patricia M. Evans, “(Not) Taking Account of Precarious Employment: Workfare Policies and Lone Mothers in Ontario and the UK,” *Social Policy & Administration* 41, no. 1 (February 2007): 45, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2007.00537.x>.

¹⁰⁹ Mark S. Dolson, “By Sleight of Neoliberal Logics: Street Youth, Workfare, and the Everyday Tactics of Survival in London, Ontario, C Anada,” *City & Society* 27, no. 2 (August 2015): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12056>.

applications for ODSP at the same time that I was getting my acceptance letters for university, ‘cause my birthday’s in October. So I turned 18 after I started at school for university,” she says. “You don’t get the chance for this to be your last resort. We’re putting this as your first resort, as your only resort.”¹¹⁰ Meagan had the experience of becoming an adult in a province with few options to support herself. Conceiving of Ontario as a space (as I have done in other contexts throughout this dissertation) reveals that Ontario is a space that provides many barriers and few options of support for the disabled.

Meagan’s words are indicative of a larger crisis in education for disabled children in Ontario. In Meagan’s hometown of Brantford, the school for blind students, W. Ross Macdonald, is requiring urgent spending on infrastructure, such as the pool integral for teaching students how to swim safely, according to the chair of the parent council.¹¹¹ “‘You are creating a pathway for ODSP. How fair is it that a child with a disability is not given the same resources, and is not treated as important as a student without a disability?’”¹¹² Meagan’s testimony reveals to me an all too common story of blind and disabled students pre-emptively applying for ODSP on the understanding that they simply will not have as many opportunities.

Meagan tells me of how ODSP engendered isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. While working as a freelance reporter during the COVID-19 pandemic, the ODSP system did not work in Meagan’s favour. Due to working full time, Meagan stopped receiving income support (but kept drug benefits). However, she was surprised when she received a check from ODSP for the full amount of income support during the first month of COVID. “The way an overpayment

¹¹⁰ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

¹¹¹ “Letting Specialized Schools Languish, Ontario Is ‘creating a Pathway for ODSP,’ Says Parent,” *CBC News*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/w-ross-macdonald-deaf-blind-funding-schools-education-1.6415813>.

¹¹² “Letting Specialized Schools Languish, Ontario Is ‘creating a Pathway for ODSP,’ Says Parent.”

works is either you pay it all off in one fell swoop or they deduct a certain percentage of your ODSP and it will literally take you years to pay off any sort of overpay,” she explains. Meagan made sure to be as transparent as possible about her employment income, lest the ODSP offices incorrectly send her a check she was not supposed to have. Phone call after phone call, she finally spoke to her case worker to explain her situation. “And I was explaining this to my worker, like, in tears. I just spontaneously started crying because it made me so upset and he said to me something that was essentially, like, well, we weren’t thinking about people like you....people who use ODSP and also have jobs at work.” Meagan’s exasperation is hard to ignore. “I’m like, what does that even mean? Like, I’m a recipient like everyone else.”¹¹³ I can attest to the fear of accidentally defrauding ODSP as a recipient, echoing what Meagan has told me. Being on ODSP is a constant exercise in proving that you are disabled enough for the program’s assistance, while also proving that you are not trying to defraud the system.

ODSP recipients are isolated from the aid of caseworkers. Meagan relates how hard it is to connect to ODSP caseworkers. “It’s not like these people know you,” Meagan says, referring to case workers. In her work covering ODSP, she often asks to interview recipients who back out before interviews. “They’ll say because I’m scared if I get put my name out there, that this provincial social assistance program will cut off my benefits,” she says. “And I always find it trickier because on one hand, I get your fear and on the other hand, what I want to say is I don’t want to, like, burst your bubble here. But actually, the person who administers this program has no idea who on earth you are.”¹¹⁴ Meagan explains how underfunded and understaffed the ODSP system is, making it incapable of properly serving its recipients.

¹¹³ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

¹¹⁴ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

ODSP recipients often find isolation when encountering the expansive bureaucracy of ODSP. We discuss ODSP's bureaucracy as a root cause for its ineffectiveness. Meagan has plenty to tell regarding her experiences dealing with an inefficient bureaucracy. "For a while, I had three different files, because they were all in different offices, depending on where I had lived," she explains. "How is this?...Can you not just..." she asks, trailing off. She is from Brantford, but moved to Hamilton, and eventually lived in the Yukon territory for some time, finally off ODSP. She eventually moved to Toronto, when she needed to return to ODSP. Either during her move to Hamilton or her move to Toronto, she realized the unprofessionalism of case workers. "The case worker wanted my social insurance number" to find her in the system, she explains. "And she was like, you can call and leave a message. This is a true story, on my voicemail with your social insurance number." Meagan's astonishment is still present in our conversation. Three different files for the same recipient were distributed over the province. "Somebody could have, like, popped in a car," she simply states, to hand over the case file. It is affirming to talk to someone about the difficulties of asking for assistance while disabled. Meagan makes an excellent point when saying, "There is nobody who comes up to your door with a binder that says this is your introduction to disability supports in your province."¹¹⁵ Through ODSP, the Ontario government has created an isolating space for recipients.

We also discuss the reality of isolation from relationships while on ODSP. "I'm pretty outspoken about the fact that I think the way social systems' programs are structured is that they disincentivize work," she says. "But, like, I don't think people also realize, like, [they] actually disincentivize marriage and the creation of families." Meagan is referring to how a spouse's finances impact a recipient's income support. If a spouse is making too much money, ODSP cuts

¹¹⁵ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

off income support for a recipient, discouraging recipients from having spousal relationships. Effectively, it keeps disabled people from having relationships. “By its nature, it will make somebody more isolated,” Meagan says.¹¹⁶ A key theme throughout this dissertation has been how integral relationships and community are for disabled people. That is why fan communities, for example, are important when discussing the disabled experience. Disabled people seek community in fan spaces when their governments foster isolation.

Meagan’s work has led her to several conclusions as to how to improve social assistance in Ontario. She has a blueprint for more effective policy that would help disabled people while not working, while also giving them support for working. “I wish the program was designed in a way that actually lives up to what it says,” she says. She advocates for more supports to empower disabled people to find employment that works for them. “Being blind...does not keep you from getting a job. It just might change what type of job you might have to get.” However, she notes that some people should receive income support, because their impairments prevent them from having a more traditional job. The issue is that ODSP treats everyone the same. “They’re all lumped and treated the same way in these programs, even though people have vastly different needs depending on their diagnosis, and where they live,” she says. Ultimately ODSP is both disablist and ableist. It is ableist for conceiving of the workforce containing only one kind of body/mind, and everyone else as an aberration. It is disablist for conceiving of broken bodies incapable of working as all the same. Meagan summarizes her experiences while on ODSP to me. “If you really ask me, like, make a list of, like, what are the top five things in your life that you would have wanted to change that like being on ODSP for most of my adult life is one of them,” she tells me.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

¹¹⁷ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

Meagan outlines how a social assistance program would encourage disabled people to work, countering the endemic isolation in the system. “I don’t think claw backs in and of themselves are necessarily wrong,” she says. “We do want people to be working, not because of money, but because of the social benefits, because of how that benefits somebody’s mental health, because they’re out in the community with other people.” She emphasizes the importance of community: “What you want is people in a job, in a workforce, with colleagues who aren’t disabled. That’s actually how you foster inclusion.” However, claw backs would accompany job supports to keep recipients employed. “If you’re going to claw somebody back for working, I think you need to also be helping them find work.” Her plans are multi-faceted, too. “If you’re going to put somebody in a system that is going to actually impact their mental health, you should give them some free counselling,” she says.¹¹⁸ From our conversation about ODSP, we both agree that mental health coverage is essential while dealing with social assistance, even when the program works. Meagan underscores a key theme in our conversation and this chapter: disabled people require inclusion and not isolation. She may have applied for ODSP alongside her university applications, but, as I will demonstrate, she has found inclusion in society through participating in local sports fan communities. Meagan has combatted the isolation of living on ODSP with joining her local sports community.

Meagan’s experiences while living on ODSP are part of the larger story of ODSP’s design, implementation, and troubles in reforming. She is just one of hundreds of thousands who have gone through the system and have found it isolating, debilitating, and destructive. Her work as a journalist also highlights this history in her writing on the subject. Her testimony contextualizes the larger history of ODSP. She expresses to me how isolating the experience is,

¹¹⁸ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6th, 2024.

something that does not come through as much through my previous primary sources for this chapter. As much as the first part of this chapter highlights the suffering of those in the system, Meagan's testimony shows how ODSP recipients have agency and opinions about the larger state of social assistance in Ontario. Ontario fails to offer access to local spaces for the disabled, in particular due to its crumbling social assistance programs. However, the disabled community finds joyful connections to local spaces, as I will discuss in the final portion of this chapter detailing Meagan's sports fan identity. Ultimately, Meagan has found both inclusion and impediments in her home province of Ontario through participating and sharing in access to local sports fandom.

Meagan and sports fan communities

Much of our discussion has revolved around the isolation of living on ODSP. However, our next topic, sports fandom, reveals how Meagan has found access to local spaces through her relationships in the sports fan community, despite the marginalization of social assistance. In this section, I argue that participating in sports fandom fosters relationships that create access to local spaces, such as the Rogers Centre, Meagan's hometown of Brantford, or even the living room of an acquaintance hosting a Super Bowl party. Shifting topics, Meagan and I begin discussing fandom, ostensibly what my LinkedIn message implied we would talk about. She first mentions her favourite children's author, Jean Little. Jean Little passed away at the age of 88 in 2020, but left a legacy of beloved children's books about the disabled experience such as *Mine For Keeps* and *From Anna*.¹¹⁹ In a piece in *The Walrus*, Meagan wrote about her first experience with

¹¹⁹ "Renowned Guelph children's author Jean Little passes away," *Guelph Today*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.guelphtoday.com/local-news/renowned-guelph-childrens-author-jean-little-passes-away-2233722>.

Little's work, revealing her connection to the author. On "closer inspection...I was more like the author. Like me, Little grew up in southern Ontario with an affinity for words. Both our families were involved in Protestant churches, and faith was central to our lives. Her eyesight wasn't great either." Little had scarred corneas, and later glaucoma.¹²⁰ Little inspired Meagan's need to write. She wrote a poem, inspired by Little's own poetry, for a local library poetry contest. She won second place. "Success felt as sweet as the caramel I had compared my irises to in the poem," she wrote.¹²¹ Meagan reflects in the piece that "Little possessed an early confidence as a writer that I didn't: she had no shame in writing about disability."¹²² Although Jean Little has no overt connection to sports, Meagan's fan identity for Little reveals an inclination for Meagan to find connection to like-minded people. She also seeks this in occupying sports spaces.

Sports fandom has always been around Meagan. "I'm the daughter of a Toronto Maple Leafs fan," she says. She follows sports, particularly baseball. "So baseball is the one that I will like...willingly organize my social schedule around," specifically the Blue Jays in nearby Toronto. She likes attending Super Bowl parties, but admits that she only just learned about Travis Kelce because he is dating Taylor Swift. Locally in Ottawa, she has attended the professional women's hockey league. "Bought myself a jersey [for the women's team], because I never had a real sports jersey," she says. "I'm not going to buy one for the boys' team, if I can buy one for the girls' team." She also aspires to become a Raptors fan. However, the start of basketball seasons comes at an inopportune time. "Basketball season starts when baseball is winding down, and by that point, I'm probably too sad to," she tells me. "I want to become a fan of another Toronto sports team that's just gonna [disappoint] me, like they all do." She talks with

¹²⁰ Meagan Gillmore, "The Author Who Shaped the Way We Represent Disability," *The Walrus*, January 29, 2021, <https://thewalrus.ca/the-author-who-shaped-the-way-we-represent-disability/>

¹²¹ Gillmore, "The Author Who Shaped the Way We Represent Disability."

¹²² Gillmore, "The Author Who Shaped the Way We Represent Disability."

a smirk on her face. “Like, I really do want someone to do a psychological study about Toronto sports fans, long term ones,” she says.¹²³ Meagan conveys a connection to Ontario sports, particularly to professional Toronto teams through both their victories and defeats.

She further explains her connection to Ontario sports by way of talking about her hometown, Brantford. She’s from the same neighbourhood as Wayne Gretzky, another Brantford native. She mentions, “I hate Alexander Ovechkin. It’s the fact that I would be okay with somebody breaking the goal record if they were Canadian, okay?” She ties Gretzky’s achievement in with Brantford. “And then I’m also like, do you know how little my hometown has?” She says. “And I understand that the points record is different from the goals record and that the points record is safe.” Her speech is more rapid when talking about hockey records and her hometown than talking about the difficulties of ODSP. “I have a soft spot for the Oilers,” she says, “because Edmonton is the only city in this country that knows that Brantford is different from Brampton or Bradford.” Gretzky’s story means much more to her than excellence in hockey. “So it just makes me feel like...I’m from a specific place.”¹²⁴ Spectating hockey ties directly into her connections to the space of Brantford, her hometown.

Meagan also shows Canadian pride via fan identity. She explains the joy of being a Canadian during the 2002 Olympic Gold Medal game. “I would have been thirteen,” she reasons. “And I remember us after church crowding our basement for the men’s gold medal hockey game...There was just something very, like, innocent about that one.” She rapidly recounts her memories from the game. “We beat America, and it was in America. And then there was the goal. There was the lucky looney in the ice. And I think the ice maker was from Brantford, and that was really cool for us....There was like a Zamboni that, like, did a tour across the city,” she

¹²³ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

¹²⁴ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

says.¹²⁵ Meagan also has a connection to Canada through her fan spectating experiences watching Canada beat America in the 2002 Olympic Gold Medal game. It should also be noted that the national context connected to the local context with the Zamboni parade through Brantford after the game. Her local space inextricably is linked to the national in Meagan's context.

Meagan also has a connection to Toronto, specifically to the Blue Jays. "I do not remember my first Blue Jays game," she admits. It probably happened in high school or late elementary school. "That's...the only time of the year I miss living in Toronto," she says. "Because now I'm lucky if I do like one or two games a year and I used to do like ten."¹²⁶ The Rogers Centre (as it is called now) is a local space that Meagan has found access in, especially when she lived in Toronto.

Meagan became a baseball fan due to her relationship with her father. Her father often told the story of Roy Halladay's almost no-hitter. "My dad was there with my brother," she explains. "He...[made] it sound like his presence is what led Roy Halladay to take a no-hitter." She quickly became a fan of Halladay. "I just went hard and fast and scheduled my life around [his] pitching schedule, and then when he got injured and had to go on the disabled list, which I didn't know what that meant," she says, she figured he was out for good. Her father explained to her the differing definition of "disabled" in baseball. "He's like [the] disabled list for baseball is not disabled like you," she says, quoting her father. This is how she learned about how scoreboards worked at a baseball game. She often listened to games on the radio growing up. When her parents got cable, she found it hard to follow along. "I was mad because the TV announcers wouldn't tell me what was going on," she says. Her dad had to explain that "other

¹²⁵ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

¹²⁶ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

people can see this.” She then understood the purpose of the scoreboard on a television broadcast. However, that summer she spent following Halladay, eagerly awaiting another no-hitter. Eventually, management traded Halladay to Philadelphia. She admits that Halladay is her favourite Blue Jay of all time. “I’ve never cried harder than the night he died,” she tells me. “I didn’t know you could cry so hard for somebody [who you didn’t know].”¹²⁷ Meagan has a deep connection to Halladay’s career, which stemmed from her father’s own connection to the pitcher’s exceptional talent. Meagan and her father shared in their love for Halladay.

During this time, Meagan closely followed the Jays. “That was when it really became, like, my thing,” she says. “I was living in Toronto during the playoff runs of 2015-2016. So much fun. I remember where I was for [Bautista’s] bat flip.” Meagan also explains how she brought friends and family to Jays games while living downtown. “One of my favourite things to do in Toronto was to take people to their first Blue Jays, because my brother had season tickets for a while,” she explains. “So, I would buy off a bunch of tickets from him.” She took a nine-year-old once, and a friend who grew up in Dundas (and had never seen a Jays game). She was astounded hearing that her friend had never seen a Jays game live, despite living so close. “I was like, how is this? I don’t understand,” she says, jokingly astounded. “This is blowing my mind. Wait. Like, how is that possible?” She explains that a Jays game is a great place to take someone. “You can adjust for the experience of the new fan, right?” she says. “So if they just want to hang out and talk for three hours, you can literally just talk for three hours. Or if they want to watch the game and be invested, you can watch the game and be invested. Like, it’s very easy.” Her love of baseball is clear to me. “You can’t do that at, like a hockey game, or football game, or something.”¹²⁸ Meagan seeks to bring her friends and family into the fold of baseball fans. She

¹²⁷ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

¹²⁸ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

creates access to these spaces out of pure love of the game, echoing my other interviewees who have told about the joy and pleasure of being a fan. In this way, she shares the desire to bring others into fandom that all my participants have talked about in this dissertation. Meagan, like every other fan, seeks to provide access to shared fan spaces, like the Rogers Centre.

The Rogers Centre is an important space for the relationship she has with her father. She talks about going to Jays games as a child with her father. He often read the Jumbotron and shared facts from it. “Some guy would come up and he would say some very obscure fact about him,” she says. “And I was like, how does he know all this?” It was not until she used electronic glasses called esight, a form of assistive technology, at a Jays game did she realize where her father was getting these facts from. “I took them to a Blue Jays game, sat in the five hundreds, their baseline, and used that as my frame of reference for the researchers,” she explains. “That was how I learned that on the Jumbotron, they say facts about the players, like he has had eight doubles in the last ten games.” The realization recontextualized her many trips to a Jays home game with her father. “For years, I actually thought my dad knew...these random facts, and he does have a bunch of random facts. So maybe he did know some of them,” she says. “No, he just has eyeballs that work better than that.” While she explains this story, I realize how much she has talked about her relationship with her father in this interview, especially with how it relates to baseball. The Rogers Centre (as it is now known) is an important space that Meagan and her father share as fans of baseball. Inextricably tied into this shared fandom is her disability. However, despite her impairment, her father made sure to keep her in the loop about interesting facts about players. She concludes her story by adding, “I am not looking forward to when he dies and I have to go to my first baseball game after he dies.”¹²⁹ Meagan and her father have

¹²⁹ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

constructed a shared local space in Ontario where their relationship is central to how they both enjoy spectating sports. In this way, they practice disability activism through Meagan finding empowerment and closeness with her father.

Meagan also spectates other sports with groups. She mentions watching the Raptors Championship in 2019. “I watched, they won,” she says. “They won...game six, I think.” For the second last game, “I watched with a bunch of men,” she explains. “And then I was the only woman there.” However, for the next night, she watched with a group of women. “All the boys were somewhere else, completely different atmosphere,” she says. “We were drinking rosé.”¹³⁰ She relates these stories with joy. Not only does Meagan spectate sports with her father. She also participates with other sports fans.

Meagan has a specific relationship to sports in general. She explains to me how her disability relates to sports. She tells me how she found both inclusion and obstacles during school sports. “So my dad was a volleyball coach, just like volunteer stuff,” she says. Growing up, her siblings played sports, while she sat on the sidelines. “For reasons likely related to my eyeballs, I did not like [playing sports].” she explains. “I famously got demoted on my first day of skating lessons. Apparently, there was a level below beginner...I started out at the beginner level and ended the lesson under the beginner level.” While growing up, she explains, “sports were not a natural thing I had aptitude for.” After turning seven, she moved to the same neighbourhood as the Gretzky’s, and one of Canada’s most known hockey players. During grade seven, her teachers assigned her the role of manager for the school sports teams, due to her impairment. In grade eight, she received an award for her management. At a volleyball tournament, she sat with her father, the coach, on the sidelines of a game, writing down statistics

¹³⁰ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

of the players. “So, I’m like there, like, sitting on the side with my friends and a girl who was playing spiked the ball. It went out of bounds and it hit me in the head,” she tells me. “And my glasses fell down. And if this happened to you, likely nothing would have happened to you. But...because of the force of the ball, and because the fact that I had eye surgery on my retina when I was a baby, it hit me on the left side. That’s my best eye. So my right eye is almost completely blind. Almost all my sight’s on my left.” Her eye bled internally from the hit. “Everything went blurry, first time in my life where everything went super blurry,” she explains. “It’s like a spider that you see in your line of vision really bad.” She no longer participates in sports “with flying projectiles.” She summarizes, saying, “So, yeah, actually my disability is very connected with my involvement in sports because it’s why I can’t do at least most of it.”¹³¹ . As much as Meagan relates to me her joy of spectating sports, there are needed improvements to remove barriers in sports fan spaces. The AODA aims to remove physical and architectural barriers, both present in sports spaces like arenas.¹³² Access is not made equal in these spaces. Meagan relates to me how much joy she has found in these spaces, but there are still significant barriers preventing her access. Access is a complicated conversation that never ends.

However, Meagan has mostly discussed how she enjoys participating in sports fan communities in our conversation. She explains the logic behind her fan identity. “In some ways, it makes it easier, because I’m a journalist and I was always good at writing, and I always knew I was better at it, better than other people,” she says. “But when I watch a baseball game, I can just enjoy the fact that that person is doing something that they’re really, really good at, and I have no desire to be them, and I know I can’t do it. Whereas, when I read a book, I’m like, ‘oh yeah,

¹³¹ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

¹³² “The Act (AODA),” *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)* (blog), accessed July 22, 2024, <https://www.aoda.ca/the-act/>.

that's really good how you did that.' And...I'm deconstructing it, reverse engineering it, or I'm jealous at you, because how dare you write a book." Sports provide an important escape for Meagan while spectating. She can enjoy the players and game truly as an enthusiast. After her third year of her undergrad, the Great Recession was making her job search dire.¹³³ She lived at home in Brantford, looking for work. "And I kept getting rejected, and for the first time in my life, I was like, I swear, they're just rejecting me because of my disability," she says. "So, I soothe myself by watching reruns of *The O.C.*...[and I] followed the Blue Jays like a lot."¹³⁴ Despite finding difficulty in playing sports, she finds inexhaustible energy as a sports fan, particularly when sharing it with family and friends. Meagan finds support and empowerment in following the Blue Jays.

Overall, Meagan has a deep connection to her local community through sharing in sports fandom. She explains to me the sorrow Brantford felt when Wayne Gretzky's mother, Phyllis Gretzky, passed away. "When I was in high school, Phyllis Gretzky died of lung cancer," she says. "And it was national news. And it was weird...I probably met her, just didn't know. It's not like she wore a sign that said 'hi.'" Her mother learned from her boss that the Gretzky family had to set signs in place to ensure that untoward fans did not take photos or pester for autographs. "There is something about the growing up in a city where you had a very famous athlete come from you, kind of, I think, see the dark side of it."¹³⁵ Meagan recognizes the social dimension of being a sports fan. The Gretzky family has certainly impacted Canada at large, but Meagan relates the local impacts that sports have for fans.

¹³³ In correspondence with Meagan Gillmore on January 11, 2025

¹³⁴ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

¹³⁵ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

Meagan received a scholarship from a foundation created by Walter and Wayne Gretzky, speaking of the social impact of sports fandom. The foundation is for visually impaired students. “I always felt weird putting it on my resumé. It just felt so strange,” she says. “But I almost didn’t apply for it because I was like you can’t ask for money from somebody who lives down the street.” Her dad encouraged her to apply regardless. Still, the proximity of the Gretzky family is something Meagan thinks about. “Like, when I go back to visit my parents, nobody knows. I can just go live normally,” she says. “So when you’re in a city where you’re aware of that there’s somebody who comes back here to visit who can’t do those things, and if you have an interaction with them, you know, it’ll always be like, oh, I met him and he was a jerk.”¹³⁶ She is connected to her community through sports fandom, particularly in this circumstance through financial support.

Still, her impairments reveal how inaccessible sporting events can be. She attended a local softball league as a spectator but found it difficult to follow.¹³⁷ “I couldn’t see anything,” she says. “So it is, like, it’s one of those things where for me it is very much about the atmosphere.” Sometimes, though, live sporting venues fail her. “I used to go all the time and then it was too mentally exhausting, ‘cause I would go there and then realize [I] can’t actually see what’s happening, and ‘why am I here?’” For Meagan, her company at these events is critical. “I’m very aware of my disability around sports, because that’s what’s going on. So, it means that you have to kind of choose who you’re gonna watch games with,” she says. “Because people who just sit in silence are annoying, and I’m like, you need to tell me, like, like, make a noise, supposed to cheer or be sad.”¹³⁸ Sharing a fan space is critical for Meagan to enjoy spectating a

¹³⁶ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

¹³⁷ In correspondence with Meagan Gillmore on January 11, 2025.

¹³⁸ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

game. Indeed, I argue that this is fundamental to many fans, regardless of disability. Sports fans share their spaces with each other. Based on Meagan and those with similar experiences with inaccessibility at sports games, it is critical that fan studies and sports studies scholars discuss the importance of access to fan spaces.

Meagan has a deep connection to her hometown of Brantford through growing up, participating in sports, and her connection to the local Gretzky family. Additionally, while living in Toronto, or following along back home in Brantford, her fan identity as a Jays fan reveals a deep connection to her local community sharing in moments from the baseball pitch. This should not be underplayed as merely entertainment. Historically, Ontario has isolated disabled people through its social assistance programs and institutions. Meagan is acutely aware of this through her writing as a journalist. Despite Ontario isolating the hundreds of thousands like Meagan and myself who have been on social assistance, Meagan finds a heartfelt connection to her local provincial communities through sharing in sports fan spaces. Meagan has resisted the isolating influence of ODSP through seeking common connections with other Ontario sports fans. In this way, she practices disability activism through creating access for herself to sports fan spaces. Like the other fans I have interviewed, Meagan and sports fans share access to common fan spaces. In this case, Meagan shares in local access to spaces like hockey arenas or the Rogers Centre with family and friends, or even to her hometown of Brantford, an important pilgrimage site for fans of Wayne Gretzky. She has found fan spaces of inclusion, not isolation.

Towards the end of our conversation, Meagan reveals a stirring memory. In 2018 at the Blue Jays home opener after Roy Halladay's passing, Meagan attended a ceremony for the famous pitcher. "There was no way I was missing that, Eric." She highlights how millennials loved Halladay. "I've never felt more known as a millennial than I have in this week," she tells

me. “Like, yes, 10,000%, I will go and bawl my eyes out with all these strangers....So then I got tickets.” She attended with her parents. The tickets were costly for a recipient of ODSP. “I was on ODSP and probably spent more than 100 bucks on this, which is like a tenth of your ODSP check,” she says. There was no way Meagan would miss this important moment in the history of the Jays, but also the history of Ontario. “There’s no way, like, I must be there to share in the collective grief.” Later in our conversation, she mentions bringing her nephew to games, and making new memories. She is effusive in her excitement for sharing the Jays with her nephew. She is excited to watch her family “be so excited for the Toronto sports teams and trying to explain to them, ‘you’re in for a lifetime of misery.’” We share a laugh having both grown up in southern Ontario, witnessing Toronto sports teams never quite shaking off a legacy of disappointment. “Don’t ask too many questions, kids,” she says. “‘Cause we don’t know why we do it either.”¹³⁹

¹³⁹ In conversation with Meagan Gillmore on May 6, 2024.

Conclusion

In August 2023, I attended Jeux Accessibilité Montreal, a conference for game industry professionals, academics, and advocates. The two-day conference was sponsored by large games industry corporations such as WB Games and Ubisoft. It also had the support of McGill University and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. However, what truly made the conference a welcoming space were the organizers, speakers, and participants, all eagerly extolling the virtues of expanding accessibility in the gaming industry. All of us, including myself, were fans of video games in some capacity. Most of us were fans, because we were spending much of our professional and academic careers focused on studying and bettering the state of disability in video games. I saw demonstrations on the basics of audio description implemented in games, a demo of the break-out indie success *Celeste* using assistive technology, and a presentation on the accessibility of farming sim games. I partook in a roundtable about how mental health connects with video games. One by one, we went around the table, describing how video games have both positively and negatively impacted our mental health and how we thought the industry could improve. We shared the titles of our favourite video games that dealt with themes of mental illness, something we cited as key to improving accessibility in the industry along lines of better representation. Here we were, dozens of video games fans from different walks of life and disciplines united on providing better access for other gaming fans through accessibility. We were doing what fans do: sharing access to their spaces.

I initially conceived of my dissertation, “Freaking Fans: An Oral History of Disability in Fan Spaces,” as a broad exploration on the intersectional links between disability and fan identity. What I discovered is that fans are keenly aware on the spaces they constitute. Marilyn

and Marcia explained to me how they provided accessibility to their convention centres, and Greg, Dakota, and Juni also described to me how they build virtual spaces that are accepting of the neurodivergent, for example. Fans practice building and sharing access to their spaces, whether they be physical, virtual, or cultural. This connection showcases the potential for further studies that highlight the key connection between the embodiment of body/minds and fan communities. The lens of critical access studies reveals how access is central to any discussion of fan communities, and therefore disability is, too.

Using concepts from critical access studies, I conceive of fan communities as intersectional spaces of inclusion and exclusion. This is key for understanding disability in these communities, but it also reveals that fans share access to their spaces with others of similar body/minds influenced by historical forces and lived experience. Fans practicing disability activism particularly focus on access to their spaces, seeking to expand access to disabled fans. In this case, fan activism consists of expanding inclusion for others out of love for their fandom and each other. Fans, especially disabled fans, are interdependent, revealing how fan spaces are constituted by relationships, not necessarily the poaching of texts as the discipline of fan studies has maintained for decades. Fan acts and practices of inclusion resist the exclusion present in fan spaces where historical forces such as ableism encourage fans to share space at the expense of the marginalized. This is a novel and useful paradigm to conceive of fan communities as inclusive and exclusive spaces as it reveals the hidden lives of my interviewees who shared with me their practices of inclusion, accessibility, and access. This study is also activist for stressing the importance of joy and pleasure in the disabled experience to complement the more common disability narratives of marginalization and activist struggles.

In chapter one, I interviewed Marilyn and Marcia, two pioneers of accessibility activism in the science fiction community. Within the physical spaces of convention centres across America, Marilyn, Marcia, their leader Samanda, and others united in a grass roots movement to make fan spaces more accessible through providing ASL interpreters, wheelchairs and scooters, and more inclusive architecture like better hallway space, among other practices. Marilyn and Marcia expressed to me the joy of sitting around the TV and watching *Star Trek* air on television with their families. However, science fiction has historically been ableist, conceiving of disabled bodies as aberrant and needing to be fixed. Despite this ableism in the genre, however, my interviewees and their cohort expanded inclusion in the science fiction fandom with better access to convention centres. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, their group, the Electrical Eggs shared access to their fan convention spaces with practices of inclusion through pioneering accessibility of the day, predating the Americans with Disabilities Act. Marilyn, Marcia, Samanda, and the rest truly loved and cared for each other in their mission to provide access to their beloved science fiction community.

In chapter two, I interviewed Antonio and Grant, two journalists covering the unfolding of accessibility in video game culture and its community. Video games also have a history of ableism, much like the history of science fiction. In the case of video game culture, the historical forces of ableism, sexism, and racism have impacted how gaming fans provide access to their spaces. Echoing the larger access discourse that I draw upon, I argue that access is intersectional, with larger historical forces impacting whether a body can access a space or not. In the 1980s, a moral panic gripped North America where policymakers and concerned parents conceived of video games as degrading the morals of their children. They used a rhetoric of shame to build policy and practices that inhibited access to video game spaces, such as arcades, particularly for

young boys. They believed, as Kocurek argues, that the advent of the skilled worker economy encouraged independence for young boys, something that was aberrant and needing to be policed. In response, male gamers culturally rejected this shaming, crafting an identity as an oppressed group, and thus binding themselves in a space of prejudicially white, cis, male, straight, and non-disabled gamers. Antonio and Grant, within the writing of this dissertation, explained to me how these historical forces of identity have impacted their access to the space of the gaming community. In this work writing about accessibility, they challenge the ableist narrative that disabled gamers should not exist, thereby expanding access to their disabled cohort. By writing about the newest assistive technology, or writing about their personal experiences, they share access to the space of their community for other disabled gaming fans who may not feel comfortable stating that they enjoy playing video games (especially with the use of accessibility features, such as easy modes). In this case, self-representation as activism is a key theme.

In my third chapter, I interviewed Greg, Dakota, and Juni, avid role-players in online communities. Although playing in different communities, my interviewees revealed to me the life-long friendships they have made with people they have never met while being in an online role-playing community. They explained to me their favourite fandoms, but arguably what they find most joy in is creating original worlds and characters with their worldwide friends. In this chapter, I examined what fans accomplish outside of traditionally defined fan communities where fans have a relationship with a specific text. I critique textual poaching, a commonly held concept in fan studies, where fans take ownership of an author's text, thus creating their own. In Greg, Dakota, and Juni's communities, these fans of other properties like *Lord of the Rings* or *Warrior Cats* create their own texts, emphasizing the ingenuity and original creativity of fans

when they share access to their spaces. In this case, my interviewees share access to their online spaces through original creation, not necessarily textual poaching. This decentralization troubles the typical author / fan paradigm. Throughout their writing process, these original fan authors seek commonality with those of similar body/minds, creating and sharing virtual spaces. Fan identity is generative, not iterative.

In my fourth chapter, I interviewed Meagan, another journalist, but one who covers disability issues in Ontario. Ontario provides an important case study for the inclusion of the disabled community, because of its own historical context. Ontario has historically practiced exclusion for its disabled population, especially stretching back to its history of institutionalization. However, as the last of the institutions were closing in the 1990s, the provincial government instituted policy changes to the welfare system that further marginalized the disabled. PC Premier Mike Harris instituted Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program with the aim to kick off as many recipients off welfare in line with the well-established neoliberalism principle of workfare. Since its inception, ODSP has marginalized and excluded the vulnerable disabled population of Ontario. Meagan has experiences with this program as a journalist covering the topic, but also as a recipient herself. She explained to me the alienating effects of living on ODSP in a provincial program that rarely aids those who need it most. However, despite this alienation and isolation on ODSP, Meagan explained to me the joys of participating in her local community through sports fandom. Her local sports teams, such as the Toronto Blue Jays, provide an integral link to her community. In this way, she shares access to local community spaces through cheering for the Jays or following the lives of the Gretzky family, natives of her hometown of Brantford, very closely. Even though ODSP has isolated her in the past, Meagan finds shared joy in watching sports with her family and friends, highlighting

the inclusive potential of sports fandom for people experiencing isolation, particularly in a province that, through policy, aims to marginalize, erase, and make invisible the disabled. An analysis of the life and relationships of a sports fan reveals the exciting potential for studying access to local fan spaces, such as Ontario.

Space is a fundamental concept in this dissertation, drawn from critical access studies. I have demonstrated the vital importance of employing a critical access lens to the study of fandom. For one, it reveals the complexities of the disabled experience within fan communities, highlighting how central the disabled experience is in the history of fan communities. Disability has always been part of fan culture. As I demonstrated in my first chapter, disability existed in science fiction since Hugo Gernsback coined the genre's term. Shaming bodies, especially disabled bodies, existed during the advent of arcade culture in the 1980s. Embodiment is a fundamental theme in the history of how people have organized communities on the Internet. Finally, the space of sports fan culture has always accommodated a wide diversity of bodies within it. Additionally, critical access studies allows scholars to break away from long-held ideas in fan studies that, although still are viable, are not the whole story. Fans have bodies and therefore they construct spaces. Regardless of disability, fans build spaces with their bodies through interacting with each other and forming relationships. Critical access studies is integral for understanding the complex historical forces present in fan history, an important concept just as there has been the historical turn in fan studies.

I conceived of this fan history as being an oral history, understanding the potential for using first-hand accounts as a primary source. As I have mentioned throughout this dissertation, historians of disability often struggle finding sources that truly express the voice of the disabled people they are studying. So much of our history has been written for us through medical records

or other paternalistic documents. Instead, I sought to talk directly to people with similar experiences as myself. After reading on oral history methodology, I conceived of a plan for my interviews, but there were unexpected roadblocks that are part of any oral history process. For one, without the Internet, I would have needed to meet my interviewees in person. This would have made it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to speak to most of my interviewees. Thankfully, with video chat, I was able to conduct my interviews. However, I sense that there were missing things with this approach. I would have liked to have been in person with my interviewees to pick up on details that are harder to perceive over a webcam. My distant interviewing process worked, but going forward as an oral historian, I would like to further have the personal connection of being with my interviewee in a physical location. Additionally, being present in the same physical space gives insight for the oral historian. I can see how an interviewee might decorate their house, for example. On a webcam, I can only see what is in frame. Regardless, conducting interviews over video chat allowed me to have a wide range of interviewees from different locations.

From previous experience writing history, I was used to what many others in history discuss: using the availability of archives to conduct primary source research. However, as my primary sources were oral interviews, much consideration was put into scheduling, recruiting, and facilitating planning with my interviewees. This speaks to the special care that is needed for oral history. Often, there are dead ends when recruiting. I initially conceived of my fourth chapter on the topic of UK football fans, but after much emailing, there were no viable candidates. Thankfully, this meant that I got in touch with Meagan, but I still think that disability in the UK football fan community is ripe for exploration, as there is great support for disabled fans in that space.

A true joy of working on this project was hearing the stories of my interviewees. Even though likely many people saw my recruitment emails and did not respond, those who did respond were eager to talk about their life experiences. I think this is because it is a common fan impulse to share joyful things and find commonality with someone who is willing to listen. I already knew that a key job of mine would be to listen, but I think especially for fan oral history, this is important. Fans want to share their experiences, because they derive so much joy and connection with their fan community. Fans were eager to tell me their stories, once I was able to schedule interviews. The basic impulse of fans is to be inclusive, and anything else falls short of the fan ideal. Fans seek connection with others. Historical forces like ableism, sexism, and racism work to adulterate that impulse, as demonstrated in this dissertation.

This study encourages other disability and fan scholars to conduct their own histories. As a case study approach, oral history focused on specific individuals contextualized within larger historical forces within a fan space may have an initially limited scope. However, with more of them, disability fan studies scholars can get a much better picture of the themes of this intersection. A history claiming to be the definitive history of disability in fan communities would necessarily miss many voices that ought to be included in such an expansive history. However, case study approaches, with care and connection to the studied community, can collectively yield great insight into an evolving field. Borrowing a concept from critical access studies, this approach is an ongoing conversation, rather than an authoritative synthesis on the topic that halts any future discussion. I encourage other scholars who are interested in this topic to follow this methodology for future insights on other fan spaces.

I conceive of further studies to be varied, widely accessing many other fan communities. In the past couple of decades, fan studies has opened up to study fandoms apart from the more

“traditional” fan communities. Realistically, this is a wide scope, and certainly other scholars with different life experiences will arrive at different fan communities yet to be studied. In my research, there are a few that I see as promising. In line with genre fandoms, the horror fandom has yet to be adequately discussed, and yet is thriving. For example, the prominent horror television show *American Horror Story* has almost 5,000 related entries on Archive of Our Own, one of the most popular fan fiction archives on the Internet.¹ The true crime fandom is also a good candidate, part of a gargantuan industry that is going strong with a long history that also reaches back to the pulp era, much like science fiction. Popular true crime podcast *My Favorite Murder* has a staggering number of 55,700 reviews with an overall rating of 4.7/5 on Spotify, showing the staying power of the genre.² In terms of fans as creators, an oral history of prolific disabled fan fiction writers would reveal great insight into how disabled fans create access to their spaces through writing about their lived experiences. One thing revealed to me in my research has been how wide fan identity is within society. Apart from being a subculture, or even pop culture, fan culture intersects with larger historical forces. In this way, fan history is truly history itself. Using a lens of fan studies, scholars will uncover the stories of many fan communities previously untold.

I highlight a realization that I had while conducting my interviews. My interviewees shared with me their spaces through telling their stories. The interviews themselves were a form of sharing access to fan spaces. Oral history represented an important fan practice that I was participating in. For just over an hour, I could experience the thickly layered culture of each of my interviewees. After writing so extensively about the Eggs, for example, there is a subjective

¹ “American Horror Story – Works | Archive of Our Own,” <https://archiveofourown.org/tags/American%20Horror%20Story/works>, accessed July 29, 2024.

² “My Favorite Murder With Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark | Podcast on Spotify,” <https://open.spotify.com/show/0U9S5J2ltMaKdxIfLuEjzE>, accessed July 29, 2024.

part of me that feels like I was there for their organization. In this way, oral history allowed me to realize the centrality of sharing space in fan communities. Marilyn and Marcia shared with me their stories, they shared with me their space of science fiction fans practicing accessibility. Antonio and Grant shared with me how disabled video game fans are organizing to create accessible gaming, making me part of that discussion. Greg, Dakota, and Juni shared with me their created worlds of space pilots and werewolves, allowing me to see their tightly-knit communities. Meagan shared with me the joys and sorrows of following Ontario sports, making me feel like I was there for Roy Halladay's memorial ceremony at the Rogers Centre. Therefore, writing, and disseminating this dissertation is also a form of sharing access to these fan spaces.

Truthfully, writing this oral history has been a joy and privilege. Finding the Eggs (especially as my first chapter) felt like fate, but I also feel lucky for all the other strokes of luck I have had while interviewing for my chapters. Antonio's testimony has made this oral history Transatlantic, giving an important perspective from Europe that reinforces the themes of my argument even though being from a different continent. Finding the role-playing communities revealed to me a deeply complex yet accepting group that I would have never found doing a traditional history. Finally, connecting with Meagan brought this larger narrative to my home province, and an encouraging connection in the face of dealing with a difficult social assistance system here at home. These coincidences and connections have always been part of the historical writing process, but I have felt are more pronounced in writing oral history. Oral history reveals the present nature of history. My interviewees all confided in me their joy, pleasure, and pain, emphasizing how historical subjects have all felt the same way that we have. It is easy to lose that when studying dates far in the past. Oral history reveals the living nature of history. This is

critical for disability history, a history that traditionally has been neglected or silenced. We have always lived our lives, even if not on the record.

Conceiving of spaces widely, constructed by the bodies experiencing them, has allowed me to look at a wide range of fan communities and their practices. Beyond this study, there are so many more fan spaces with stories to be told, and thus, there are more fan spaces in society than previously thought. To be a human is to seek joy, pleasure, and community, and this is what fans do. Fans are everywhere. Fan spaces exist throughout culture and society, but for disabled fans, creating access and inclusion is critical. It is activist in nature. Historically, disabled people have encountered barred spaces. In fan communities, they find their people, even when they encounter larger historical obstacles. Eventually, they find their Marilyn, their Antonio, their Greg, or their Meagan.

These fans share access with each other in relational spaces that we call “fan communities.” This dissertation advocates for considering how fans construct their own spaces, their opening or closing of which reveals whom they identify with among their fan communities, and perceived hierarchies in such spaces. Therefore, disability activism within fan spaces consists of fans finding empowerment through creating inclusive spaces that further empower other disabled individuals who share in this space. Sharing in the pleasure and joy of fandom is truly revolutionary, as the disabled have historically been medicalized and denied pleasure through marginalization. This historical study has employed flexible methods to demonstrate the continuity of theme in disability history through an intersectional lens. It also expands the discipline of fan studies by broadening the discipline’s definition of what is a fan space. Fan spaces are formed and sustained by the relationships between fans experiencing fan culture. We disabled are in any conceivable community, but so often on the sidelines. In a fan community,

though, we are the celebrated outsiders, and the most impassioned loud mouths. We probably do not care how we come off. We are freaking fans.

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Appendix I: Transcripts

Eric and Marilyn Teague – February 8, 2023

Eric: So very broadly. Please speak to your experiences with disability, so it might be your disability. It might be others' disabilities, people in your life. What would you say your experience with disability is?

Marilyn: OK. Well actually it started when I was a child. My father had a friend, uh, who was a tailor, and my dad would actually go to this man's house and pick him up. Take him to work. And then reverse it, you know, from work. Take him back home to his house and his name...we called him Uncle Marky. His name was Mr. Marx. MARX. Yes, I think it was. Anyway, Mr. Marx, Uncle Markey had a disability. I think he had polio and he was a wheelchair user. And it -- it impressed me that my dad was strong enough to pick up this man and transfer him from his wheelchair and to the front seat of -- of Dad's car. You know, and -- and then he folded up his wheelchair and did all of that and took him back. And I never knew the relationship other than, you know, I don't know if they were army buddies or just what, but, you know, my dad just did this for him. My dad had a barbershop in the front of the -- the tailor shop where you know, Mr. Marx, did alterations and the like, you know, on clothing. And uh, you know, I mean it didn't occur to me that this man was disabled. He was just Uncle Marky to me, you know, and uh... I, so since I was a child, I've been around people who were disabled, didn't think anything about it, you know?

But then growing up, you know, I guess maybe, oh my gosh, well, going to sci-fi conventions. Been doing that since, what, 1966, I think, just when I was graduating from high school and that's when *Star Trek* came out, you know? September the 8th, 1966, if you need to know and my gosh, you know, *Star Trek* changed my life. You know, only because, well, there were no people with disabilities there, but just *Star Trek* got me pretty much into fandom. And then I found out that there was a sci-fi club where we didn't even really want to call it sci-fi. You know, it was science fiction for the elitist, and there was, but there was a club that met on -- ohh, I think it was once a month. Downtown Atlanta. So, I found out about it. I don't know how, uh, maybe an announcement in newspaper and I attended the meeting. And UM. You know, everybody was sitting around, and they were talking about books that they had read. Well, I really wasn't much of a reader of books. You know, I wanted -- I like movies and TV shows, but the fact is, you know, I got hooked on fandom right out of high school.

UM and then, uh, there was college, but actually I noticed, I think it was mostly my husband who introduced me to Samanda Jeude. Her name was spelled JEUDE and Samantha had polio, so she was using a scooter to get around at conventions. I don't know when they first met. I don't know why it never occurred to me to ask, but he -- he just says I want you to meet somebody. Maybe she was a he was into reading. Again, I'm not a reader, but he was big on books. I mean, Robert

and I got married and he brought all his books with him. You know, I brought all my videotapes with me. My DVD's, you know? That's -- that's where I was. But basically, notice that at -- Samanda was writing a -- a guide on how to make your convention accessible for people who had disabilities, and primarily, you know Samanda, he needed a scooter to get around. And -- but there are people with other disabilities that she was concerned about. People who are blind, visually impaired. Uh. UM and we went on to include women who were pregnant, you know, as a temporary disability. But nevertheless, you know, you -- they needed accommodations. I -- I don't know if the ADA covers pregnancy, but we did and -- and I say we, I mean...

Eric: Ohh yeah.

Marilyn: We started a group of fans, some disabled and some not, but we were concerned that people who have disabilities have a darn hard time getting around at conventions. I mean people, even who were wheelchair users -- UM -- they couldn't get into the bathrooms the -- you know, they couldn't get into the dealers rooms because they were so crowded. You know the -- the -- the rooms just didn't allow for people to get around in wheelchairs or scooters. And by the way, speaking of scooters, Samanda told someone that her scooter was her "electrical legs" because she wasn't able to walk. So she used a scooter and this fan she was talking to misunderstood her and thought she said "Electrical Eggs." So that's how -- that's how the group was started, you know, Electrical Eggs.

Eric: That's why it's called that, yeah.

Marilyn: We just thought it was, you know, kind of cute and catchy. And those of us who were there at the beginning, we were considered carton members like, you know, egg cartons. OK. So OK, so the carton members. Uh, Samanda, she was the egghead. How's that? OK, Marcia Kelly Illingworth, now she was...

Eric: Cool. OK.

Marilyn: What do you call the people who ride an ambulance as the take care of people? Paramedics.

Eric: Oh, like yes, yeah.

Marilyn: She was a paramedic, right? And so she was a medeggal -- medeggal. Now you have to spell medical with eggs. Medical. Egg. OK, so that's her title. We all had different titles. I my -- my name at that time was Marilyn White, so I was called, guess what?

Eric: Egg white.

Marilyn: Egg white. That's it. Yeah. And my husband. I don't know why, but Samanda called him eggbeater. Now, does that mean that he was beating his wife? No. But anyway that, I mean, Samanda just called him eggbeater, and so we were called the "meringue couple" because, you know, that's what you do with eggs. You beat them and they become meringue, anyway. And there's a guy named Saint, who was, I don't remember his title. Samanda's husband Don Cook. What was Don's name? I can't remember now. I did put Marcia Kelly Ellingworth in -- in contact with you. I sent you her e-mail so she can, she can tell you more about the titles that we all had.

Eric: Yes.

Marilyn: I. Oh, Oh yeah. We had famous people who wanted to become associate members, egg-ssociate members, egg-ssociate members of Electrical Eggs.

Eric: Hmm.

Marilyn: UM. Oh my God. See, now I draw a blank. I should have had a script, you know, ready. So I was going to be able to tell you this stuff right off the bat. But some I want -- I want -- I want you to talk to Marcia -- and I don't want to tell you all this. You know Marcia can fill you in on everything. But, we had a lot of authors who were supportive of us. We had T-shirts that we made-up that said "I support Electrical Eggs" and with, and you know, we wore them and we sold them as a fundraiser, so there might be a lot of people out there wearing them. I was going to hang, hold one up. So, you could see one but. We did some remodeling in my house, and I can't find.... I found one, not my favorite one, but they're -- they're in the house somewhere. Ask Marcia about her T-shirts. But, anyway, but we did produce a booklet, a guide for convention organizers on how to make conventions accessible.

Eric: That's OK.

Marilyn: And not just, you know, basically the first step really was selecting a hotel that was already pretty much accessible, had wide aisles, had decent bathrooms. They -- they didn't have this air lock kind of thing, you know, where you have a you go into one room. I mean to the bathroom and but you still got to go into another through another door to get to the actual stalls. Oh and -- and the -- And Electrical Eggs came out really right before the ADA was, UM, enacted, I think. Again, you know, normally I could just rattle off dates and everything, but I can't. But the -- the ADA came out. I think it was 1990 and we were out there doing this stuff at 18 -- 1987.

Eric: This is all great, so no worries.

Marilyn: 87, 88, 87 I think so. We preceded the -- the ADAs far as accessibility is concerned. Again, ask talk to Marcia. She -- she's got all the dates. She's younger than I am. I -- I'm getting old and I can't remember a lot of stuff. But basically we, just, the guidebook just said, you know, these are things that you want to have for people with disabilities, such as program books, making them in large print. We got a couple of put into Braille. But you know, those were, like, very thick and it was really hard to have a one person walk around with a Braille program book. We did it once or twice.

But it was like, you know, very cumbersome, and we didn't really have much of a call for it these days you can -- you can have your -- your program book for people who are blind or vision impaired, they really don't ask for it, but they will. We can have it transcribed if we have enough time, you know, but not much call for that. People have service animals, you know. We were concerned about well, having a dog walk for...

Eric: Mm-hmm.

Marilyn: Service animals. And we go through a process of qualifying what is a service animal because you know, I mean my cat, Ripley, I love her to death, but I would not call her a service animal. You know, I try to get her to fetch things. And she just she looks around. She looks the other way. Some dogs you know can be trained. Of course, there are the seeing eye dogs, but a lot of people do train a lot of people who are deaf train their own dogs. So there you go. But you know what else? Are we -- are we concerned about just basically registration, getting people registered, providing in sign language interpreters? That was unheard of back in 1987-88 even. You know, I was actually working at a convention called DragonCon. Well, I worked a lot of conventions as a volunteer. I mean, but Dragon Con, I started out as a registration -- on site registration director and -- but I kept insisting, you know, I need to be working with people with disabilities. I need to be working as an interpreter because I did go to college for to -- to become an interpreter, sign language. So they finally said OK, and the -- the following year, DragonCon did set up a what we used to call handicap access. OK, we don't call it that anymore. It became disability services after a few years. But I was the director of handicapped access. And basically, people who were disabled would come and they would register with us. They would tell us, we say, "Well, what kind of -- of -- of a disability do you have and how can the convention make things more accessible to you?" And they would basically tell us what they needed, now this is always on site. Basically, we didn't really have that many people at the time register with us in advance.

I think DragonCon does it differently now I'm -- I'm not really with -- I'm not really... I'm not a director anymore for DragonCon. I don't know how they if they do anything in advance to register people, but actually I was also, the parade director, I was the first director of the Parade for Dragon Con. Many people don't know that, but I was also at the same time doing

handicapped access and the parade, you know, and that was a lot. So, they finally did decide to split it into two departments, thank goodness. But, I -- I did the parade for about 6 years and then I turned it over to one of my best friends ever, Jan Price. But Jan had cancer and she died last year two years ago now.

Eric: I'm sorry

Marilyn: Yeah, we are. We are. I told, like, you know, you just don't get over people who are dying and then people who are dying from cancer. My husband had glioblastoma, which is brain cancer. And that's how he died. So, to me, cancer sucks. You know, I mean. Can't tell you how many people I know that have died because of cancer, but anyway I move on. What else did you want to know? I get off of on these tracks. You know my -- my brain kind of travels sometimes.

Eric: No, this is great. I -- I have a lot to write down. So there there's -- there's a lot to talk about, which is -- which is great. So thank you again.

Marilyn: Uh. Yeah. Uh, sure, yeah, we had. You know, it's -- it's -- it's amazing too. We've also had some of our guests at conventions who are people with disabilities and they will also request services mainly... At the time, you know, uh, we use, we were able to get I -- I there was a what is it -- pharmacy in in Tucker, GA. They used to donate uh, two or three wheelchairs for us to use. At the convention we -- we -- we get a van and we go pick up the chairs and then we bring them back and we loan them out to people, people who are staying at the hotels, the hotels had wheelchairs, yes, but not a lot that they could spare basically, and -- and then there was a company called Scooter Around that we, the DragonCon contracts with them. And last year I think I counted about close to 75 scooters there that they had people had records, had registered, registered reserved in advance. You know, there might have been more, but they were all parked down the hallway. And so now we see that. And I was one of those people. Last year I rented a scooter for a couple of days just because I'm -- I had a trouble walking with my -- I -- I have asthma too.

You know, but and you, you, you know, you talk about my disability well. I didn't think about, you know, I didn't really have a disability. To me, asthma was not a disability. It didn't -- it didn't affect me that much. I'm 74 years old now. I have arthritis and I used to walk in that parade. I tell you, that was like a mile and a half walk, maybe 2 -- 2 miles I used to do it in heels, you know.

Eric: Wow.

Marilyn: And. Then you know my husband and I, we were just the banner carriers. We carried the banner that, this said, "Dragon Con parade" at the front of the parade. And I thought nothing about it, you know, I mean, but all of a sudden, you know? The last couple of years it's been, you

know, it was like I -- I -- I noticed that there's a hill that we're walking up and the asthma was really getting to me. So, the last couple of years, you know, I teetered out. I -- I didn't -- didn't get to walk the whole parade. And I just had to take myself out, you know, that was bad. OK. But this year now here's the thing. Back in April. Excuse me, back in October of this year, I developed something. That we didn't have a name for it first, but it's called peripheral artery disease PAD. What happened was my big toe had this big infection. And it's like the doctor podiatrist said, "OK, your toes gotta go." I said, "OK. No big deal." I had already had the left toe, the left foot, little small, the pinky toe amputated, cut off because I had an infection over there. That was back in 2017. OK, so I thought, OK, no big deal. I've already had a toe amputated. OK, I can -- I can handle the right toe, but then the right side was really bad. The other four toes were bad too, so they had to cut them off. OK, I said. OK, why did we do that the first time? But they said, "Nah." And then guess what? The foot died itself. You know, it wasn't getting a blood there wasn't -- there was no blood flow. OK, so I go and like, you know, man, why are we messing around with this, you know? And so the doctor said, "OK, well we can do uh this experimental thing where we try to cut off your foot but leave the ankle intact. But you'll need like 3 surgeries for that. Or we can just cut off your leg below the knee." I said, "Well, look, let's do it. Let's, you know, I -- I don't really want any more surgeries." So right now I am amputated. With below the knee, I have a good chunk of my knee and the leg below that, so I'm actually not supposed to, but I am a I -- I like -- I climbed up the stairs in my house. I have like 13-14 stairs from the living room upstairs to where the bedroom is, where the -- the -- the -- the -- what do you call this? The washer?

Eric: Oh.

Marilyn: Dryer are but I -- I can't walk, so I'm, like, scooting up by sitting on each step, 1 by 1 by 1. It actually took me about 20 minutes to get up here and. Because I, and I started this at 6:30 and I, and then I said, "Oh my God, I'm supposed to be meeting with Eric at 7:00. You know, there's no way for me to get back downstairs in time, you know?" So I'm still upstairs sitting in the dark because there's no lighting up here, but it's going to take me another 20 minutes to scoop down each stair individually. But you know, I gotta do laundry. I live alone. I and me and my cat, basically.

Uh, I didn't tell you about my son. My son died in 2016, and then my husband died in 2017. OK, both of them had illnesses and infections and stuff like that. Cancer. So anyway, so it's just me and the cat now. But this is going to be interesting for me. I -- I'm actually going to meet with the prosthetics people tomorrow morning. I've already been there once, so I'm -- I'm going to be hopefully measured. They're doing evaluation now. They -- they want to see how well I'm doing, using a walker. Not very good. I really mainly depend on the wheelchair. And uh, but uh, they're going to do some more tests tomorrow. I don't know what they got planned. But I, to me, I think it's cool. I mean, I'm OK. I'm -- I'm trying to think, you know, I -- I'm gonna, I'm -- I'm going to

have a prosthetic leg. I can have a picture of a of a of an anime character or, you know, a robot or something. And I said OK, I want Nichelle Nichols. I want Uhura on my on my prosthetic leg. So I think it's gonna be so cool walking in the DragonCon with a prosthetic leg, you know, with the...

Eric: That's awesome.

Marilyn: With Lieutenant Ohura on it, I've already got the photograph. I know what it's going to look like, but anyway, so that's me joining the disability community. In a nutshell, well, I -- I took -- how long did it take with this? Uh, 20 minutes. OK, sorry. Any other questions?

Eric: Ohh no that. Yeah, I've got a few more, but I just want to say I really appreciate everything you've -- you've offered so far because it's -- it's -- it's very help helpful contextualizing things because it's, you know, it's -- I -- I like being a historian. Historians are -- are, it's -- it's --, it's my calling but...

Marilyn: OK.

Eric: You often just read dusty, [books] and -- and you have to really imagine the lived experience, right? So, what, what attracted to me to oral history doing this kind of history where I talk to people and record their stories is that it is the lived experience. So, it comes alive.

Marilyn: Yes, right. OK.

Eric: So, I just, I just want to say how much I appreciate your lived experience.

Marilyn: Yeah. Oh, sure. I'm just glad that somebody forwarded your e-mail to me. You know, they saw you. Somebody had written. You had written to somebody and they posted on Facebook and somebody said, "hey, Marilyn T, you know, you might be interested in calling this guy or talking to them."

Eric: Yeah.

Marilyn: I go like, "yeah. Sure. Always." And you know, I mean, my passion is working with people with disabilities, that is true. Even though you don't think of people who are Deaf as being disabled, they certainly do not. They're not, they're not handicapped, they're not disabled. Yeah, we do learn the terminology, you know, we know that people aren't handicapped. It's the situations around them, the buildings...

Eric: Yeah, that's right.

Marilyn: Are what handicapped somebody? But I would never call my -- my best friend. She's Deaf and I would never call her handicap by any, you know, no stretch of the imagination. Is she handicapped? She's -- she's holding down a job, you know? And she's working. Uh, she was maid of honor at my wedding. So, you know. Oh, yeah. We had a *Star Trek* wedding. I did. I left that out, didn't I?

Eric: That's awesome.

Marilyn: Jot this down. Yeah, we had a *Star Trek* like wedding me, my husband and my son was dressed as Jordy from *Star Trek*. It was a *Star Trek* wedding. We had *Star Trek* dresses, uniforms, my husband and his best man, you know. They were like, you know what, it wasn't *Star Trek: The Original Series* uniforms they were. These were and not [*Star Trek: The*] *Next Gen[eration]*. They were, what was the first movie? The *Star Trek* movie. I can't remember the name of it. I didn't say that I did. I -- I can't remember the name of the *Star Trek* movie of *The Wrath of Khan*.

Eric: Ohh.

Marilyn: Uh, so you know, they looked like those with their costumes they had.

Eric: Yeah.

Marilyn: Somebody make the men's costumes I had. We had the lady who made the women's costumes. You know. It was super dynamic. If I find the photographs I can send you some, and, you know. Yeah. *Star Trek* through and through. Not *Star Wars*, just *Star Trek*. That's...

Eric: When I was, must have been three years old, I watched [*Star Wars Episode IV: A*] *New Hope* on my dad's VHS player. So, I'm a *Star Wars* guy. But that being said, I married into a I'm getting married into a *Star Trek* family, so I've been watching...

Marilyn: Oh yeah. That's OK. Great.

Eric: *Star Trek: Discovery* with my father-in-law. And so, when we go over, we'll have dinner and -- and then watch *Star Trek: Discovery*. And I -- I really enjoy it. I really like...

Marilyn: Oh yeah.

Eric: Well, 'cause *Star Wars* isn't really science fiction, right? That's what a lot of people say, right? *Star Trek* is -- is *Star Trek* is very much science fiction. It's about humanity's place in the

future and humanity's place in the cosmos. And it asks big questions, but I -- I love *Star Wars*, but it doesn't ask very many big questions about anything.

Marilyn: Yeah, well, so much of *Star Trek* has come to be, you know, I mean, you know, the, the, the, the tricorders that they have the, the, the handheld communicators, right. OK. I mean everybody has one -- my sister still has her flip phone.

Eric: Yeah.

Marilyn: She's not letting that go, and it's not even -- it's not even -- it's not an iPhone, it's a[n] Android. But she, you know, but you know, there's so much, you know -- *Star Trek*...just -- it just gave people hope. You know for the future and -- and, uh, every now and then, you know, I -- I think it was great that people like Whoopi Goldberg was on there. Doctor Mae Jemison was on there. Stephen Hawking, you know, I mean it's -- it's great to see that these people recognize the impact that *Star Trek* had. You know, I don't see them and I don't see too many famous people wanting to be in a *Star Wars* movie. I mean, really as actors, or am I wrong? I mean, really I can't...

Eric: Uh, you know, I might think I'm trying to think. I think like the actors who came in for the sequel, like Daisy Ridley and John Boyega, you know, these actors who were unknowns, quote UN quote, really were like, Oh my God, my first...

Marilyn: Yeah. Yes.

Eric: Acting break is a *Star Wars* movie. And I remember hearing about that. But it's, I guess -- I guess you're right, it's not quite the same as like all of these celebrities really wanting to be on *Star Trek*, right? Yeah.

Marilyn: Exactly. Yes, you're right. That's exactly right. They know *Star Trek* rocks, yeah.

Eric: Yeah, you know it -- it astounds me this TV show from the 60s. I don't know how many episodes the original series was on for, but it's not like it was on for 10 seasons, but it, like, it fundamentally changed, not just like....

Marilyn: No.

Eric: Science fiction as a genre, but pop culture at large.

Marilyn: Sure. Right. Yeah, right. Yeah.

Eric: You know, it just completely changed the game, right? And I you know that better than I do. I've only read about this but it's really cool. It's really cool.

Marilyn: Well, you know, I mean now, I think just recently have I noticed that you know this whole. I -- I can't say the initials LG....

Eric: LGBTQ like the queer [community], yeah.

Marilyn: Yeah. Thank you. Yeah, I get kind of confused on the initials, but you know, gay lesbian, bisexual, queer, right? OK. Some of my best friends are gay. How about that? But you know, but I'm starting to see that moving over into *Star Trek*, I think. Can't ask, can't -- don't ask me which episode it was, but I think you know, I mean, the acceptance of what we have now, as far as society is being reflected in *Star Trek*. Yeah. Did I say that right? Wow.

Eric: Yeah, yeah, I completely understand what you're saying. Yeah, for sure, I agree.

Marilyn: So, there you go.

Eric: I completely agree.

Marilyn: Yeah. And so yeah, so but it's what we're seeing. And as a society now is being woven into the fabric -- oh I like that -- that woven into the fabric of *Star Trek*. But we got so much from *Star Trek*. Being woven into our communities, societies. Ohh Gee, that's very heavy, isn't it? Uh, wrap my brain around.

Eric: It's great. I mean, I think I think that's what good science fiction should do like that. That's the -- that is I think the point of the genre of -- of that. So I agree, I agree.

Marilyn: Yeah.

Eric: Yeah.

Marilyn: Yeah. So yeah, it's all good, really. You know, I mean, just one of those things that are you know we are seeing, um, happening these days. But you know, I mean I -- I don't know. You know, there's tragedy going on too, you know. I mean earthquakes in Syria. And the -- the war in Ukraine. They don't really, you know, in in the future there aren't any wars, you know? Well, not, not really. I mean, yes, there are wars between, like, the Cardassians and the -- the Bajorans. There's a war. I forget that. OK, well, scratch, scratch what I just said. Yeah, there are wars.

Eric: Yeah, but, *Star Trek* -- it provides this optimism which like...

Marilyn: Yeah.

Eric: You know, like even -- even, you know, I like, I guess, like, I grew up reading a lot of fantasy. Like *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* and that kind of stuff. And those are those are certainly optimistic, but there's nothing like being like, well, what are we going to be like as a species in 1000 years and looking forward and seeing.

Marilyn: Yes.

Eric: You know, like instead of missions to go destroy this or that it's a mission of tolerance of exploration. And I think that's very admirable.

Marilyn: Yeah. You know, my dad was marvelous. He liked horror movies and he likes science fiction. UM. And I'll never forget the night that man first walked on the moon. My dad and I stood, stayed awake all night watching the -- the -- the broadcast. And he made hot chocolate for me. You know, for us. We were sitting there, and, but my dad also liked horror movies. And science fiction. So you know, I mean, somebody asked me, what do you think you got your, your love of -- of science fiction and fantasy and horror from my dad. And I think you know he contributed into it, but I think I fed some of it to him too. You know, I said, "OK, look, you know," and he go, "oh, OK. OK." And we watch movies and TV shows like there was *Men Into Space*. I -- there's a really old TV show. Of course. You know, *One Step Beyond*. OK. Kind of really creepy stories. Not so much Alfred Hitchcock, but oh, what was that show? *Lost In Space*, started out there at the same time, just about as *Star Trek*. But you know. *Star Trek* and *Lost in Space*. You know. There's the robot and there's Doctor Smith, and I love that show. Don't get me wrong, I love, I love both of them. I still watch the reruns on MeTV here. I don't know if you know what MeTV is but uh....

Eric: But it's like "vintage" like -- they show all the old shows.

Marilyn: They show old shows. They show. Yeah, right. Yeah. Like, you know, you can watch *The Wild, Wild West* or -- or *[The] Andy Griffith Show* or, you know, good stuff.

Eric: Yeah, yeah.

Marilyn: Yeah, but you're in Canada. I don't know what kind of TV you have in Canada, but...

Eric: So me and my partner are very much of our age. We don't have a cable box, no satellite. It's just streaming. Like, that's, yeah.

Marilyn: Streaming OK, streaming is good. Yeah, I stream most of my shows are on a, I have an Apple TV.

Eric: Yeah.

Marilyn: So, and there are apps that are added to it, so that's how I watch local news and Netflix and something called Freebie. You know, just, you know, all kinds of stuff. Not that this is an endorsement for them. But I -- just I -- just you know, watch streaming and apps on my TV. Yeah, I got to stop staying I -- I was up until like, 2:00 this morning watching TV. Man, I can't get. That's fine. Not when I have....

Eric: That's good.

Marilyn: To go to work the next day. Yes, I am still working fine, by the way. Yeah.

Eric: Yeah, so, so you, you your, your, your, your occupation do you are you like are you are you working as a sign language interpreter? Are you or are you more of in an administrative role or what exactly?

Marilyn: Yeah, basically, I'm actually my -- my I work with this company. I am with this company. I just -- I just celebrated 7 years but I worked 19 years at an -- a similar company. And basically people call my agency when they need to have a sign language interpreter for doctor's appointments, hospital visits, colleges, not so much the elementary schools. That's another agency [that] handles the elementary and the K through 12 schools, but we get these calls all the time. You know, we need an interpreter tomorrow at such and such. They will, we go like, "OK." And they tell us how long. And so basically my -- my job title is ASL services coordinator. So, you know, whatever service they need. If it's in sign language, American Sign Language, then that's we -- we schedule. Accordingly, but like I said, I don't go out and interpret. I do volunteer, but I don't really get paid to be an interpreter. That's -- that's another step right there. You need to and -- and -- and in the United States. You need to be certified as a sign language interpreter, which means taking a test A2 part test and passing both parts. And I took the test once I passed the first part, but not so much the second part. And I kind of gave up mainly because it's a lot of money to spend to be, to take the test again. So, like when I save up some more money, I've been saying that for like 7-8 years now having a, you know, maybe I can try to take the test again.

Eric: Hmm-hmm.

Marilyn: But most of the people who are working, in fact all the people who working with us are nationally certified sign language interpreters, so. But I can volunteer the hell out of everything, you know? I mean, if I -- I volunteer for DragonCon, I interpreted DragonCon and -- and the

Atlanta there's other conventions. The Atlanta Comic Con, I volunteered for them one year. What else do we have here? Oh, well, there used to be something called the Atlanta Comics and Fantasy Fair. But they dissolved after a few years. Anyway, yeah. Ask me another question.

Eric: Absolutely you -- you very... I have a list and you've been answering a bunch of them without -- without trying. So that that's great. OK. Oh, OK. Well, this this is a bit more of a like a like a -- like a headier question. Like, how do you feel disability -- well, actually, we talked about that because you kind of mentioned that *Star Trek*, no one's really disabled, but... how do you feel disability is represented in the fandom? So in -- in in *Star Trek*, the shows, the movies, but also within the larger community, would you say?

Marilyn: Yeah. Let me see. OK. There was one episode of *Star Trek*, you know? "Loud as a Whisper." Where they had a Deaf actor playing a Deaf character, which we thought was interesting, and it was amazing because I don't know if you've seen that, it was -- I'll make it real short, but he was going to be a mediator between two warring factions, and he lost his interpreters. His interpreter died somehow, was killed, and he was there, and nobody could communicate. He couldn't communicate with anybody except for da-da, Brett Spiner's character. What was that?

Eric: Oh.

Marilyn: I can't remember now. Uh Data. OK, so magically Data learns sign language, you know, and those of us in the interpreting community who saw this episode, we thought, well, that's really great, but...

Eric: Oh yeah, yeah.

Marilyn: He was voicing. What? Howie Seago -- that's the actor he was voicing his character before he actually finished signing. You know, it's like, wait a minute. He hasn't signed that yet. So I mean, I know maybe they're doing it for lack of time and all that stuff, but it was really fascinating watching it, you know, Data, learn sign language, just so he could communicate with this character who was Deaf. But. Sorry I digress. What was the question?

Eric: Yeah, I know that -- that -- that I think that's -- that's a good answer to the question. You know just generally you know like you know for when I'm writing to say you know this is kind of what you know disability, how disability is viewed in this fandom, like you know it is this fandom having discussions about disability in some way right and the writers of *Star Trek* consciously put that character in to make a point, right? And you've -- you've outlined exactly you as fans, what you were able to be like, "Wait a second. This isn't the most accurate portrayal, but you know it's still very notable."

Marilyn: No, I want to say groundbreaking, but it was I think you know the first time there was a person with a disability portrayed again. Deaf people don't see themselves as -- as disabled, but, for lack of a better term here, but you know it was great just to see that. And we thought, oh, that's great. Have we seen a person who's in a wheelchair? Well, uh, some people will say the very first pilot had, Captain Pike, who was nonverbal. He was in a wheelchair of sorts, and he could only communicate by pushing a button. That's, you know, green for yes. And -- and red for no. You know, he -- he didn't have any arms. He was just, you know, encased in a box and it's like, you know, what kind of life support was he on? That he was still, you know, I mean, how is he being fed? How did he go to the bathroom? I mean, these are questions I was wondering, you know, this man is in a box. But is -- was, would -- would that be considered "disabled," "disability?" I don't know. He was the captain of the Enterprise until there was a crash and he, you know, they -- they salvaged what they could. Of his body. And uh, I don't know. I have to ask somebody, you know, we have that I haven't really had a discussion about that as far as the disability folks that I know, you know. But I might ask Marcia what she thought about that. But you know, I mean. Fandom is, is, is all-encompassing, you know basically. It's like you can go to conventions and you can be a person with a disability and you can get -- you could be around other people, not so much disabled, but just people in general that you can become friends with. I mean, you know, there's -- there's Facebook now, you know, Facebook took a lot, I want to say, well, you know, we weren't doing well for a couple of years, of course, because of the pandemic, we were not doing face to face conventions. You know, in person, DragonCon went virtual, another convention went virtual, where there was you could see what was going on -- on YouTube, basically. Or, something like that. They had a hook up. And UM. Costume contests. People submitted videos, short videos of themselves in costume, and they were all strung together, you know. And, UM, one thing that I always do at -- at every DragonCon during the masquerade, they have a UM, What do you call it? The -- after the all the costumes have come on stage, they have a lull where the judges go and go vote for best of show, best makeup, best costume. So there's a break and in between that break they have always shown the cartoon Duck Dodgers in the 24th and the half century. And that's been my schtick, you know, basically I am the one who interprets *Duck Dodgers in the 24th½ century*. You've got to look that movie up. I mean, it's -- it's great. It's only about 24 minutes long. But that's my thing. That's -- that's what I look forward to every masquerade that they have at DragonCon. UM, because it's so late in the evening, I think, you know, not too many people actually want to interpret it, but I do. And so it's always been my thing. But anyway, I -- I digress again. I keep going back to DragonCon because I look forward to it every year.

Eric: Yeah, that makes sense, yeah.

Marilyn: Yeah. [indistinguishable] Yeah...comes to me. Well, in a couple of weeks, we've got other conventions like MomoCon coming up. "Momo" is the word Japanese word for peach. And Georgia is considered the peach state.

Eric: Oh yeah.

Marilyn: PeachCon doesn't come -- doesn't come out so well, but Momocon has, uh, erupted on the -- on the scene here. Dragon Con pulled in like 80,000 people last count, 80,000 fans.

Eric: Wow.

Marilyn: OK, of everything you know, I mean, anime, science fiction, fantasy, horror, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, young adult literature, and MomoCon, it's mainly Japanese animation. And they pull in 75,000 people. You wouldn't think that there be that many people who are fans of anime, but there are and. A lot of them are... People, they have the best costumes. Uh, Japanese anime costumes, I mean. People go all out for these costumes. I know a little bit about anime, not a whole lot. My husband was big into Japanimation, Japan, Japanese anime. He got me hooked on it. How I can say that? But you know people. I...

And I -- I -- I talk mainly about the conventions because that's what I like to do. That's -- that's what gets me out of the house. Otherwise, I'd be sitting here, you know, I don't play Scrabble. I don't play checkers or anything like that, but, or solitaire. But I do get out and do conventions. So that's my thing. MomoCon, the Atlanta Comic Con. Deep South convention. World con, have you heard of Worldcon? Yes. OK, Worldcon, Worldcon was here in Atlanta couple of years back 1996, 1998. Sorry so. Oh yeah, that, yeah, that used to be the thing. Before conventions, what do we have? I don't know. It just seems like I've been going to conventions. The last 30 years? Yeah, basically so. And you know, they're -- it's like -- it's like...Going to conventions is like having homecoming. It's -- it's like, you know, it is. It's like, you know, for four, for four days. It used to be just three days, but now it's stretched out to four. Thursday, Friday, the five days for Dragon Con Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday. It's homecoming because...

Eric: Yeah, yeah, I like that.

Marilyn: You -- you know, people who are living in Canada will come to DragonCon people who live in Washington, DC or Washington state or even Japan. We have entered the international fans who come to DragonCon, so it's like these are people, you know, I'm part of the. Captain America group. Captain, uh, Agent Peggy Carter is who I cosplay and I love her. Uh, the fact that she's a kick-ass babe, you know?

Eric: Ohh that's awesome.

Marilyn: And so that's my costume. And I'm with this group the -- the Captain America Group, and they're just great. They're--they're based all over the country. But they come together at DragonCon. So I I was able to join up with them. And the you know, so you know the -- the Captain America people, right?

Eric: Yeah.

Marilyn: OK. I know you're in Canada, but. I have a friend who lives in Canada too, so it's nothing. I'm not saying anything. I'm not making this trying to make it sound like ohh you're -- you're in Canada. That's too bad. That's not bad at all. I I do have a friend who who lives in Ontario or where are you?

Eric: Oh, no worries, no worries. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm in Ontario as well. Southwestern Ontario. So just West of Toronto.

Marilyn: He's in, he's in Cornwall. I don't know.

Eric: [I] know, yeah, Cornwall. Yeah.

Marilyn: Yeah, you should get to know him. OK, David Sally, you probably have never met, but that's OK. But he's a fan, and he was -- he and my husband actually were -- were really good friends. They did -- they did a lot of writing. Another part of fandom is doing fanzines. Fans, that's it, yeah, fan fiction. Yeah. And my husband was prolific in writing fan fiction, and David was—was -- was on this.

Eric: Fanfiction. Ohh. Fanzines. Yeah.

Marilyn: Fan fiction Net Network basically was, you know, my husband would publish his stories there. And, you know, people would critique and say, oh, yeah, that's really great stuff. [We] want more. And so he was, that was his life.

Eric: Yeah.

Marilyn: Anyway, but yeah, you know, it's conventions. I'm like, uh, you know, he (my husband), put together a little small mini convention in his home city of Panama City, FL. And I traveled down there and I think we had all over, like ohh 25 people, which was, you know, compared to 80,000, but it was still like it was homecoming.

Eric: Yeah, yeah.

Marilyn: Or -- or. He called it September party because it was held in September and you know, you sit around and you had -- you'd have a BBQ out in the backyard and it was like a lot of fun, basically.

Eric: That's great.

Marilyn: They just get together. All over, you know. You can do a little small 25 person gathering. UM. Uh. Or you can do an 80,000 person convention, either way and still. Kindred souls, right. People want to be with people who are like themselves, or who like the same things that they do. And the fans are very accepting. You know, you can sit around and talk about the Hubble spacecraft or the oh, there's another one up there now the "John something."

Eric: The--the Webb telescope maybe...

Marilyn: Yeah, yeah, the thing. Yeah, right. OK. I'm not really into the science, true science, real science part. I should be, you know, astronomy, astronomy and all that stuff. I have a telescope in my closet downstairs that my husband bought. I don't use it, you know? I mean, you know, if I want to go and look at those stars, you know, I -- I should pull that thing out of the -- the closet. And, you know, put it up, look at it, look up, and go, "Oh, yeah, you can, you know, there's a space station, you can see that." My big thing now is I'm going to become a ham radio operator. How about that?

Eric: That's awesome.

Marilyn: I know, I have a I have a I bought amateur radio and there's a group that I joined here OMIK O-MIK. Oh, Mick. Oh, Mik is how it's pronounced and it's all Black ham radio operators, I think that's really cool. So and just have meetings like every Thursday. So you know, by zoom. Everything is by zoom of course these days. But I also joined ARRL, Lord, don't ask me what the initial stand for. Amateur Radio Relay League, I think it is.

Eric: That's cool.

Marilyn: Yeah. So just so I can, you know, be in on what other people are doing and talking about so there you go. My friend in Texas, he got his license, so I'm studying to become, to get my amateur beginners license. You know, amateur radio is in like 3 stages, so I'm trying to get in on the bottom floor here. And you know, that's another thing about fans. They do so many different things. I mean, there -- there are attorneys. There are doctors and nurses and social workers and -- and -- and -- and students, you know, college students, grads -- grad students. A lot of teenagers, yes, but everybody who attends conventions and who is part of fandom -- they --

they do have another life, but they sort of put that aside to get into the fantasy side, right? I mean, what about what about you? You don't tell me -- what are you -- are you -- what are you interested in?

Eric: So I -- so I -- I -- I. Like I said, you know, we'll start at the beginning. I think I read a lot of fantasy as a kid and that definitely has left a mark on me, but admittedly, I don't really read that much fantasy anymore. The last fantasy I would have read was *A Song of Ice and Fire*. So it's been a while, right? But I've been reading more sci-fi recently. I read *The Three Body Problem* trilogy, which I really enjoyed. I read a lot of horror. Horror has been a kind of a consistent theme throughout my life.

Marilyn: I love horror too, yeah.

Eric: So yeah, it's great. I -- I really enjoy it. My, my, my poor, my poor partner hates horror. So on one of our first dates, she said, "oh, I know you like horror, Eric, but I have to tell you that I won't watch horror with you. I don't like jump scares." I'm like, "don't worry. I'm not gonna make you watch horror or anything. I've got my buddies for that kind of thing. Me and my buddies will go watch horror." But, yeah. I -- I -- I really like speculative fiction too, like in general and, yeah. Yeah. So I I'm it's very broad. Like I said, *Star Wars* been watching it since I was three. Uh, I have a lot of opinions on *Star Wars* and then just recently *Star Trek* with -- with my -- my...

Marilyn: OK. That's good, yes.

Eric: Father-in-law. So yeah, yeah.

Marilyn: Right, yes. OK. Are you there? Oh, OK. I thought you froze for a minute. The picture froze, but yeah, so that's OK. I mean, I mean, that's all good, you know? I mean, I was into vampires for a long time. I mean, I'm talking about the horror, the the Hammer Horror.

Eric: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Marilyn: I could watch hammer horror movies over and over again. You know Christopher Lee. [indistinguishable] David Steele. Nothing. You know, he only did one movie The entire movie. And it's terrible when you sit down and you can recite the dialogue, right, you know, I mean that's, you know, you see the movie over, and over again, and yeah, yeah. And I -- I know the dialogue, and I'm not going to recite it here, just because. Yeah. That's one of my favourite movies: *Rise of Dracula*.

Eric: Ohh classic.

Marilyn: [Indistinguishable] *Rise of Dracula*, but again, it's a horror. It's a Hammer Horror movie. And that's what I like about MeTV. There's -- there's a guy called Svengoolie, who is the host of his show, *Svengoolie*. Every Saturday night at 8:00 and he shows old horror movies, right? OK, I love it, you know? So I love it. But then there was also *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.

Eric: Oh yeah, of course, yeah.

Marilyn: "Of course, of course," you say. And I -- I watched the reruns of -- of -- of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. Just because they show -- I mean, but some people don't like it because they're talking through the movie, but that's the fun part because they're -- they're saying such funny things and with Svengoolie, he does give you a lot of good background information about a particular actor or movie like *Creature of the Black Lagoon*. He might talk about the -- the actor who had to play the gill man and you know stuff like that. But I digress. Again, sorry, I need to stay on topic.

Eric: This, this, this is great. I -- I I'm just happy to have a conversation and it's I've got -- I've got quite a few pages of notes, so I'm -- I'm going to be able to incorporate some of this into my dissertation, so no worries.

Marilyn: And you can tell people that you're having a little mini convention right here, you know, you know, like two people sitting around talking about their favs. Uh, you know, I mean, this is what fandom is about is like finding somebody that you can talk about, you know, things to -- nothing. I'm expecting that we going to be meeting like this every Thursday night or anything like that, but oh, wait a minute. Tonight's Wednesday. But anyway, but you know, it's just that's what fandom is, like people like to talk about what they like. With people who are accepting of and -- and -- and who like the same things, right? So but you were talking about people with disabilities and fandom? Right. I mean, I'm trying to get back on topic. I'm trying, you know, not to digress so much, but...

Eric: You know, it's -- it's all part of the larger picture. I -- I think because I -- I don't know, like some people will say like I -- I don't know, me, myself, I identify as disabled, right? I have an invisible disability. I would say that my disabled experience ties into my fandom because you know...

Marilyn: OK. Yeah.

Eric: When I think of like reading *Harry Potter* as a kid, you know it's about this, this kid who's different from other people. And I saw myself....

Marilyn: Yes. Yes.

Eric: In that because of -- of you know, I mean, so I -- I view the world through a disabled lens, but other people wouldn't want to associate those two things. So it's OK that those are kind of two separate topics and they're not always intertwined. They don't need to be intertwined....

Marilyn: Yes.

Eric: All the time they can exist separately, right?

Marilyn: OK. Right, right. Yes. Well, I again, I didn't read anything. I didn't read Harry Potter. I didn't read, uh anything. I mean, I waited for it to come out in the movie and UM, I watched all the Harry Potter Harry Potter movies. I love them. Uh, of course I love the music. That's another thing. I'm really big on music and music of, you know, music sets the mood.

Eric: Yeah.

Marilyn: For a lot of the movies. And so I'm keen on that.

Eric: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I know. I mean, you think of how iconic the *Star Trek* theme is, for example, like the the, you know, I mean, like when?

Marilyn: Oh yes. Oh, God, yes.

Eric: You when you hear those notes you....

Marilyn: Yes.

Eric: Really, think of think of that, right? So that makes sense.

Marilyn: And you know, after a while you start knowing, uh, the uh, the composers of certain -- you know Hans Zimmer. You love him. I love John Williams. Of course, James Horner. OK, you know, these are people, you know, you start saying ohh, love his....

Eric: Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Marilyn: Music. His music was great in such and such movie and and but John Williams, who was Johnny Williams when he was doing the theme for the *Lost in Space*? He was Johnny Williams, but now he's John Williams. But you know, it's like...

Eric: Yeah.

Marilyn: Yes, you love his music. You still love his music and will forever love his music. And we want more. Ah, yay. Oh, who did the music for? Oh my God. OK, my brain goes into mush. *Avatar*. OK. It'll come to me.

Eric: Ohh uh ohh, that's a really good question.

Marilyn: Uh, no, I didn't mean this is not a test, but I just you know, they're just some – some -- what's my point? My point is that there are are composers out there who who, who seem to know how to make music fit the movie and the moods and convey those moods so beautifully. Yes. Yes, OK. I'm trying to be very....

Eric: Yeah, absolutely, yeah.

Marilyn: OK, ask me another question.

Eric: So I -- I think that's the extent of my questions I -- this is -- I'm -- I'm very new to interviewing people for -- for this kind of research. So I wasn't entirely sure how much we were going to talk about, but we covered a lot of ground. So thank you very much.

Marilyn: OK. Ohh yeah I -- I can keep talking forever. I could do this all day but -- but I do want you to talk to Marcia Kelly Illingsworth -- Illingworth [there] is no S [in] Illingworth, but I did give you her e-mail. She's waiting to hear from you and Saint, that's another person who knows a lot about Electrical Eggs and fandom and people with disabilities, so yes. And umm, you know, if you think of anything else, give me a call back, you know, and we'll hook up again.

Eric: Yeah, for sure.

Eric Vero and Marcia Illingworth – March 22, 2023

Eric: So I wonder if you'd be willing to for just a little bit to be interviewed about your experiences in fandom, your experiences with disability. 'Cause I believe you helped out with the eggs, right?

Marcia: Oh yeah. Ohh yeah. I was very active. My -- my title was medical egg. At the time, I was a working firefighter paramedic and very able-bodied, but able to help to figure out what was going on and advise people and that sort of thing. And then I progressed to being disabled myself. Things happen, we're going to say.

Eric: Of course. Yeah. And, you know, I've -- I've been studying disability for a few years now, and what the scholars say, what activists say is just that disability is so central to the human experience that, you know, one day most people are going to be disabled in some way. Right? And...

Marcia: At some level or another. Yep, Yep.

Eric: Absolutely. So if you want to, if you are OK with talking about it, I just have a few more questions to ask.

Marcia: Absolutely.

Eric: OK, so falling under ethics with my university. I just have a few questions to ask to make sure that you're aware of the study, that you consent to it. Just so everything is -- is clear and you know what's going on. So. What -- what is your name? To start off with an easy one.

Marcia: My name is Marcia Kelly Illingworth.

Eric: Perfect. Have you had a...

Marcia: When I was with eggs, it was Marcia Kelly McCoy.

Eric: OK. Yes, OK. Yeah, which I mean it's I -- I guess we're going back a while then, right?

Marcia: Yeah, my husband and I married in 1997 after dating transatlantic for five years.

Eric: Ohh wow.

Marcia: I was already active in eggs when we met. Because I was active in fandom, as was he, and in town we met. So yeah, it goes back a few years. We had our 25th anniversary in August.

Eric: Ohh. Well congratulations. That's wonderful.

Marcia: Thanks.

Eric: So my next question is did you have a chance to look at my recruitment letter? I'm not sure if it got to you. We'll just have to quickly go over it, but it's just basically informing you about the study, what my intentions are, how I intend to do my study, stuff like that. Did you -- did you ever see [it]?

Marcia: I did, you sent it to me. I read it. I was fine with [it].

Eric: OK. It -- OK, great. Do you have any questions about it?

Marcia: Not really. Maybe why nobody's done this kind of stuff sooner?

Eric: Yeah, I know. I -- I was really surprised myself when I'm like, "oh, I wonder if anybody's done this intersection of disability and fandom." And it's -- what's been done is very small and very recent. No one's really done a big study like this, so I'm certainly very excited to be jumping into this, of course.

Marcia: I -- I found it amusing. I had more or less [indiscernible] and well, especially from US fandom because my husband's British and I moved to England for 11 years and we came back and then I was taking care of, guess what, disabled family. And so I just didn't have a lot of time for fandom. And then I went to a convention again, started back in 2015 and....

Eric: Yeah.

Marcia: People were like, "wow, where have you been?" I said, "well, I learned my alphabet." And they'd look at me, from me, and said, "family comes before fandom." And so I was gone. Well, I came back in only to find out that all the battles we had fought and solved back in the 80s and 90s, they were reinventing the wheel. It was like we'd never been there.

Eric: I -- I can only imagine how frustrating that is. I, uh -- Yeah, I -- I mean, I -- I. So I -- I identify as disabled. I'm disabled and my similar experience is the frustrating back and forth with our disability program here which is like income support and other things but....

Marcia: Well.

Eric: It is just like hitting your head up against a brick wall constantly dealing with these, you know, social workers and bureaucrats who want to help, but they're just like their hands are tied behind their back because the system just is not made for disabled people.

Marcia: You're right. You're -- you're absolutely right. And they need more disabled people involved in doing the planning.

Eric: Yeah, absolutely.

Marcia: I was in a meeting with a bunch of convention runners in 2015 that have been gone long. Because a lot of the people were new and nobody knew me or who I was. And so I was just sitting and listening. And, you know, people are standing up asking questions, making suggestions. Stuff like that. Finally, I stood up. I introduced myself. And identified who I was.

Eric: MHM.

Marcia: And how far back I went that I had been in fact, instrumental in the Electrical Eggs operations in the 90s. And you people are trying to reinvent the wheel. We have this all solved.

Eric: Yeah.

Marcia: Our goal at the time was to no longer be needed. And fans told us they had learned the lesson and we weren't needed anymore. And yet, here you are. Solving all the problems that I helped solve 20 years ago.

Eric: Yeah, yeah. You know, I think it speaks to how it's -- it's a fight, right? Not in a violent sense, of course. But it's a fight to have the very basics, you know, and it's so easy to like, I don't know, like it -- it's just -- it is -- it's this constant struggle just to have a -- to be set at a reasonable level, you know, like forget even, like going far and above and beyond trying to be accessible and above and beyond, you know, making people's lives better. It's just a struggle to get the bare basics, right?

Marcia: Yeah. Yeah. So and and it's ridiculous it is. And I think a lot of it, and you're going to laugh, it is kind of ego-driven. Everybody thinks that they have a better idea because they're newer. So obviously they know more than we knew.

Eric: Of course.

Marcia: And some things are just so basic and -- and they don't need all that technology and stuff, it's just basic common sense stuff.

Eric: Yeah. Well, I -- I imagine when you guys started out like with the with the Eggs, a lot of it was just common sense like, you know, cause you didn't really have a manual to -- to say, well in this situation....

Marcia: We made the manual, we....

Eric: Yeah, exactly. Yes. Yes, of course, of course.

Marcia: We -- well, I talked to -- my husband's British and we went to -- when we married, I moved to England. The -- the Eggs principles. Some of the hotels we had come in regularly. Took clues from what we told them. And built-in things into their hotel and well, "wow, this helps our employees too."

Eric: Well, you know, something mind-blowing. Years ago when I was being trained for a job at the university was the accessibility people came in and said, "accessible, like designing for disability and accessibility is good for everybody, not just the wheelchair users, not just people who like who have who have limited mobility." Like it's good for everybody. Everybody uses the wheelchair like the -- the electric door. What do they call [it]? For opening doors, right, everybody uses it, yes.

Marcia: And they used the ramp because while they might have been able to struggle with the steps and not make a big deal out of it, so many of them do so much more easily with the ramps. That's what the hotels love. And -- and one of the things I tell hotels all the time, it's, first of all -- because I noticed that they do hotel rooms that [are] quote "disabled rooms," frequently with one bed. How many disabled people travel by themselves?

Eric: Uh-huh. Yep, Yep.

Marcia: And those are the only rooms they put walk-in showers in. Any able bodied person can use a walk in shower, but a disabled person needs a walk-in shower. There's so many things they could do that would benefit everyone, but they -- they don't have the -- the broader outlook. I -- I've always been a -- a think outside the box kind of person. Actually I've been a: box -- "there's a box?" kind of person, but yeah, I try to get it across to people all the time.

Eric: Yep.

Marcia: One day we're all going to be old one day, because of that, we're all going to have some level of disability.

Eric: Yep. MHM.

Marcia: I had that told to me in 1977, when I was at the. National Women's Conference in Houston, TX and was during all of the equal rights stuff and I was a delegate from the state of Tennessee to the conference and in the course of crossing the street in Houston, one day, I stepped in the hole, and I broke my ankle.

Being the stubborn sort then and there was a car bearing down on me. I jumped up all across the street and hobbled back down to the convention centre. I had one of the convention people say, "Ohh you have a problem." They were at least looking for people. Now, I said, "yeah, this happened." She said, O"K, I'll bring you an ice pack." And I sat down, propped my leg up, put an ice pack on it. Had to go to the emergency room that night, 'cause my, obviously, my ankle was swollen like a ballon, and -- and the next day I came in on crutches and there were quite a few disabled women there at this conference. And as I crutched past them, I heard a voice say something along the lines of "see how fast you can become one of us."

Eric: OK. Yeah.

Marcia: At the time, I thought how bizarre, because I've been on crutches off and on most of my life, but OK. And that's something people need to realize. There, but for the Grace of God.

Eric: Yep.

Marcia: At anytime, though, any one of us. And there are so many more types of disability than mobility. That, that, the vision. I used to prepare large print and Braille programs for our attendees that [indiscernible] and any convention I did access for. I would arrange mobility assistance with scooters and the wheelchairs, both push and electric. For people who did have mobility issues, 1992 Worldcom, one of the major con chairs (well, she wasn't a chair, but high committee people) had a fall right in front of me. In the hall, where all the services were, and wound up needing a scooter. Fortunately, I had rented extras because stuff happened. I don't know. I'm sorry. I could go for hours on this. How about I hush. And you ask me questions.

Eric: No, this is this is wonderful. I really appreciate it, but I guess I will. We'll follow up with some other questions. Just a formality. Are you OK with this interview -- interview being audio record?

Marcia: Absolutely, absolutely.

Eric: OK. And then this one's a bit of a wordy question, but it's still important. Do you agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this research, with the understanding that you may be referenced generally by your area of expertise or experience? So for in your case disability activism, fan community activism, anything like that?

Marcia: Sure, that's -- that's fine. I'm in favor of anything that gets this field brought forward and dealt with.

Eric: I'm one after you. We're kindred spirits. I completely agree. And then the....

Marcia: Good. Can you can you give me permission to immigrate to Canada? Please, please. Pretty please, sugar on top? I'll give you my first born child. Wait. No, he's not that great -- [how about] my second born child?

Eric: Your second well if it's your second born, I mean. We would, we wouldn't...

Marcia: The first one grew up being a -- a right-wing reactionary. The second-born's a liberal bisexual guy. And so yeah, take your pick. Which one do you want to go?

Eric: What I will say is on behalf of Canadians, we would be more than happy to have you up here without having to take any of your sons.

Marcia: I think you already have one? Actually, my youngest lives in Edmonton.

Eric: Oh, OK. Yeah, yeah, that's it's, it's I'm in Ontario, so I've never....

Marcia: I had to pick that up.

Eric: Yes, yes. I've never been out West. I hear it's beautiful though.

Marcia: It really is. We've been out there and we've been to Winnipeg at this point. My husband, I've been almost all over the world. We've missed China and we're trying to figure out a way to pull that one out this year, but it's not looking like it's gonna happen. Right, yeah. Canada is beautiful.

Eric: Another question, well, it's more of a statement and whether or not you agree with it. So the -- the statement is "I agree to the use of attributed quotes in any paper or publication resulting from this research with the understanding that I will have the opportunity to review the quotations and how I will be attributed prior to publication." So as -- as I believe I mentioned in

the recruitment letter you will get a chance to look over my work. So, you'll see how you're attributed, how you're quoted, and if you don't agree with something with how I represent something you have the right to say that to me and I will have to change it.

Marcia: Alright. Yes, I have no problem with that at all.

Eric: OK.

Marcia: I'm an open book pretty much. Gets me into lots of trouble.

Eric: Some of my dearest friends are ones are people who, you know, speak their mind and it's always refreshing to be around people like that.

Marcia: Maybe we are related. Who knows?

Eric: Who knows? What pronouns do you prefer?

Marcia: I'm good with "her" and "she" and all of that.

Eric: Excellent.

Marcia: I respond to almost anything. Nothing really insults me. When I was a paramedic, I sat in a station one time where the night before we'd had a a very tragic bunch of idiot kids playing Russian roulette. And one of them lost and they -- and drove him up to his mother's house and we got called out. I wouldn't let her in the car. But it was dark. It was emotional, and the next day she came into the station and complained about that man who wouldn't let her into the car.

Eric: MM. OK.

Marcia: And I'm sitting right there. She had no idea it was me.

Eric: Yeah.

Marcia: Anyway, but yeah. My usual is "she" and "her." But I answer to almost anything.

Eric: OK, good to know. So you've already I think -- I'm very appreciative of it. You've already talked about your relationship with disability, whether it be your partial disablement or your disability with the other people. Is there anything else you want to talk about in regards to, you know, how your life has been intersecting with disability?

Marcia: Wow, where do I start? Yeah, probably started when I was a paramedic and before I was actually very active in fandom. I -- I just developed a -- a close friendship with one of my patients who had muscular dystrophy. And she had a daughter who had been hit by a car and almost died. In fact, one day while I was at her house, we had to call another ambulance over (I was off duty) to take her in for a doctor's appointment at the paramedical. That ambulance had been on the ambulance that picked her daughter up when she got hit by the car.

Eric: MHM.

Marcia: And he almost cried.

Eric: Yeah.

Marcia: Because he thought the child had probably died.

Eric: Yeah.

Marcia: She does to this day -- my friend has long since passed. I'm still in touch with her daughter and she has some deficits from the head injury.

Eric: Yep.

Marcia: And things like that and having had a dyslexic son. And assorted things. Had me already predisposed to be looking out for people who needed extra help. And then I met Samanda Jeude. I was the head of Electrical Eggs through fandom and we just clicked. Like sisters from another mister. I, I mean. We even look so much alike that people sometimes confused, as if I was on a scooter. Long red hair kind of thing.

And she told me that she was working on this organization called Electric Eggs. Her husband got to know me and liked me so much that he would let me take her to cons without him and he was very protective of her. 'Cause we just -- we're that close and that's actually how I got involved in access with that fandom. UM. Now couple of surface connections here and there, and then finding a focused group, really working on the subject, I dove in headfirst.

Eric: Yeah. I am, you know, listening to this. I really appreciate you talking about Samanda. Of course. Because she really seems like quite a like, what's the word I'm looking for? Like a very -

Marcia: She was a force of nature.

Eric: Yes, you know the way everybody has talked about her, it's with reverence too. So I wonder if you could perhaps if you're willing to elaborate on Samanda like how, how else would you describe her?

Marcia: Ohh, she's the ultimate idealist. When she was your friend, she was your friend. And Lord help anybody who ever should have cross word about you 'cause, that little, tiny polio ridden body could carry gossip. Uh. She supported people of all sorts, of differing abilities. She let people know that this is all right to be different. And there was nothing wrong with maybe taking a little longer to read something.

Or having to -- I remember one friend we had who was very active as an Egg and sadly has also passed away. So he had some really serious mental health issues. And every now and then, he just had to walk away.

Eric: Yep.

Marcia: And he would disappear for hours. And when he was ready, he would come back. And that was fine. Because that's what he needed. Ohh gosh, how do I describe Sam? She had high ideals. And how things should be. And would do anything and everything to help them get there. I'm not going to say she was without flaw. We're all human. We all have flaws, but those of us who loved her learn to live with those and work around them.

Eric: Of course.

Marcia: Just like we do with other people, we love.

Eric: Of course, you know, I think that that piece of her story and your story, of course. And the Egg story is just how admirable idealism is. You know, it's so easy to get worn down by how hard the world is out there. And how unfair it is. But you know, to have that kind of idealism, to fight for a better world is, I think, the most admirable thing I can think of. What I'm trying to articulate is I completely hear what you're saying.

Marcia: It was the loss of the world when she passed.

Eric: Of course, of course. Now I just want to briefly check in with you. I know this is a a lot to deal with on a Wednesday night, of course. So if it is a bit too difficult to talk about like the harder stuff, we don't need to talk about that. I think this is more than enough for me to write about. So we can talk more about your participation in the fandom outside of the Electrical Eggs. Talk about like what kind of like you were into *Star Trek* too, right?

Marcia: Ohh yeah, I grew up -- well not grew up, because hell, it's only what 50-6 years that it first aired and I'm 72, but my father, and my father was a chemist. He was -- he had a PhD in physical chemistry and he's the reason I'm a science fiction fan. When I was growing up, he got all of it every month, and it was like a race to the mailbox. If they came while he was at work, and I got them first and I got to read them first. And he was, he was a hard science fiction person. He had the definition which others have used. But he told me this many times: it's not that he necessarily created this definition, but I've heard him say, and that is a bit different between science fiction and science fantasy.

Eric: Yes, yes.

Marcia: Is that science fiction -- is that which extrapolating upon knowledge that we have now is theoretically realistically possible in the future. Anything else is science fantasy. He being a scientist was a hard science fiction fan, and I -- I think -- he would never go to conventions. He just wasn't the kind of person, he wasn't a people person. But he -- we -- always when *Star Trek* came around. In those days, we didn't have a whole lot of television, so the family television was in my parents' room and the rest of us sat on the floor at the foot of the bed and watched *Star Trek* every week without fail. And when -- he wasn't....

Eric: Oh, that's awesome. That's awesome.

Marcia: A movie person. But when *2001: A Space Odyssey* came out, the whole family went to see that.

Eric: That is so cool.

Marcia: Oh. And I enjoyed [it] tremendously. And when Tim and I got married, being able to introduce daddy to an author who was in attendance, whose books I had introduced him to and was a hard science author. I think that's when he realized that, yeah, I really was involved in this nonsense. It was this great time. I remember he actually gave us an autographed copy of one of the books. We unwrapped the present at the reception. My husband looked at it and said -- said out loud in front of everybody, "please tell me you didn't ruin the value of this by personalizing it." And voices in the crowd: "but wait, there's an author in here?" But daddy, daddy was so, so, so pleased that he got to meet an author friend of ours whose books he was liking.

Eric: Do you recall who that author is?

Marcia: Oh yeah, he has long since passed -- Jim. Hogan, James Hogan. James P Hogan.

Eric: That's wonderful. Thank you. Cause I can, yeah.

Marcia: We actually have a picture of him in our house in Chattanooga before we got married.

Eric: That's really cool. That's super cool.

Marcia: My favorite part of fandom -- this is gonna sound so crazy. You know, people are like you have autographs. I don't care about autographs. I care about memories. I -- I love having pictures with people who I admire as writers, and I treasure those things. I don't get to [indiscernible] about autographs.

Eric: Yes. Yes.

Marcia: But I collect memories.

Eric: I think that is. Yeah. I think that's kind of beautiful. I agree. I feel the same way.

Marcia: I yeah, finally decided I could fund my way to conventions by becoming a dealer. And I still do that to this good day and I enjoy it. Yeah, some of the coolest jewelry I ever saw [indiscernible]. I was like, yeah, I think that's -- [I'll] probably make that. And so I started making jewelry. I'm old enough now and have enough issues that a lot of what I sell is stuff I source elsewhere. But I've still got time to make a piece or two here and there and you know it funds my con habit.

Eric: Yeah. That's -- that's really cool.

Marcia: Ah. My kids used to laugh because at every convention I'd pick up neat stuff that I saw in the dealers room and I had a bag that I kept it in. And that was mom's gifting bag. I never missed a birthday anniversary no matter what. Even if I forgot about it, I had my gifting bag. I had something to give them.

Eric: That's awesome.

Marcia: But. Yeah, I've met some of the most amazing people. And I treasure those memories. I loved sitting and having tea with Anne McCaffrey on Jersey. And I loved having coffee with -- Ohh hell, I hate it when my brain does this.

Eric: That's OK.

Marcia: Terry's friends, Terry's friend, that did those books together. The God's books of Chattanooga. No, no. Married to famous rock'n'roll star. I'll think of it as I go along. When you get old, your brain doesn't plug in, right?

Eric: It is absolutely OK.

Marcia: Oh. Terry Pratchett was a friend. I spent a full day in Melbourne at the 1999 World Science Fiction Convention. Well, not full day. He left his jacket in the program office, not realizing that it would close later.

Eric: Uh-huh. Yeah.

Marcia: And he had -- he hadn't come back for it. Well, I've known Terry, [indiscernible] know Terry. I just picked up [his] jacket that I'll find him. Carried his jacket around and finally found him in the bar. Of course. I gave him his jacket, he said, "why have you got that?" "It's because the office closed, something." "Yeah, OK, whatever." Yeah, I've had some fabulous experiences. Gaiman. Neil Gaiman. That's who I had coffee [with]. My brain just brought it back. One of my son's favorite pictures is the two of us together. Ohh, and he and Terry did some stuff together, which is....

Eric: Yes.

Marcia: Why that weird train of thought went through.

Eric: I completely understand how how that happened, so I that is super, super cool and I -- I really like this piece that you're talking about of you know what, what you have with you are these memories and -- and those memories are something that you will keep forever right and...

Marcia: Yeah.

Eric: I think it's really special that you you have these memories and I know I I sound like a broken record when I say this but I really appreciate all of this and I think people who read my dissertation will also very much appreciate it.

Marcia: One of my favorites was introducing two of my favorite authors who were at that convention together, and they were going to be on a panel together, but they had never met and one of them came up to me and said, "do -- do you know Harry Turtledove?" "Well, yeah, I do." He said, "could you introduce me, because I haven't met him yet and we're doing a panel later." And that was Grant. The first name just went out of my mind. He's another one who passed. He was a horror writer.

Eric: OK, he was “horror Grant.” That sounds vaguely familiar. I'll be able to look up who that might have been.

Marcia: We had been friends at Chattacon for years because he came to Chattacon every year and I said, “yeah, I know Harry, cause we had him at a [indiscernible] con a couple of years ago,” and I took him over and I got to introduce him to Harry Turtledove. Just like two of my favorite authors. This is great and I get to introduce, I think, pleasure of such a silly little things like that.

Eric: That's so cool. I -- I think that's...

Marcia: Oh, OK. Sorry. My husband's watching jeopardy and answering the question.

Eric: Ohh that's OK.

Marcia: Yeah. Shirley Grant, Charles Grant is who it was. I didn't realize how weird my brain and memory had gotten. This is the first time I've talked about a lot of this stuff in a long time.

Eric: Yeah. I'm as you know, a lifelong nerd/geek fan. However, you want to put it. I'm just kind of like -- absolutely. I think this is very, very, very cool. Neil Gaiman is one of my favorite authors of all time, and I've read Terry Pratchett and I just...

Marcia: He's just wonderful.

Eric: Just you know, I think it's this is I've gone to conventions, I've cosplayed, but the conventions I've gone to are very like commercial at this point. They're very big, like. And I think you it's harder I think to nowadays, at least, and maybe I'm just not looking in the right places, but you know. I get a sense that conventions back in the day were far more intimate and it was easier to run into an author or just find camaraderie with fellow fans, right?

Marcia: I think you are quite right. Actually I have that sense as well. I mean yeah, I think at the same -- I believe it was the same Eastercon where I sat and had tea with Anne. And her son is still a Facebook friend.

George RR Martin and his now wife, then girlfriend, were there as well. They were -- they were our guests and years later, when *Game of Thrones* was big on TV, one of my sons was -- was still living here at home for a while. And I watched through the living room one night and I think some, I don't know if HBO, some somebody was doing a special on *Game of Thrones* and George, and I walked through the living room and George was on TV doing an interview, and I took two steps back and looked and went, “Ohh. Hi, George,” and kept walking into the kitchen

and my son went, “No, you do not know George RR Martin.” Well, yeah, kinda. I mean, you know, I don't send them Christmas cards, but we had him as a guest on Jersey once. Is there anybody you don't know? Yeah, probably a lot of people, but I'm not sure who they are right now. All right. And again, lovely memories. Not sure if he remembers. I think he does because we ran into him at a Worldcon, and fairly recently in 2016, I mean, it was like 98, no hell, it's 93 when we're in Jersey with it and. Yeah, before he did, he even started on *Game of Thrones*. And then in 2016, we ran into him at the Worldcon in Kansas City. And he was like, “oh, hey, haven't seen you.” And we talked for a while. He invited us to his after party. You know, he does his post-Hugo's thing. Well, he did. I think he might be about to get out of that too. And, we had the whole family there for that one. So that was. A good family reunion. Make sure all the kids and grandkids get to go to a Worldcon, 'cause it's close. Ohh and Tim's father, who at the time was like 90. And he had fun because he went to one of the panels with Saint, (also name is Bill Francis) who was there helping us with him. And one of his school mates was cited in whatever the lecture was that he'd gone to. He thought that was the best thing ever. When you get to introduce 89-90 year old people to fandom, it is so cool.

Eric: Of course. That's so that's awesome.

Marcia: And for him to find out that his old friends were involved was just phenomenal and it was just purely chance. Purely chance. It doesn't seem to have as much of the family feel as it used to.

Eric: Yes. Yeah.

Marcia: I still go to some of the smaller conventions. I go to Chattacon, I go to Liberty Con and - - and other smaller conventions that I can get to fairly easily. But. I can't go to as many as I used to. And I was really very disappointed recently to find that some of the principles that I found so dear to the access theme were discounted by a lot of the youngsters and fandom now. A lot of us are getting older. And -- and one of the things that happens when you get older these days is it your brain doesn't work as fast. I didn't appreciate it when my mother was alive, but I understand now. She used to say, you know, “that file cabinet's only so big.” And if I want to get everything in there eventually, I've got to throw some stuff out, so I can't always keep track of everything. And I have seen situations of late, and it's generally fans of my generation are being criticized for slipping up and saying something which, admittedly, in today's times might not be totally appropriate, but in the times when we were younger it was the polite thing to say.

Eric: Yep, Yep, and it moves fast too. Yep.

Marcia: And that's really hard to deal with. You know, stuff slips out that you think, “ohh wait, this is in there.” This -- this is the way to say this before your brain goes, “ohh. Wait. No. You

used to. Now you say this.” And I had a huge argument with the newer access people about that. They [were] contending that it was “a cop out,” air quotes, there to say anything was due to age. And, I've been around long enough to realize that get there is something to do happen as a result of age, and yes, they are disabilities. They're not anything you do on purpose. If you had control over them, they wouldn't have it. And that -- that really distressed me tremendously, that they didn't recognize that, yes, age in and of itself has its own disability. When I get [indiscernible]. But that was that was very traumatic for me.

Eric: I'm very, very sorry. Uh, I know I can't speak for of course -- I can't speak for these people. I can only speak for myself. But I'm really sorry that you had to go through that.

Marcia: Thank you. I appreciate that. I didn't say it for sympathy. I was -- it was -- it was just an example. An example of the different types of disabilities that we have to be aware of, and they aren't always obvious that there are so many hidden disabilities. When I saw what had happened, I wasn't there when I had when it happened. But I saw the screenshots of everything and went, “oh my God there but for the grace of God go,” I, I grew up in the South and the 50s with absolutely nonracist parents when we were growing up. The accepted polite term for African Americans was “colored.” It now transformed to people of color and I go with that. But the person that was being chastised, I can see how she slipped up.

She was trying to speak and -- and the person she was talking about was a friend of hers. And it just slipped out. And rather than going, “ohh wait, she's a child of the 50s in the South. It happens,” everybody kind of ganged up on her. I -- I wish more people were aware that. We don't all have the same life experiences and we're not all in the same life phase. And what may to your ears sound inappropriate, and if we had time to think about it, we'd probably go, “yeah, that's inappropriate now, too.” Might just have jumped out from the bottom of the filing cabinet before we realized who was there. Yeah. I really didn't mean to go into that one.

Eric: That's OK. Yeah, absolutely. No worries. So I am....

Marcia: And I don't mind anybody knowing actually, that I said it because God knows I went to bat for her on Facebook. Big time when that happened. I don't say much that I'm not willing to be quoted on. Pretty much if it's on my mind, it's on my list and people can take it or leave it alone. God didn't put me here to make friends. [He] put me here to do good. So, as long as I keep doing good, people can like it or not. Sounds pretty self-righteous. Doesn't it?

Eric: But I know what you mean.

Marcia: It shouldn't but.

Eric: I see exactly where you're coming from.

Marcia

I spend every minute of every day trying to do good. For other humans and all of the animals. After the 2016 Worldcon, I started getting sick at that con and didn't realize how desperately ill I was. It was so bad by the last day when we were breaking down my table and my family had to load stuff up for me. I couldn't even concentrate on where things went. I'm still finding stuff going, Oh hell, I wondered what y'all had been with then. And I had bad upper respiratory infection, got home, got -- had to take some really heavy duty antibiotics for it. And I don't like antibiotics, but when you can hear someone breathe across the room and can't [indiscernible] antibiotics.

And so I took them and then I developed something called plus c difficile. Or C diff, which happens when you take broad spectrum antibiotics and they wipe out, you're good and you're bad bacteria, except for this one thing. That goes into hyperdrive when everything else gets knocked out and it attacks your colon and causes. A -- a type of colitis, pseudomembranous colitis. And I wound up in ICU and emergency surgery and losing my colon. And -- and coded on the operating table and they had to resuscitate me. Basically, I tell people all the time I was too damn stubborn to stay dead. Now other people say, "no, there was a battle going on at the pearly gate. Saint Peter's going, 'no, she's coming to see you.' And Satan's going, 'no, she's coming to you. She's been really good. She's coming to you and staying good. So she causes trouble all the time. She's coming to you.' And finally taking this and she comes here. She's not gonna take over." He says that's what Saint Peter says. That's what I'm worried about too. Let's just throw her back. Anyway, all my life I've been told that you survived something like that. It means that God has work for you to do on this earth. So ever since then I've spent just about every minute of every day trying to do good, mostly for animals, but I throw it out for humans too. And that's just what I do, and I've given up caring too much what people think. About it, I'm doing what I think my assignment is.

Eric: And I think that's an excellent place to wrap up for -- for this evening. I. Yeah, I -- I don't have any more questions. I think this is a lot to work with. And again, I very much appreciate your time and -- and your willingness to share.

Marcia: All right. I'm happy. Would you like me to put you in contact with the UK people who were involved with this and with Saint Bill Francis?

Eric: Yes, please. Yes, yes, please. Uh, if you. If you can send them my e-mail, would you -- do you have my e-mail? OK. Yeah. So if you send them my e-mail and say, "hey, you know this guy is doing a -- an oral history project for disability and fandom, if you're interested in talking to him because he would like to interview people, please e-mail him." And that would be a great

thing to do if they decide to give you their contact information to pass on to me, we can also do that too. I just need confirmation that they will give their consent to do that. Just ethics wise. Yeah, I need to...

Marcia: Sure. I understand. Yeah. OK. Well, very good. I will be in touch with them. I'm still in touch with them and hopefully they will be happy to talk to you.

Eric: I think what they would have to say would only complement everything that I have so far. So, I just I also want to just make sure are you doing OK 'cause we kind of covered some tough stuff. So I just want to make sure you're doing OK.

Marcia: Oh, hey, I'm fine. I am fine. I am getting older. I have some health issues that I deal with day in and day out. But I still manage to do a lot mostly. Mostly for providing treatment for cats with feline infectious peritonitis. Which, if you have cats, you may or may not have heard of because most people don't hear of it. It's not that common. Most people don't hear about it until it tells them their cat has it. And the nicest thing they could do would be euthanized. And there is now a very effective treatment for it, but it's not FDA approved, so it's air quotes again "black market." Only because the drug company that owns the patent wants everybody else to use their more expensive drugs, they've refused to submit it to the FDA for approval, and there's nothing wrong with it. But the FDA can't approve something they haven't been sent.

Eric: Ah. Of course.

Marcia: Yeah. So, yeah, I starre at the edges of the law every day of my life saving cats once. We've actually adopted five of these cats whose humans weren't going to treat them and they were just going to euthanize them. They're living their best life here now because this is a very effective treatment, so I may not be as physically active and able as I used to be, but until my dying breath, I will be helping those who need it.

Eric: Good. I think that's great.

Marcia: It's who I am and what I do.

Eric: That's wonderful.

Marcia: I pulled my first kid out of the mud at the bottom of the Bayou. When I was 12 years old and I've been trying to save lives ever since.

Eric: I think that's an excellent place to -- to wrap things up. That's great.

Eric Vero and Grant Stoner – May 3, 2023

Eric Vero: So before we jump into the interview, I just have a few questions relating to the study. I need to ask.

Grant Stoner: Mm-hmm.

Eric Vero: So, did you get a chance to read that recruitment letter I sent along, maybe a week ago? It goes into the study and what not?

Grant Stoner: Yes.

Eric Vero: Awesome. OK, great. Do you have any questions?

Grant Stoner: No, not that I can think of.

Eric Vero: OK, good. Awesome. My next question is do you consent to participating in the interview?

Grant Stoner: Yes.

Eric Vero: OK. Do you give permission for your interview to be audio recorded?

Grant Stoner: Yes.

Eric Vero: And the final one is: “Do you agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this research with the understanding that you may be referenced generally by your area of expertise or experience?” So, example is here: your participation in the video game fan community.

Grant Stoner: Yes.

Eric Vero: Excellent. OK. Yeah, there's just some things we need to clear to make my ethics board happy. So, everything is good. Do you wanna jump into things? I have a few questions. Just about your time in the video game industry, your experiences with disability, any stories you wanna kind of preserve? Because this will be put into a dissertation and it'll be part of the scholarship for disability and video games. So, if so, we can absolutely jump in.

Grant Stoner: Yeah, let's just get right into it.

Eric Vero: Yeah, for sure. So, the very first question is what name would you like to be referenced by and what are your pronouns?

Grant Stoner: Grant Stoner and my pronouns are he/him.

Eric Vero: Perfect. OK, so this is a bit of a broad question, but it's intended to be pretty broad, very to whatever extent you would like. Please speak to your experiences with disability.

Grant Stoner: OK, so I was born with a neuromuscular disability called spinal muscular atrophy type 2. It progressively weakens muscles over time, so basically, as I get older, I tend to get weaker.

Eric Vero: Mm-hmm.

Grant Stoner: I tend to use assistance for this, other people have varying tech to complete tasks like eating, bathing. During my work, sometimes I use speech-to-text software and virtual keyboards to complete my assignments. I've never not needed assistance for anything in my life, but this meant that I've found ways to increase my independence through assistive tech and other means.

Eric Vero: Yes. If ever I'm pausing, it's because I'm writing stuff down, taking notes.

Grant Stoner: Oh no, you're fine.

Eric Vero: Yeah. So, you kind of, you know, it seems like you're speaking to this, but I guess the follow-up question is what kind of institutional barriers are part of your experience?

Grant Stoner: You mean in general life or in the gaming industry?

Eric Vero: You can talk to both. I'm happy to take notes on either of those for sure.

Grant Stoner: OK. So, generally, like, usually it's transportation. A lot of the transportation I need, again, assistance, so, I have a specifically designed van with a lift in the back. And if that ever breaks down or gets damaged, I literally can't go anywhere. I also have to have 24-hour care whether it's through my parents or through nursing or just friends, someone usually at all times has to be in the vicinity in case anything from just eating, drinking, toiletry issues. And maybe I also have, occasionally respiratory issues as well. So, there's a constant need to be, I don't want to say watched, but like I need constant assistance. And if I don't have that, I probably essentially can't live and thrive. And there'll often be trouble with some lack of nursing in case my parents are sick and the nursing agencies can't send their substitutes. It can be again, as I mentioned with my vehicle, if it's broken down, I can't leave. So day to day with activities like that, I need assistance and that's probably the biggest barrier.

Eric Vero: OK, yeah. Yeah. So, you mentioned a bit about the video game industry and the video game community. Would you want to talk a bit about that?

Grant Stoner: Yeah, sure. So, I'll talk about specifically for me. I think the biggest barrier is where, with my job, you're consistently with the narrative that accessibility is now really important for all aspects for the industry to consider. Especially in my career, which is journalism.

Eric Vero: You know, as I was kind of doing research on Twitter, seeing who, you know, seeing there really seems to be quite a big community of accessibility people for video games on Twitter. And I didn't know about it at all. And I've been off and on in the video game community, depending on my schedule and my workload, but it's really cool to see so much being written about accessibility in the gaming industry because you know it's, you know, I come from a university background where accessibility is only starting to be talked about, like, and the resources that are there as having gone through our accessibility services, you know, it's kind of lackluster. I really wish they could support us more. I really, really do. But like...

Grant Stoner: Yes.

Eric Vero: Thankfully, my schedule can accommodate things, but for the most part, university is really lacking and I think there's a real push to move the needle forward in this discussion. But there isn't the same kind of conversation happening, I think, with what you're doing as a journalist and other accessibility journalists are doing in the video game industry.

Grant Stoner: Yeah, definitely. I will say with academia, I used to be in academia and was essentially pushed out because it just wasn't accessible to me. The field I was in, yeah, the field I was in. It was very resistant to major accommodations and changes. So, that's why I fell back to my undergrad degree, which is journalism. I just entered the gaming industry through there. And that was a challenge too, because when I first entered in 2019, like for accessibility, the industry didn't care.

Eric Vero: MHM. Yeah.

Grant Stoner: So, I had to continuously push other publications, push studios for interview access and to demonstrate the necessity and importance of this type of coverage. But yeah, the academia aspect. I completed grad school for a degree. After I graduated, I tried to find jobs and they would have these ridiculous requirements, like, you must be able to lift 50 lbs.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Grant Stoner: For writing jobs.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Grant Stoner: And you know, they aren't necessary. I mean, I remember bringing that up in interviews, everything all these requirements you have to do these. And so I've never really managed to land even a writing job in the academic field.

Eric Vero: Yeah, that's really frustrating. That's incredibly frustrating. So to build off of that, what kind of insight have you gained regarding your experiences, whether that's in journalism with your disability in academia and the video game world? What kind of things have you learned over time? What insight do you have that really sticks with you?

Grant Stoner: I think I'll stick to the video game industry, because I guess with academia I had to leave. It wasn't a success, but for the game industry also, I learned that if you can show people tangible results of why this coverage is important and why it matters, you're more likely to get people to respect it and even well to use it for future coverage attempts. So, for example: one of the lessons I learned was any story can be made into an accessibility story, but it has to be relevant to current events. So, I can't just pitch a story about a 5-year-old game because it's not relevant to the current issues that people are talking about. But if there's a new game coming out that somehow relates to maybe the progress of a studio within those five years, I can tie it in and demonstrate how accessibility is evolving. It's not just looking at a story and being, "Oh yeah, I can write about that." It's thinking of ways to incorporate accessibility into my own conversations, and thankfully...

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Grant Stoner: The gaming industry has really taken big steps into improving accessibility across its games and platforms, so for my job as a journalist, I really don't need to seek stories anymore.

Eric Vero: Oh, yeah.

Grant Stoner: They're mostly there for me now to just write about, if I choose, which is a lot better than when I started in 2019.

Eric Vero: That's interesting. That's really cool. So, building off, or kind of pivoting away from stuff in the video game industry, what do you think, what are your thoughts on society at large? What kind of societal supports do disabled individuals need more than ever? Like in 2023, you know, the Americans with Disability Act has been around for a while, but realistically, what do you think? You know, the disabled community needs, of course, speaking to the fact that everybody's disability is different. My disability is different than my supervisor's disability and et cetera, et cetera. But what do you see especially because I guess you've got quite a finger on the pulse stuff in the video game industry and where it's going with accessibility, what do you see? What kind of societal supports do you think the disabled community needs now more than ever?

Grant Stoner: I would say the biggest issue that I've seen in the video game industry, which translates to outside of it, is disabled people consistently fight amongst each other.

Eric Vero: OK.

Grant Stoner: And they really don't accept others. Like there's a constant notion, like you're not "disabled" enough. Or yeah, if you have different types of disabilities like blindness, which is a spectrum.

Eric Vero: Yep.

Grant Stoner: A lot of people in the blind community will argue amongst each other about like, you know, "you have some vision. You don't have any vision. I'm more blind than you." I mean people will only recognize very physical and visual disabilities and invisible disabilities tend to be ignored or even disrespected among disabled people, so I think it's really hard to push for change when the disability community still vehemently argues against each other. It's really hard to advocate for the greater community when, at the moment, a disabled person could just say, "well, you're not disabled enough." So, I feel like disabled people need to understand that the disabled experience is individualistic in nature. But that doesn't diminish your lived experiences. And you're still at the end of the day disabled.

Eric Vero: Yeah. Yeah. I really like the way that you say lived experience, because I did one of my PhD fields in disability history. Right and that is what the scholars and activists kept coming up with, saying was this idea of lived experience. And I really like, you know it was a real revelation to me when I said well, "wait a second." Disability really is the norm of the human lived experience. I think because in some way, you know, a quote unquote able-bodied person, whatever that means, is going to be disabled in some way, whether that's through temporary disability, whether that's aging too, right. So I think a more useful conversation is to say, "OK, well, you know. Yes, you know, I might not know what it is to be part of the Deaf community and I might not know what it is to have a psychiatric illness, but in some way, we really understand that it's about viewing the lived experience through a disabled lens like a disability lens." Right? And that was a real eureka

moment for me that I'm like, "Ohh that's what all of these scholars are saying and arguing." And, it was kind of liberating too, because I feel like I'm constantly having to advocate for myself and say that, "hey, you know, like I definitely need this kind of support because my disability, my illness it stops me from doing certain things or it doesn't let me do certain things the way I want them to." Right? And I have to keep advocating for myself and, you know, you go blue in the face just trying to get basic help. Right? So, yeah, I really appreciate your perspective on that, especially that the big issue, it seems like is that within the disability community, there's a lot of argument. And really we should be kind of there should be more unity because you know it's whether whatever force it is that's trying to get rid of us in some way, you know, is really the big bad here, right?

Grant Stoner: Right. There's this failed understanding that other disabled people aren't your enemy.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Grant Stoner: It's usually society's restrictions that are preventing you from living your life to the fullest and are usually keeping you within these restrictive boundaries. And I've really seen in the game industry like, blind people will have massive arguments on those YouTube videos and stuff for like "you're on blah blah. How can you speak for us?" All that, it's like but, yeah, you can't argue with the lived experience.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Grant Stoner: You can't say that someone isn't disabled just because they don't fit your definition. And so, I really wish people would expand their understandings and work together to find better solutions.

Eric Vero: Yeah. We should be building towards solutions, exactly. Like you say, yeah.

Grant Stoner: MHM.

Eric Vero: Yeah, that's great. So, to kind of shift topics a little bit, what are the fan communities that you belong to? So, I know you're a video game journalist, so you're very in tune with the video game community, but what are like maybe you could talk about a few games that you are really into? Certain communities that you're really into? But what does your fandom look like?

Grant Stoner: My fandom is, oh gosh, it's mostly within the video game industry, but mostly revolves around Pokémon.

Eric Vero: Awesome.

Grant Stoner: So, the Pokémon series is really near and dear in my heart. It's one of the series I bonded with when I was sick, because growing up as a young child, I was hospitalized a lot. So, it was easiest for me to bring my GameBoy into the hospital because at the time I had the strength to hold my GameBoy, press the buttons. And because Pokémon games are intrinsically easy to play by nature, it didn't require a lot of strength. So, I probably have played through (well I know I've played) every single game. I've beaten every single game. I probably played through the entire series, at least, well over fifty times, just because I've learned that I use Pokémon as essentially my coping mechanism.

Eric Vero: Mm-hmm.

Grant Stoner: So, whenever I, yeah, I'm going through a rough patch or a particularly bad health week I'll just play a Pokémon game and sort of centre myself, ground myself, and then I can feel better after. But I think, aside from Pokémon, the only fandom I really love is Star Wars.

Eric Vero: Ohh, awesome.

Grant Stoner: That's good. Yeah. Really has nothing to do with my disability, I just really enjoy Star Wars. I enjoy the lore. I enjoy the games and movies, all the shows I just love viewing it as a fan. And it's one of the true franchises, I guess you could say that I don't really explore with my disability and just viewing it strictly as a fan.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Grant Stoner: Also about there, because after my grad school experiences sort of left the historic fandoms, 'cause I used to love ancient Roman history.

Eric Vero: Oh, no way. I, for a while, I was considering doing an MA in Roman history.

Grant Stoner: I almost applied for three PhD programs in Roman history.

Eric Vero: Ohh awesome.

Grant Stoner: Yes, I love Roman history but after my experiences with grad school, I sort of stopped reading books watching documentaries and such, and very slowly I'm getting back into it, but not enough to be able to say that I'm like in the fandom if you will.

Eric Vero: Yeah, well, I can, you know, someone, I'm a very expansive again, I also did a lot of fan studies, of course for the dissertation, but also during my first year I read a lot about fan studies and I have a very wide definition of fandom so, there's a part of me that says, "just like some kid who was never allowed to watch Star Wars growing up only saw the trailers on the VHS tapes, and saw the trailers for the re-releases of the original trilogy. And it was like, this is the coolest thing I've ever seen. But my parents won't let me watch it." I'd still be like that kid's part of the fandom. Of course. They're part of the fandom, right? It's, you know, so, I think. I haven't read a Roman history book in a very long time, but I would absolutely consider myself a fan every time I boot up Civ 6. I have to convince myself to not play as Trajan again, you know, so...

Grant Stoner: True. Yep.

Eric Vero: Yeah, that's cool. Awesome. That, that's good. My committee will really like to hear that one of the persons I interviewed is a history fan. So that's cool.

Grant Stoner: Yes, yes. Yeah, that makes me feel better knowing that I'm still considered in the fandom. So, thank you for that, I appreciate that.

Eric Vero: Of course, of course. So, great. OK. So, we kind of covered some of the follow-up questions for that question. So, OK I guess my other question might be, so, you, as I've said a million times up to this point,

you're a video game journalist and that's one really big way you participate in the fan community. But did you ever participate in the video game community in other ways? Like, you know, the one thing that always comes to mind is fan fiction. I don't know if you've ever written fan fiction for the fan community, but you know what I mean by those kinds of fan practices? Did you get involved with forums? Did you get involved with different Discords like outside of the journalism angle? What else did you do? What else have you done, rather?

Grant Stoner: Again, it's mostly relating to Pokémon, there's a website called serebii.net, which is essentially the central hub for all things related to Pokémon. They have forums that they post on regularly, interact with, you can trade with other players or battle.

Eric Vero: MHM.

Grant Stoner: We would just have discussions on like, "I'm going to build this team for this game." "Ohh, I can't wait to see how this teased Pokémon evolves and maybe speculate on what it really is." I really was active throughout my high school years in those forums and really connected with a lot of people. Actually, my first story of writing in 2019, professionally, I wrote an innocent Tweet about, "Oh, I'm playing Pokémon Silver, or whatever, right?" And some guy responded. He was like, "I love that game, it's my favourite game." And now we talk all the time.

Eric Vero: Hmm. Yeah.

Grant Stoner: Yeah, I found out he lives, like, 45 minutes from my place.

Eric Vero: Ohh cool.

Grant Stoner: So we're planning on meeting soon and yeah, so like it's still a big part of me, and I'm really glad that I'm able to essentially turn off my journalism brain and go into that series as just a fan. And interact with everyone.

Eric Vero: That's awesome. That's cool. Yeah. Did you ever get a chance to go to fan conventions? Like, I guess like, my previous chapter I talked to sci-fi community members and conventions have always been really important to the Star Trek community. And when I've gone to fan conventions, admittedly, it's been a while because of the pandemic, but when I would go, video games were huge. They absolutely had a huge presence, and I would go to the bigger conventions here in Ontario and a lot of the presence was like big companies, EA coming in, giving off demos and stuff. So, I guess my question to you would be, have you ever been to a convention, a con, and how accessible have they been in your experience?

Grant Stoner: I am probably going to surprise you, but most of the gaming conventions are either in LA, New York, or Europe.

Eric Vero: OK.

Grant Stoner: And because traveling is difficult for me, I've never been to them. And it wasn't until the pandemic when all these conventions began doing online alternatives, that I was finally able to participate in them.

Eric Vero: Right. Yes.

Grant Stoner: As of now, as the pandemic restrictions are lessening, they're doing more in-person events.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Grant Stoner: Also, there's conventions to return with the same lack of online substitutions as previously, so, I'm slowly starting to lose the access to those convention opportunities.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Grant Stoner: Hopefully people can convince studios to do online alternatives, but as of right now, like Summer Game Fest, which is essentially a different version of E3. I don't know if you're familiar with E3.

Eric Vero: MHM.

Grant Stoner: Yeah, yeah. OK. So it's a different version of E3. It's essentially the new substitution. They currently do not have online substitutions. So, this summer, I won't really be able to participate as I have been throughout the entire pandemic.

Eric Vero: Yeah, that sucks because in my sphere, I've been in academia too long, but, you know, I went to a conference to give a paper a few months ago, and most everybody was there in person, but it was hybrid, right? So, two of the speakers on my panel were piped in through Zoom. It really wasn't that difficult. So, I don't fully understand why, when you can do hybrid or provide a virtual option, that infrastructure isn't there to just keep doing that outside of the pandemic. It doesn't really make sense to me. I don't know. Granted, I've never run a big convention...

Grant Stoner: Yep.

Eric Vero: ...etcetera. But it just seems to me like it wouldn't be that difficult to. Well, actually, that gets me thinking. Sorry to kind of jump on a different track, but Games Done Quick, the big speed running community.

Grant Stoner: Yeah, yeah.

Eric Vero: They've been pretty good about doing things virtually, haven't they?

Grant Stoner: Yeah, those run the best events here. I've usually heard from participants that it's usually a very inclusive community. And a lot of the charities they raise money for are usually dealing with sick children or disabilities or what have you. So, they usually do have a very conscious effort of being inclusive and providing alternatives for both participants and viewers. It's one, I would argue that it was doing online substitutions better.

Eric Vero: Oh, yeah.

Grant Stoner: That's where everyone else even realizes their own alternative. Yeah, GDQ, I love.

Eric Vero: Yes.

Grant Stoner: I love GDQ every year. It's a really good event.

Eric Vero: Yeah, I'm very excited for this next one. I'm so used to watching the YouTube backlog of them, but this year for the one that happened in the winter, I was able to catch a whole bunch of it live. It was really cool to donate and participate, and you know, so that was really cool.

Grant Stoner: Yeah.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Grant Stoner: It's really interesting how the entire games industry really comes together to raise [indiscernible] just a general safe space for all players.

Eric Vero: Mm-hmm.

Grant Stoner: I know usually there aren't many mad people in this place. It's usually everyone's really inclusive and welcoming. That's the other reason making sure everyone gets a chance to have their own spotlight. It's very good about it. I love it very much.

Eric Vero: Yeah, it's really cool. I bond with my fiancée's brother a lot over it. We'll watch stuff or be like, did you see this? And did you see this? And, so, it's really cool. Yeah, you bring up a really good point. It really is this, like, it brings people together. It's so odd because I try to explain, like, to my fiancée the concept behind a specific speed run. I'm like, it's weird. Don't get me wrong, they're using a glitch to do this, but it's a lot of fun.

Grant Stoner: Yeah.

Eric Vero: You know, so...

Grant Stoner: Yeah, yeah. I love the Super Mario 64 speedrunners. The different ways that they still learn how to skip entire sections.

Eric Vero: Yeah, absolutely.

Grant Stoner: It's served on the logic. I love how there's an entire dimension that, like you said, it's basically design. You see how fast you can break the game.

Eric Vero: It makes you view games so much differently. Yes, yeah, I was watching a speed run last night of Banjo-Tooie. It's one of my favorite games from my childhood. And, they're beating it. They're just flying through stuff that took me weeks to beat. Oh my God, are they doing it in seconds?

Grant Stoner: There is a speed run for either Bloodborne or Elden Ring. I can't remember which, but the speedrunner was giving his play-by-play of why he was doing this path, this movement. It's just like, oh my gosh. You have studied this game far more than I realize. You know so many secrets that I've never even thought about playing these games.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah, you know, and just the time people put in to break a game. It's really, really cool to see.

Grant Stoner: MHM.

Eric Vero: So I have one more question. I guess it's a bigger question, so it might take a bit of time. The question is, what are the challenges that the video game community faces in the present? Take it like an essay question. What are the big challenges that the video game community faces from your perspective? From what you write about, I imagine a lot of it might deal with accessibility. What do you think are some of the challenges that the video game community faces?

Grant Stoner: Can you give me three minutes to get my inhaler? This is a big one. I need a big breath for this.

Eric Vero: Please take your time. Please take your time. No worries.

Grant Stoner: I'll be right there. Sorry about that.

Eric Vero: No worries.

Grant Stoner: OK, sorry about that.

Eric Vero: Absolutely no worries. I did a bit of a stretch break and drank some water. My throat's getting dry, so no worries.

Grant Stoner: Yeah. Alright, so I'm going to answer this in two to three parts because they mostly overlap, but they're also usually separate. The way they handle each issue is different. First, with accessibility specifically from the media side, the gaming industry still doesn't really know how to properly cover it. For example, there's very few of us who primarily write about accessibility. I would say only a small handful of us. Even for many of us, it is inconsistent, usually because of our disabilities, energy levels, or stretching thin with coverage.

Eric Vero: Yep.

Grant Stoner: The way media covers it so far is significantly better than it used to be. However, they still don't understand concepts like just because the game has options means it's going to be accessible to everyone.

Eric Vero: Right?

Grant Stoner: They don't know how to properly conduct accessibility reviews. In line with the idea that if a game has options, it must be accessible, many reviews just list the options in the game without really exploring how they interact with the game or how the game plays without those options. If you were to strip everything away, can you still play it as a disabled person? I think as there is more accessibility awareness and interest on the media side, there needs to be full-time positions for these topics. You can bring on people who are skilled and knowledgeable about these subjects to provide accurate information. Without proper training and awareness of these issues, you can't really progress the industry. A lot of times, we've seen from developer feedback and community feedback that accessibility stories will influence game development sometimes.

Eric Vero: Right.

Grant Stoner: Because what you're doing is you're showing how studios are making these options and design practices. How these options and design practices work, how they don't work, what's missing, and what needs to be done for the future. But if you only give a very surface level coverage, you can't really educate.

Eric Vero: Right?

Grant Stoner: Which is gonna lead to misconceptions and misinformation and just a general lack of knowledge on how to increase accessibility across the industry. That includes again making positions, bringing on numerous disabled voices. One of the main principles we have with my work is because the gaming industry is so vast and so expensive and because disabilities are individualistic in nature, I tend to never interview the same disabled person more than twice because I want the industry to show or to demonstrate that.

Eric Vero: Yep.

Grant Stoner: You need multiple perspectives to be able to get a better understanding. So, you need better coverage, better positions. There are also different types of troubles using different services. Outside of accessibility, the gaming industry still has a massive problem with racism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia. It's still very unsafe for a lot of marginalized people. And until, well, I don't really have the solutions. I don't know...

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah.

Grant Stoner: ...what the solutions are, but we need to be better served spaces for marginalized groups. Because currently a lot of creators, journalists, even consumers, are consistently pushed out of this space due to racism, homophobia, transphobia, what have you.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah.

Grant Stoner: So, until the gaming industry really accepts and acknowledges that it has a problem with these issues, it can't really create better spaces and more inclusive spaces for other players aside from the straight white male community.

Eric Vero: Yep. Yeah, I've outlined this chapter, and if I'm going to be writing a contemporary video game history, I'm going to talk about Gamergate because you know, right?

Grant Stoner: You have to!

Eric Vero: Exactly. You know, I talked about it in my thesis, my MA thesis, but it was a bit more current then. But now we're in 2023 and it's been what, 7 or 8 years maybe? And I feel like, you know, I guess. I don't know if things have gotten better. Like I think, like you say.

Grant Stoner: I would say that they're different. They're not better. They're not worse. There are new issues coming up, but there are also some issues that have been resolved. But there's also like, you know, the Blizzard case, massive sexual assaults of numerous employees. That's still being investigated.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Grant Stoner: So it's not really a – but it really hasn't changed aside from just maybe making different problems.

Eric Vero: Yeah. Yeah, no, this is excellent because the way I planned this chapter, the way I envision it is at the end of the chapter, I'll say this is what I'm arguing. This is my contribution to the scholarship. But I asked these members of the video game community, what are the big challenges video games have to face? And so it's going to really be ending more on a question to say, these are the questions that this generation and future generations need to deal with. It absolutely breaks my heart that I will watch a GDQ video, I will watch a speed run and see how people are able to put their pronouns up and display their pronouns and be who they are. But then I'll read something like exactly like you mentioned, stuff that's going on with Blizzard or just come across something on Reddit. I don't go down any rabbit holes on Reddit. I don't really use Reddit that much but it's easy to find some problematic stuff. I think you know what, that makes a lot of sense. What you say is different. There are new challenges, old challenges and here we are in 2023. Yeah. No, that's great.

Grant Stoner: Yeah. It's very much, I totally get when people are pushed out, not pushed out but refused to join this industry. Again, it's not a very safe space. It's incredibly harmful, especially if you're marginalized. Speaking exclusively for myself, I've even received death threats for reviews. To me, I wasn't necessarily fazed with mine. But for other identities, that's incredibly traumatic.

Eric Vero: Yeah, of course. No one should open their e-mail or open a DM and have that, you know? Yeah, I know.

Grant Stoner: Terrifying. Yeah, yeah, yeah, it's very...

Eric Vero: Yeah, it's. There's a lot of...

Grant Stoner: Yes, a lot of work.

Eric Vero: Lot of work. Yeah, I agree. I know that we're kind of ending on an ambiguous note, but those are my questions. Is there anything else you might want to add, any stories that come to mind or any final words you want to say?

Grant Stoner: I'll say maybe some final words about accessibility overall. When I joined the industry in 2019, accessibility was still very much like, I don't want to say an afterthought, but not as prevalent as it is now. In those four years, oh my gosh, four years since I've been doing this, it's dramatically and drastically increased and improved. There's still a lot of work to be done. But the fact that this awareness is here and this attention to disabled voices is here is really indicative of positive change.

Eric Vero: Yes.

Grant Stoner: I don't think it will happen overnight. I don't think it's fair to expect it to happen overnight.

Eric Vero: Yeah. For sure.

Grant Stoner: Right. It's definitely happening and you can see in gaming alone how disabled people are being respected and elevated and no longer treated as niche categories. I don't really have a full idea of when disabled players can be fully embraced and accepted in gaming. Outside of gaming, that's a whole other issue that I can give answers for...

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Grant Stoner: Legal barriers.

Eric Vero: Yeah. No, I think that's great. I really appreciate your expertise. Just as a note, participation in all of this is voluntary and you can withdraw your consent by advising me of your decision at any time. If you have any questions for the research ethics board, contact information for the Office of Research Ethics is listed on that recruitment letter I gave you. If you have any other questions about this study, don't hesitate to contact me at my e-mail or send me a message on Discord or any way that makes the most sense to you. Basically, the way this will go is I'm going to go away, I'll probably interview other people to get their perspectives, I'll write my chapter and then I need to write two more chapters.

Grant Stoner: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Oh gosh.

Eric Vero: And so like, I know, what did I get myself into?

Grant Stoner: Yes. Yeah.

Eric Vero: But basically, eventually down the road, probably next year when I have a final copy of this chapter, I will send it to you for you to review if you want to do that. Basically, you'll sign off on what I'm saying and how I'm using your words if you feel like you're being represented correctly because that's really important.

Grant Stoner: MHM.

Eric Vero: Because I don't just want to go away and put words in your mouth or anything like that. So you'll get a chance to look over everything and ask for changes. It could be simple, something like, oh, you know, like I said it this way, but I feel like this other way more accurately gets across my idea. I will absolutely factor that in and change that. So I will follow up with you in the future if not sooner about things. So yeah, I just want to say thank you so much. I've really enjoyed us chatting and I know that I will be able to add something to the scholarship of this topic based on what you've said. So thank you.

Eric Vero and Antonio Martinez – May 5, 2023

Eric Vero: Well, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. I'll go into a bit more. Like, I'll go over again kind of what it's about. I'll ask some questions according -- like that I need to ask according to ethics, and then we can jump into the interview. So, I'm a PhD candidate at the University of Waterloo. My dissertation is an oral history of disability and fan communities, and currently my chapter is on video games. So, I've reached out to people in the accessibility community and the video game community just to talk about their experiences. You know, anything that they want to pass on to future generations kind of thing. Like what -- what do you think is important in this -- in the story of accessibility in the video game community, right? So very briefly, I just need to ask a few questions up front for housekeeping reasons. So, the first question is what is your name?

Antonio Martinez: My name is Antonio Martinez.

Eric Vero: Perfect. Have you had a chance to read the recruitment letter I sent along? I think through e-mail.

Antonio Martinez: Yes.

Eric Vero: OK. Do you have any questions about it?

Antonio Martinez: No it's pretty clear.

Eric Vero: OK, great. So just as a reminder, participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can withdraw your consent by advising me of your decision at any time. If you have questions for the research ethics board, contact information for the Office of Research Ethics is listed on the information letter. That I provided. For all other questions about the study, you may contact me at eavero at uwaterloo.ca, which we've been corresponding with. So, the next question is, do you consent to participate in the interview?

Antonio Martinez: Yes, I do.

Eric Vero: OK. Do you give permission for your interview to be video recorded?

Antonio Martinez: Yes.

Eric Vero: Do you agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this research, with the understanding that you may be referenced generally by your area of expertise or experience? So in this case it's your participation and expertise in the video game community.

Antonio Martinez: Sure, of course.

Eric Vero: And then finally, the final question, do you agree with, "I agree to the use of attributed quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this research with the understanding that I will have the opportunity to review the quotations and how I will be attributed prior to publication"?

Antonio Martinez: Yes.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah. So basically it just means that, uh, once I finish the chapter, you'll get a chance to look it over and make sure that you're being represented properly. OK. So, with that out of the way, I think we can jump into the interview. I just have a just a single page of questions and they're by no means strict. You can talk about anything you would like. We don't have to talk about things you don't want to talk about. They're just more like guidelines, I think is the best way to put it so... What pronouns do you prefer?

Antonio Martinez: Oh, he/him. He/him is good.

Eric Vero: OK. And you're OK with being referenced with your full name in the dissertation, correct? Like you wouldn't want to use a pseudonym or anything like that?

Antonio Martinez: No, I'm fine.

Eric Vero: OK, so a very broad question. Could you please speak to your experiences with disability?

Antonio Martinez: You mean in real life or in video games specifically?

Eric Vero: Whichever route you would like to take that in, it's very broad to yeah.

Antonio Martinez: Well, my disability is muscular atrophy Type 3, which is a progressive disability. It affects muscles. And they get like, week overtime. So, I started experiencing it when I was like 3 years old. And they diagnosed me with it. I've been doing physical therapy since then because there's no cure or any kind of treatment for it. I mean, there's a treatment, but the only thing that it does is enough. It slows down the progress. Yeah. I mean, if you give it to children with other more aggressive types, it helps much more. In my case, it's put only like stop it or probably delay the condition, but I mean, I'm fine with that. I have been taking that so growing up with a disability was a bit -- I wouldn't say rough, but different. I never thought of myself as disabled because when you're a kid, you don't hear those words, you know, especially we are talking about, you know, the 80s in Spain.

Spain had been kind of on the back foot of advancement because we have a dictatorship that kept us like 20 or 30 years behind the rest of Europe in terms of like human rights, disability rights, we're still trying to catch up in that regard. Probably. I mean, we have made, like, huge progress, but there's still room for improvement. So, growing up my, my experience was just well, you know, I'm different to other kids. I cannot run as they can, I cannot play the same game that they play because I fall to the ground very easily. You know, I kind of see I don't have the same strength. So, I for example like school because on the school well you are not limited by your body so much, it's more about your mind, right?

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: I mean, mine was like absolutely fine. I [achieved] high grades. So I enjoyed school. I enjoyed making friends there. I always find it a bit difficult. Because, you know, let's say you get to recess, right? What do the kid do? Well, they play football or they play. They play tag, you know? And it's about running. I cannot run, so I cannot play. I cannot play football because I cannot run. So for me, this is where most -- like -- waiting in a corner in -- in the in the courtyard. You know?

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: For the kids to play. Talking to them, the kind of stuff. So when I discovered video games, and more specifically, computer games, I was completely, you know, it was a new beginning for me.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: Because now I could invite friends to my [home]. And now we could play games. I mean they took like forever to load, which was a bad thing. But on the other hand, I think it really helped me because those -- that time, so to speak, when, while the game loads, you -- when you started to talk about seeing from school, from what you like, what you don't like and to communicate, to socialize even more than even at school, you know and that's when I came more open to making friends and it really helped me. So, the people that came to my home to -- to play, some of them became my best friends. And some of them are my friends even up to today, you know, after. And now, after 36 years I've been playing game with them, for some, so long. They are my family at this point.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah. You know, I just hit my 30s and I can tell you how difficult it is to keep friends like, you know what I mean? So it's really special that, you know, one could, you know, keep in touch and be really close to, you know, those -- those -- those friends who [you] would have had in school. Yeah, I mean, I don't really even talk to my friends from high school necessarily, we just fell out of contact. I really appreciate everything so far. This is great.

Antonio Martinez: No, it's good. I mean my best friend from school still at least near me. I am the I seem to call it the Godfather of his daughter

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah.

Antonio Martinez: So I have like, you know, the kind of the relationship with them, we are like brothers like you always talk to me like my brother, which is really nice with others adults I've lost contact because you know, life happens.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: But those times when we were. Like playing games still come up in conversations and then you are very like, do you remember we played that game for like -- like "Oh my God, we played that game and we played it like 100 times."

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: And we played it all the time. It doesn't matter if I had out of games like, there were specific games that were, we -- we always came back to when we were like bored because we knew that it was again where we felt. We don't even need to communicate verbally sometimes to know what we needed to do because they were competitive games and it was really helpful and I -- that also helped me a lot with my disability because when you are a small kid and they tell you, OK, so you need to do like 30 minutes of physical therapy everyday. When you are a kid you're like. Well, that's no fun to do it. But then, as you grow up, you start to get tired because every time you do more exercises, more exercises takes time from your studies, takes time from your free time, take time from making things with your friends.

And -- and at some point you didn't feel a bit bad because you go to the doctor and the doctor will tell you there's nothing new for them because you're not asking. Your mom is asking, like, "is there new advancements for this?" And they're like, "there's nothing. There's nothing." And you take it and you're like, fine, there's nothing to keep going. But at -- at some points in your life, you're like, well, there's nothing. "Why do I keep doing this?" You -- and physical therapy became hard to me, but games were always there for me to help me out. Because when you're playing games, you're moving your arms, you're moving your hands, and you're -- you're doing exercise without realizing it. And years later, when I was reaching my teenage year[s] like my 12 years, 13 years. The doctor[s] were like, "What are you doing to keep in this good shape because it's not usual for people like you in this age to be so strong in your arms, you know they tend to lose much more mobility?" And like I study and I play games and they didn't -- they didn't find that, you know, the relation in that moment, this day they -- they do because they're more into it, you know, but it was that it was my playing games every day, what helped me -- Help me keep my arms. My hands. Yeah. Yeah, I'm, I'm mobile for a long time. Even after I stopped walking when I was like 15, I had to stop walking. I had to take on a wheelchair. Which was a struggle for me not because of the wheelchair itself, but using the wheelchair, like as -- as -- as a tool. Right? You cannot walk longer, walk so long.

OK, so you take the wheelchair. The problem is that I didn't have the strength in my arm, my arms, to move the wheelchair by myself. Because it was a manual wheelchair, so I found some only that there was -- I -- I will not say like bound but like stranded. I -- I had lost my independence in some ways before I could go to one way or another. Watch something in in, you know, in wherever I wanted to go now I couldn't have to ask the person who was pushing the wheelchair to take me somewhere. Maybe they were busy or whatever you know, so I lose my independence. Years later when I go to my first power wheelchair, it was like -- I was like 23-24 years old and I got my first power wheelchair. And I remember when I went to the shop for it with a prescription they told me, "OK, so now you need to choose one, and I will teach you the controls. But it will take time for you to get used to it because you know it's not easy to -- to drive this -- this time." But the funny thing is that since I've been playing games for my life, with a joystick and keyboards, the moment that I saw the wheelchair and I had this small stick to move, I was driving perfectly from the first moment. The point that the woman I remember, the woman in the in the shop, she was like, "oh, you you've been kidding with me. You have used one of these before." Like, no, I haven't. They have been playing video games and this is exactly the same. It's exactly the same. And I never hit corners and never hit doors, never. Which is funny because when someone tried to like, drive for me, they were like hitting everywhere. Everything. Ohh. Like how can you be so bad at driving? Doesn't make sense. You know. You just practice. So that's practice with video games. Helped me then in my real life when I was using my wheelchair. And something that and you feel much more free.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah, I -- I -- I imagine just that sense of agency, right, that sense of. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, that's -- that's awesome.

Antonio Martinez: Exactly. Then as my condition progress, I started to lose more -- more mobility. And video gaming became getting harder because you know they require more inputs and you need to make things in a more complex way. I couldn't hold down buttons anymore. I started to question myself like, "Well, I cannot play this kind of video games anymore." I could find other ones but, I did, I -- I felt bad and frustrated losing access to something that was important for me. But back then, I didn't know what accessibility was, so the only thing that I knew in my -- in my head was like, "OK, this game is not for me." But then something said in my

head, “But yeah, but you know, if I could, if I didn't need to hold down this button, if I could do it like in that another game that -- that you have where you can just switch between aiming or crashing by just pressing 1, you know, with a toggle, yeah, it would be different.” But, you -- you don't realize that's not your fault. So, in that I remember I was always thinking “ohh, it's the fault of my everything. It's my disability's fault.” But it wasn't. It was just that, you know, there was no awareness about the issue. And then the developers were not able to implement the proper options on design or design features to help with that. So, when I feel like I was losing access to my games, I -- I feel really sad. I went through a severe depression when I was around 30, 30-something. Because of, you know, life issues decorated with the loss of games. Because games work for me, not just as a way to socialize or a way to -- to think they couldn't in real life. But, you know, just to have fun, for escapism, for mental health, to give me time to cope and say, “it's OK. My life is changing. Let me go back to my games, let me regain some confidence in myself and now I can face the real life issues better.” And that was a time where I didn't have that and that really hit me hard. Everything came together and I was in that depression. But I came out of it. And when I came out of that, I started to look for more games to play and one day accidentally I found out that I could play Assassin's Creed Origins because I've been playing that franchise for like forever. I really like, especially -- what I really loved was the parkour element because -- but you can climb buildings and walk on the roofs and everything. It gives you this sense of freedom of...

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: I don't know. It's like flying, you know, for some people, they dream about flying. I dream about walking because to me, it's yes as impossible. But it's yes, as liberating as it is for the people to fly. And I remember when I was playing Assassin's Creed: Black Flag, the thing that I love and I did like for all the -- all the time was like yes going roof to roof...

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: ...tops and hearing the soothing sound of my footsteps jumping from one roof to another, you know? Made me feel so free, so powerful, so myself. So, when I started to lose that because again, we're making much more complexes, I was feeling like, OK, I understand that I lost. So, when Assassin's Creed: Origins came out and I realized that I could play because they had just a few options, you, just a few toggles here and there. I was like, “OK, I can play these games again,” and now it's an open world and it's in Egypt. I love Egypt. The culture is, like, so fascinating.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: I had everything that I wanted in a game, open world. I could travel distance. I could train a horse, could fight for justice. It was -- it was the way that I found that actually existed. It is how I found out that people were working for accessibility, for people like us and with people like us, you know, to -- to make games better for everyone. And that gave me -- that made me feel like, “OK, I -- I need to do something about this. I need to talk about accessibility to other people because just like I didn't know, other people don't know.” And [I'm] going to help them realize that they can still play games. So I tried creating a YouTube channel, didn't work out because. I'm terrible at video editing like I'm afraid of it, so, I waited a bit more and then I join Can I play that? I -- I told them, “Hey, you're making reviews for Deaf accessibility. Would you like if I made a review for motor accessibility, like low mobility people? they're like, yeah, sure, fine. That would be great.

And I was very nervous. I was like, “oh, this is going to be like, an undertaking for me.” My first time I did -- I did fairly well, apparently, and they told me, like, “you know what? We want you to be our mobility editor.” Like, wow, this is amazing. And the -- the response from the their audience was also like very good. Like, they were taking notes. They were the message, like with work we are taking note of what you're saying. You know, we're paying attention....

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: ...and to contact me. And from there, I was like, “OK, this is, this is what I've been waiting on my life. This is my calling. I'm going to be trying to raise awareness about accessibility and to try to improve games for everyone and I'm going to make sure that people in the future don't have to face all the difficulty that I have to face when I was younger.” And that's my story.

Eric Vero: That's great. There's -- there's a lot to talk about, which is -- which I really appreciate. And yeah, yeah. You know, I, as I've been doing research, I find -- I've found that there's quite a community of -- of activists, you know, who are pushing for accessibility in video games, and it's really, really like not inspiring, inspiring the wrong word, but really like -- like it, it's -- it's really engaging. It's like ohh yeah. You know, there's so much. There's so much potential in gaming to be accessible. Right/ And it's -- it's right there. It's just we need to advance the conversation further and further and further there. So, I think that's really cool. I -- I on Wednesday I talked to another journalist who also does accessibility journalism, and he's -- he's echoing, he's he has echoed a lot of the things that you're saying.

Antonio Martinez: Where are you going, Stoner?

Eric Vero: Yes.

Antonio Martinez: Great guy. Great journalist.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, he -- he was -- I really enjoyed our discussion like the -- the two of us so. That's great. So. You've covered a lot of some of the other questions, so let's move on to a different kind of, let's pivot a little bit. What fandoms do you belong to? So, you mentioned you play a lot of Assassin's Creed.

Antonio Martinez: Yeah, I think the funny thing is that back in the day, when I -- I started to stop playing Assassin's Creed, also couldn't play, like, Far Cry games. You know, most games that were made by Ubisoft. So, like OK, there's nothing for me from Ubisoft games, right, Ubisoft is making games that are not for me anymore. But that happened to this game from, like, Electronic Arts, you know, because I -- I got shooters I remember playing...

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: Battlefield Bad Company 2, like on the multiplayer aspects for like many, many hours, like way too many hours probably and I love the rush of, you know, 32 guys and 32 guys trying to fight for a position, destroying walls, advancing, helping each other. I lost that too because I, in the next games, didn't have the option to toggle, so that was a big blunder for me. That too. But then -- so all those games were bad for me. So, for example, I love Far Cry games too. But they weren't great for me again, the thing is that when Ubisoft made this change with Origins, from that moment on, they started to implement other changes in other

games too slowly. And that made me think like, “ohh, you know what? If I can play this game from these guys, maybe I can play this other game that they're about to release.” And you know what? I could. And that's what brought me back into the whole OK, I like these games -- I am doing some -- I'm very also a critic in the -- in the -- in, on the games studios, because if something that is not right, I will call them out. But that's not the point of, you know, being an activist or a consultant or whatever because also the consultancy -- very tedious.

But it's always good to be like, OK, there's no matter if I like the game or not. The most important thing for me is how can I play this game? How can people play these games? Because nobody is going to be able to tell me if I can play again or not. They need to tell me what there is in the game and I will be able to decide by myself. That's what I try to do, you know, not telling people this thing's accessible, is inaccessible. No, that's an opinion that I can have for myself, while you can -- telling it OK, so this is the game play. This has all the options. This is what they do. This is what they change. This is what they are lacking. This is what is not working right. These are values that are still going to be there if you make the attempt. And people can make their decisions and for example, you say fandom for Assassin's Creed, the most fandom I say that I did for a script. I think it was, they made one of those picture, uh, photography contest. You know, when you -- you go into the photo mode of the game, use the pictures. And I did, I took photos, pictures from I think it was for Origins that a lot of pictures of that game and then in [indiscernable] took a lot of pictures too for one of their giveaways, you know? And I won one of them and I got.

Eric Vero: Oh, really? Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: Yeah. It's not a big problem, you know, just like a season pass or a t-shirt. You know something like that. But it's very, really great to be part of the community, you know to be, to be involved in that, to be like, “hey, that's my picture.” It's -- it's -- it's -- it's one of the winners that's that great. And I got a T-shirt.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: It's -- it's part of what makes you feel like into the community, you know, and now you have this conversation about, OK, So what game was better? They're like, oh, well Unity was better because the parkour was much more complex. You could do more things and like, no Unity was, like, terrible for me. I understand what you mean. But in Unity, I couldn't do like, nothing. Like, I remember that again. I -- I literally launched the game. I went to the tutorial that you had to climb a place and they -- they tell you how to go down and I did it wrong. The character fell down and hit his. [indiscernable] And died. Of course, this before, and there did that and I was like, OK, this is dumb. Just getting here is taking me, should have taken me like 10 minutes to me, half an hour. I failed all the time because the controls were not right for me. And I would, like, and that's it. There goes 50 euro down the drain. I bought one of the, you know, characterizations and other stuff and it's sitting there in my chair like reminding me to never, never, ever trust again until I see the accessibility so. That's what it is. As for fandom, I was a big fan of Yu-Gi-Oh games before that. Yu-Gi-Oh games, I don't know if you're familiar with them. Yeah, well, you know, trading card games and all that stuff. I love that game. This -- the cool thing about that game is that they allow me to socialize with people from all over the world. I made friends with them also, and some of those friends like last like 10 years or more, you know? Yeah. The thing is that the social aspect of that game was completely focused on the text chat, so when my hands became not able to type, I was like, “OK guys, I need to take a break,” and then I had to sit there for

like 30 minutes, maybe an hour, resting my hands, seeing everyone talking. And you were like, it felt like someone was like covering your mouth. And you can talk when you needed to or I could make a joke there or have a good tip there. Or I could say this. And you have no opportunity. And you even saw your -- get your friends coming to the game and they would see that you were there online. "Antonio, you were like --"

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: I can't even tell you "hi" right now. I can't even tell you I'm here right now. And that was hard to the point that you made me like...

Eric Vero: Of course.

Antonio Martinez: Out of the game. And it's funny because I left from the game for like 6 months. And everybody who knew me, they were like, you know, that I have been there for, like years. I have been like, new players, giving cards to new players like, so, when I returned after six months, they were like, "hey, are you the original owner of the -- the account," and like, "yeah, it's me of course." And like, "dude, they said you were dead." I'm like what? That yeah, because they said that you would have never quit this game. Because you love it so much. Like it's impossible that you have done it, you know, like, OK, this is what happened. You knew that I was getting more and more tired. And you -- I -- I told you like why it was happening and I couldn't communicate. And when it was affecting me. Yeah. And at some point. The whole game falls apart from me because all I could do is go in there, play cards with other people but not communicate. And it was probably the best part of the game, you know. It's not about the strategy, it's about playing a card and before your opponent is going to play the next character in them, I know what you're going to do, the, like now they're trying to, that's a bluff. And you have the perfect counter prepared. And they're like "how do you know?" You're like, "because you have done this and this and this." And now you were like ohh you, you kind of felt like ESP or something like you're in my mind. Like now I have a lot of experience and I know whether I'm doing so that's it. It's when you start, you know, becoming friends with people and they're like, "oh, that's cool. I want your deck, can you give me the recipe and --" That kind of thing is what really get me wanting to win the game.

Same with Assassin's Creed. I love that game because they are open world. You can tell your own story. They gave me the freedom to do whatever you want. I would like to be more involved with the community. But I know that the community works usually in forums you know on sites and they are like places where you have to type and write and I am already like pretty tired just by writing my reviews on my pieces so I don't have the energy to do that. I could make videos, but again, maybe this editing skill like absolutely, I don't know in a scale of one to 10, you know, I manage an 8, you know? That's how bad I am. But I would love to.

I -- I got the opportunity to be more involved with, I think it was, Far Cry 6. We were invited to an event for people with disabilities and for journalists in general to take a look at the game before it was released. You know, give our opinions. Try the game remotely, when the pandemic hit. And, it was amazing, because I was there playing the game on my own and for a number of hours with someone there to assist me if I needed help and then they were like "OK, now we're going to -- to the multiplayer aspect of the game. So you're going to play with another journalist from another country." And I was paired with someone from Portugal from a big site, "like oh, you work for this site. That's awesome. I read your site." And the thing is that all the people with

disabilities, all the content creators, advocates, you know, really where they were invited, we were treated exactly the same as any other journalist. There was no distinction. They were like, “you will have access to the same as them using, we're going to provide to you is where I'm going to ask you. You need any kind of assistance, any kind of accommodation and we will provide it for you, whether it's sign language, interpreters or whatever, just ask. You are tired. Let us know we will take the control for you for a moment. There's something you cannot do. Let us do it for you. We're going to be there for you.” And that was extremely empowering. I was like -- I'm one of -- And just one more, you know like. This is exactly how it should feel for anyone to be part of our community. You gonna be like, “hey, I am just disabled right now. Hey, I'm Antonio, and I'm here too. OK, cool. What do you do? Play games? Disability. Oh, that's cool. Do you want to disclose it? Fine. You don't want to disclose it? Fine. Just be who you are.” You know, I'm not ashamed or, you know. Stigmatized by that at all. I'm very open about it, but they also know that when you say that in certain games, especially in multiplayer, it's like you're putting a target on your back. You know, it's like, let's make fun of these guys. Let's be toxic with this guy.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: Oh, yes, let's keep this guy out of the game because it's fun. I had that happened before.

Eric Vero: I'm sorry. Yeah. And -- and I imagine like -- in addition, people put you in a box as soon as they hear a label, right? And that I know in my personal experience that's very frustrating because I'm more than my diagnosis or my illness. But people, as soon as they -- it -- it can be very scary to disclose your disability or your illness, because people, might they, they will treat you differently and it -- it could be very like soft and paternalistic and like, you know, or -- or it could be outright “I don't want to have anything to do with you because, you know, your -- your illness scares me and I'm scared of what you will do.” Right? And, yeah, you know, I -- I -- I in my own journey I kind of feel like you -- like you, I think, you've summed up how I feel too where I'm not ashamed of -- of -- of what what I have what I live with I -- I'm, you know, I've -- I've been published talking about my experiences. But on the other hand, I know that there's this tension right with, as I say that out loud into public, that people will treat me differently because it's still -- we're, we -- we have so much farther to go so.

Antonio Martinez: Yeah, absolutely. I remember one of the -- this is something that really hurt me back in the day, so I was playing a game called Left for Dead 2 and if you know, it is a shooter, it's really fun. You know, it's for -- for four players against four players and that's really, really cool. I was pretty good at it, to be honest. I like playing along with people. I didn't mind because I was good enough to complete the whole game with the AI. So, I remember one of the people that that played that card and Yu-Gi-Oh, he was going through a hard time. He has lost his job, was depressed and I was like, you know what I'm going to give you something. So, I gift him a copy of Left 4 Dead 2 to him. And I'm going to teach you how to play. And you will meet new people and you will be able to play. So, when we start playing like he was really bad because everybody's bad in the beginning, right? It's part of -- it's part of how it is. You learn and then you improve. And I remember that he was like, “ohh this is great. I'm learning so much.” Now two or three weeks after that. So we like I -- can we play, can we play together, can we play together? After that, he said to me that, you know, he was like, more busy. He didn't have too much -- much time to play. And you were like ohh sorry I woke up earlier. We are in different time zone. All that stuff. I understand. But then at some point I saw that it wasn't that because he was playing with other people. He was like, “OK, I'm going to finish this game and then we're going to play

together.” Like, yeah, sure, fine. But then when he finished that game, he would start another one, another one, another one, and he would never invite me. To the point that at some point, even when I got into the party enough people voted to kick me out because I said, “hey, I’m going to be the probably running behind you for because I have some difficulties with my hands, but I’m going to cover you right?” And they were like, “we don’t want any dead weight.” And they would kick me out of the lobby. And the thing is that my friend who was there in the lobby he wouldn’t say a word and he would not leave the game. He would still play with those people. Those other random people, another point I was like, “so I introduced you to this game because I want you to have fun and now you’re teasing me. Because you want to be with the cool guys.” I felt really bad.

Eric Vero: Of course. That, that. That’s awful. I’m so sorry. Like that -- no one deserves to be treated like that.

Antonio Martinez: That’s you. That that, you know it’s -- it’s -- it’s -- it’s -- it’s part of what taught me, you know, like, you have to be very careful with who you disclose your disability. Because I always said it in a way like I’m going to play this game if it’s a shooting game, I want you to understand that there are things that I will not be able to do as well as you do. But there are things that they can do just as good as you, OK, I’m a pretty good sniper. As you put me to fly a helicopter, for example, and the controls are rubbish. Like I remember this going on Battlefield. 3. Battlefield 3, maybe. We were on a beach and they were like, “OK, we’ll jump to the helicopter. I -- I jumped the land and they’re like you are the last. You have to fly us.” I told them if I fly this thing we are going to die and they’re like, “no -- no you’re going to be fine.” I said, “OK, your funeral.” I took the controls. And I crashed 30 meters above and they’re like, “what did you do?” I told you. I told you I couldn’t fly the plane. You forced me to play the plane I told you we would crash and we crashed. It’s what happened, right? So then I play as sniper and it’s great. But this kind of disclosure is not something that you can do open. I did the same when I was playing Hero of the Storm. It’s a MOBA. Similar to League of Legends but much more heroes, so to speak. And I was playing with the machine to train. I was like, getting pretty good. I mean, I got to the point where I wanted to be with other people. I played with some random people. And after the first match, I noticed that the skill gap was like extremely high. Because this is, there is a difference between playing with the machine. Depending on these other people, you need much more reflexes. I couldn’t map all the controls that I wanted, so I couldn’t use specific actions in time. Whatever. The thing is that after that first game. They reported me for something called “feeding” and I was like, what’s “feeding?” They tell me “feeding” is when you are losing on purpose to give experience to the other team so they can be even harder and I told them that’s the most stupid thing that I had ever heard. I told you, “it’s literally my first game. You can see my rank this is my first game. Why would I be like losing on purpose? Just to make you lose if I didn’t even know you.”

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: But they reported me and I went to the phone and I was like, “hey, this happened to me. So what’s going to happen?” And because I’m now, I’m worried that my account is going to get banned for something that I didn’t [do] and people were like, “oh, don’t worry. You’re not going to be banned. We have seen no, no, no report for you.” Whatever. And the response from all some people were like, “oh, I’m sorry it happened to you, you know,” but the response from the party was like, “dude, don’t take it wrong, but people like you, I don’t want on my team because you’re going to make me lose the game,” and like, ohh that’s fine. But to be honest I played the game to play. I don’t play the game to win. I win? Great. I like to win, right? But if you’re going to like report anyone that cannot win all the time like...

Eric Vero: Of course.

Antonio Martinez: And then I realized that those games were like super toxic. So I -- I went back to play, yeah, with the machine. And I also found other people play with disabilities. They were like, "I will play with you." And then in private, disclosing disability we'll be playing for a long time together, but it is -- it's a really tricky topic because even on -- on Twitter when I started to like. Ask question to the developers like, OK, we're going to release this game and I told them, "OK, so is -- is there going to be like these options like for aiming at this time?" I remember one guy, one random Twitter guy wished me to be dead. He wished my death and all that of all disabled people just because he said that we are -- we're ruining the game for them. And I -- and I have been said to that and have been had people with me to have myself and told me to cut my fingers and stuff like that just for asking about accessibility. And that's something that shouldn't happen to anyone and that's a very difficult conversation, but something that I used to be on Twitter with a, you know, an alias. Anthony Martins is how I wrote my first articles, Anthony Martins. And interviews I had that to them now. At some point I was like, I don't need to hide from people. If I'm hiding from people for my own safety, I understand. But at some point I need to tell these guys that. They didn't scare me. I am who I am.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: You didn't accept me? That's their problem.

Eric Vero: Yeah, exactly, exactly.

Antonio Martinez: So, that -- that's what I'm doing. I'm sorry, what was your question? I -- I've been talking a lot. Sorry.

Eric Vero: No, this is good. I -- I -- I don't come -- in the way. I've been taught to do this is -- the questions are very broad so that you are very much telling the story, if that makes sense. You get to talk about what you want to talk about. This is your time and it's my job to record it. And UM. And then, uh, tell it honestly. So, you can talk about whatever you want. These questions are just meant to be very broad. What -- what you have given me is -- is -- is -- is quite a lot and it's going to be very useful. So, thank you and -- and you're I know we talked about kind of a difficult subject, but you're -- you're doing OK?

Antonio Martinez: Yeah.

Eric Vero: OK, good, good, good, good, good, good. Just it's -- it's important, I think, that I check in. So we've got a I -- I -- I blocked in an hour for this. But I also appreciate that you -- you probably have plenty of stuff to do and like I know -- I'm -- an hour long Teams call is very tiring, so I do have maybe one more question, would you be OK if we did one more question?

Antonio Martinez: Sure, don't worry. I -- I -- I just made [available] my -- my day for you. Don't worry.

Eric Vero: OK, OK. So very broadly, I think we've -- you've kind of touched on a lot of them so far, but more specifically, what do you think are some of the challenges that the gaming industry faces in the present and what do you think it is going to be facing in the near future? What -- what are some big questions that the video game industry needs to deal with?

Antonio Martinez: I think it needs to start by dealing with the whole thing about, you know, the -- the whole concept [indiscernible] pass for one whatever you want to call it. The fact that some games are releasing on some platforms is -- is already an issue for people like me. For example, if they release a game that is very accessible, because, you know it has, like ohh we have put like 70 options that not going to mean nothing to me because the thing is going to be locked to a specific platform like PlayStation and I don't have PlayStation because I can't -- I can't use a controller. Yeah so we need more tech in that regard. So we need to make advancements. We also need to make sure that people have the possibility to use any device that they want. To play on their choosing that, right? It doesn't matter if it's PlayStation, Xbox, PC, who cares? People want to play games wherever they feel more comfortable to. It's not about -- for people like us. It's not about brand. It's not about being a fanboy or whatever, you know, like -- like this is where I can play this, where if you can't open, this is why I can't play, which is the most important thing because, when someone said like, oh, this is going -- is going to be exclusive to whatever platform you're like, "OK, that's awesome." And we're -- we're -- we're going to be excluded now because when you mean exclusive, you are excluding people. So, we need to look at that and be aware that you want to be like truly inclusive. Need to do it intentionally. And now you know, just by coincidence. Ohh it's -- it's a good like that it was accessible or whatever. Also we need to look at the fact that options are not going to be everything when it comes down to making games more accessible, options help a lot. As I said in my talk, options allow you to the player to customize the experience to their needs that are going to be evolving like in my case. So what? It's alright for me now. It's not going to be alright for me, maybe two or three months. OK, I will need something extra.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: I also need to look at the way that we handle communications, for example, as I mentioned before, thank God we have the CVAA who's had like this big impact in how games communicate. So now we have like they have to have like text chat and voice chat and iConsole. And more -- it's something that you know they have to communicate things in many different ways, so nobody is excluded. That's awesome because, remember that one of the best experiences that happened in a game was when we were doing our review focused on Ghost Recon: Breakpoint. We went with my friend Tessa who has low -- low mobility. My friend Victor, who has low vision, my friend Allen who was Deaf and me, also low mobility and you would think well, such shooter games team based, how are you going to communicate? But we had text chat. We have voice chat and we have text to speech and voice to text so it means that all of us could communicate. And that was amazing because we worked as a team. Yeah. I mean, we were pretty bad in the beginning, like we died a few times, but it was always because of the same reason we'd approach an enemy and coming and coming, for example, there were like 30 guys there. And they were like entrenched. And we were like, "OK, let's -- let's do it slow. OK, let's -- let it be smart." And then we started doing so well, we got cocky. And that's a bad thing that could happen. You know you. When you're like, "ohh, we are going to kill these guys," And then we were like, completely destroyed. But the fact that you could get cocky meant that we're having a good experience. We were having communication that was not a barrier. And that means that...

Eric Vero: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Antonio Martinez: We were failing like we were not feeling frustrated. We were having fun. Failure was part of the fun, even different than when you play, for example, Dark Souls, or in those games, what it's like here, I'm going to punish you because you couldn't hit the button at the exact right moment. Like you couldn't do

this complex motion. And you're like, "I cannot do that no matter how many times I try, it's no matter I try 100 times." [I never] get better. It's a matter of it's impossible for me to do that in that way. Give me another way and I will do it. Give me tools. Because they're like, "yes, like you know, programmers and developers need better tools to make their games more accessible with less effort and better implementation of features. We need those tools to -- to be able to play their game and you didn't provide them for us." Anything that we can do, so we need to open platforms to -- to -- to more control devices, we need to make sure that things like integration text-to-speech, voice-to-text they are implemented on in all games and not on a system level because on a system level like it kind of sucks because it's not working well like mapping since that seems so basic, but it takes so much effort because of the way that engines work these days. You need to be done much better. And in that order we need to start having the conversation of talking about accessibility openly and not like, "OK. So we're going to talk about the game for like 3-6 months and we're going to show you, like several changes and all that stuff. And then at some point we are going to show you some of the accessibility features that we have." Now the industry is changing and you will notice that when there is someone that works on accessibility in a studio they -- they publish like their own info on what the game is going to have and then they invite people like us from the side to review the game to make to give them feedback to improve on the features, to test the game. To play test they need to start putting more and more people with disabilities in their play test because it doesn't matter if it's like 1-2 or years before you release the game, you don't have people with different disabilities trying the game. You're never going to find the barriers, no matter how many experts you have, because I know those people and they are amazing. They know their stuff, but they are the one that said we need disabled people to test the game because we are experts in accessibility, but we are not expert in our experiences. Only these -- these people have that experience. Like, if you're going to write an article about discrimination on women, you're not going to invite 10 guys to tell you about that. It's stupid. You need to invite 10 women who are going to give you exactly what it means to be discriminated as a woman. That's how it works. And we need to do the same and we need to be open and -- and learn that the term disabled is not negative and it's not stigmatizing. I know that it can be for some people, so we need to be sensitive and ask people how do you want to be treated. You prefer a person with disabilities, do you prefer disabled person because some people will have agency there? I don't mind disabled person, for example gamer, but I also [know] people who that, but that's fine.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: Like I have a maximum which is: "I don't treat people the way that I want them to treat me. I treat people the way that they want to be treated." Because that's how it should be.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: And I see that the industry needs to, yes, understand that disability is not a trend. It's because they already know. Like you can see more and more positions opening in studios and they're doing it and there is a lot of people who are trying to transition into that, that field, you know? At the same time, we have the experience and if we get that knowledge, they're going to be much more valuable and you can see that the person who are doing like the best are people who are -- are their own disabilities or not. But they are also giving that they have that experience and they know how to deal with it. You know, they have the sensitivity there because they have been dealing with it all their lives. Like, for example, they -- they are, they announced that the next -- some motorsport is going to be playing accessible so blind people will be able to drive for the

first time in a Forza game in a racing game probably. and there was a huge thread on Reddit with people making jokes about that and telling that the studio have put those -- those kind of resources into that and more into the game and you're like, "you don't understand how games work, dude. These things go in parallel, OK? It's not like they took money away from graphics to put into accessibility. That's not how it works."

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: And we need to educate people. Education is fundamental from the first stages of the player, and we're doing more open only to make sure that we have a safe space. So, they don't have to face bullying, you know? Yes, for being disabled.

Eric Vero: Thank you. That's -- that's -- that's awesome. I'm -- I'm just looking over my notes, and there's some -- there's some really, really, really great points and really great anecdotes and. It's going to be -- it's going to be great to sit down and -- and outline my chapter because also be including what -- what Grant has said and I might conduct a few more interviews. But what I have between you and grant is quite a bit, so it's good.

Antonio Martinez: Grant is way more eloquent than me. I will give him that like all the time, because I mean, he's native English, so he knows very well how to speak. I'm from Spain and have to work my mind around the words all the time. They're out of turn that are like pretty bad in Spanish and when you translate into English they become absolutely terrible. Why is it that I'm trying to do, you know, like? Find a way to translate all these terms that we're using in accessibility in English to Spanish so people have an easier time understanding the concept, but I'm very happy that I was able to help you. And feel free to reach out anytime in the future. I'll always have time for you.

Eric Vero: OK. Yeah. And I -- I have time for you as well for if you. If you want the academic, if you ever need an academic source or something like that, I might be able to point you in the right direction. If -- if ever in your writing. Now I'm speaking from like a like an English Canadian perspective. But there's some really exciting disability scholarship going on right now, really advancing things and I think you talk a bit of like the inner like behind closed doors kind of thing. You know, you have academics talking about something and it -- it's very little, gets distilled down into a more public, popular discourse, right? So this is where I think the alliance between academics and journalists are really important, because journalists can take what academics are doing translated into an accessible format and then disperse it so that people it's a lot like what you're talking about exactly about how accessibility should be more or like the language surrounding disability shipping more accessible. Right? Then people have a language to talk about it with and that's, I think huge part of it.

Antonio Martinez: Yeah, I highlight people like literally turning in Spain. So about this game is very this is very accessible, but I couldn't work out what the options do because I don't understand what they mean. And then I look at the game in Spanish and like all the translation is like absolutely terrible. It's because, you know, the person who translated this game had no -- no idea about what these words mean in the context of accessibility. So, when they translated the text, the translation was like...

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: Absolutely terrible and like always, play the game in English always because you are -- yeah, maybe your English is not so good, but you're going to be able to understand exactly what the options do. And now that you know, you can just add it to it to Spanish and play your story or whatever you prefer. I personally prefer English, to be honest. Like, I don't -- I don't like the dubbing. I don't like the subtitling. I don't like the localization, like I don't like it. Sorry, it's we have really good dubbers and really good people working in the industry. But the emphasis on everything that comes with the actor performance, it's very difficult to translate. I think. And the context and everything. And also games made me get interested into English because when I starting to start study English, when I started to play games on my computer and yeah, in those days like the thing that you would get in a game was like loading health life, you know, that kind of thing really start. But some games have, like a bit more complex structures, like for example [indiscernable] Escape. When they tell you like, "oh, you, you need a code to do this, you need --" And then I would wrote those lines go back to my teacher. And if I couldn't find something in my dictionary, I will ask there, "OK. So, what that does mean, you know?" And they were like, "where did you get this from?" "Like, from a video again." You're like, "this is way too complex for you." And that really helped me. My grade school teachers were always like very good, because games were giving me a complementary education in English, so just like it is for my physical therapy, they were helping me with my studies in English so.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Antonio Martinez: I just said [indiscernable] marketable because the games have huge benefits for everyone.

Eric Vero: Yeah, I agree. I think that's -- that's awesome.

Antonio Martinez: I will check on your -- on your, on your position and if I have the need for someone like that or something, I will reach out. To you, thank you.

Eric Vero: So I I think that's a really good place to -- to wrap up unless there is anything you wanted to add on top of all that, but if not, that's OK too.

Antonio Martinez: No, you had that. One of the things that we tell you to do is to watch and maybe the talk that they gave at the conference this last week. Because if it's 14 minutes early and it probably will give you a bit more context of what a progressive disability is. Because stable disability, some disabilities are a bit different in the term that -- I feel like I'm 46, right? And I feel like my time in games might be close to going away? Uh because my -- my -- so, it is progressing very fast. And my disability is progressing very fast too. That's probably not at the right pace that I would need, especially in terms of technology. So I feel like that conversation needs to be taken somewhere, and we need to be like, "OK, we understand that accessibility is a marathon, not a sprint." You don't need to rush, but be aware that the -- the -- the clock is ticking for a lot of people, right? And the more we wait, the more it's going to take for them to be able to go back into gaming and more people are going to be missing on opportunities and -- and experiences. And at some point they might be like so limited in their mobility or any other capacity that they will not be able to play all those really cool games that they're going to release and have, like super cool graphics and all that stuff. But, they might just be able to only press 1 button and that's not going to cut it so. We need to be looking at that, not just at the at the medium size, you know, but at the bare minimum of what people can do and how we can make those games

accessible both people with the minimum level -- minimum level of mobility or community or visual capabilities.

Eric Vero: That's great. So I think it's good. Let's -- let's wrap it up here. Thanks so much again, Antonio. This has been like aside from doing work for my dissertation, this has been a great conversation and I appreciate you taking time out of your day to to talk to me.

Eric Vero and Dakota King – December 12, 2023

Eric Vero

So the very first thing we're going to do is, there's a consent form that I'm going to read out and you'll give verbal confirmation of. We'll go through that together and then we will go to the questions. There's six very broad. You can interpret them as you would like.

You can talk about, you know, in response however you would. It's very open to interpretation because I'm very eager to hear what you have to say. And that'll be the extent of the interview.

Do you have any questions?

Dakota King

I don't have any questions. However, circling back on the Internet issues you're continuing to sound robotic and I don't think that's going to be very conclusive... It's really distracting on my end and I don't want to not give you my full attention. Would you like to try, uh? I can turn off my voice now my video to see if that helps at all. If you like turn off yours, maybe that that could help. I don't know.

Eric Vero

I think that's a great idea. Yeah, yeah, absolutely. OK.

Dakota King

Hello.

Eric Vero

OK.

Eric Vero

How -- hello.

Dakota King

It's sounding a little bit better.

Eric Vero

Let me try one more thing.

Dakota King

OK. Oh, you sound super clear.

Eric Vero

Yeah. OK.

Dakota King

Awesome is it staticky on my end at all? Alright, alright, alright. Let's begin the interview, I'm excited.

Eric Vero

[Not audible]

Dakota King

My name is Dakota King. I did read it a little bit at first. I think the recruitment letter was posted to the Souls' RPG in one of the discord channels. So I read through it more thoroughly and I scanned it through your e-mail. So. I like pretty sure I know. What's on there? Sorry. I don't know. I'm apologizing. Yeah, I read it.

Eric Vero

[Not audible]

I do not. I just wish you the best of luck with your study and I hope everything goes well.

Eric Vero

[not audible]

Dakota King

Of course.

Eric Vero

[not audible]

Dakota King

That is correct. Alright. Understood.

Eric Vero

[not audible]

Dakota King

I do consent to – sorry, I do consent to participating in the interview.

Eric Vero

[not audible]

Dakota King

I do give permission for my video to be recorded. Fire away.

Eric Vero

[not audible]

Dakota King

Yeah, I consent. I'm willing to for the donate – not the donation, yes I consent. I'm sorry. I'm saying sorry a lot as well. I apologize.

Eric Vero

[not audible]

Dakota King

Okay. Yeah, I consent for that. I am OK with that. Not a problem.

Eric Vero

[inaudible]

Dakota King

Alrighty, sounds good. First of all. I was gonna say I hope you're having a good day. I hope everything is going alright on your end.

Eric Vero

[inaudible]

Dakota King

That's good. I'm glad you had a good day with your class. It sounds fun.

Eric Vero

[inaudible]

Dakota King

Alright, I'm ready for interview when you are.

Eric Vero

[inaudible]

Dakota King

I guess my online name, I go by Eage Minton, E-A-G-E. It is short for "Eager," so if you want you can call me "Eage," you don't have to. It's fine either way on the 'Souls community in particular, I go by Eage Minton, so I don't know. Whichever you're more comfortable with. I don't mind being called Dakota. I also don't mind being called Eage. Whichever is more comfortable for you and sounds better in your dissertation.

Eric Vero

[inaudible]

Dakota King

Interesting. Interesting, interesting. I use they/them, pretty much exclusively. Like, I'm all right with being referred to as he or she, but I would prefer not to. I'm down the straight and narrow of being non-binary. And yourself?

Eric Vero

[inaudible]

Dakota King

I don't think that's boring at all.

Eric Vero
[inaudible]

Dakota King
Alright, good.

Dakota King
Umm, I mean it, it has gained sentimental value because I've had the name for so long. Like uh, it's like. I've had many pseudonyms throughout the years, you know. Like, as a kid, I used to have "heartbreaker" because I was edgy. Umm. But Eage is the most recent one. I've gone through a lot in the past few years, like especially in fandom space and in the role-playing community. It holds a lot of significance. But initially like the reason I chose, each friend was literally because I put my Tumblr username to be "eagerfriend" and my family was like, "you're gonna attract pedophiles." And I went, "Okay, let me fix it, I guess." So I just took off the N in the D, or the R and the D from the words and then I had my name for like the last few years. Does that answer the question?

Eric Vero
[inaudible]

Dakota King
It'd be nice to have the context of the question.

Eric Vero
Absolutely. And I think that does it. Yes, I'm getting a reading bar. I'll remember the first 10 minutes or so of this. So again, what's most important is your contribution right now. So, but yes, I think that absolutely does answer my question. So, thank you.

Dakota King
Yay.

Eric Vero
Well, it's it's so interesting. You know, you read so many people's handles online and you're like, how did they come up with? And then they explain it to you from a very personal experience. And you're like, oh, that's so cool that, you know, we're able to be in this space where we get to name ourselves, right? You know, for me to go out and change my name to something that...

Dakota King
Yeah.

Eric Vero
The name I was given at birth, for example. I'd have to go through such bureaucracy and so much time and money to go about that, right? What's so cool about being online is that you get to represent yourself.

Dakota King

Yeah, you get to carve out your own identity and your own place in the in the “world,” because no one is going to decide what – no one can force you to go by your birth name. You can choose whatever name that you want. And I totally understand. It’s really – It’s really nice to be able to just introduce yourself as one particular name and have people address you as that name. I’ve gone into Discord servers and been like my name is Edgar for the server ‘cause. I just want to test it out to see how it feels to have people call me that name. When you know it doesn’t change anything in the end. But it is nice to have that identity that I carved out for myself that I honestly refer to in my – in a monologue I refer to Eage a lot more than I refer to Dakota. Like I sort of see Eage to be my truer self. It’s a little difficult to explain, but it’s safe to say I almost introduced both my username and my actual name in the interview. “Hi, my name is Dakota King, but online I’m called Eage friend. Uh, can I volunteer please?”

Eric Vero

Yeah, and. And you know, like in hindsight, I would tell you like, yeah, if you reference yourself at like that, like, I’m a fan studies scholar. So I study online communities.

Dakota King

Yeah.

Eric Vero

I study, you know like the whole range of the different ways people have fan identities and identities online. So you’d – actually you’d 100% be saying that to the right person with, like absolutely no judgment and just like you’d kind of get like a “yeah, that’s awesome” kind of thing. But yeah.

Dakota King

I figured that would be the case. But like I said in the e-mail. This is my first time ever participating in a study and I don’t know how to – I don’t know how you’re supposed to go about it like the correct “way.” So I wanted to just be – take precautions and be formal.

Eric Vero

That makes complete sense.

Dakota King

But I definitely enjoy your vibe. It’s very easy to talk to you.

Eric Vero

That’s really good to hear. You’re really easy to talk too.

So let’s dive into the next part of the interview. This one is a much bigger question. And take as much time as you need with it. If you need a few seconds to kind of reflect and think about how you want to talk about it, go ahead. And please understand that if there’s something you don’t want to talk about, we absolutely don’t need to talk about it. And if you need to take a pause or break, please let me know and we will take a break. So the next question is very broadly, please speak to your experiences with disability.

Dakota King

Oh. You know. OK so, I – in hindsight, I've been disabled my entire life. I don't believe I mentioned it in my e-mail. Do you wanna know the specifics of the disabilities? Of the disability?

Eric Vero

You can talk about it so long as you're comfortable with it. You know, in disability studies, we also talk about – and I speaking on behalf of someone who is disabled – we talk about, and I'm sure you can understand, like we talk about disability almost in queer terms of “is this person out or not and who are they out to, right?” Is my disability visible, right?

Dakota King

Wow.

Eric Vero

And I only tell that to people I trust. Of course, I'm only out to them if that makes sense, right? And over the years, I've gotten much better about opening about that. But I just want to stress, like, you know, don't feel like you have to give specific diagnoses if you don't want, but if you do, that's OK too. My main concern right now is that you feel comfortable in talking about this.

Dakota King

Oh yeah, that's fair. I'm very comfortable with my disabilities and what I've gone through. Like I literally like tell everyone at work if they even remotely ask me, mostly because it affects me a lot at work.

Eric Vero

Of course.

Dakota King

Real quick question was “what is my relationship to disability?”

Eric Vero

What are your experiences with disability? And it's intentionally very broad because you can talk about yourself, but you know, to kind of pull back the curtain. Part of what I want to do also is show that like disability is a very intersectional in someone's life which they might have their own disability, but maybe a parent is disabled, or maybe they had an experience with disability when they were much younger that shaped their perceptions about things. It's very broad. Yes, exactly. So talk about yourself if you would. Talk about others that intersects with you, that kind of thing.

Dakota King

Alright, well OK so. I'm gonna ramble, but I'm sure that's what you're looking for. I've been disabled my entire life. For starters, I have a myriad of mental disorders I have autism, which it isn't really a mental disorder, but you know, you know the stigma on autism. I have autism that was undiagnosed for several years. I've been recently diagnosed with bipolar, I think 2. I don't

remember which one it was, but I have bipolar. And depression, and anxiety and paranoia. There's a lot. And then I have my chronic pain. I deal with fibromyalgia and I've been dealing with that for the last several years and it is truly hell.

Eric Vero
Yeah.

Dakota King

It's hard to – there's nothing wrong with people who are disabled, but in my own experience it is the worst thing. That's no, that's not completely true, but it's not a great thing that I've developed a chronic pain disorder because a lot of my life I had dreams of being an electrician. I didn't want to go to college because I wanted to go trade school. And then I injured myself on Christmas 2021, I believe. I did like 13 illustrations fully back-to-back and I took pain meds all throughout the month to work through the pain and then for the next till present day my arms hurt every day and it makes it so hard to participate in fandom space. It makes it hard to participate in anything because at my injuries are mostly in my hands, but they're also in my back and stuff. They're all over. That's the thing about fibro's, it's everywhere, unfortunately. But with my hands specifically. For a long I used to be an avid writer.

Eric Vero
Yup.

Dakota King

And I stopped because I was so tired all the time. I was fatigued and my arms hurt so badly that I could barely even like pick up objects because it hurt me so bad, so I couldn't write because I was supposed to let them rest. And, I'm still trying to get into writing now, because now that I've been officially diagnosed with fibro, I know that there's nothing that's gonna change. I just have to learn to adapt and work through it and, you know, continue on my hobbies, but also it's made working really difficult. Like, I have a hard time keeping a job for more than a couple of months because usually I will get really bad flare ups that will prevent me from being able to, like actually do my work. Like, it will wind up getting to a point where I'm hobbling towards the end of the day, like an old grandma riddled with arthritis. And, um, and also a lot of crying. I tend to cry a lot because, you know, you gotta mourn the life that you wanted. The life that could have been that no longer will be. And there's nothing really you can do about it. So, my relationship with it is it's very distressful. I I'm learning to deal with it and that's all I can really do, I – there is a lot of grief with the process because I have – I have a lot of chronic pain friends who are much older than me, like in their 30s and a lot of them have chronic pain and stuff. I remember thinking like a couple of years ago, “like man, I would really hate to develop a chronic pain disorder. They're going through so much. I don't know how I would deal with that.” And I developed it myself and I'm like, well, I fucking hate this. It sucks.

Eric Vero
Yep, I – oh, sorry.

Dakota King

No, no, it's OK. Go ahead.

Eric Vero

I was just going to say: first off, thank you because I see what you're doing. And I know how hard it is to, I don't know, talk about my own disability. So I understand that you're putting in a lot of work right now. So thank you.

Dakota King

Of course.

Eric Vero

And I, yeah, I really am – you know, you've been saying a lot of excellent things and I think the one that the thing that keeps sticking in my mind is the way you talk about it like it's – you mourn, you grieve. And I know exactly what you're talking about. I feel the same way. And you know, and granted, I don't have a physical disability, per se, but a lot of the complications of my disability I do feel physical pain and it's just debilitating, right? So I completely...

Dakota King

Oh. Yeah.

Eric Vero

You know that's – so I don't know where I was going with that tangent, but I want to say thank you and... And

Dakota King

You feel seen? I understand. It's...

Eric Vero

I feel seeing I feel seen, but that's – so please continue on. I've got some follow up questions if you would like to end there. But if you have more to say on this specific question, please go on ahead.

Dakota King

I guess I have more. The thing is, is that like when I talk about things I'm very conversational. I love talking to people and having conversations.

Eric Vero

Of course.

Dakota King

So right now I'm just like, yeah, well, I'm not gonna pressure you to talk about what your disability is, but it is, is that way like that sometimes, like. Like go in depth. So I think we can stop here, but basically what I wanted to say was you're completely valid and I do understand, it's difficult to deal with. And when you don't have a support system, which I don't know how much of a support system you have, but I know mine is kind of shaky, it's – it's really hard to deal with, so I sympathize with you and I feel for you because disability sucks. There's no other way to say it, but it does suck sometimes. Even if it does, I don't...

OK. Here's another thing. I tried not to talk unpaused negatively about disability because I know that for some it's a part of their identity. It means a lot to them, and talking intrinsically negatively about disability can lead to people disliking themselves more or feeling ostracized because of their disability. I hope that's making sense but. I can't – I, in my own experience dealing with this, I can't help but be negative because it is – I'm with all my friends who have chronic pain are like in their 30s. I'm in the beginning stages of learning to deal with it, so it's really hard for me right now and I can't really rely – I can rely on others, but talking to others, it's like I don't know how to ask them for help of like, how do you deal with this? What did you do to learn how to deal with it? It's it's bad, it bad.

Eric Vero

God yeah. Well, you know that – I think that response to it is very valid and I think, you know, I've had to do a lot of reading, academic stuff on disability studies, and overwhelmingly, you know, I think if you distilled all of it down, it's like some people are very proud and you know, but then the other side of the coin is that, you know, disability can suck a lot, so I'm really glad that you're voicing that.

Dakota King

I'd say I'm very vocal about how I feel about how my – the things I deal with make me feel because there is nothing inherently wrong with disability. Everything will be disabled eventually. That's just sort of way of life and how our society causes, like churns us out and stuff, but it's really hard when you have plans and all those plans sort of fall through.

Eric Vero

Yep, I hear you. I hear you.

Dakota King

Yeah. Yeah, but also your follow up questions?

Eric Vero

Oh yeah, absolutely.

Dakota King

I don't have more to say, but it would just be like talking in circles.

Eric Vero

Of course. So the next question would be what institutional barriers specifically have been part of your experience? Some people talk about, of course, you know, institutional barriers at work or school like that kind of thing. Do you want to talk a bit about that?

Dakota King

Yeah, that's fine. I'm happy to talk about that. Now you said “institutional” and I was like, “Oh, it wasn't so bad. The thing about – there is also a good chance I have ADHD. Let me just say that real quick. You know I got the whole laundry list. I never realized I had autism until I left school because I had such a good – school provided a really nice schedule for me to function off of, and

I think one of the reasons why I'm flailing and struggling now is because I'm no longer in school. I don't have that intrinsic schedule set up to help get – that schedule is gone and I can't really – I don't know how to replicate it in my day-to-day life in a way that is meaningful and will get results.

Eric Vero
Mm.

Dakota King

So I find myself – I feel myself missing high school and college, even though I know that if I were to go back now, I would be like, “this sucks. This is hell.” Because my disabilities are worse now. Go figure, you get older and things get worse.

But another institution that I really struggle with is work like I mentioned that a little bit earlier. I get really bad pains in my, basically, in my lower half, like from my hips down, I start to hurt really badly when I work in a day. But it really sucks because the pain like will start either A) immediately, or B) like after a couple of hours of working I'll really start to feel the effects. And then there's nothing I can really do to circumvent it besides breathing through it and continuing to work. Like, when I used to work at Arby's, right? Well you don't know that. But I used to work at Arby's, and I had the morning shift. I was so stressed at that job, which was really an easy job. It was a very easy job. It was just a lot of dealing with customers that I think was the issue. It was very over stimulating, but that easy job became nigh impossible because I was so – I was in so much pain every day that I was physically distressed, obviously.

And I couldn't – I was taking – It was really hard to deal with, but also I couldn't really eat like if I went to work I would try eat, but it was like my body physically rejected it. It said, “no. You don't get to eat. Like, if you chew, you're dead. You're gonna feel like there's maggots on your tongue. Good luck!” And it was really hard. So I wound up not eating anything for a couple of days and then when I leave I'd feel fine because I think it was just work is stressful but I end up in those last few weeks. It was like the main mission became [to] survive, essentially. And then I did quit because, you know, I was dying.

But, unfortunately, that is a common pattern in my life with workplaces is: I'll work somewhere and work there for about three to maybe four months before I have to quit due to debilitating pain everywhere. And, it's something that, having recently gotten diagnosed officially with fibro is sort of a relief 'cause it proves to me like, “OK, I'm not crazy. I'm not failing to keep up. I have a literal reason why I can't perform like other people do.” But it's really frustrating because like I always said earlier, with mourning who I was and mourning what I could have been, I'm also like mourning the skills, the abilities I used to have. Like when I was like 15, I used to be able to work so much. I could multitask on everything. I could take orders at McDonald's and cash people out and make a happy meal boxes, 'cause I also worked at McDonald's at like 15. I could do all that no problem and I succeeded at it. I was a really good worker and I was a really good worker for years and years, and then after Arby's, I noticed that my disabilities got really bad. And they continue to get worse because unfortunately there's nothing I can do about it. So, it feels miserable because not only am I failing to participate in society effectively, I'm also – sorry, brain decided to stop right where it was.

Eric Vero

OK. Take your time. Yeah, take your time.

Dakota King

Not only am I feeling to participate in society, I'm also failing my inner expectations. And it's really hard to grapple with because when you're on your own, and if you have a support system like I, I don't know, financial stability, disabilities aren't as difficult. Like they still suck, but at least you don't have to be like, alright, I can take this day off to rest if I need to, because such and such, but, because of my disability coming up and the fact that I'm only 21 as of right now, my mom is very frustrated with my progress. She always asking, like, "are you getting better? Is it feeling better? How are your arms?" And I have to be the unfortunate bearer of bad news and say, "it's not going great." 'Cause I don't – I think she has chronic pain herself, but I don't think she realizes what it's like to have my issue, you know?

Eric Vero

Of course.

Dakota King

So like, she'll pressure me to go to work and keep working and she'll be like you have to save money to move out because in the real world, they're not gonna – sorry I thought I heard someone about to open my door – no one's gonna help you unless I, like get on disability. And even then, that's a lot of loops I have to jump through in order to actually get it. And even when I do get it, they're gonna limit me at, like two \$2000 a month or whatever. And it's like, man, it sucks 'cause now I feel alone. I feel alone. And on my own and I have to just – it feels like you just have suck it up, and continue to work even though the pain is like – Eric. That's your name, right?

Eric Vero

Yeah, yeah.

Dakota King

Eric, OK. Cool, Eric, let me level with you. I have a shoulder injury, kind of. It's like a pulled muscle, but one of the things about fibro and I know I keep saying I'll circle back to that.

Eric Vero

OK, OK.

Dakota King

My shoulder, I think the muscle is pulled. And because of that, now my ribs hurt a lot of the day, like the bottom of my left side of my rib cage feels like there's a tight band being pulled on it, and in fact, when I work for too long and by too long, I mean like. 7,5,6 hours. It will start feeling like a rubber band tightening around my chest and it makes it really hard to breathe. And then I have to just sort of suck it up and keep going because no one's gonna stop. And I have a high fast-paced job. I'm a dishwasher. So, it's bad, it's bad. What did I say I was going to circle back to you on? "I'm a level with you..."

Eric Vero

Oh, that's a good question. Let me look at my notes. I have something about inner expectations. "Let me level with you," but I think that's a bit further back, but I think you've, I think you've done a very good job at illustrating your own personal experience and, yeah. So yeah, I think that's great. You're doing OK?

Dakota King

Yes, actually I will need a break. Like a 5 minute break. Just 'cause I have to run to the bathroom. Still trying figure out what's the circle back thing was. I know what it was like on the tip of my tongue, but I don't remember.

Eric Vero

Let's jump to another question and we can take that 5 minute break now, no problem. And then maybe when we get further into that other question, your brain will be like, "oh, I've got it. I've got it! I've got it!"

Dakota King

Yeah, alright, sounds good. So take back in five?

Eric Vero

Yep, whenever you're ready.

Dakota King

Awesome. I will turn on my mic and say hello when I'm back.

Eric Vero

Perfect.

Dakota King

Hello, hi, I'm back.

Eric Vero

Perfect. Are you ready to jump back in again?

Dakota King

Yes, yes I am.

Eric Vero

Sounds good. So the next question is: when did you first start – sorry, I'm jumping ahead. What fandoms do you belong to? Let's talk about the fandoms you belong to, and then we can talk about when you first jumped into them. So what fandoms, do you belong to?

Dakota King

That's a great question actually. I know like the – my apologies.

Eric Vero

No, no. Take your time.

Dakota King

I definitely have the fandoms, so I belong to, but I haven't participated in some in a long time. I'm guessing you mean currently belong to?

Eric Vero

I talked to previously to someone who's been in the Star Trek fandom for like, I don't know, like 50 years or 40-50 years. I haven't – please talk about whatever fantasy would like to yeah, ones that you used to be part of are really cool to talk about, for sure.

Dakota King

Whatever.

Eric Vero

Ones that you are a part of now because they're significant to you, any that you feel are significant.

Dakota King

Yay, I get to talk about my cringe? OK.

Eric Vero

Yes, that that is what this dissertation is: please talk about your cringe.

Dakota King

Yay alright so. The fandoms I currently belong to, I belong to the 'Souls RPG fandom. I think that's considered a fandom?

Eric Vero

I would consider it.

Dakota King

I also belong to the Mystery Skulls Animated fandom, which is a uh short form music videos about Scooby-doo rip-offs that gained their own lore, and I really love them to death. They're my favorite.

Eric Vero

That's awesome.

Dakota King

I was also heavily into Danganronpa for a lot of my life. It was one of my main hyper fixations. I was also into Hetalia Italia. Not proud about that part, but, you know, I was like, what, 14-15? I was young so...

Eric Vero

Yeah, we've all been there. All been there.

Dakota King

I also belong to the NINJAGO fandom, which is a yeah, it – these are like my major, main hyper fixations, like the things that I know I've hyper fixated on for a long time. Ninjago, I'm still hyper fixated on it. That was mostly like childhood hyper fixation. Danganronpa. I found another one, I don't remember what it was. Danganronpa, Hetalia were definitely like teenage phase fandoms that I still really like. I'm really into the Danganronpa uh death game sort of thing. It's one of my favourites. And then Mystery Skulls Animated, which is MSA for short. I'm just. Is it okay if I refer to it as MSA or Mystery Skulls?

Eric Vero

I've got the full name written down and it'll be recorded. So if you want to use the acronym, please do.

Dakota King

Wonderful, because I need to save breath. MSA is the first official fandom that I actually did things for. Like the first few I mostly just was a consumer of fandom. I would read fanfic blah blah and never made anything for besides like my own fanfics and my own journals, but that all changed with MSA. With MSA, I hyper fixated so hard that I made like 90 works on Archive of Our Own for that specific fandom all within like a year or so, maybe two years. I was heavily involved in like Discord servers and it's difficult to talk about because it's the first fandom I officially was like a creator in but it's also the first one I experienced drama in and like got trauma from.

Eric Vero

Oh, I'm sorry.

Dakota King

No, it's okay. I think traumas like it comes from everywhere, but it's sort of, it's difficult to talk about because I'm still kind of into MSA but I only recently started to actively get back into it just because I've had a – I've been burned a lot in this fandom, but it's no one else's fault. It was more the fault of circumstances and my own immaturity, which it definitely was my own immaturity a lot of the time, but, like, it's something I'm sort of getting used to. It's like, you know, the teen thing where, like, they have explosive relationships. I guess that's not limited to teens. I've had a few friendships blow up on me and, you know, relationship fallout. Sadly, you're emotionally devastated for months to come.

Eric Vero

Of course, of course.

Dakota King

So yeah, you know, the usual. What else are you gonna get from a fandom? But also I met many, many friends. One in particular taught me how to be a better person essentially like there was never, never anything like wrong with me. I wasn't in a bad person. I wasn't like kicking puppies. OK, but I hadn't emotionally matured.

Eric Vero

Yeah. Of course, of course.

Dakota King

And being around this person helped me emotionally mature and bring me to a point where I can – I'm more active in my mental health sort of scenario. I recently lost all insurance, which is not – it sucks, but not a big deal. Don't worry. So I started taking in a journaling to both fall in love with writing again and also to take control of my emotional issues. It sucks but you know. I think that's gonna be the underlying thing for a lot of things. It sucks, but it's necessary. And I do like journaling. I fell out of it for a long time, MSA, because of the friendship breakups. I guess I don't know how to talk about it. Because, like, when I open my mouth, my brain just goes, “no.”

Eric Vero

Yeah.

Dakota King

It's more like kind of going blank, but kind of knowing exactly what to talk about that. It's just sort of hard to pick up the thread, you know.

Eric Vero

And, you know, what I think you painted a pretty good picture of everything.

Dakota King

Thanks!

Eric Vero

Yeah. And so let's circle back a bit. I want to talk about ‘Souls because this is how I got into touch with you. This chapter that I'm working on is about online communities, but specifically role-playing communities. So play by post RPG's, MUDs MOOs anything where you are playing a role, play like a text based role-playing game online and that's the scope of the chapter currently. So I'm quite interested to hear what you have to say about ‘Souls.

Dakota King

Alright, so ‘Souls, I really like so far. I got into it because a friend from my MSA fandom. Her name is [S]. I don't know if you've spoken to her or if she has emailed you at all. But, she was in the ‘Souls, like, RPG space and I got into it because of her, because I'd see her talk about her OCs and her characters and what they get on to. And I'm like, “wow, that sounds really interesting.”

Eric Vero

Mm.

Dakota King

I kind of want to find a community in that regard. I would love to, you know, I want to role play werewolves. I like that.

Eric Vero
Heck yeah!

Dakota King
But it took a long while to actually get into it because I am a planner, so I prefer to do as much research as possible. Like before jumping into something.

Eric Vero
Yeah.

Dakota King
So the 'Souls RPG thing have like a whole role-playing guide. That is so long. It's very long, but it has a lot of lore and depth like things that the werewolf creatures can actually do in terms of technology. And what happened to the world and? And just like a lot of like information to help new players, but also there's like a wiki for packs, like the werewolf packs and stuff like that. So I wound up reading everything for months before I actually joined. And then I did join and I had a lot of fun. And then I got another job. So I haven't been writing for it for a lot, writing for it a lot, unfortunately. But, I am in the discords for the communities and I get, you know, I'm still in it. I still plan to write for 'Souls. It's just right now I'm in a really difficult spot where stress causes my pain to flourish, and I'm not saying that 'Souls is a stressful game. Don't think that is at all. But, in to deal with the stress, I've been smoking marijuana.

Eric Vero
Mm.

Dakota King
To like, calm down and stuff. But because of that I can't write, so I haven't been participating as much and I feel guilty and bad that I'm not performing up to "standard," even though I know that. The standard is in my head. No one else is really upset with me. It's just more myself. So I guess I feel bad I can't share much more about the community. I think it's fun. I really enjoyed the events I did get to participate in. Because, like they had the, umm, like monthly events. It is like Wordtober and stuff like that and I really want to participate in it. I really really do. But I just can't. I wound up not being able to do any of it. Because the stress of my job it and yeah, I think that might have been what I wanted to circle back to it.

Eric Vero
Yeah, yeah.

Dakota King
It's been really hard to write for them, but I really want to write for them. I think that all I can really say at the moment is I would love to participate more. And it feels really frustrating that I can't because, like I said, I wrote like 90 pieces of work for MSA. I was really into writing and I'm still really into writing. So the fact that – and now I've hit this roadblock of real life and my body working against me, so I can't do things in the space that I want to. It's frustrating. It's really stressful. Like I feel bad for my role play partners that I haven't responded in a while, but

there's – they all understand. They're like “it's just a game. You don't have to worry. It's just a game.” And I'm like, “yeah, but it's important to me. And to you guys.” Yeah, unfortunately I don't have much to say about ‘Souls.

Eric Vero

I think you've said – I think there's a lot that I could talk about.

Dakota King

Yay!

Eric Vero

Yeah, yeah, no worries. And you know, I will say like, you know, before I got on the right medication, my old medication just gave me severe brain fog. And one of my favorite things to do, if not my favorite thing to do, like you say, is to write. You know, like I could also be a prolific writer too, but with the brain fog like I just couldn't string sentences together. And...

Dakota King

Yeah, brain fog is such a bitch. I feel for you.

Eric Vero

It is. I feel for you. I completely understand. And it's like someone's putting a gag in my mouth, like the fact that I can't sit down and write.

Dakota King

Yeah!

Eric Vero

Right?

Dakota King

That's exactly it! It's like there's weights like on my soul.

Eric Vero

Yeah.

Dakota King

That's making it hard to do things I love.

Eric Vero

I empathize with that greatly. I am...

Dakota King

We are shaking hands.

Eric Vero

Sorry?

Dakota King
We are shaking hands.

Eric Vero
We are shaking hands!

I will ask: I think another way we could connect this interview back into 'Souls is: I'm going to have some committee members who don't have any idea what 'Souls RPG is, will have no idea about, you know, these forum RPG's or anything like that. They probably know what a werewolf is, but they don't know the nuances of it. Could you explain to me or to them through me, what souls RPG is and what it is like? What is your take on it?

Dakota King
Absolutely. The 'Souls RPG game is an alternate history game where at some point in the 1900s, don't know when I think it was 1936 or something, like a power plant, or a virus got out into the United States and spread to the world. It became a pandemic in a sense. But it took out all of the humans. There are no humans in the game. And if you try to play as a human, you can't, that there's a no human rule on the game. However, the virus affected, specifically animals with a canis gene, like they came from the Canis family. So wolves, coyotes, dogs and I think, jackals. Not jackals. I don't know which one is included, but I think there's one that used to be in the canis gene but got moved on to another gene like. So for example, if you wanted to have a fox character, they could not be the "werewolf" because they're not in the canis gene. So only animals with that in that genealogical family can be can become werewolves. And the term for werewolves in the 'Souls RPG is LUPERCI. And LUPERCI are. I don't know if I'm saying it right either, but they have 3 forms. They're in their regular dog form. Then they have a bulkier, heavier form, that is the midpoint between the lupus form, which is the dog form, and the optimine form, which is a "human" form. And in the last stage is the optimine form where they stand on two legs, their bones and muscles have shifted to allow them to walk on two legs and perform things with their hands, basically. The three different stages have a lot of benefits to that particular form, but there's also downsides and a lot of characters are often in their optimine form because they're the closest thing to humans. I think the role-playing, the role players prefer that because they can use the characters hands in order to do stuff. Since it takes place in an alternate history, it actually is up to date today, like in the game it is December 12th because the game runs on like an annual cycle, basically it's in real time that sort of thing. The form is pretty easy to actually navigate. It is a full website that they dedicated to the forum and there is like information articles on what you should know about, the characters, and stuff you should know about the world. Like if there's fauna or specific plants that you wanna go after, do they exist in Nova Scotia? I don't know hows ay the name but...

Eric Vero
Oh, Nova Scotia. Yeah, it's out east of us in Canada, yeah.

Dakota King

Yeah. Exactly! That's where 'Souls takes place. "That's where the board is." And it's a lot of fun so far. I really like it. There's more information to be shared. I'm scratching the inside of my head. Give me a second.

Eric Vero
Yep, no worries.

Dakota King
Right. So basically at the point of 'Souls at the moment is, it's like we're role-playing the rise and fall of civilizations. I mentioned earlier that there are packs like wolf packs, but the packs are more like clans essentially. Like, they have big groups that are dedicated to a specific cause and they build communities within them. One of the packs I'm in is in the Casa di Cavalieri. I think that's how you say it.

Eric Vero
Yeah.

Dakota King
And I really like it so far. But you can also be a loner wolf if you wanted to. You don't have to be in a pack, although it's recommended that you're in a pack to begin with because you have easy role-playing opportunities. But, the main focus of the game is interaction, writing and role-playing, essentially. Like, I know, basic information. But, there's like penalties you can get from not writing as often. Like if you don't respond to something to anyone within, like a month, you can get characters dropped because within the role-playing, within the thing you can apply to have many characters. Like, for example, I have two characters right now. I have Lucina, who is a border collie Luperci. And she is in Casa di Cavalieri. CDC. Just gonna call it CDC. That's the pack name. And then I have a second character named Alma Bort, who is a coyote. Who has amnesia. Who suffered a lot of abuse from wolves. So now they're going to be going to the coyote centric in order to live out their life and to, you know, figure things out. Was that a decent explanation? I feel like I ran in circles for a lot of it so.

Eric Vero
I think you were quite clear and articulate, so no worries.

Dakota King
Yay.

Eric Vero
I think I'm talking to another 'Souls person in the next little while, and I'll pick their brain as to give a definition. So it'll be their definition and your definition working together to be very succinct. And like, I feel like, I guess like, I could do the research and look through the handbooks and get a sense of what the game is about. But coming from actual players gives it so much more credence and it will be so much more effective. So thank you. I really appreciate that.

Dakota King

If it's an older player, I think you'll have – it'll be a lot easier because a lot of these players have been here for like – since 2009, I think that's when it was founded. So you'll have a wealth of information from other players if you need any more questions from me, I'd be happy to do my best. I will warn you, I am still technically a new player. I started February this year, which I know was about a year now, but it's still technically new and I'm I still feel new to the whole thing. So, you know.

Eric Vero

That's OK. No, I think you've been very helpful and I think the way I would pitch my history is not so much about looking at the institutional history of a fandom. It's about disability and fandom. So your experiences with disability will interact with you know, 'Souls, but also Dagonronpa, MSA and all of that. I'll weave together a much larger picture about disability and fandom.

Dakota King

Right.

Eric Vero

Through the lived experiences of the people I've talked to. So it's absolutely OK if you still feel like you're new to things because your experience in that community is absolutely valid. And in my mind really helpful in balancing out the more senior members of the group, if that makes sense.

Dakota King

Right, you have new perspectives.

Eric Vero

Yeah.

Dakota King

I think I have told you a bit about how my disability affected my contributions to 'Souls, right?

Eric Vero

I think it's been running through our conversation, but would you like to expand on that?

Dakota King

Yeah, I'll expand a little bit just on the like the specifics of – and I guess something else I wanted to circle back to, I wanted to mention earlier that I don't know if I already did or not, but fybro is triggered mostly by stress. And because of my current job it has been really difficult to set aside time to actually put into my creative studies. So I think due to the stress of the job, I tend to over prepare for other things and I don't have time for 'Souls as much anymore. And it's really frustrating because you want to dedicate yourself to something, but if you have limited spoons, it's difficult to actually pull your put your heart into it. Because I definitely want to expand on my characters and roleplay with them more. But if you don't have the time or the energy, it's kind of like you're out of luck, you know.

Eric Vero

Absolutely, yeah, I hear you. I hear you. So actually this might dovetail really well into my next question and we are getting to a close in a couple more questions. But the second to last question I wanted to ask is: how do you feel disability is represented in your fandoms? I would even expand that further. How is disability present in your fandoms? You've been talking a bit about how your disability gets in the way of your ability to participate. That would be absolutely one way. But could you expand further? Like is disability represented in 'Souls RPG by the characters? You talk to other fans who can talk about their disabilities? Or do you feel kind of alone in this and you know, it comes back to, like, a lot of what we've talking about so far?

Dakota King

I think it's – I think my answer is a bit of a mixture of the examples that you provided.

Eric Vero

Sure.

Dakota King

Oops. I-- my voice peeked through on your end. That was surprising. I do feel a bit alone in a sense, but I don't think that's the fault of any of the other players. I think that's more my own isolation. Say at least in 'Souls, I think that disability is pretty interwoven through a lot of it. I can't speak specifically for the other players, but I have spoken to the others and I think we're pretty all intermingled and interwoven. So when there is an issue with like our own disabilities and things that are stopping us from actually doing 'Souls, we talk to each other about it, we express – at least in my scenario – I express and apologize for my lack of responses due to said disability, but like there are tons of characters who are like blind, who have chronic pain. I don't – I have a friend in in the soles RPG community who has – not dissociative identity – but they are plural in a way.

Eric Vero

Yeah. Yes.

Dakota King

So we talk to each other a bit about our own disabilities and how it affects us and their my plural friend. They're a very big player in the community. They role play all the time. I'd say that in some cases, disability can limit you from certain communities, like it has with myself. But, I think with other people – speculative, really – I think that sometimes their disabilities can help aid them in their pursuit of the community. Like, for example, I have a friend who is an Australian 'Souls, but they're from MSA they're disabled, right? So with their “free time,” with the time they have remaining, they tend to dedicate to their, to their fun stuff like.... [coughs] My apologies, I had a stuffy throat.

Eric Vero

That's okay.

Dakota King

They will have more time and more – they find more comfort delving into like various aspects of fandoms, like talking about alternate universes or fanfics, or just doing art to spend the time, because there's not much else to do. That's those are the few ways that I know you can participate in fandom. I know in some regards you can just watch from the distance and carve out your own little community, because sometimes jumping into the great big beyond of a fandom space can be so overwhelming, that you'll get lost in the trenches of how much there is.

Eric Vero
Of course.

Dakota King
Yeah, sometimes disability can allow you to find people who are like you. You can build support groups through your fandom spaces, because sometimes I find that a fandom can be like almost like a second family. Like, especially if you have not a lot of people to talk to in your IRL situation, you can speak a lot to your friends in the fandom space is and a lot of the times they will have similar disabilities to you and they can be able to share their tips and their tricks. It's almost like being neighbors. No – kind of.

Eric Vero
Sure.

Dakota King
I'd say that fandom bridges us together. Like, we come together for the for the werewolves. Then we stick around for each other. At least that's how I think – that's how I see it, you know.

Eric Vero
Yeah, that sounds like it would be a good chapter title like –

Dakota King
Yay, I can't wait to see it.

Eric Vero
That that was. Thank you. That was beautiful.

Dakota King
I'm so glad. I'm so happy you said that.

Eric Vero
Yeah, yeah, no, this has been wonderful. It's been lovely to chat. I think then that we have one more question and it's a very broad question. A very good concluding question. Not to say that my questions are good. I think it just works as a concluding question. So what are the challenges that your fandoms face in the present? And we can talk about 'Souls, but please talk about your other communities. Talk about anything you're a fan of. And what do you think about fandom in general? Whether that's video games, Star Trek, anything you are passionate about, what are some of the challenges that we face in the present moving forward?

Dakota King

That is a broad question. Challenges moving forward. Well, one of the challenges I know that is pervasive in the MSA fandom and in turn I guess on Tumblr. I guess it's like all over most social medias. I haven't experienced it necessarily on my own, but I have heard there's a lot of issues in like the MSA community about people not really responding to each other on social media sites like people just sort of, apparently, from my from my fandom elders in the MSA community. There used to be a time where people would like make a post on Tumblr and then would get a lot of responses from people who are like, "oh, I like this idea, but what if this and what if that?" And they like tend to expand upon the ideas together and create almost like a fanfic together. Really what they're doing is they're bonding with other people in the community and that hasn't really been prevalent. That hasn't been happening as much lately, because no one has energy and times have changed in the Internet sphere and it's been really challenging, especially for the older members. But I think for the younger members as well, like myself, because they wind up – it feels like the community of fandom has slipped in a way. And it's really difficult to find people who to talk to unless you're kind of like in the right place at the right time. 'Cause, otherwise they can – you can just become like a popular creator and have a bunch of parasocial relationships with people who look up to you but don't wanna talk to you, you know?

Problems in the future? For 'Souls, I don't know if there's any problems going on there I think. I think maybe the main problem could be like people aren't writing as much, which I think contributes to the time of the year. What's going. Like, Christmas is right around the corner. Places are busy. So it's hard to write as often because there's, you know, not a lot of energy to. But I'm not sure what the problems in fandom spaces are. I think it's more just like the sense of community is starting to wane as, I don't know about purity culture. I don't know if purity culture is the answer or the reason why it's happening, but people, I think, the baseline is people aren't engaging with each other as much anymore. It's more they just read what others are saying and they just don't respond as much anymore. And like I said, I haven't experienced the time where people –like if I were to post something on Facebook about 'Souls....

Eric Vero

Mm.

Dakota King

...maybe I would get someone to talk to who's also in the 'Souls, and it's just like, "wow, this is so cool." But nowadays I guess if I were to post something I would get a bunch of likes, but people might not respond to it, you know. And I think, it feels like a juvenile sort of problem. I just either A) I don't know any of the like the bigger problems, like if there's anyone abusive in the community. But it's – I don't know.

Eric Vero

No, thank you. I think that's actually quite insightful. Because there's this huge like, I don't know. Like, it's almost like right crossroads right now with the Internet. Web 2.0 has made it easier than ever to broadcast yourself, certainly.

Dakota King

Yeah.

Eric Vero

For content creators to become a big thing. But you know, there was something about the earlier Internet before all that when you'd have these really tight knit communities and maybe this is just a sign of things changing. And you just won't see that as much anymore. But it's really funny that you mention that because as I've been doing, because I've been doing history on MUDs, right, I've been reading up on that. And so that's kind of what people are talking about, how you used to have these really like integrate – like not integrated but interwoven communities. But that kind of changes with. A consumer model of the Internet where there's content creators, and then there's consumers, right? Are, like you say are in parasocial relationships.

Dakota King

Yeah, I was just about to say.

Eric Vero

So actually I think that was quite insightful.

Dakota King

Yay, I'm glad to hear it. As you were talking, it, like occurred to me that it's the monetization of the Internet and like started the sanitization of the Internet like – big companies want to make things more profitable. But also there's like this weird purity culture going on in the Internet. Like, if you say anything remotely wrong remotely incorrect people can come at you and accuse you. Like, I've seen people accuse others of using AI art when they just drew a hand in a weird way. So it's a weird, pervasive problem in the Internet as a whole where people are getting shorter tempered and angrier with each other as things travel on to more of a consumer method of interaction instead of a community-based interaction. So yeah that I just wanted to add that on because it occurred to me and I was like it's a good answer I think. But, yeah.

Eric Vero

OK. So that's the extent of my questions. I do want to add anything, anything that's come to mind. You would like us to be included anything like that?

Dakota King

Honestly, I don't have anything else. I'm more just hoping you're having a good day and everything is going well.

Eric Vero and Juni – December 14, 2023

Juniper: 'Souls RPG. It is not a fandom role play, so I just want to be perfectly clear. That is the RPG that I'm currently writing in and have been for many years, but I have role-played in fandom before, so I can speak about both experiences. It's just been a long time since I've role-played in fandom. But yeah.

Eric: I really appreciate that. That's great. I wasn't sure. There was some ambiguity, I guess, when I was researching about 'Souls because I'm like, "oh, well, you know, one could make an argument that it's part of a larger genre fiction kind of thing, and people who are fans of specific kinds of stories are going to be part of it, right?" So I'm like, whether or not it's an established property, that's OK because I'm going to find people in there who are fans of other things, right?

Juniper: Yeah.

Eric: So that makes a ton of sense to me. I'd be very happy to hear about some of the other fandoms you're part of, some of them you've RP'd in. Whatever you would like to talk about, that's perfect for me.

Juniper: Yeah. Uh, so I guess I'll start by saying how I got into role-playing, which is when I was, I've always been a very avid reader and writer, and I actually kind of stumbled into role-playing by accident. That was through the Warrior Cats fandom when I was about 10, maybe a little bit younger, even. I had never read Warrior Cats at the time, but I was, you know, it's easy enough to figure out what was, you know, like, oh, the cats at this rank have this kind of name and blah blah blah. So I was just like, alright, whatever, I'll figure it out. And so that's kind of how I got into it. Then after I started role-playing, I started reading the books, which were, you know, they were good. I enjoyed them at the time. That was how I got into forum role-playing. My family was not very supportive of role-playing because they didn't really understand it at the time, so I was just hiding away like, doo-doo-doo-doo-doo, "I'm reading, leave me alone." Now they're much more open to the idea, but that was my intro to role-playing.

It took me a long time to find forums that had communities that were accepting and both passionate and flexible. There are a lot of forums that can be quite toxic, so it's hard to find, but once you do find a community, that's why I really enjoy 'Souls. It's got a lot of really bright and passionate people that are also super accepting, and I've been role-playing with them for several years now. So yeah, once you find people that are great, you just gotta stick with them.

Eric: It's true. You know, I do a lot of tabletop role-playing games and I've played with many different groups, but when you find that group that you feel like you're found, like it's that found family trait, you know, you're like, "Oh, these are my people. These are my people," right? So I completely understand that. This is great, and I want to continue on this line of thinking. I just have some questions about consent.

Juniper: Of course.

Eric Vero: So you've already given me your name, which is excellent. So thank you. My name is Eric Vero. Today is December 14th, 2023. Just as a reminder, participation is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent by advising me of your decision at any time. If you have questions for the research ethics board, contact information for the Office of Research Ethics is listed on the information letter which I passed around.

Juniper: Okay. Yes, I have it.

Eric Vero: Oh, perfect. For all other questions, you may contact me at my email, which we've been communicating. So my first question is, do you consent to participate in the interview?

Juniper: Yes.

Eric Vero: Awesome. Uh, do you give permission for your interviews to be video or audio recorded?

Juniper: Yeah.

Eric Vero: OK. Do you agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this research with the understanding that you may be referenced generally by your area of expertise or experience, such as your participation in the 'Souls community and fandom community and the RP community?

Juniper: Yes.

Eric: And then do you agree with the following: I agree to the use of attributed quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this research, with the understanding that I will have the opportunity to review the quotations and how I will be attributed prior to publication. So basically, I'm going to go away after this interview and I will write this chapter. Then once it gets to a certain point in the revision process, I will be sending it out to my interviewees to make sure that they can sign off on it and say, "Yep, you've represented me how I want to be represented. This is perfect," or on the other hand, "I kind of disagree with what I said here, so could you change it to X, Y, and Z?"

Juniper: Yeah. No, that sounds good to me.

Eric: OK, great. So I have my list of stock questions we can go through, but to continue the line of thinking that you were talking about, do you want to expand on that further? I'm very happy to just sit here and listen to what you have to say. We can kind of on the fly talk about other things, but I'm here more than anything to listen to what you have to say.

Juniper: Yeah, of course. So what was I saying?

Eric: I had to jump to kind of do some housekeeping.

Juniper: Of course, no, it makes sense. I totally understand. I come from an academic family, so I get that it has to happen.

Eric: So we talked a bit about finding flexible communities and how being online in 2023, it's so hard to get a reading on some community before you jump in and commit to it. It's true. You don't know who's on the other end, and you don't know the culture that's been created for the past five to ten years, right? So I think that's a really good point you make.

Juniper: Yeah, absolutely. And especially as a disabled person, I have epilepsy and I am also autistic, though I don't really consider my autism is to an extreme where I would consider myself disabled. But I am obviously

not neurotypical. That being said, I think that a lot of role players are neurodivergent in some way, shape, or form, and it can be quite easy to find like-minded people. But, I think it really depends on the community that you go to. Depending on where you're at, you could very easily find yourself in a space that is not very accepting. We can just leave it at that. Or, and, I don't want to give the wrong impression that I've never had any extreme experiences in forum role plays, but there's definitely good vibes and bad vibes. You always want to be in a space where you get good vibes. You want to be talking to these people, and that's how I view it. I want to be excited every time I open up Discord, like, "Oh, I'm going to go check in on my friends. You know, what's happening today?" Some places aren't like that for me, but are like that for other people.

Eric: Yeah, I think that's really great. I really appreciate you coming from such a place of expertise in these communities. So I really appreciate you giving your expertise. We can jump to some of the questions I have.

Juniper: Sounds good.

Eric: So I guess my first question is, what name would you like to be referenced by? Are you OK with Juniper, or do you want to go by your pseudonym handle, like your Internet handle? I'm very flexible.

Juniper: Yeah, I think we can just use my nickname, which is Junie. I just sent it in the chat. That's my nickname in real life and also online.

Eric: That's great.

Juniper: Yeah, and then once you send the manuscript to me, I'll let you know whether I want to have my name attached to anything that you referenced. I don't think that, but you know, who knows?

Eric: And we have this built-in to make sure that you give your consent throughout the entire process, right? Doing an oral history, doing this kind of study where my source is the testimony of people, I want to make sure that you are an author in this just as much as I am because you should be the author of your own words, right? What you have to say, I'm only really putting it all together into one cohesive package, right? So it's really important that you sign off on the words that are representing you. So, absolutely.

Juniper: Wonderful.

Eric: What pronouns do you prefer?

Juniper: I use they/them pronouns.

Eric: Awesome. Excellent. I've asked that. So you've briefly talked about your experiences with disability, with the diagnoses you might have, but would you be comfortable at all talking about some of the institutional barriers you've experienced in the past? And I will absolutely say, if there's anything you don't want to talk about, we don't have to talk about it. My focus is to make sure this is a comfortable discussion between colleagues.

Juniper: No, it's OK. I absolutely do not mind talking about this. I think it's extremely important to have these kinds of conversations. I am a recent college graduate. I just graduated from UC Santa Cruz...

Eric: Congratulations!

Juniper: Thank you – with a degree in ecology and evolutionary biology.

Eric: Awesome!

Juniper: Yeah. I consider myself to have gone above and beyond throughout my time in college. I worked extremely hard and I did a fellowship in my junior year studying plant pathology. Then this past summer, spring and summer, I did an internship at the San Diego Zoo studying micropropagation of rare and endangered native plants. I also worked in horticulture throughout my entire school career. So, I've worked extremely hard and I have a solid resume. Now I'm applying for jobs. And, I've been told multiple times that I am very qualified. I have lots of very good references. People who have told me, “don't even bother – don't worry about it, don't bother asking if I can write you a letter of recommendation, just put my name down, and when they contact me, I will write it. It doesn't matter, do it.”

I'm applying for jobs, especially government jobs, but I've recently stopped applying for government jobs because I have to get in contact with the Office of Disability. Because, I was getting rejection letters saying, “you are not being considered for the job because you do not have a driver's license.” And, I told them that I have epilepsy, but my application is not ever getting seen by a human being. A computer is seeing that, “oh, this person doesn't have a driver's license – this job needs a driver's license,” even though none of the job requirements actually require someone to be driving around. If that was a requirement, I wouldn't apply for the job because I can't drive. But, they see that, and they're like, “this person isn't qualified. Throw that application out.” And, it's extremely frustrating because I have yet to see a government job in my field that does not require a driver's license, even if literally in the job description of duties, it does not mention driving. So that's been extremely frustrating. Right now, I've been revising a paper about the research I did last summer. So, hopefully it will get published.

Eric: Best of luck with that. I know the whole thing. I completely understand.

Juniper: Thank you. It looks really good, but it's hard to get things published. So, we'll see. If it does get published, then that means that grad school is a step closer. But, job's, man.

Eric: That is so frustrating. I'm so sorry. If I could talk about my experience, there was a long time when I was figuring out medication and symptoms where I couldn't work at all. So, I was living on disability and would have been happy working two or three hours a day, I think my mental load could have dealt with that. But, it would have been so difficult, just the way things are set up, for me to find a job like that, where I could do that. These institutional barriers are so common and pervasive, and like you say, this is the kind of thing we should be talking about. I agree.

Juniper: Yeah, it's so extremely frustrating. I know so many disabled people who, even if they can work at least a little bit, they actually can't. They can't get a job. Even if they could get a job, they can't work the number of hours they need to survive in the city they live in. Or, I know disabled people who can't get married. Like all kinds of problems. All kinds of problems, and if you think about it too much, it drives you up the wall. You'll go insane.

Eric: Yeah, and you know what I did? I decided to do a PhD in critical disability history and write about it and talk to people to try and make sense of it. I think that's a common impulse in one way or another. So, absolutely.

Juniper: I'm glad that I have the opportunity to speak with you because my impulse was to combat climate change in the one little way that I know how, through ecology.

Eric: That's so cool.

Juniper: Well, you can't do everything, you know? You can't fix the world, which is so frustrating, especially when you're one of the people who is suffering and can't get a job.

Eric: Yeah, and that's the thing. I think from what I hear from people and from my own experience, I want to work, I absolutely want to work, and contribute, and do things, but there are so many barriers stopping me. A theorist in my field argues that (what we think of as) modern disability only comes about with the industrial revolution because you need a specific kind of body to operate machinery. Any body that is aberrant to that is disabled. It's wrong. We're saying that it's a wrong, defective body because it can't operate the way the economy needs. That theorist has been critiqued enough, but this idea that we're not fitting into the prescribed idea of what a worker is, is beyond frustrating. It's really debilitating. SO, yeah. I don't know where I was going with that.

Juniper: No, I mean, having a clear understanding of when our definition of disabled developed is important because that gives us the ability to look back through history and contextualize that history, which helps us understand the present. I think it's important to at the very least be thinking about these things. It's always frustrating to me. I think it's important to critique and debate theories like that, but I also think it's important to propose theories like that.

Eric: Absolutely. Move the conversation forward. I agree completely.

Juniper: Yeah. I actually have another story to tell you. I worked at my school's Arboretum for the entire time that I was there, except during COVID. I was hired there right at the beginning of my freshman year because I had previous experience with working in a seed lab. The Arboretum just the year I was hired had just opened their own seed lab, and do you know what a seed lab is?

Eric: I am quite ignorant as to what a seed lab is. I'm assuming that it's somewhere you work with seeds in some capacity, but that is it.

Juniper: It's a place where you process native seeds and store them as a genetic bank, so that it's a space – there are many different seed labs throughout the world, but they're a genetic bank of material as protection against extinction of native species. So the arboretum was opening their own for the first time.

I was one of three people with prior experience. I was hired to teach student workers how to process seeds because the other two people were salaried employees and they were often gone doing other things. So I was doing the grunt work. But then COVID happened, and I went home to San Diego. Before I left, my boss told me, “Juniper, when you come back, if you want a job, come to me, I'll hire you, no questions asked. Don't worry about it. You'll have a job. When I was able to return, I went to Brett, I was like, “can I have a job?” He

said, “of course.” I was also hired as a student responsible employee, which meant I worked on the weekends and I was in charge of opening and closing the Arboretum and the gift shop. I was one of two student employees present on the grounds at all, which was against university policy, to be clear, not allowed. But that’s what the arboretum did. That position came with a \$3 raise, which is why I did it. It also meant I could work a full day without worrying about classes, or anything. I could come and work a full day.

I have to let the dog in my room.

Eric: No worries!

Juniper: They’re just scratching at my door.

Eric: I completely get it.

Juniper: What are you doing? Yeah, she’s really pathetic.

Eric: I love pathetic dogs. Pathetic dogs are the best!

Juniper: They are!

Juniper: So, in February of my senior year, just months before graduation (for some reason, I’m trying to remember exactly how this happened), right, planning spring vacation, my boss, Rick, who was my boss's boss (so, not Brett’s boss, but a higher-up), and because I’m a responsible employee, I report to him on the weekends. He texted me like, “Juniper, what are your plans for spring break?” I had been incredibly busy, and normally would have emailed him with my plans, but by then I really didn’t know fully what my plans were, because I had been so busy with my senior seminar. And, I’m like, “fuck,” and I call my mom and were figure it out, and I text him back a few minutes later. He also texted me during class, so I had to leave.

Eric: Oh.

Juniper: So, I left my senior seminar, call my mom, and I’m like, “shit, shit, shit.” Because, I knew how Rick was. And, I’m like, “I’m going to be gone visiting family during spring break.” And he texted back, and he was like, “okay, we’re letting you go as a student responsible worker.” Basically, he demoted me. And, I’m like, “what the fuck?” And, I’m like, “this is batshit.”

Eric: Uh-uh, of course!

Juniper: I text the person that I work with on the same day, like my coworker. And I text my boss and my boss was on vacation, so he didn't get back to me right away. Neither did she. But they didn’t get back to me until later that day. But, I call my mom, and I’m like, “what the fuck?” And she’s like, “hold on. Repeat that. You told him that you’re going on vacation?” This is like a week and a half before spring break, like, yeah, that fucking sucks. Like, it was shit. Like, I should have told him before. But, he had never given me any warnings. Like, no behaviour problems, ever. He never told me in anything, any hints that he had ever been upset with me as an employee. So, I’m like, “shit.” So, I text him, and I’m like really level-headed. Like, “hey, can we work this out? Blah-blah-blah. I really want to know what the problem is.” And he texted me back and he’s like, “you’re a really unreliable employee.” I’m like, “that’s really weird.” And I look through my calendar,

and I'd only ever missed two days in the past year. And both times I had had seizures the day before. And so, the problem wasn't that I had missed a lot of days of work, but that I had missed them without giving him notice ahead of time. But here's the fucked-up thing. My coworker, who I worked a lot of days with, missed work all the time, but she gave him proper notice. And I was such a reliable employee that he could rely on me to always be working, because I needed that money.

Eric: And, yeah, it's such a double-edged sword, because you want to be reliable to your employer, but on the other hand it sets the bar so high.

Juniper: Yeah. And so finally, my coworker gets back to me. She's like, "this is crazy. You are always working. Like, what's happening?" I'm like, "I know." She says, "I don't understand." And then Brett gets back to me, "Juniper, don't worry about it, we're going to figure this out, blah, blah, blah, blah." And eventually it got to a point where everyone at the Arboretum had to fight him.

Eric: Really?

Juniper: Really. They didn't let me back on as a student responsible employee. He wouldn't let that happen. But, instead, was they created a new position for me in Brett's department. Basically, I was a teacher, because I was already a teacher. So, I was getting paid the same amount. But now I was working for Brett. It was really fucked up. Like, so fucked.

Eric: It sounds like it. What is so frustrating about hearing this is I've heard so many similar stories from my colleagues or people I've interviewed for this, too. They're graduates, you know, and they talk about the academic system is not the most hospitable for us most times.

Juniper: No, it's not. Always, not always, I've been for a long time I've been focusing on academia, I've been volunteering in labs, I've been doing internships and fellowships, doing research just really with the goal of going into academia. But it's hard, and this is all in spite of being fully aware of how fucked up it is.

Eric: Yeah, I know. I know.

Juniper: My mom was a PhD student. She has just recently decided to leave because, I mean, the best way to describe it is that her advisor was sabotaging her. And there's no end in sight, basically. But, she's been a PhD student for the past five years, incredibly knowledgeable, very well-respected at UCSD. It's just like very stressful.

Eric: I hear you. I have my own personal stories that I could tell. We could be here all afternoon. It's not funny, it's interesting because my previous chapter, I talked to someone with similar experiences, and I'm getting a sense that it might be an overall theme of my dissertation, somehow. I came in to talk about disability and fandom, thinking I would talk about convention accessibility in the 1990s and how before the ADA these Star Trek fans were trailblazers in accessibility. I thought I was going to come in and talk about. But it seems like there's this interesting intersection where, I guess, a lot of fans go into academia. There's something there. That's not my field. I'm history. We'd have to talk to a sociologist, maybe, or something like that to look at the statistics. What I think I'm getting at is there's this common theme that's coming up about disability and academia. That cross-section.

Juniper: I wouldn't be surprised. I know a lot of disabled folks, and I've met a lot of like-minds in academia. And I will say I've never been to a convention, so I won't be much help there.

Eric: Here's the thing: there's this really interesting narrative that is coming out of this about "spaces," and "access to spaces." I think that's the overall, big capital T Theme. So, we can talk about physical spaces and accessibility in those spaces, like fan conventions.

Juniper: I can talk about that. That's something that I can talk about. Strobe lights. So fucked.

Eric: Yeah, absolutely! For a lot of folks, that is a big – like of course, of course! Do you want to talk about that?

Juniper: So I recently went to a concert, a Little Dragon concert in San Diego, at the House of Blues. I spent maybe a third of the time covering my face like this, because the strobe lights during those times were so – intense isn't the right word – it's a mixture of them being rhythmic in the right way. And there's this, like, perfect intersection where it gets to be too much. And I am not photosensitive. My seizures are not triggered by light. And so it isn't that. It's my autism that makes strobe lights just really bad. And also like this fear of – well, I wasn't photosensitive when I was 14, but who knows now? Yeah, it's like an unrealistic, like it's not unrealistic, it's unreasonable, irrational fear. But, it's there. And it's not something I can control. Because I've had a lot of seizures, and I don't want to have more.

Eric: Of course, I think that's a completely rational anxiety. I think that's completely rational. You know, some people have phobias of panic attacks. And I wouldn't consider that necessarily a phobia – that's a real anxiety. Like, panic attacks are horrible to experience. Like, for myself, I have anxiety surrounding slipping into a depression. Like, that to me is something that I'm very scared of and cognizant of. Right? And I think it's a perfectly rational and real anxiety to have.

Juniper: Yeah. No, I mean it's still frustrating though.

Eric: Very frustrating, I hear you.

Juniper: To me, it's like I wish there was more. I'm glad that we've gotten to a point where movies and shows will put warnings in front at the beginning of whatever they've created, if it could potentially trigger a seizure. I will say that I wish that they just wouldn't create those things or they could create two versions and have some shows with and some shows without.

And, especially what the thing that really like ticks me off is that I know so many people who are not disabled. They're perfectly able-bodied and neurotypical. They just don't like them. It isn't like, "oh, well, if we take them out, then everyone's gonna hate it. Like, everyone loves strobe lights and it's just you disabled people who are missing out." Like, no. There are so many people who actually hate that experience. Or at the very least are neutral about it – wouldn't mind either way. And it just doesn't make any sort of sense to me to have something that could potential trigger seizures or anxiety attacks all like in a certain portion of the population. And, you're just like, "well, sorry guys."

Eric: Yeah. And, you know, ultimately it is saying something about who they want and who they don't want in that space by doing that, right? And then on the other extreme to say like, well, you know, not extreme, but like

the alternative is just to design things from the ground up where everyone can use them. Right, that universal design piece. And, it's like you say, "I'm not really affected by, I don't really have a sensitivity to lights or rhythmic lights, or anything like that." Like, I think my quality of life is going to be fine if those things are no longer in my media. I think I'm going to be okay, right? Yeah, and I think it makes storytellers and content creators be more creative if they can't use that, you know, to say like, "well, if you want to show disarray, if you want to show excitement, you can't use those things. But, you're just gonna have to be more creative in a different respect. And that usually is a better product anyways in my opinion. That's just my armchair expert opinion.

Juniper: Universal design is such a wonderful and cool concept to me. My grandfather is a paraplegic. He's paralyzed from the waist down and has been my entire life. He's been paralyzed from the waist down since my mom was an infant. And so, I grew up thinking about his experience, and understanding that, well, if I put this here, then he can't reach it. Or, well, we can't go that way because there are stairs there. Oh well, if this is designed like this, then he can't go that way. And also knowing that if I say any of these things, he's going to get pissed at me. Yeah, he's a bit of an asshole. It's just how he is. Like, love him to pieces.

Eric: It's family.

Juniper: It's family.

I think, like, universal design is, I wish interior designers, actually just designers, everyone was forced to live in other people's shoes more often. It isn't going to kill anyone to have to walk up a ramp every once in a while, you know, but if you don't have a ramp, then that means that if there's no other way to get from A to B, then we're going to have to pick up my grandfather, and carry him up those stairs. And if we absolutely have to go, it could mean that we just don't go at all.

Eric: Exactly. Yup.

Juniper: But if we absolutely have to go and we have to carry him up the stairs, and we could drop him, he could die if he falls down the stairs. Like, there's all kinds of dangers if we don't have access to a ramp, or an elevator. And it's just like, we've had to do that many times. It's just – that's part of his life, getting carried upstairs. Yeah. Anyway, disability.

Eric: Again, I'm gonna sound like a broken record, but I really appreciate all of your expertise and talking about your experiences. And yeah, do you want to talk at all about the roleplaying, the fandom?

Juniper: Yes, I was just about to say that we've gone very off topic if we're talking about my grandpa.

Eric: That's okay! Well, it's part of your experience, and I'm here to listen.

Juniper: Wonderful. Thank you very much.

Eric: Of course.

Juniper: Do you have a question about writing?

Eric: Do you want to start with maybe talking about when you first started to write and role-play? Want to expand on the Warrior Cats stuff and what that means?

Juniper: I was always very into books and very into writing. I don't know when I first started writing; it could have been way earlier than I remember that I remember roleplaying. I have a really poor memory. By the time I was six months old, I could pick up a book, turn it right side up, and open it from the front page. I knew the alphabet when I was really little. All kinds of things. I started writing really young, but I don't remember when. I know that I started role-playing at around ten because that's when I had access to a computer. Before then, we didn't really have easy access to a computer. That role play or fandom was very young, with a lot of really young people. It was very short posts, like one paragraph posts. It was a bunch of kids role-playing together, mostly. At least, that's how I remember it. Sometimes, the posts could be longer, but I mostly remember them being – like, I'm forgetting the name, like "Shadow Paw walked across the meadow and looked out into the distance" -- that kind of stuff. It wasn't very story-oriented; it was very character-oriented. Which, I think that my writing and role-playing now are much more story-oriented. I like telling stories, and my characters are ways for me to tell stories. I like working with my friends to tell those stories. That's something I learned to do after many, many years, ten years of telling more character-oriented stories. But now I'm like, "I'm going to kill the character." Traumatize all of the other characters. Now, I like to create more complex narratives.

One thing that I think is noteworthy is telling stories of disability within my role-playing. One of my characters, she has epilepsy and has seizures. I've written out her seizures many times. It's one of those things that are just really funny to me because, to me, it's like, "yes, she had a seizure. That is how it is." And everyone's like, "That's terrifying." But to me, I've had well over 100 seizures, tonic-clonic seizures, and literally countless focal onset awareness seizures. So to me, that's just life.

Eric: Of course, yeah. Could you define that kind of seizure for someone who may not know? I'm not saying myself, per se...

Juniper: Yeah, so, the first one: the tonic-clonic seizure. Tonic means stiffening, and clonic means shaking. That's the new name for what used to be known as grand mal seizures. Those are the seizures that you think of when you think of epilepsy. Usually, when someone has a seizure in a show or movie or whatever, you stiffen and then you shake and stiffen again, or vice versa. But usually, that's the pattern. Focal onset awareness seizures are different. I have a really weird type of seizure, actually, and we don't really understand it. But focal onset awareness is the closest, so that's what I call it. Basically, I'm awake during the seizure. How I describe it is you have two bodies at any given point in time: the physical body and the consciousness body. Usually, they're inhabiting the same space. You would never be able to tell them apart or separate them using your own will, but during these seizures, the consciousness body separates from the physical body. You can feel them both. You can still move the physical body and feel it, but you can also feel the consciousness body, and it's separate from you and doing its own thing. It's really weird, and we're not 100% sure that it's a seizure.

Eric: I think you did a really good job of explaining it. I kind of get a general sense without having experienced it what that might be. Disorienting isn't strong enough of a word. That sounds really tough.

Juniper: Yeah, it's definitely very strange. It's the kind of thing where you really can't understand it unless you've experienced it or something like it. It's triggered a lot of conversations with myself and others about what consciousness is and what being alive is.

Erin: Yeah, no kidding!

Juniper: Because, yeah, it's really weird. But anyway, I'm glad because I haven't had one of those for quite some time. There used to be a time where I could expect to have multiple in a day, or at the very least, several a week. The tonic-clonic seizures I have much more rarely, usually between three and ten a year, but sometimes more. It just depends on the year.

Eric: Yeah, and I think there are so many different factors that influence that, right?

Juniper: Medication that I'm on. There was a period of time in high school that was really rough, but now I'm past that and on a good medication.

Eric: Good. I can tell you my own stories about finding the right medication.

Juniper: It's fucked. No, there was one. I'll tell you the horror stories about medications later. It's terrible. But yeah, like I was saying, writing the seizures out, people were like, "shit," you know? Because I don't know how many people have seen a seizure in real life, much less ever could, I think fewer people could ever get an inner look at what it's like to have a seizure, to wake up and be in pain, and not have any clear understanding of what's happened. You can't move, you can't speak. There's this awful weight on you. Maybe you're bleeding. Like, it's a lot. A lot of people had no clue and it gave me a lot of context. I got really used to it at some point. I think a lot of the people around me got used to it, too. So, to me, I was just like, "whatever." But then having people be like, "ah, that's crazy." Yeah, I was like, "yeah, yes, it is crazy." Though, that was interesting for sure.

Eric: For sure. One of my best friends actually has epilepsy, and he's very quiet about it. By the time we met in university, he probably had found the right medication because it never came up in conversation. There was no way of me knowing without asking. I kind of trauma-dumped about my new diagnosis to my circle of friends, and it's one of things that you think about in hindsight, "why did I do that., but whatever." But when I was driving him home a week afterwards, he turned to me and said, "Eric, I'm here for you. I have this, blah, blah, blah, blah." I don't know what it's like to have a seizure, per se, and he doesn't know what it's like to have a manic episode, but in that moment, we got each other on a level we hadn't before. There's that real power in sharing your experiences with your support circle.

Juniper: Yeah, absolutely. I'm incredibly fortunate to have the family that I do have. My family is very queer and...

Eric: That's awesome!

Juniper: Yeah – and also, like, very accepting. It works very hard to support each other, but also messes up and hurts each other's feelings (like anyone) because we're human. My sibling is so supportive, even though they are not disabled. They try so hard. I feel just so fortunate because I know I can always go to them and be like, "I need help." And they also say, "oh, I'm fine, blah, blah, blah, blah," but they're definitely

neurodivergent in some way. Every single one of us has our own problems, and some people have a hard time accepting help.

Eric: So true.

Juniper: Anyway, more questions?

Eric: Yeah, absolutely. Out of curiosity, what fandoms might you be a part of in the present day? You've talked about the Warrior Cats, which makes me very happy because one of my good undergrad friends – he's one of the weirdest people that I've ever met – was a big Warrior Cats kid growing up, so that's how I first encountered it. And he'd explain the ridiculous names, and the concept behind it. And I'm like, "this is fascinating." And he makes so much more sense now that that is what he was reading as a kid. There's that piece. What fandoms might you be a part of now?

Juniper: I'm trying to think of big fandoms that I'm a part of. I grew up reading a lot of Percy Jackson.

Eric: Oh, yeah! Percy Jackson!

Juniper: And Harry Potter, and Game of Thrones.

Eric: I have devoted so much of my brain in gigabytes to Game of Thrones lore, and I don't know what I'm going to do with it now that the show is done. But, also, whenever the next book comes out...

Juniper: It's never going to happen.

Eric: I'm going to mourn for that.

Juniper: So traumatizing. Triggers every time I think of that. I never finished the show. At some point, it was too ridiculous. I was really into the books. My mom didn't let me read them until I was thirteen, which was too young, but I was really pressuring her. So she was like, "once you go to high school, you can read them." I was like, "yes." I spent all of high school reading them. So, yeah, Game of Thrones. So, this is really funny. I was obsessed with Ender's Game throughout my childhood. I didn't know that it was a series until I graduated high school and then I was too busy to read them. So, I just checked out the second book from the local library. From like age eight, that was when I read the first book. Then I literally re-read it over and over again. I have two copies, and they're both super fucked. Like literally falling part, because I'm not kind to my books.

Eric: I'm like that too.

Juniper: As for now, this isn't so much a fandom thing, but do you know Kim Stanley Robison?

Eric: Are they an author?

Juniper: Yeah, he's an author. Incredible author. Like really obsessed right now. I just bought "New York 2140" but haven't started it yet. I literally just got it. Do you know "Ministry for the Future?"

Eric: No, I don't.

Juniper: Okay, no, that's his most famous book.

Eric: That's really good to know.

Juniper: I read "Ministry for the Future" a couple of years ago and got super obsessed. His book "The Years of Rice and Salt" is my favorite. It's the kind of book that – I don't know if I agree with everything, or I actually don't agree with everything – it's a lot of discussion of religious principles, especially Eastern religious principles, and a lot of it is about reincarnation and karma, but it's the kind of thing – it just made me think a lot. It's not fandom, but I'm slowly going through his books, obsessed.

Eric: That's a great list. It really contextualizes a lot of what we've been talking about. So, no worries. If you think of something else, just shoot me an email. That's perfectly good, too. No worries. I really just have one more question. I guess it's a big question. I'm going to have to modify this to be more expansive: you role-play in an online community, you write in an online community, in that community, in that space, what are some of the challenges that community faces in the present?

Juniper: I think that literally right this second one of the biggest problems our community is facing is member inactivity. But, that's not anyone's fault. It's just that life has been really hard lately for everyone. Most of our members are – well, all of our members are over 18 (that's a requirement to join), and most of them are over 20, if not all. I currently don't know of any teenagers in the community. Many are in their 30s or 40s. In the last census, there were members who were in their 50s or 60s. Really, this is an adults' home made community. Adults are very busy with jobs and personal issues, and life. I think over the past year the impression that I've gotten, because I went on hiatus for my senior year, because I was just too busy. I couldn't stay online, but after returning, I got the impression that the past year was hard on everyone. has been really hard on everyone. It's been difficult to stay active and plot and tell good stories without people dropping out. That hasn't always been the case, but I don't think it's something that's going to last. Activity ebbs and flows. Two years ago was an insanely active year...

Eric: I can kind of see that making sense.

Juniper: ...with multiple extremely popular, very active plots happening at the same time. I wrote 45,000 words in the month of December 2021 and I know this because every January we do SoSiWriMo, which is 'Souls' alternative to NaNoWriMo. Some of our craziest members do both. But yeah, the goal is to roleplay throughout the month of January and write 50,000 words during that month. I was so disappointed, because due to plot reasons, I wrote so much in the month of December, and almost completed SoSiWriMo in January. Overall, I wrote almost 90,000 words in two months, but I was just short of the goal. And it just haunts me to this day.

Eric: Yeah, I get that. I have an Excel spreadsheet, with all of my word counts and projects, and if I don't meet my weekly word count, I die on the inside.

Juniper: Exactly. That gives you an idea of how active – It certainly wasn't just me. I was super active that year. After my plot was over, I got super burned out. Because also, after my plot was over, I went and did a fellowship. And I just couldn't keep up. I think a lot of people got burned out between life and plots. It was a lot. I don't think it's going to stay like that indefinitely. People are going to return to normal levels of activity, but right now, that's the biggest issue. And also a lot of people are not struggling right now. There are still plenty of folks chugging along, but it's been a rough year.

Eric: That's great. I think that's the extent of my questions. Do you want to add anything else? Do you want to talk about anything else? 'Cause on that point, we'll wrap and then finish.

Juniper: I'm trying to think of anything I might have missed. Not really. How much do you know about 'Souls?

Eric: I've done some cursory research, but I'm going to do a more impactful research. I think once I get back from the Christmas break, doing some deep dives, looking through forums, probably gonna use the Internet archive a bunch, too, like the Wayback Machine, and I'm going to go through the handbook, read that.

Juniper: I'd say go to the handbook first. That's actually how I found 'Souls. Having that context about the plot and history will help you, especially when going through the forums. There is literally 23 years of history, and a lot of characters, and a lot of things happening. The handbook first.

Eric: That makes sense. Thank you. I really appreciate that. I'm looking at some play-by-post RPGs and I'm also looking at MUDs tied to IPs like Hogwarts by Night I was looking at and a Lord of the Rings MUD I was looking at. 'Souls isn't necessarily an established IP that has a fandom, but a lot of people who are part of it are fans of other things. And so that was kind of my rationale of like talking to the community. But what I'm gonna have to do is I'm gonna have to read that handbook, gonna have to read a whole bunch of 'Souls stuff to the point where I am able to talk about it in my sleep do a genre comparison to essentially say, "here's the connective tissue between 'Souls and other werewolf stories that are IP's that exist out there in the world that people would be fans of, and then I can demonstrate that – then I can go about my argument talking about disability and the intersection with online communities and that kind of stuff.

Juniper: There is a ton of werewolf RP. It's its own genre. Literally it's its own genre. And whether it can be, I don't know enough about your research to say that it could be called its own like – like I mean it's not like its own fandom, but like if you go to like RP sites where werewolf RP is often like its own section and 'Souls is usually #1.

Eric: Yeah, it's huge. Everywhere I've been looking, I come across it. So, I'm like, "I have to talk to these people."

Juniper: 'Souls is usually number one in that section. From a scholarly point of view, some scholars might argue it isn't a fandom, but if an online community user is acting like a fan and writing their own text, then that's fannish activity. It's a fan community. There are fan communities around fan fiction writers. If in your heart you're a fan of something and you participate and write about it, then you are a fan. I think 'Souls is so big and has been around for so long that it feels like its own little institution. You'll have your own opinion as you learn more about the community and its history. It's not like writing Twilight fan fiction, but we are creating our own stories and characters in our world. It's got a very common theme throughout fiction in general.

Eric: I really appreciate what you have to say as someone who's part of the community. This is great.

Juniper: I'm happy to be of any help. Thank you for talking with me.

Eric Vero and Greg Botting – January 11, 2024

Eric Vero: Hi, Greg.

Greg Botting: There we go. Sorry about that.

Eric Vero: Oh gosh, no. No worries, it's great to connect finally.

Greg Botting: Likewise, pleasure. I clicked the wrong link, like I said, but I'm here now.

Eric Vero: Absolutely no worries. Was there anything wrong with the email that I sent?

Greg Botting: No, no, no, I just, Gmail just decided to be really stupid. And, they basically don't allow for the traditional accessibility features that I'm used to anymore.

Eric Vero: Right.

Greg Botting: So wading through the mess of emails was a bit of a challenge, but, yeah. They decided to change how they made the system accessible this month. So that's been a bit of a headache getting used to.

Eric Vero: I'm sorry, that really sucks.

Greg Botting: It does suck.

Eric Vero: So yeah, I'm glad that we're here. Just as an introduction, my name is Eric. My pronouns are he/him. I'm a white male with dark hair and a matching dark beard, and I'm currently wearing a really comfy but very old dark blue hoodie.

Greg Botting: Fair enough. Personally, I really don't care, but I appreciate the description. Can I ask: if I read the email correctly, you're he/him, but queer. Are you gay then?

Eric Vero: I'm bisexual.

Greg Botting: Bisexual, OK, nice.

Eric Vero: Yeah, and I think it's, you know, like... Oh, I'm he/him. He/him works for me as well. But I think my take on gender, the way I embody gender, is a bit more complicated than just, you know, the normal.

Greg Botting: Absolutely. I'm much the same way.

Eric Vero: Oh, it's great to meet a fellow like-minded person.

Greg Botting: Indeed.

Eric Vero: So, I think the first thing we can do is I'm gonna ask some questions about consent.

Greg Botting: Absolutely.

Eric Vero: So I would just like to briefly ask you some questions relating to the study. As you can tell, I have a script. My name is Eric Vero. Today is January 19th, 2024. So the very first question is, what is your name?

Greg Botting: Greg Botting, B-O-T-T-I-N-G.

Eric Vero: Great. Have you had a chance to read the recruitment letter?

Greg Botting: Yes, I did.

Eric Vero: That's great. Do you have any questions about it?

Greg Botting: No.

Eric Vero: OK, so as a reminder, participation is voluntary and you may withdraw your consent by advising me of your decision at any time. If you have questions for the research ethics board, contact information for the office of research ethics is listed on the information letter.

Greg Botting: Just out of curiosity, what field is this study in? What are you getting your doctorate in?

Eric Vero: History. So I'm doing oral history, yeah.

Greg Botting: OK, nice.

Eric Vero: Yes. For all other questions about the study, you may contact me at eavero@uwaterloo.ca. So the second question would be, do you consent to participating in this interview?

Greg Botting: I do.

Eric Vero: Thank you. Do you give permission for your interviews to be video or audio recorded?

Greg Botting: I do.

Eric Vero: Do you agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this research, with the understanding that you may be referenced generally by your area of expertise or experience? So in this case, your participation in the fandom.

Greg Botting: I do. Yeah, I do.

Eric Vero: And then finally, do you agree with the following: I agree to the use of attributed quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this research, with the understanding that I will have the opportunity to review the quotations and how I will be attributed prior to publication.

Greg Botting: I do.

Eric Vero: Excellent. That's great. So if you're willing, let's dive into the questions that I have. There are six questions, they're very broad.

Greg Botting: Sure, go ahead.

Eric Vero: You can talk as much or as little as you'd like. We don't have to talk about anything you don't want to. It's totally up to you, and I just want to stress how much I appreciate you giving your time over to me.

Greg Botting: Hey, happy to help.

Eric Vero: That's great. So the very first question is, what name would you like to be referenced by? Of course, you have Greg as your name. If there is...

Greg Botting: Yeah, Greg's fine. Technically, my full name is Gregory, but I never go by that.

Eric Vero: Awesome. That's great. What pronouns do you prefer?

Greg Botting: He/him is fine.

Eric Vero: Yep. So the very first question is very easy. The second question is more of a prompt, I guess. Would you be able to speak to your experiences about and with disability?

Greg Botting: Sure. Excuse me, I am totally blind. I have minimal light perception out of my left eye, but that basically means nothing. I was born 16 weeks early, give or take, so I have what's called retinopathy of prematurity. As I said, minimal light perception out of my left eye. The right eye is actually intact, but the optic nerve is fried.

Eric Vero: OK.

Greg Botting: Go ahead.

Eric Vero: Oh yeah. No, I'm just signaling that I'm listening, I guess.

Greg Botting: Yeah, and the retina is non-functional in the left eye.

Eric Vero: OK.

Greg Botting: So that's my primary disability. I do have – and that's been lifelong. There's no viable treatment, and I wouldn't take it if there was, frankly. I'm comfortable with at least that aspect. I was diagnosed, I think officially last April, with epilepsy. I've only had three seizures to date, fortunately, that I know of. I also have depression and anxiety, and I'm in therapy for both of those. The depression has been long-standing; the anxiety is more recent. I'm attempting to get tested for autism, as I feel that I have certain behaviors which may indicate that I have autism, either that or I've just picked up certain behaviors from my roommate who's autistic.

Eric Vero: OK. Yeah.

Greg Botting: So it's one of those two. So, I think in terms of disability, the biggest issue of late has been coming to the conclusion and dealing with the fact that I have multiple disabilities: with the epilepsy, being blind, and technically depression and anxiety as a multiple disability. And also fitting into not only the minority category of disability but the smaller category of multiple disabilities. And then how does that intersect and crossover with other minority categories I fit into. For the purposes of both identity, the study, and further

information, I am white, male, but I do consider myself bisexual and technically in a queer relationship, even though I have a girlfriend. We both are bisexual but we're very committed to one another. So it's a question of how do I make all those identities work and how are they all expressed. And how they all come together to make up a whole person. That's been something I've been thinking a lot about.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah, that's a lot to think about.

Greg Botting: Some of the reasoning I'm going into graduate school for social work, hopefully.

Eric Vero: Oh, that's awesome. Congratulations.

Greg Botting: We'll see. It's a mess.

Eric Vero: Well, with every intent I have, I hope it goes really well.

Greg Botting: Thank you. I appreciate it.

Eric Vero: Yeah. You bring up a really good point about these intersections. I think we often think if you're disabled, you only have one disability. But the more I read from disabled scholars and activists, it's really interesting how often they say that they might have multiple intersecting disabilities.

Greg Botting: But here's the thing. You don't think about it because typically you think of...

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Greg Botting: Multiply disabled or multiply impaired as severely multiply impaired.

Eric Vero: Yes. Yep.

Greg Botting: And that's been hard for me to come to terms with, honestly. The fact that multiple disabilities are broader than just severely multiply impaired folks.

Eric Vero: Yes, I have two disabilities, and both of them have been with me since I can remember. But, one of them was only diagnosed in my 20s and the other one was diagnosed a few years ago. But they've always been with me, and it's wild to think that they've always been with me, even though I didn't notice them. Even in hindsight, it's kind of obvious.

Greg Botting: Yeah, yeah.

Eric Vero: Yeah, that's great.

Greg Botting: Yep.

Eric Vero: That's a really helpful answer.

Greg Botting: Oh, hey, you're welcome. I was the kind of person who, whenever I would go to one of my eye doctors when I was a kid, he'd usually have 3-4, sometimes five students or interns in the room, and I wouldn't care.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah.

Greg Botting: I'm like, just look at my eyes. I don't care.

Eric Vero: I guess you know, I imagine you kind of – at least I do – get used to being poked and prodded and asked invasive questions, and all of that, by medical health professionals.

Greg Botting: Not even so much that. It was more of a, if my eyes can help you in your student endeavors or whatever, go ahead and use them. I don't care.

Eric Vero: Yeah, that makes perfect sense, I think.

Greg Botting: Honestly, I find the most annoying are the ones who want to pray for me to get vision back.

Eric Vero: I can imagine that's very insulting.

Greg Botting: Those piss me off to no end. Anyway, where were we?

Eric Vero: Well, you know, I know someone, she was a friend of mine during high school who had a psychosocial disability. She had mental health issues, and her mom, who is devout Catholic, would ask people to pray for her daughter to cure her psychosocial disability. It just shakes you to your core, right? You're like, what? I didn't ask for... You know? So what kind of institutional barriers might you experience?

Greg Botting: So I am a Braille user.

Eric Vero: OK.

Greg Botting: And I do have assistive technology. I have a laptop with JAWS, which is a screen reading program. JAWS is expensive, as are the Braille devices that I use. So I wouldn't say those are necessarily “institutional” barriers, but they are in the sense that it would be a lot easier for me and for folks who are blind, visually impaired, and/or generally disabled if that kind of technology was cheaper and more reasonably accessible in price. I think largely due to the capitalist nature of the Western world and the niche markets that these devices have, that's allowed the makers to set their own prices. And I'm not saying that some of these prices aren't legit because, you know, you need components that are unusual and elements that are rarer. That's why laptops are so expensive in general. Even so, price gets in the way.

I guess from a purely institutional background, I was lucky in that I attended a K-12 district in the United States. Who...I was basically the only blind person in the district, or at least the only totally blind person, and they were willing to get me what I needed. For example, coming into high school, they didn't have updated signage in Braille in the high school because the school had been built just prior to the ADA and IDEA getting signed into law, so they got grandfathered in. But they updated the signage, and the same thing actually happened with the college that I attended. They updated their signage, not all at once, because I was like, just do the signage in the areas I'm going to be. You don't need to do everything all at once. For me, I'm not crazy. You don't need to do everything. And the nice thing about the college, I went to Alma College, a small liberal arts school in Michigan, which is where I'm from. They basically also got me whatever I needed. They got me a Braille math book, for example.

Now the good thing was, I convinced a couple of blind and visually impaired folks to come to Alma as well, a couple of years behind me, somewhat to my detriment personally. So they were able to use that \$4000 math book. So it wasn't just me using it. But you know, they did other things. They worked with me on getting with all the professors to get the materials I needed, and I was pretty good at advocating for myself, by and large, and I didn't have too many problems in high school or college. I got lucky in that I had parents and teachers who actually gave a shit and knew how to teach this stuff, advocacy and so forth.

Eric Vero: Of course. So I guess my next question is (it's absolutely related) what do societal supports look like for you, with you and your disability?

Greg Botting: Are you talking to me specifically or generally?

Eric Vero: Speak to whichever you would like, whichever you think is most relevant.

Greg Botting: I think I'm going to do both just because I think if I first talk about myself and then broaden it a little more generally, that'll just give me a point to go from. I have an academic background, undergraduate in English with a double minor in political science and creative writing. So I was busy. For me, I basically was able to prove that I was capable of obtaining a college degree, and at least in Michigan, the rules are that the state will cover one piece of assistive technology per blind person and up to the highest rates for tuition at a public university in the state. That's in Michigan. I went to Alma, which is private, but I had enough scholarships that the rate the state ended up paying for me was lower than what they would have paid if I'd gone to, at the time, the University of Michigan, which was the highest tuition public university in the state. I basically got college for free.

Eric Vero: That's great.

Greg Botting: I know. A lot of states don't do that either. I know, for example, in Idaho, I think they'll cover up to 90%. Now, Michigan's a little different in that we haven't had a functional school for the blind since the mid-80s, and we haven't had a school for the blind at all since the mid-90s. Even if the school for the blind had been functional, I don't believe my parents would have sent me there. I was mainstreamed from day one pretty much, with special teachers from the district and whatnot during my time in K-12 education. And I don't think my parents would have put up with me being sent to an institution. Other states still have schools for the blind in various states of functionality. Indiana has one, Texas has one, California has two, I think Florida has at least one, so it really varies state by state. I will say Michigan and other states do really well in some areas with the blind community and not so great in other areas. Michigan has a tendency, depending on where you are in the state, to do really well on the education front, not so well on the jobs front. I graduated in 2016 and I have yet to find full-time employment, almost eight years later.

And, even before COVID hit, but especially once COVID hit, I just gave up on the state trying to help me. They were just completely useless. In fact, the gentleman I was working with from the state told me I wasted four years going to college, to my face.

Eric Vero: Wow.

Greg Botting: Yeah, to my face. However, I'm trying to get back in touch with the state in hopes that I can convince them to fund graduate school for me.

Eric Vero: Mm.

Greg Botting: We will see if that happens. I'm also trying to work with a local organization that has a jobs program for blind and visually impaired folks. They're in touch with, I think, about a dozen local employers. The problem with that, though, is, and I think this is true in a lot of disability communities, I don't really – I have personal differences with the gentleman who runs the program.

Eric Vero: OK.

Greg Botting: And frankly, I don't trust him. So there's some biases I have to get over, and I think unfortunately because of how I was raised, middle class, not overly privileged but I would say definitely privileged. So not upper middle class but firmly in the realm of, I didn't have to worry about a lot of things.

Eric Vero: Of course.

Greg Botting: Except grades and shit. I definitely have biases, and that doesn't just extend to the disability community, but in general. It doesn't help that my mother for years and years was the president of the statewide parent group for folks who are blind and visually impaired for kids, which is now defunct. She basically was always pushing for a higher standard for a lot of kids, and it just didn't work really. A lot of districts, at least when I was growing up, didn't want to do shit. There was one time where my mother went all the way to the Upper Peninsula, way the hell up north.

Greg Botting: At the tip of Michigan, basically where to help out to the support of a parent with an IEP. I think there was a regular kindergarten like a mile from their house and they wanted her to go to the special kindergarten for severely multiply impaired kids out of town.

Eric Vero: Right.

Greg Botting: And it was just ridiculous.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Greg Botting: So, honestly, I think that's partially, at least, why I'm wanting to go into social work because I see the systemic problems facing not only blind people, folks with disabilities in general, but also the wider population at large. Truth be told, I have been and want to frankly run away from the disability community. I don't want to work in a disability-specific position. I want to be taken seriously as a person, not just a person with a disability. Yes, I want that disability to just be part of who I am, not define where I end up.

Eric Vero: Of course. A question occurred to me. Do you mind?

Greg Botting: Please.

Eric Vero: Do you mind saying what decade you grew up in? Like when, yeah.

Greg Botting: Sure. So I was born in '94.

Eric Vero: OK.

Greg Botting: And I graduated from high school in 2012 and graduated college in '16.

Eric Vero: Perfect. That really helps to anchor some of the context.

Greg Botting: Absolutely, yeah.

Eric Vero: That's great. These are really helpful answers. Do you want to add anything else? Because you've clearly thought a lot about it. You know, it's always refreshing to talk to people who have an understanding of systemic issues and whatnot.

Greg Botting: Yeah.

Eric Vero: I'm quite curious. Do you want to talk more about any systemic issues or anything like that that you've noticed?

Greg Botting: I think... I don't want to speak to broader systemic issues because that's going to be a circular discussion.

Eric Vero: Sure, absolutely.

Greg Botting: I think how we change those is by getting good policy in place and good people on the ground, which is why I'm hoping to go into policy. If I end up doing one-on-one individual therapy... One reason I want to go into policy despite the fact that I actually hated the policy class I took in undergrad. I feel like I'm going to get too attached to my clients.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yep.

Greg Botting: I care too much.

Eric Vero: Of course.

Greg Botting: But if I end up doing one-on-one, I think I'm good people enough that I can hopefully do some good. I think with... I would say, not to make a pun here, but with the minority communities that are less in focus.

Eric Vero: Sure.

Greg Botting: Blindness, disability in general, even LGBTQ to some extent, normalization and education is critical. That's one reason I invite questions about my disability. Not so much about my being LGBTQ because I just don't feel a need to come out to many people, frankly.

Eric Vero: Yes.

Greg Botting: That's been something that I've only recently started coming out to people about. It's just not something I feel a real need to disclose.

Eric Vero: Absolutely. If I can speak for myself too, about the queerness and all that. For me, it's a safety issue. I'm only going to tell people that I trust that is an aspect of my identity.

Greg Botting: Despite living in a very red area of Michigan...

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Greg Botting: I feel very safe being queer, so...

Eric Vero: OK.

Greg Botting: I don't mind telling. I just don't feel a need to.

Eric Vero: Oh yeah, that's an excellent way of phrasing it too, I think, yeah.

Greg Botting: But you know, with the disability...

Eric Vero: Yes, go ahead.

Greg Botting: That's why I encourage so many questions. And yes, I've gotten very screwball questions before.

Eric Vero: Of course.

Greg Botting: Probably the weirdest one, which I almost punched the guy, but he also had a traumatic brain injury himself, so I can't necessarily blame him. The guy asked me how I wipe my butt one time. Feel free to laugh. It's OK.

Eric Vero: Yeah, there's a part of me that wants to laugh, but then there's also a part of me that's kind of depressed by that because someone asks that question and...

Greg Botting: I mean, he had a TBI, so he had other stuff going on too.

Eric Vero: Yeah, but still, I like that you can laugh about it at least.

Greg Botting: Yeah. And I'd like to add that if you've got any colleagues that you know of in either your program or other doctorate programs or master's programs, if they want to reach out for academic purposes or otherwise to talk to me about my disability and how I approach things, please send them my way or vice versa.

Eric Vero: No, that's really great. I'm part of the connections and the disability scholarship. One of my supervisors is a disability scholar, and that is really good to have in my back pocket.

Greg Botting: Yeah.

Eric Vero: Thank you.

Greg Botting: Yeah, I would be happy to – I'll talk your ear off.

Eric Vero: That really serves my purposes well.

Greg Botting: Yeah, I basically haven't shut up since I was 4.

Eric Vero: That's great, I mean, but you know, that's the kind of thing that would help you in social work. I think it would be, yeah.

Greg Botting: Yeah, that too.

Eric Vero: So, shifting gears a bit, I guess my next question is, what fandoms do you belong to? You can be as expansive about that as you'd like.

Greg Botting: So, broadly, I would say...Mmm. Let's make it five.

Eric Vero: Awesome.

Greg Botting: So, how to phrase this? I guess the earliest would be Lord of the Rings.

Eric Vero: Awesome.

Greg Botting: My parents, actually, when they were first married in 1984, read the books to each other in bed.

Eric Vero: Oh, that's awesome.

Greg Botting: I know, it's adorable.

Eric Vero: Yes.

Greg Botting: So I kind of grew up with Lord of the Rings. Mom actually read them to me when I was about 6. I didn't really understand half of it, but it didn't matter to me. And then I read them on my own when I was in 6th grade, in Braille, by the way. And that really is kind of what... Well, OK, I guess Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter are kind of co-equal for me because I read Harry Potter on my own first before Lord of the Rings. But those were the two big ones that had a significant impact on my childhood. To give you an idea, I had surgery on my eyes when I was 6 or 7, I think this was either 2000 or 2001. And I had to lie on my stomach all night, and my mom sat beside my hospital bed with a tape player and played the first two Harry Potter books for me all night on cassette tape. And, you know, growing up we took a lot of road trips, so we did a lot of books on tape. Usually that was Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings, or other stuff. Occasionally Redwall, the [indiscernable] mystery series. We did a lot of driving. Once I got a bit older, I got into Star Wars when I was about 9. In fact, my parents actually bought me the unabridged Attack of the Clones novel on cassette tape to keep me entertained on our way back from Florida. We'd gone to Disney World and my birthday happened to be while we were down there, so as a birthday present they got me that. And I had a tape player with headphones on the 20-hour drive back. That's what I listened to. Mostly as far as Star Wars goes, I grew up with the books and the first six movies. I must say I'm not a fan of the Disney sequel films.

Eric Vero: Not alone there.

Greg Botting: I did enjoy Rogue One. Yes, I particularly enjoyed Solo and I really enjoyed The Mandalorian, but apart from that, I'm...

Eric Vero: Mmm.

Greg Botting: A book person. And especially since I've been able to get my hands on unabridged copies of some of the books I didn't have access to growing up. The New Jedi Order in particular is of interest to me. I really enjoy those. But I think the biggest one for me and what's had the most impact is Star Trek. I ran into Star Trek actually at a blindness summer camp when I was 10 or 11. An older camper just happened to have the audio cassette abridged version of First Contact, one of the novelizations of the movies. And I don't know how we got started, but I started listening to that with him and had all these questions. Star Trek just became a really big part of my life. It came right at the exact time when I was really starting to develop deep morality, and it's shaped a lot of how I view the world, honestly.

Apart from some other things like, I've always paid attention to international affairs, politics, that kind of thing. I'm a huge public radio nerd as well. So I actually credit my dad for that one. I actually remember hearing about 9/11. My dad was driving to choir practice on the night of the Twin Towers collapse and I was in the car with him. I was like 6 or 7, listening to the radio, and that's really what sparked things for me on that score.

But Star Wars really has had a huge impact. Star Trek, I'm sorry. I'm part of a couple of role-playing games through online writing. I did a paper on Star Trek in college. I did a paper actually on Tolkien in college as well. I bought a complete Star Trek series on DVD as a gift to myself after a really bad breakup in college. Retail therapy!

Eric Vero: Yes, I do it too.

Greg Botting: I convinced my girlfriend... Well, it was a combination of convincing and she just sort of was like, all right, if I get to show you my shows, then we're gonna watch your shows.

Eric Vero: Mmm.

Greg Botting: So she's committed to watching every single Star Trek with me, some of which I haven't seen myself.

Eric Vero: That's so cool. That's awesome.

Greg Botting: Yeah, we started with Enterprise. So we're doing this in-universe chronologically and we're in early Next Generation, which we're trying to get through. It's a bit of a mess right now. Some of those early episodes are really cringy, but we're getting through. And you know, I make Star Trek references all the time. We actually named our cat after one of the Star Trek characters in one of the newer shows, a character from Discovery.

Eric Vero: Oh yeah!

Greg Botting: Yeah, we named her Georgiou after the... Not the Empress, the Starship captain.

Eric Vero: Yes, I would have questions about the cat's character if it was... It's been a while since I've watched it. About the Terran...

Greg Botting: Empress. Yeah, she acts a lot like an Empress though. Pretty funny. No, but she's adorable. And, you know, I'm guilty of reading mostly Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, the occasional Star Trek fanfiction. Lately I've been reading crossovers with Harry. So crossovers between Harry Potter and Star Wars and Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings. Particularly if they're very well written. I think because of my English major background, I have a deep appreciation for the written word. And if it's not written well, I will not read it, or at least if the story is not compelling, I will not read it.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Greg Botting: I've gotten into a couple of other fandoms lately, mostly from my girlfriend, but not as extensively. Gilmore Girls. She loves that show. She introduced it to me. I love it now. It's fucking great.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah.

Greg Botting: I am guilty of working my way through a giant Gilmore Girls fan fiction that my girlfriend will not read, partially because she rolls her eyes when she hears about my fan obsession. Criminal Minds, also mostly from my girlfriend, a little bit. Mostly I'm just trying to keep up with this one particular fan fiction that is just adorable. This is my LGBTQ stuff and my girlfriend coming out to play because she's got me into things that I wouldn't have gotten into otherwise. And I call them adorable because they kind of are. And I don't care that I'm really sounding gay right now, stereotypically anyway.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Greg Botting: We've also gotten into The Great British Baking Show.

Eric Vero: Oh yeah.

Greg Botting: So yeah, we're ridiculous. And then also things like, I wouldn't necessarily call these fandoms per se, but shows like... We watch Grace and Frankie. We just started Glee. She even got me to watch some Miyazaki movies. In fact, I'm writing a Harry Potter/Ponyo crossover for her right now.

Eric Vero: Oh my God...

Greg Botting: As a present for either Valentine's Day or her birthday. Not sure which.

Eric Vero: I will say that sounds like a wonderful present. If you decided to put it online, I feel like a lot of people would love to read something like that.

Greg Botting: Yeah. Oh, and there's one more, which is actually how I heard about this study in the first place. I'm part of a MUD (multi-user domain) game. Which is how I heard of this (Miriani). Most of the player base is blind. Most of them, in my highly unprofessional opinion, lack social skills severely and have multiple disabilities, some of them pretty severe. The game itself is pretty good for acting as a distractor, but it can be pretty much a time suck.

Eric Vero: OK.

Greg Botting: And. I've been playing this off and on for... Oh God, 15 years. I've tried to stop and I come back to it. It's ridiculous. I love it, but I really want to put it down and then I can't. And so it's irritating. Honestly, it's helping me cope with some of the stuff I have to deal with. I'm trying not to play as much of it lately, which isn't working out too well. I'm hoping once I actually get going on hopefully finding a full-time job and other things, I'll play it less because I'll be busier.

Eric Vero: Of course.

Greg Botting: My girlfriend doesn't necessarily mind. I mean, she's got her own games that she plays. But for me, it's just frustrating. Go ahead.

Eric Vero: Oh, I was just going to ask, like, I'm really curious about the Miriani. Yeah. Tell me about some of your favorite memories, things that have happened in that game.

Greg Botting: So I guess I should just tell you how the game's played. It's all text-based.

Eric Vero: Sure.

Greg Botting: So you input your commands on a computer keyboard, and the game responds to those commands. I would say when the world was going to shit, particularly with COVID, it was an escapism thing for me. You know, it's a science fiction-based game. The world-building's OK. I think if I were running it, I would probably develop the world more.

Eric Vero: Sure.

Greg Botting: And like I said, the user base... Most of them are blind. A lot of them have, I would say just from my interactions with them, a lot of mental things going on.

Eric Vero: Sure.

Greg Botting: So I think it's more of a "I can get away from, in some ways, a reality that feels very crushing escape to me." I'm trying to find healthier ways of coping. I've devoted myself to reading, not necessarily in Braille. But I am going to try and do my best to read two books a month this year. Most of that's probably going to be on audio, although my girlfriend and I are going to start reading to each other. And there's one book, *A Wrinkle in Time*, that I still have my Braille copy from when I was a kid 20 years ago. That's shocking because most Braille books don't hold up that long. So I'm definitely going to read that to her in Braille. She's never read it, so I'm really looking forward to reading that to her.

Eric Vero: It's a really well-loved children's classic.

Greg Botting: It is. I'm really surprised she hasn't read it. But we'll get around to that after about the other 50,000 things we're doing.

Eric Vero: Yeah, of course.

Greg Botting: We're the kind of crazies who – we have theatre tickets and symphony tickets and opera tickets. Just all kinds of crazy stuff.

Eric Vero: But you got to keep busy. Like I firmly believe you got to keep busy.

Greg Botting: Exactly. I mean, her dad's an opera singer and my mom plays French horn and I grew up playing violin, so yeah.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah. I found someone like that too, for myself. We work very well together, so I completely understand.

Greg Botting: Yeah. So it's not really favorite memories per se. It's more a sense of camaraderie, like we're all trying to escape something we just don't always necessarily talk about.

Eric Vero: Camaraderie.

Greg Botting: Sometimes if you get close enough to some people, they will...and I've tried to keep, to some extent, my online and my real life separate. I dated a girl I met through that game back in college. That was actually the breakup that caused me to do retail therapy with the Star Trek series.

Eric Vero: Ah yes.

Greg Botting: She was, to put it mildly, crazy.

Eric Vero: OK, sure.

Greg Botting: And that's being polite.

Eric Vero: So it wasn't a particularly good relationship then?

Greg Botting: No, no. And it's taken me years to get through therapy, and I'm still dealing with it.

Eric Vero: Of course. Yeah, I completely hear you on that.

Greg Botting: To be honest with you, I've found more community in the Star Trek role-playing groups I've been a part of.

Eric Vero: I would love that actually. That sounds...

Greg Botting: All of them have been online. You basically develop a character sheet and then you write as that character. So it's almost like you're writing a novel with five to ten different people, depending on the size of the group. I think there have been a couple of groups where we've had up to 15 people, and you all play different characters. A lot of people have more than one character. So it's a lot like writing a novel, and you can take it in so many different directions. Especially recently. Not so much when I started senior year of college, actually by accident. Well, I guess even then too, but these groups, a lot of them, have Discord channels. That's been interesting. So you get to know the people behind the characters too, a little bit. I've been in various groups, some of them more successful than others. I just joined two groups, which I literally need to catch up

on after I'm done with you. And I think I need... I'm gonna join another one. Three is about the limit where it can be effective.

Eric Vero: Mmm.

Greg Botting: The nice thing I like about these groups is it gives me an outlet for my writing creatively. Which, I was that weird guy in college who was able to do both critical and creative writing, which is pretty rare in undergraduate English circles.

Eric Vero: I would say it's hard for writers who are professional, who end up getting pigeonholed in what they do. You know, so that is really rare and that's a tough thing to do, to have that ability to shift between those two voices.

Greg Botting: Yeah. I was gonna get my doctorate in creative writing and teach and write all the time. That didn't work out for lots of reasons. But you know, I really find the community aspect lovely because you meet folks from all over the world, and most of them, by and large, are lovely, supportive people. Even the ones you don't agree with. Like, legit, there's a woman I have worked with on a couple of different groups who voted for Brexit. Not to get political, but I was actually studying abroad, not in the run-up to Brexit, but in the run-up to Scottish independence. If I'd been able to vote, I would have been voting for Scottish independence and to remain in the European Union. So even though we fundamentally differ politically, despite the fact we're in two completely different countries, two completely different systems, we can still be friends because we've worked in these groups together. We don't communicate all the time, but we're still friends on Facebook.

Eric Vero: That's super interesting. I love it.

Greg Botting: Yeah. And there's actually... I need to catch up with this one guy too. I met him in the first group I was part of. A really nice guy. I need to convince him to join one of my groups because I really want to work with him again. He's an absolutely wonderful human being. He's a bus driver in, I think, one of the London suburbs. Poor guy just lost his wife. He's got two young kids. And you know, I would... I'll put it this way: I would consider inviting him to my wedding, even though we've never met in person.

Eric Vero: But I think that speaks to the realization that you have that connection with someone, even if you know that's huge.

Greg Botting: Absolutely.

Eric Vero: Speaking of Star Trek, do you have a particular character that might be your favorite or who you identify with?

Greg Botting: Why do you ask the tough questions? So, I can find a character in pretty much every series I can identify with. Now I despise Lower Decks, which is one of the new animated series. I watched the first episode. I actually have the first season on DVD. That was a waste of 15 bucks. I despise it. I really dislike it because they say it's not a parody, but it clearly is a parody. And I just feel like it's a really interesting idea that was just poorly executed.

Eric Vero: Yeah, that...

Greg Botting: So outside of Lower Decks and Prodigy, which I'm just not watching because it's a kids' show, I really have enjoyed all of the series so far. If I had to pick absolutely one character, if you're really gonna push on that one, I would say it's a very, very close tie between Jadzia Dax from Deep Space Nine and Seven of Nine from Voyager and Picard. I haven't seen all of Picard yet, but I do know about Seven's arc, particularly because I've seen all of Voyager. And I've seen about a season and a half of Picard, and I've read all the rest of the episode summaries on Memory Alpha. And quite apart from Seven being LGBTQ now, as revealed in Picard, thank you very much.

Eric Vero: OK.

Greg Botting: When I got around to watching all of Voyager in college because I didn't have access to it for a long, long time, I found her arc very compelling because she came in as a real outsider. Despite the fact that biologically, she's human, she was raised by the Borg, essentially. And she now has to reintegrate into a humanoid society. But the question is, what does that integration look like and how do you, as a person who was raised in a very different environment, deal with that environment and yet relate to your new circumstances? Whereas for me...

Eric Vero: Of course.

Greg Botting: Coming from the perspective of being blind, I was raised in a sighted world. And I feel like not a lot of blind people, especially the older ones, realize that we live in a sighted world. The world does not revolve around us. We have to adapt to it; they don't need to adapt to us. Now, that might sound like an apology for the sighted world, but my opinion is that every damn day I get up and step out my door and do what I'm gonna do, I'm being an ambassador for blindness. That phrase – and feel free to use that – was coined by a teacher of mine who taught me Braille and everything in elementary school and beyond.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Greg Botting: Basically, I'm showing the world that I can do anything and everything I set my mind to, within reason. So that's why I really connected on a basic level with Seven. As far as Jadzia goes, she's just badass, and she's freaking awesome. And I had a crush on her, but not because of how she looked, but just for how the character was written herself. And also she and Worf are adorable.

Eric Vero: Got to have that adorable element?

Greg Botting: Absolutely! And I just love DS9. If push comes to shove in terms of favorite series, in order, I would say DS9, Enterprise, and Voyager. They're all very, very close. In terms of the newer Star Trek, I would say I probably identify most with Tilly because she's a chatterbox just like me, and she's also adorable and we just love her both my girlfriend and I.

Eric Vero: OK.

Greg Botting: I'm not... We had a discussion of who would you want to sleep with and who would you want to befriend. We both said we want to befriend Tilly.

Eric Vero: Mmm.

Greg Botting: And I love Discovery. I really do. I just don't agree with some of the world-building choices that they took in seasons three and four, and five, coming out next year. I just feel they could have done something better with seasons three, four, and five. One and two is great, and four, I haven't seen all of it, but it's some of the best television I've seen apart from the world-building.

Eric Vero: So full disclosure then. I watched, I think, the first two seasons of Discovery with my fiancée and her dad. He's a huge Trekkie. So I think he was happy to get his future son-in-law to watch some Star Trek with us, and yeah, I think...

Greg Botting: Sure, sure.

Eric Vero: I think it was... I really enjoyed it. As someone who has not really interacted too much with Star Trek, it felt accessible, which I think is a win for a show that's been...

Greg Botting: Yeah. Absolutely.

Eric Vero: For a franchise rather that's been going on since the Sixties. So I enjoyed my time watching it. It was very enjoyable and yeah, I really liked... Tilly's her name, right?

Greg Botting: Tilly, yeah.

Eric Vero: Yeah, yeah, I really liked her. And I liked Michael, of course, too.

Greg Botting: Yeah. I like Michael. She's just not my favorite.

Eric Vero: Of course.

Greg Botting: Besides Tilly, it's either Saru or Stamets.

Eric Vero: Yep, yep. So you also appreciate... So this is... I'm working on my third chapter right now. My first chapter was about the science fiction fandom, and so I talked to Star Trek fans who were activists for accessibility at conventions in the '80s and '90s.

Greg Botting: Hmm!

Eric Vero: And so I have a whole bunch of Star Trek scholarly books on my shelf.

Greg Botting: Nice.

Eric Vero: In the fandom and...

Greg Botting: Yeah, when I was doing my research for my undergrad paper, I saw that somebody did their doctoral thesis on... I don't remember if it was Next Generation as well, but it was definitely Deep Space Nine and Voyager. Every episode from a Black feminist lens. I was like, whoa, that's impressive.

Eric Vero: There's some really cool discussions surrounding Star Trek because of the content of what it is and its argument for the future, right?

Greg Botting: Absolutely.

Eric Vero: You know, there's so many things you can talk about, and it's really... Like, you know, this woman in her 70s who was there on the front lines of pushing for accessibility was talking to me. And she's like, "Yep, I'm getting a prosthetic leg. And they said that I can have a picture on the leg. And I know exactly what picture I'm gonna have: Nichelle Nichols as Uhura."

Greg Botting: Of course she is.

Eric Vero: Right. And I thought that was awesome and so cool.

Greg Botting: Yeah, that's actually one of the reasons I love Star Trek so much is because the possibilities are really limitless. Do I have my quibbles? Sure. Are there a couple of episodes I refuse to watch? Sure. Am I going to watch them with my girlfriend anyway? Yes.

Eric Vero: Absolutely. So I want to be mindful of time. Don't know what...

Greg Botting: Absolutely, no, no, it's fine.

Eric Vero: I want to be mindful of your time commitments too. I'm good for a while. But there's one more broader question that I have and then we can wrap up. So very broadly, this might be another tough question because it's so broad. But what are the challenges that your fandoms, whichever fandom you've talked about so far, what kind of challenges does your fandom face in the present?

Greg Botting: Well, Star Trek is, of course, very divisive among the fan base, particularly with the new content, as is Star Wars. Partially, I'm trying to stay above all that. I certainly have my opinions, particularly on Star Wars and Star Trek. I mostly embrace the new Star Trek. Really despise the new Star Wars. The other fandoms? Either I haven't seen a lot of controversy, partially because I don't care, and/or they're just old arguments that get bandied about. Harry Potter, there's a lot of discussion about J.K. Rowling being close-minded. I use the polite term.

Eric Vero: Sure.

Greg Botting: I can separate the books from the author. Even though I'm a huge believer in, from an English major perspective, authorial intent.

Eric Vero: Mmm.

Greg Botting: But I can separate those books from the author because they tell a larger story.

Eric Vero: Sure. Yeah.

Greg Botting: Sure, I've got my quibbles with Harry Potter. Yes, I'm the crazy one who has lined up all the dates so that it all makes sense and tried to make sense of some of the inconsistencies in the canon and plots and things. But I think with Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings too, because they were so integral to my childhood, I can enjoy them without the need to critique them. Now, like I said, I did a paper on Tolkien. It was a 15-pager and I loved it to death. That was my final capstone in undergrad and I loved it. But there's so much

richness to be had with Lord of the Rings and pretty much all of these fandoms and subgroups that we like and enjoy. But especially with Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter, I can enjoy them without the need to critique. And the same for Star Wars and Star Trek. I just think that Star Wars and Star Trek have been a little more visibly divisive of late.

Eric Vero: Do you see any intersections with, you know, different social things, political things, cultural things, I think?

Greg Botting: Yes.

Eric Vero: You want to talk a bit about that?

Greg Botting: Absolutely. So Star Trek is, you know, trying to be inclusive. As is Star Wars to an extent. I don't know if you remember *The Rise of Skywalker*, but they had a very, very clear lesbian relationship in there, which I thought was fantastic. But they're getting a lot of pushback. In both cases. I think particularly with Star Trek, because that's the one I know most about, the people who are pushing back don't realize how progressive Star Trek has always been. And so they honestly miss the point to some extent. Criticism is all well and good, but criticism without context is nothing but arguing, in my opinion.

Now, with Lord of the Rings, I know there was some pushback because, particularly with the Rings of Power series, they had some POC (people of color) in the cast. And I have no problem with that myself. Because despite the fact that Tolkien was racist, it doesn't mean that the fandom needs to stick to those narrowly defined classifications. In fact, you know, there's a lot of, I would say, debate within the community over what Tolkien meant by the Dark Elves who show up specifically in *The Silmarillion*. And for me, I never took them as dark-skinned. But I have no trouble and no problem believing that there are black elves out there.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Greg Botting: And to be honest with you, this is a whole other discussion, but in some ways I find it much easier to believe in the religions of Tolkien and particularly the religion present in DS9 with the Bajoran Prophets than traditional Earth religions.

Eric Vero: Yeah, I think there's a reason why you see what comes across my feed on Instagram are all of these Tolkien fans who are explaining lore and these things rack up so many views. I think what Tolkien did, and I can't speak to the Star Trek lore as much because I'm not part of that fandom...

Greg Botting: Sure.

Eric Vero: But like you, I was huge into Lord of the Rings as a kid. You know, parts of my brain will remember stuff like that forever.

Greg Botting: Oh, absolutely.

Eric Vero: Yeah. And there's something to be said about that spirituality which really appeals to... There's a reason why people keep coming back to it, I think.

Greg Botting: Absolutely, and Tolkien particularly did so much world-building. Just so much to explore.

Eric Vero: Yeah.

Greg Botting: Hell, my family, when I was a kid, we did a Lord of the Rings Christmas one year.

Eric Vero: Oh no, that's so cool! Please tell me more about that.

Greg Botting: We did a kind of a diorama of different places in Middle Earth. In the entryway, we renamed all the foods after stuff in Lord of the Rings. Like, I'm not kidding you, we had Barad-dûr Coffee and Mount Doom Hot Cocoa.

Eric Vero: That's...

Greg Botting: Grapes wrapped in cheese became Shelob's Lunch.

Eric Vero: Very good.

Greg Botting: Yeah, we did a whole bunch of stuff.

Eric Vero: That's super cool. That's super, super cool. So I think you've answered very well the questions that I've had. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Greg Botting: Not for the record, but if you just want to reach out to me personally, just on a personal level, if you have any other questions about, you know, fandoms and any of all we've discussed, please feel free. I will talk your ear off like I said. And if you've got any colleagues who you think could benefit from talking to me academically or just out of personal interest, please send them my way.

Eric Vero: I will absolutely do that. This has been a true pleasure, Greg.

Greg Botting: Absolutely. It's been a true pleasure for me too. Thank you so very much.

Eric Vero: Yeah. Thank you. And that's everything from me. I'll send you appreciation material...

Greg Botting: No problem.

Eric Vero: ...within the next little bit, before the day ends, and it just goes over like how to contact me and whatnot.

Greg Botting: Absolutely. All right. Thank you so much.

Eric Vero: Great. Thank you.

Greg Botting: Thank you. Have a lovely day.

Eric Vero: Yes, you too. Bye.

Greg Botting: Bye-bye.

Eric Vero and Meagan Gillmore – May 6, 2024

Eric: Hello.

Meagan: Hi, Eric, how are you?

Eric: I'm good. How are you?

Meagan: Doing OK.

Eric: That's great. Well, thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. I'm on my last chapter, which is very exciting.

Meagan: Oh, that is very exciting for you.

Eric: Very briefly, I'm doing, as I mentioned, disability history of fandom. Because, you know, reading a lot of critical disability stuff and being disabled myself, I've seen that there's not enough discussion about that. So I'm going to do my dissertation on that. I think that's a really good idea. What I found is very interesting. The past three fandoms I've looked at, but I think it's time now to look at the sport fandom and talk to people who are interested in sports generally. That's where I came upon your research and your journalism. I was reading what was going on in Ontario, some of the disability journalism going on in Ontario. Of course, your stuff popped up. I noticed that you're a Jays fan. I would love to talk a bit about that. Do you have any questions so far?

Meagan: Not really.

Eric: OK, sounds good. I just have some brief questions about consent before we begin.

Meagan: Yes. Sure.

Eric: My script is: I would just like to briefly ask you some questions relating to the study. My name is Eric Vero. Today is May 6th, 2024. The very first question is: what is your name?

Meagan: Right. So Meagan Gillmore, MEAGAN.

Eric: Perfect.

Meagan: Then GILMORE.

Eric: Excellent. Have you had a chance to read the recruitment letter that I sent?

Meagan: Yes. Yep.

Eric: Excellent. Do you have any questions about that?

Meagan: No, I don't have to sign anything? OK.

Eric: Nope. We're going to do a verbal consent. That's fine with my ethics board. As a reminder, participation in this is completely voluntary and you may withdraw your consent by advising me of your decision at any

time. If you have any questions for the research ethics board, contact information for the office of research ethics is listed on the information letter. For all other questions about the study, you may contact me at cavero@uwaterloo.ca. You definitely have my e-mail. The second question is, do you consent to participating in the interview?

Meagan: Yes.

Eric: Do you give permission for your interviews to be video or audio recorded?

Meagan: Yes. Is the video going to be used? Because I'm assuming you're just doing this for transcription purposes?

Eric: It's completely for transcription purposes.

Meagan: Yeah.

Eric: Do you agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this research, with the understanding that you may be referenced generally by your area of expertise or experience?

Meagan: Yup.

Eric: Do you agree to the following: I agree to the use of attributed quotations in any paper or publication resulting from this research, with the understanding that I will have the opportunity to review the quotations and how I will be attributed prior to publication.

Meagan: Yes.

Eric: Once I'm done with this chapter and it's gone through revisions with my co-supervisors, I will circulate my final draft to all of my participants and they will get the final say about their attributions and their quotations. Down the road, you might think, "hey, I know I said it this way, but really, I mean it more like this." You will get a chance to look over what I've written and give the OK for that.

Meagan: Yeah.

Eric: I feel like you know most of this stuff.

Meagan: Yeah. There's things you guys do that we don't do.

Eric: That's great. If you would like, I've got my six very open-ended questions. We can jump right into those. You don't have to talk about anything you're not comfortable with. We can skip any questions and feel free to talk about whatever you would like. This next hour is completely yours. I view oral history as a collaborative process, not so much me studying someone else's lived experiences, but a chance for me to co-write and collaborate with the people that I'm interviewing. This is very much your time, more so than mine, I would say.

Meagan: OK, I just have a quick question because I forget, are you still in Ontario?

Eric: Yep. I'm in Woodstock right now, actually. I commute to the University of Waterloo every so often. I'm probably going on Thursday to help run some seminars for some high school students, which should be fun. But I am based in Woodstock, so Southwestern Ontario.

Meagan: OK, cool. Yeah.

Eric: And you're in Ottawa, correct?

Meagan: Yeah. I moved here about three years ago, so I'm not from Ottawa originally.

Eric: That's good. OK, that's good to know. My very first question is a very easy one. What name would you like to be referenced by? You've given me your name, but is there a preferred name?

Meagan: Meagan is fine.

Eric: What pronouns do you prefer?

Meagan: I'm a woman, so she/her.

Eric: Perfect. Follow-up question. I don't think it will be as important for this, but I'll ask it anyway. If you would like to use a pseudonym, is there any significance you attribute to it? I've often talked with online virtual communicators.

Meagan: Oh, right. I don't have a pseudonym.

Eric: Perfect. That's good enough for me. The second question: Please speak to your experiences with disability.

Meagan: OK, so I was born with retinopathy of prematurity, ROP for short. It's a retinopathy caused by being born premature, so retinal damage. I've been legally blind from birth. That would be the medical diagnosis of it.

Eric: That's great. I've actually interviewed someone from my previous chapter with that diagnosis as well.

Meagan: Oh, really? Yeah, there's not always a ton of us because it's very specific. I think we have the best of the visual impairments, but I'm a little biased.

Eric: Of course, I got that completely. I'm the same way with my diagnoses and stuff like that. Could you speak to some of the institutional barriers that are part of your experience?

Meagan: Just in general?

Eric: However you would like to approach that question.

Meagan: If you read the Walrus piece, the most recent one I did, that might have hinted at it. Another Walrus piece I wrote a few years ago was really in honor of the late children's author Gene Little, who was my favorite children's author. It talks about this more like my parents really raised me no different from my siblings. Even still, as an adult, when people talk about the barriers you face, I just wasn't trained to even think about my

disability that way. So institutional barriers, like obviously, I'm legally blind. I'm always legally blind. It doesn't matter where I go. When people ask what you can and can't see, which are actually [indiscernible] questions to answer, like street signs, I can't see them. I can't see people's facial expressions. Distance things can be really difficult. That can be an institutional barrier depending on where you are and what print materials are there and how they're laid out. Things like that.

I don't drive. That'd be the biggest one. Access to public transit is really important to me, and I've had the privilege of living in various cities in Canada and not all of them have good public transit systems. That's a big one. I would argue tied to the lack of driving ability, at times it made it harder to get a job because I'm a journalist and a lot of journalism jobs will say that you need to have a driver's license. When I explain why I can't drive, then that's a whole other conversation. What accommodations do you need at work? I don't need a ton of accommodations, but there are still things that I need. That can be an issue for some people. It's like, "we liked your resume, we think you're a very good writer, but we've decided to go with someone else." You never know if the reason they want someone else is because this person can drive and doesn't have a disability. Those would probably be the main ones. I was up until recently a recipient of the Ontario Disability Support Program. I got a full-time job this past October, so I took wait for the probationary period and then after I made it through probation, I totaled ODSP. Now I am no longer a recipient of ODSP, but that's been in the last few months.

Eric: OK, that really echoes me too. I was on ODSP for a few years and I was on ODSP during the pandemic, which was a challenge upon a challenge upon a challenge. The reason why I took myself off ODSP was because it was becoming really difficult because I was cohabiting with my fiancée. We wanted to joint file for tax purposes, right? We got lawyers involved. It was a whole thing and they wanted to see personal documents relating to her family and we were just like, "absolutely not." This is such an overreach of this program.

Meagan: Yeah, that's something I talked to my boss about in terms of us writing about that, reporting on it. If we ever do, I will keep you in mind.

Eric: Absolutely.

Meagan: I don't think people realize that because I'm pretty outspoken about the fact that I think the way social systems programs are structured is that they disincentivize work for people. But I don't think people also realize they actually disincentivize marriage and the creation of families. And, it's actually a problem for society in general that people can't form family units, because of this.

Eric: Yeah, I completely agree. I've got my really nice little family with me, my fiancée, and our extended families. It was a huge pressure on us to figure out the ODSP situation until I finally said, "I'm done with this." I know it's nice to have income support, and I'm on a lot of medication too. I said, "Put me on your benefits," and that's what we agreed to. Now I haven't looked back, and I feel much better knowing that I can work freely.

Meagan: You don't have to tell someone every month how much you earned.

Eric: It is such an invasion of privacy, and there is absolutely no sane reason to do that.

Meagan: Yeah, it's some weird stories, some questions I've been asking. I'm like, "What is this? What's going on?" But yeah, I was an ODSP recipient. I also received the disability tax credit. I've never had a problem with the DTC. Nobody has questioned it. It's all been good for me. I say that because, as a journalist, I'm looking for the stories of all the people who've had terrible DTC experiences. I have not had one of those. I still disagree with tying the Canada disability benefit to the DTC, but I've never had a negative DTC experience.

Eric: But you know what? That's a valid experience, right? Because it's not going to be uniform. Absolutely.

Actually, that really ties into my next sub-question. Could you speak further to your insight regarding ODSP? You've got the lived experience, but also you've researched it and talked to a lot of people. Could you expand on some of what you've been talking about?

Meagan: Sure. I do think it's important when talking about people's experiences with ODSP (do I have to relate this to sports fandom or can I just talk about ODSP?)

Eric: We'll get to sports fandom...

Meagan: Okay. I don't know how to do that. I'll try for you, Eric! I think it can be helpful for when researching ODSP or trying to understand people's experience is that you'll want to know how old they were when they got onto it and what that process was. For example, for me, my parents were able to receive assistance for children with severe disabilities (ACSD), financial assistance available for some families who have disabled children. When I turned 18, they transferred me off of that program, and I had to apply for ODSP, but I was already in the system. That, I think, is a different experience psychologically and in all these things from, let's say, I've spoken to people who had this experience: you're an adult with a job and a life, you get sick or have a disability of some form, you're now unable to work, and now you have to go on ODSP. Both of those experiences have some commonalities, but I think there are different ways that it might hit somebody emotionally, usually all negative ways, but just negative in different ways if that makes sense.

Eric: Yeah.

Meagan: When we talk about acquiring a disability, typically we will ask, "Was this acquired or were you born with it?" I do think that question is also very relevant when it comes to social assistance. Was this something that you were just thrown into because of a disability or disease acquired later in life? Or is this something that you were kind of thrown into because you turned 18? How dare you become an adult and then realize this is what the government thinks I'm capable of? I've written about this in that essay and other places. For me, it was like this feeling of betrayal in the sense of, "But I was taught I was just going to go to school and get a job. We were all taught to have the same expectations as everybody else." Then actually, jokes on you, right? There's this. What's difficult is: while ODSP and OW are described as the last option; you have to have exhausted all your other available options before you can qualify for this, in the functional reality of the programs, I was filling out my applications for ODSP at the same time that I was getting my acceptance letters for university because my birthday is in October. I turned 18 after I started at school for university. There's a subtle messaging of, "You don't even get the chance to look for a job. You don't get the chance for this to be your last resort. We're putting this as your first resort, as your only resort." I understand why they had to do it. The social worker who met with my mom and I talked about it was very like, "You're going to get a job, but we just have to do this because there's a reality of systemic problems." But yeah, when you're an 18-year-old kid,

you're 17-year-old kid, and we're being told that, it's just very weird. Then I earned most of my money for university working at a camp for people with disabilities, and I saw people who spent their entire life living on ODSP, and I just could not understand that because that was not at all my first experiences of people with disabilities or having a disability myself.

That is a trickier part of it. I don't know if there's been as much attention to just the mental health consequences of living on ODSP, the challenge of having to make your life fit into the narrative that you were told to make it fit into for government forms. Parents will talk about this, how they struggle to fill out funding forms for their children because they have to talk about their child's deficits all the time and the struggles and the burden. This is not how I view my kid, but to get what they need, I have to do this. It's this very weird experience. I'm not a parent, but I think that's how I felt. That's still how I feel every time I have to fill out the form and list all the terrible things about your life because of your disability. I don't know if the other participant you spoke to with ROP mentioned this as well. You only get this disability because you survived a traumatic birth experience, right? If you're going to be born premature, this is one of the best outcomes for you. I don't say it as a joke because you're looking at either you're dead or alive, right? For me, always being taught to view it that way, my parents have zero tolerance for a discussion of disability as a bad, awful thing that happened to our family. They would say it was a hard experience that we went through, but the alternative was that our daughter was dead, so we're happy, right? That's the tricky part about ODSP. Also, things like the barriers to employment. I think the jury is still out very much on if the recent changes in Ontario took away that. Most of my time on ODSP, it was after \$200, you're getting a 50% clawback.

Eric: Yeah.

Meagan: Now it's been changed that you can earn \$1000 without any clawback, but then after that, it's a 75% clawback. Personally, if they'd asked me, I would have raised the income exemption to \$1000 and kept the clawback at 50%. But obviously, I wasn't being asked. I don't think anyone has asked. It's just – none of this makes sense. It's all bizarre. There's that barrier to work. Never once did an ODSP employee help me find a job.

Eric: Hmm, interesting.

Meagan: I didn't even know how to ask about that, but I was also like not – I also had some problems with ODSP during COVID because I interpreted – remember how they were saying at the beginning that you didn't need to report your income and that your benefit levels would stay at the previous amount?

Eric: Yes.

Meagan: The months immediately preceding COVID, I had a bunch of freelance work, so I was still a freelancer full-time enough that I did not receive ODSP money. I would just get the drug benefit, but not a check. I interpreted that to mean my support is going to stay at \$0.00 because that's what it had been before.

Eric: Right.

Meagan: So, that makes sense for you too, right? For the first few months of COVID, I ended up with more freelance work because I was covering COVID, so I was like, "OK, that's fine." I used to know exactly how

this went down because it pissed me off so much. I did not report my income the first month, and then I got a check for the full ODSP amount. I was like, "This is an overpayment. I don't need this." So then I tried to fix it. By that time, I was still mailing in all my forms, and ODSP kind of pressured me into switching to the online filing. We did that, which for whatever reason I just didn't like, but I got used to it. They told me that I would have to repay this overpayment. For those who don't know, the way an overpayment works is either you pay it all off in one fell swoop, or they deduct a certain percentage of your ODSP check, and it will literally take you years to pay off any sort of overpayment. I got on the online system, a few months passed, I'm submitting my income every month, and all the ODSP offices were closed or at reduced hours for this. It was kind of like some of them were open, some of them weren't. It was all very weird. I logged on, I always tried to file before the deadline, which is the 8th, so I would always try to file in the first few days of the month. I filed, and then just something, so I was like, "I wonder if they've processed it."

A couple of weeks later, I went online, and they hadn't processed my employment things. I checked again, it still hadn't been processed. This is coming up to the end of the month. I called them, stayed on the phone, somehow got through to somebody, and was like, "Hey, you need to update my account because they're going to issue me a check for money that would be an overpayment. Then I'm going to pay you back this overpayment. You need to go on and update my account so that you don't issue me the wrong check." I left a phone message on my then case worker's manager's voicemail explaining this. I did all the things, and I did more than all the things, and I still got an overpayment. So I had to pay off two full months of overpayment because I would have been exempt that month as well because of the income I earned, which really isn't a lot of income, but you somehow think it's a lot of income because I've out-earned ODSP. It's so weird.

Then I had these massive overpayments that I was paying off for more than a year before, for whatever reason, they just canceled them. I remember crying because then I got a new ODSP worker who had the best accent ever. He had such a great accent, loved his accent. He was kind and everything, but I remember explaining to him my situation. I was like, "Hey, whatever, the first overpayment, miscommunication, I still think I'm right and you're wrong." I even tried to get a lawyer to review my case because I was like, "I'm only doing this because I'm a journalist, and because I know that there are people on this program who, for a lot of reasons, are having problems with it, and they're not able to call in and complain, so I am complaining on their behalf. You need to do something with this." But then some lawyers wouldn't take it because of how I... Anyway, that whole thing. But there was a second one that I was like, "No, you're clearly in the wrong because I submitted my stuff, and then I reminded you to process the paperwork. You had three weeks to process the paperwork. You didn't." Jokes on you, I should be able to keep this money without any overpayment. ODSP did not agree with me. I was explaining this to my worker in tears. I just spontaneously started crying because it made me so upset. He said to me something that was essentially like, "Well, we weren't thinking about people like you. We weren't thinking about people who use ODSP and also have jobs at work." It was like, "OK, you do understand there's a lot of people in this program who also work." For me, that's always like, I've always felt like I never fit in with the disability group. Then when you hear the people who are administering this program saying, "Well, this actually wasn't for people like you," I'm like, "What does that even mean? I'm a recipient like everyone else."

Eric: I understand that frustration having gone through that system. If I didn't know any better, this whole system would incentivize... What they say is that they want you to temporarily use ODSP, get a job, and then eventually get off of it. They want to put you back into the workforce so that you're not disabled anymore. You

see this in other welfare states. Historically, this was the case in the States too, where they want to make productive workers out of temporarily disabled people. Shouldn't it be a good thing that you're also working while being on this system?

Meagan: Yeah, it's so weird. I remember what he said to me. He was like, "You know, it was early days in the pandemic, people were struggling to do their jobs." I turned and said, "Well, I did my job." He didn't say anything. I'm like, "Yeah, because I'm right, you were wrong. You're just seriously BSing your way through this conversation. It's obvious this person submitted their income before they were required to try to call you to rectify your mistake." For people who don't know the system, it's not like you have a direct line of contact with your caseworker. You have no idea how to reach them. It's not like these people know you.

I always find it interesting as a journalist because there'll be some people who have concerns about social assistance programs, in some cases very serious concerns that I wish would be more public. They'll say, "I have a story for you, here's my concern." You're like, "OK, this is the concern." Then you call them back a day later, "Do you want to do an interview?" "Oh, no, I don't want anything published about it. I'm scared if I put my name out there, this provincial social assistance program will cut off my benefits." I always find it tricky, Eric, because, on one hand, I get your fear, and on the other hand, what I want to say is, "I don't want to burst your bubble here, but actually the person who administers this program has no idea who on Earth you are. They do not care about you, and I don't think they care about you enough to cut your benefits. They don't know you. You are a case file. There is no personal connection here." Which is why I wish people would speak out about it more because I'm not convinced that you would get your benefits cut because I'm not convinced that they even know who's technically on the case file. Like, right? It's just really frustrating as a reporter. So, that was a whole thing. I never applied for CERB because I intuitively knew there was going to be some ODSP kerfuffle. I was like, "I'm going to spare myself this pain." So I never did it, and I'm glad I didn't.

Eric: Yeah.

Meagan: That was my voluntary choice to think, "I'm opting out of this program because I know it's going to be a headache, and it's not going to be worth it at the end of the day. I'm fine, I don't need the money." I wish people understood it disincentivizes marriage and family. By its nature, it will make somebody more isolated if that's all they have. Then there's all the questions about... For me, because I got onto the program when I was 18, I don't have to worry about this. But there are people who become severely disabled later in life and are unable to work, but they've had "productive working lives" and have assets and had to get rid of all their assets so they could go on a poverty ground. It's the dumbest thing. I've told people as a reporter, "I know people have their different political views on social assistance or whatever. Before you have your opinion, you just need to know the facts of how these programs work and how they don't work." Yes, I've met people who are like the stereotypical lazy person who is just milking the government. I've heard people say that in front of me, "Oh yeah, I'm going to try to go on ODSP because I think it's like some wonderful cash cow that's going to –" I don't know where you live, but in reality, sometimes jobs suck. Everyone knows this. But trust me, your job doesn't suck that bad. Just trust us on this. Then I've also heard parents saying, "Oh yeah, oh, our kids, they're not going to worry about going to school or getting a job because they just have ODSP when they're an adult." I'm like, "I don't know who you talked to, but this is not a sustainable plan for your child's future."

Eric: Whenever I was isolated in my apartment, I felt guilty for having ODSP and having that income support. My friends never made me feel guilty; they've always been really good. But I see them going on with their lives, having careers, and I'm stuck at home. I feel so guilty. I have to remind myself that I'm not milking the government because it would be easier to just go out and get a job rather than deal with this. The process to put my application together and the stress and the waiting and all of that was harder than just going out. The reason why I'm doing this is because I need time to treat my disability, and I need time off to do that. There needs to be a pressure valve in society that allows people to do that safely and equitably.

Meagan: Yep, yep. You can make a big argument that the way it's set up right now is it's not safe and it's not equitable. I wish the program was designed in a way that actually lives up to what it says it is, which is just a temporary thing to help those who can find employment get employment. Those people that I worked with when I was a university student, yes, some of them I think could have, if given the right supports, been working. I'm sorry, being blind is not... A lot of them were blind, and that does not keep you from getting a job. It just might change what type of job you might have to get. But there's a lot of people I worked with who had complex medical needs, complex cognitive or developmental disabilities, would not be able to have a nine-to-five full-time job the way we conceive of it, often very active in other ways in their communities. Those are the people that I want this money to be going to. I want them to be getting more money. I want their families to be supported, not me. I think that's the difficult thing of it all being they're all lumped and treated the same way in these programs, even though people have vastly different needs depending on their diagnosis and where they live, and all these different things. It's really challenging. It's probably one of the most isolating things. If you really ask me, like, make a list of what are the top five things in your life that you would have wanted changed, being on ODSP for most of my adult life is one of them.

Eric: Yeah.

Meagan: Which is probably why I talk about it more publicly now because I think I have a job that affords me the ability to do that, and I know there's a lot of people in similar situations who would like to say all these things.

Eric: Yeah, well, I really appreciate this because it's very cathartic for me on a personal level to talk to someone who's been through the system, but also just like from my perspective, writing my final chapter, just talking in the Ontario context. I haven't done the Ontario context quite yet. I've done the American context, Spanish context, but throughout all of what we're talking about, there's common themes underscoring all of this. I've also talked to two other journalists, the video game journalists, and we've talked about these things. So it's interesting to see in different contexts how these things operate on a global scale, which is really interesting. I'm looking forward to doing some ODSP history, writing that, so that should be...

Meagan: Yeah, if you need contacts. I know people who were actually part of it, part of the history of it.

Eric: Oh, that actually... I might shoot you an e-mail later and ask for more details about that because that would be really excellent.

So I guess this could be a long question, but I'm very curious. Just the final question about ODSP, then we can move on to some, I think, more fun topics. If you were in charge of ODSP policy today, what might some things be that you would do to change it so that it could be more equitable and more fair?

Meagan: Yeah, I do think we need to revisit the clawbacks on employment. This is going to be a controversial take that's going to get me canceled. I don't think clawbacks in and of themselves are necessarily wrong.

Eric: OK. Yeah, I think that's a nuanced take.

Meagan: Because ideally, we do want people to be working not because of money, but because of the social benefits, because of how that benefits somebody's mental health because they're out in the community with other people. I'm very critical of the move to, like, "Oh, we'll make disability employment mean all the disabled people start their own businesses and they work from home." OK, maybe that's good for some people, but no, what you want is people in a job, in a workforce, with colleagues who aren't disabled. That's actually how you foster inclusion.

Eric: Yeah, I agree.

Meagan: Maybe some people are just more entrepreneurial than me, but I'm just like, no, actually, that's what we need. So I do think you need to form a clawback because there are going to be some people who will abuse the system and will be like, "No, I can work, and I could work, but I'm not going to because I have this thing that you think is a lot." I was 17 when I was doing the applications for ODSP. At that time, your liquid asset limit was \$5000. When you're seventeen, \$5000 sounds like a lot of money, and then it's part of your mother's job and the job of the social worker to be trying to explain to you, \$5000 is not a lot of money. Do not think that this is good. Think further, and we're like, "Oh, they're going to give me like 800 bucks a month. That's a lot of money." No, it's not. Obviously, it's more now, but yeah. So I was on ODSP before I got \$1000 a month. I remember those days. So I think we do need to address the clawbacks and pair clawing back with employment supports. If you're going to claw somebody back for working, I think you need to also be helping them find work. Those two things need to go together. I never really checked in to see how much was covered with benefits with ODSP. That's weird too. You never really know what is covered in my health coverage. Maybe you do. I don't know how much counseling or mental health supports are covered. But if you're going to put somebody in a system that is going to detrimentally impact their mental health, you should give them some free counseling to go with it.

Eric: I agree. So under ODSP, all of my medication was covered, and I've been on it. It's all a blur, I guess. That was part of the problem with some of the medication I was on. But I was on up to five or six different medications. I know ODSP covered all of it, which I was very surprised because I was on a drug that still hasn't gone generic.

Meagan: Oh wow, that's great.

Eric: Yeah, so ODSP covered it, and that was great. But I remember asking about coverage for counseling, and I remember it not being very much. I don't remember off the top of my head, and this was years ago too. It could have changed, although maybe it probably hasn't changed. When I was doing counseling, I was going to somewhere where they would subsidize the counseling for like six sessions kind of thing, right? This wasn't ODSP. This was the counseling office, the practice doing it.

Meagan: Oh wow.

Eric: But you could only get six sessions, and then you'd be cut off, right?

Meagan: Yeah, and it really takes... I just started counseling recently, and I know they say it takes probably the first three or four sessions for us to figure out what we're going to be working on and that type of thing. So yeah, I do wish that there was more for that. Obviously, we need transparent communication with workers, like caseworkers. It used to... I've moved a lot as an adult. I don't know if they've changed it since then, but for a while, I had like three different files because they were all in different offices depending on where I had lived. I was like, "How is this?" But I had the same person. Can you not just...

I grew up in Brantford, ON, so I know Woodstock because my family's in London. Woodstock was a meeting place. The Tim Horton's, the Tim Horton's, off the highway by the hotel. That one. So I had the file with the Brantford office. Then I moved to Hamilton, so I had an office there. I had a file there, but then I got my first job in Whitehorse, YT, which meant I had to go off of ODSP because I was out of the province. One of the things that actually made me want to go out of province was I knew I needed a break from ODSP. So then I was up there for a year. It didn't work out the way I thought it would, and I moved to Toronto. It was very sad for me because I never wanted to live in Toronto.

Eric: It's Toronto.

Meagan: Yeah, right? You got it. Southwestern Ontario. We don't go there. We go there for a baseball game or to see a museum, and then we leave. We thank God that we don't live in Toronto. But then I moved to Toronto. I had to go back on ODSP. I'm very thankful for the rapid reinstatement program that if you've been off for two years or less, you can get back on. Really, if I was in charge, I'd probably extend that amount of time. I wouldn't make it longer than five years probably, but five years would be my cutoff. It seems more consistent with other government programs. So then I'm trying to get with Ontario, with Toronto, and it was the weirdest process. I think that might have been the time. Is it then? Or when I was moving to Hamilton? Or it might have been Toronto. The caseworker wanted my social insurance number. She was like, "You can call and leave a message on my voicemail with your social insurance number."

Eric: Oh no.

Meagan: I was like, "OK, I'm not the smartest kid out there, and I was only like 24. This seems weird to me." I really don't feel comfortable leaving my social insurance number on someone's voicemail. She was like, "Well, that's the best way that we can find you in the system." I was like, "How messed up is your data system... What?" Can't you just type in my name? "Oh no, because you have like three different files." Well, you know, Brantford and Hamilton are geographically very close to each other. Honestly, somebody could have popped in a car, driven half an hour, and dropped off a paper file. I get you can't do that all the time, but it's just weird. It's things like that. None of this makes any sense whatsoever.

I know a lot of people have concerns about the attestation that you have to say that you have not been out of the province for longer than 30 days. I understand those concerns, but I'm not a constitutional lawyer. In my reading of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, that is allowed. There is an exemption on mobility rights if it is to receive social assistance.

Eric: OK.

Meagan: Isn't that wild? It's in the Charter. No one talks about that. I remember learning that a few years ago as a reporter and having this moment of, "Wait, so disabled people have different Charter rights?"

Eric: When my doctor gave me my diagnosis, there was no pamphlet going over the things I should worry about, like that, you know?

Meagan: Yeah, that's another thing I'll tell people too. There is nobody who comes up to your door with a binder that says, "This is your introduction to disability supports in your province, A-Z." I write a lot about medical assistance in dying, and I would tell people it is a fact, it's just an empirical fact, that it is easier to get MAID, it is easier to get information about it, than it is to get information about any disability program.

Eric: Yeah, and I think that illustrates that issue very effectively.

Meagan: Yeah, it's just like I'm working on a piece this week about somebody who was considering MAID and is no longer, thankfully, because they got some supports that they needed. Part of it is like, how do we explain as a reporter, "Yeah, call this phone number. There's a phone number issued by the government to help you get this. But good luck trying to get through to anyone who's going to give you support to live your life. Good luck with that." Unfortunately, that's the example I have to use now as a reporter when I'm explaining how messed up it is to access disability support services, to compare it to ending your life. It stinks, but I'm like, I don't know what else to do. I don't know what other comparison I'm supposed to give you. I can pull up that information for you pretty quickly. It's a lot harder for me to pull up the information for you on how to get disability supports.

Eric: I knew that taking on this topic for my dissertation would be very cathartic. For so many reasons I did it, but I knew that there would be those points when we start to talk about the history or the current state of disability that you end up in that heaviness, right? To say that it's a bummer is quite an understatement.

Meagan: Yeah, it's one of those things that I've reported on MAID since 2020 when they first introduced legislation to expand it. I've done this for four years, and so every time I have to say it's actually easier to get that than to get disability support, there's part of me that's like, "That sentence is nonsensical." Well, actually, yes. I don't even know what to say. That's what it is. It's a problem, particularly for people who were born with their disability. It's not like it was a surprise that I turned 18 and got on ODSP. For people who this wasn't a sudden random thing, we knew. Can there not be better information in advance? Parents who have kids who are being discharged from pediatric hospitals and then will join adult healthcare – I have a lot of thoughts about the transition planning. I spoke to a mother couple years ago who accidentally thought she was filling out an application for ODSP, but she was filling out an application for ODP, the Ontario Developmental Services program, for people with developmental disabilities, and had to redo the entire application.

Eric: Wow.

Meagan: Right? Yeah, that sucks for you.

Eric: If things were just clearer and information was more accessible, that just wouldn't really happen.

Meagan: Yeah, it's really weird.

Eric: OK, thank you.

Meagan: Welcome to catharsis.

Eric: Yes. So let's talk about sports fandom, taking quite a pivot. You mentioned you're a Jays fan, but are there any other fandoms you belong to?

Meagan: For sports, that's probably my most consistent team that I follow. I'm the daughter of a Toronto Maple Leafs fan.

Eric: My condolences.

Meagan: Yeah, right to him, I guess. I did watch overtime on Saturday. I kind of feel like because they get to game seven, I guess I have to watch this. Baseball is the one that I will personally willingly organize my social schedule around the Blue Jays schedule. At times, other ones, it's more like I go to a Super Bowl party every year because my friends are there, and I like the food, and it's fun.

Eric: Sure, yeah. Why do people do that, right?

Meagan: I also didn't know who Travis Kelce was until he dated Taylor Swift, even though I'd been to a Super Bowl party last year where both he and his brother were in it. I was like, "Oh," and did not clue in for months that it was the same person. Ottawa does have a professional women's hockey league team. We sadly missed the playoffs this weekend. I have a jersey. I went to a game, bought myself a jersey because I never had a real sports jersey before, and I was like, "I'm not going to buy one for the boys' team if I can buy one for the girls' team." That's probably the main ones. I always say every year that I'm going to become a Raptors fan, and I just haven't because basketball season starts when baseball is winding down, and by that point, I'm probably too sad to even consider becoming a fan of another Toronto sports team that's just going to crush me like they all do. I really do want someone to do a psychological study about Toronto sports fans, long-term ones.

Eric: In fan studies that I'm a part of as a historian, the discipline has very much overlooked sports fandoms. There's going to be a book that comes out that takes a Toronto perspective, the different teams and the fans, because it is such a unique, singular experience growing up in Ontario and talking to all these Leafs fans who are like, "Oh, well, they're up two points in the second period, and they're basically expected to go under by the end of the third period." This is just a matter of course. I'm like, "I don't get this."

Meagan: I do want to know. I want to know if there is to be a specific clinical diagnosis for Toronto sports fans because they're so invested. They get hurt every time. God love them. People who are fans of multiple Toronto teams at one time, I personally, I've also just like, I have a life, you know, I have things I need to do. But also, that's a lot to take on.

Eric: It is, for sure.

Meagan: This might come up, too. I'm from Brantford, grew up in the same neighborhood as Wayne Gretzky. I hate Alexander Ovechkin. It's the fact that I would be OK with somebody breaking the goal record if they were Canadian. He's Russian. I just don't like it. I know that sounds really xenophobic, OK, like it could be really problematic. Do you know how little my hometown is? I understand that the points record is different

from the goals record and that the points record is safe, blah, blah, blah. But yeah, I have a soft spot for the Edmonton Oilers because Edmonton is the only city in this country that knows that Brantford is different from Brampton or Bradford.

Eric: Very big differences, yes.

Meagan: It just makes me feel like, OK, you know that I'm from a specific place. Could you speak to any memories you may have attending sport events or watching sports with family, friends, anything like that?

Meagan: I'm 35, born in 1988. I would have been 13 during the 2002 Olympics. I remember us after church crowding our basement for the men's gold medal hockey game.

Eric: Yeah, I remember too.

Meagan: Yeah, good times. I feel sad for people who didn't experience it. There was just something very innocent about that one. We beat America, and it was in America. There was the lucky loonie in the ice. I think the ice maker was from Brantford, and that was really cool for us, okay? There was a Zamboni that did a tour across the city. I understand that Gretzky was the GM. Did we care about him? No. We cared about the ice maker, the Zamboni: priorities. Everyone was honking their horn, and we're driving to church for the evening service. Our youth pastor was just about to make the announcements, and he was like, "First off, we won, everyone!" That was fun.

When I was in university, I used to watch the World Juniors final hockey game because people get together, but then we kept losing. So I was like, "I guess I won't watch World Juniors hockey anymore because then we just lose." I never knew who any of the players were, obviously, because I'm not following the OHL. People talk to them, so they know them. I'm like, "Really? You know that 16-year-old kid?" No, you don't. I do not remember my first Blue Jays game. Someone asked me this recently. I guess I was probably in high school or late elementary school. I don't remember. I've been to many. It's the only time of the year I miss living in Toronto because now I'm lucky if I do one or two games a year, and I used to do like 10.

It actually kind of does connect with my disability. My dad was a volleyball coach, just volunteer stuff, and he coached the volleyball team for my elementary school. I went to a small, privately funded Protestant Christian school, so did not receive any government funding, distinguished from Catholic schools. By grades, I'm the youngest, and both my brother and sister played sports and were fairly competent at it. For reasons likely related to my eyeballs, I did not. I famously got demoted on my first day of skating lessons. Apparently, there was a level below beginner, and I started out at the beginner level and ended the lesson in the under-beginner level. My sister was on the other end; she was older than me too. She was like, "I am like a dancing elephant or something." Her group was the elephants. I was like, "You know, like a robin or ball hog." Swimming lessons, first kid in the pool, last kid out of the pool, only kid that didn't learn how to swim at the Y. Because I didn't understand, I couldn't see it well enough. So I had to do private swimming lessons in high school because my parents were like, "Our child is growing up in Ontario and doesn't know how to swim. This is a safety issue." I never learned how to ride a bike because I couldn't pedal forwards. Anyways, sports were not a natural thing that I had an aptitude for.

When I was seven, my parents moved us to a city, and we lived in the same neighborhood as one of Canada's most famous athletes. They say they grew up in Brantford. Thanks, Wayne, appreciate this. Rub it in my face. We're talking grade seven, really small school, sports were a big part of it, which I think is probably standard for a small Southern Ontario city. The teachers decided that because it was unfair to ask me to try out for the teams because I'm obviously not going to make it, I can't physically do it, I was the designated manager, like equipment manager. So I still got to be on the teams and go to the tournaments. I got a special award in grade eight for that. You can kind of think of it like the late Joey Moss kind of idea.

Eric: Sure.

Meagan: He died on my birthday. It was really sad.

Eric: Oh, really?

Meagan: Yeah, bummer. I met people who are sports fans, like real sports fans more than me, who were like, "I never heard about this guy until he died." Where have you been? Grade seven, we're at a volleyball tournament, and we're watching. We weren't playing, we're just watching the team match because one of the teams that was playing was the team we were going to play next. My dad wanted to watch them, just study their strategy. I'm sitting there with a clipboard, and he wanted me to take stats, like where, when we served the ball, where the ball landed. Sure, OK. This mattered to him. He has a degree in sports administration, so he likes stats. I'm sitting on the side with my friends, and a girl who was playing spiked the ball. It went out of bounds and hit me in the head. My glasses fell down. If this had happened to you, likely nothing would have happened to you. But because of the force of the ball and the fact that I had eye surgery on my retinas when I was a baby, it hit me on the left side. That's my best eye. My right eye is almost completely blind. Almost all my sight is in my left eye. My eye started bleeding internally. It burst the scar tissue on my retina. It hit it and then tore apart and started bleeding internally. Nobody could see it. Everything went blurry. First time in my life where everything went super blurry. If you talk about people who've had retinal bleeding and stuff, it's like a spider that you see in your line of vision. Really bad. We survived the rest of the day. We go home, tell my mom. I don't know if she knew earlier in the day this happened because she was working. She freaks out, "Why did you not tell me that this had happened to my kid?" My parents were still married. They got over that, I guess, or got through it. Because of that, I was prohibited from playing any sports with flying projectiles.

Eric: Right.

Meagan: I volunteer at my church youth group on Friday nights. I don't play dodgeball with the kids. I never do water tubing or water skiing, not because I'm a terrible swimmer, but because of the potential jarring. If something happens. My disability is very connected with my involvement in sports because it's why I can't do at least most of them. I always say I'm going to take skating lessons and swimming lessons again because my nephews and niece are better than me, and that's embarrassing. All those things. In some ways, that's hard, but in some ways, it makes it easier because I'm a journalist, and I was always good at writing, and I always knew I was better at it than other people. When I watch a baseball game, I can just enjoy the fact that that person is doing something that they're really, really good at, and I have no desire to be them, and I know I can't do it. Whereas when I read a book, I'm like, "Oh yeah, that's really good how you did that." I'm deconstructing it, reverse engineering it, or I'm jealous of you because how dare you write a book, and I mean to, and I haven't.

Whereas with sports, I don't have that because I'm like, "I can't do it. It's just not a thing." In some ways, it makes it easier to enjoy it because I have no... I mean, I might be irritated that you're making a bazillion dollars for what I... I might be irritated because you haven't lived in my hometown in decades, and I'm still telling people that I don't know you. You know, you never... We are not friends.

Eric: Yeah, from what you know.

Meagan: I mean, if he wants to... I mean, I'd go to a party if he invited me to it, I guess. If there were women there. But no, I don't know you. It makes it easier to enjoy in some ways because it's just like, "Oh, this is a fun thing." My dad really liked baseball and wanted something to connect with my dad about. You know, like the classic story, "I feel like my father didn't spend enough time with me. Let's watch sports."

Eric: Of course.

Meagan: If he was on this call, he would tell you how he was offered a job with the Toronto Blue Jays head office their first summer of existence because he was in school. He was offered a summer co-op, and he turned them down because he already had a summer job lined up at Zeller's to work in the Zeller garden center. He turned the Blue Jays down to sell plants. Then Christie Blatchford wrote an article about how everyone hated working in the Blue Jays front office and was quitting, so he dodged a bullet. I watched occasionally.

In the summer of 2009, the Great Recession, going into my third year, no, going into my fourth year of university, I didn't want to go back to my summer camp job because the year before had been terrible for a variety of reasons. So I was like, "I'm going to stay home, and I'm going to find a job in Brantford." I had maybe a dozen job interviews, at least eight. I forget now. I used to remember this. I kept getting rejected, and for the first time in my life, I was like, "I swear, they're just rejecting me because of my disability." I didn't know what to do. So I soothed myself by watching reruns of *The OC* because it was on CHCH every afternoon at 12, and I was home a lot. So I just followed the Blue Jays a lot, a lot, a lot. They were... I remember that year they started off that season really well. They were above 500, like way above it. I didn't know it at the time, but that was Roy Halladay's last season with the Jays. I scheduled my social calendar around Doc's pitching schedule because why wouldn't you? It was like, genius. I knew who he was because I'd gone to the games. We all knew who Halladay was. My dad loved the story. He loved telling the story of Doc's career and how he... That game, his first start in Toronto when he ran a no-hitter until the bottom of the ninth. My dad was there with my brother. He always likes to tell that story and make it sound like his presence is what led Roy Halladay to take a no-hitter into the bottom of the ninth.

But yeah, I just went hard and fast and scheduled my life around Roy Halladay's pitching schedule. Then when he got injured and had to go on the disabled list, which I didn't know what that meant, I just heard "disabled list," and I was like, "Well, he's not going to play baseball again." My dad's like, "What do you mean?" I'm like, "Well, he's on the disabled list. He's disabled now." He's like, "The disabled list for baseball is not disabled like you. Those aren't the same things." I'm like, "Oh, okay." That's when I actually learned how to understand what the scoreboard was. Like a lot of kids, I would have grown up listening to baseball on the radio, Tom and Jerry. Then my parents decided that since most of their kids had moved out, they could suddenly afford cable. So then we got to watch it on TV. Then I was mad because the TV announcers wouldn't tell me what was going on. I'm like, "I can't see this. You're supposed to tell me." My dad's like, "That's

because it's on TV." I'm like, "Oh, right. Other people can see this." That's how I learned. Because I had nothing to do that summer, the Jays weren't bad until they didn't make the playoffs like they never did. Then Doc got traded. But yeah.

Roy Halladay was, still is, I guess, my favorite Blue Jay of all time. RIP. Never cried harder the night he died. I didn't know you could cry so hard for somebody you didn't know. Never cried harder for somebody I didn't know.

Eric: No, it's true. In fandom, it's so common to really attach yourself to... For me, the biggest thing I shed tears over in my fandom is Jon Snow in Game of Thrones. Watching him get murdered was really tough for me, and that's not a real person, but you know.

Meagan: Yeah. So that was when it really became my thing. I got to be in Toronto. I was living in Toronto during the playoff runs of 2015 and 2016. So much fun. I remember where I was for the bat flip. Bautista's bat flip, game five. Yes, so great. I might have shed a tear when he came back last year, and they put his name on the Blue Jays level of excellence. Definitely shed a tear when Russell Martin retired, and they did that little pregame ceremony. But yeah, that was probably it. I say this, but I would never want to be a professional athlete. Not just because I can't do it, but because I think it's a terrible life.

Eric: Yeah, it's grueling.

Meagan: It's really... And it's weird. I think part of that honestly is when I was in high school, Phyllis Gretzky died of lung cancer. It was national news. It was weird to have somebody... I didn't know her because Phyllis was notoriously not in the spotlight. I probably met her, just didn't know. It's not like she wore a sign that said, "Hi."

I remember my mom, she was working at Home Hardware at the time, and her boss was a family friend of the Gretzky's. He wasn't able to go to her funeral, but he went to the visitation and then came back and was telling the employees about what he saw. My mom was livid and came back to tell us. There's only a few funeral homes in Brantford, and they picked the best one. Everyone loves this one. There were signs everywhere that were like, "Don't ask for photos, don't ask for autographs." What moron shows up at a funeral visitation? And it's like, "What?" I didn't even know it was a thing, like you could do that. Growing up in a city where you had a very famous athlete come from, you kind of see the dark side of it. This person doesn't live here because we kicked them out as a kid because parents were jealous of them.

Eric: Sure.

Meagan: So, it is weird. I got a scholarship. Walter and Wayne Gretzky had a foundation for visually impaired students, blind, visually impaired students. It was supposed to just be for your first year of university or college. Technically, I guess you can get it for other years, but I only applied for it once because that's what it said. I got that, and I always felt weird putting it on my resume. It just felt so strange. I almost didn't apply for it because I was like, "You can't ask for money from somebody who lives down the street." My dad was like, "What?" I was like, "Well, yeah, Walter lives two or three streets away. We can't ask him for money. When we moved here, you drove us past the house and told us that you never wanted to see us stalking this house in case their kid came home." He was like, "OK, I appreciate this, but this is actually different. A charitable foundation

is different than being a weird person who's stalking someone's house." When I go back to visit my parents, nobody knows. I can just go live normally. When you're in a city where you're aware that there's somebody who comes back here to visit who can't do those things, if you have an interaction with them, it'll always be like, "Oh, I met him, and he was a jerk," or, "Oh, I met him, and he was the greatest person ever." Nobody says that about me when they meet me. It's fun, but I wouldn't want it to be part of my life.

Eric: Of course. They put their bodies through so much. My sister is a hockey player. She plays rep, and the amount of injuries she's had and the amount of time she's needed to go to the emergency room is just like a lot.

Meagan: It's painful. When basketball players get finger injuries, I didn't realize you could injure your finger unless it gets caught in a machine at a factory. I didn't know that finger injuries existed. I wouldn't want that. Those are my main sports stories. Oh, and the Raptors Championship 2019. So much fun. They won game six, I think. I watched the last two games with friends. The second last game, which we thought was in Toronto, we thought they were going to win it. I watched with a bunch of men, and I was the only woman there. The next night, same place, but I watched with women. All the boys were somewhere else. Completely different atmospheres. We were drinking rosé.

Eric: That's awesome. That's great. I see we're 10 minutes over. Usually, these take 50 minutes. I really appreciate everything you've told me. This is really helpful, really good stuff. Do you want to add anything at all?

Meagan: Do you have any disability-specific questions about disability in sports?

Eric: Yeah, how those two intersect. I am interested in talking about that. They're going to have to inform the conversation, absolutely.

Meagan: Obviously, when I first said I can't do sports because of disability, I also got money to go to school as a result of a combination of disability and former professional athletes. Weird, I would say. I went to a professional women's hockey league game here a few months ago because I live a 15-minute walk from where they play, and it's so fun. But I couldn't see anything. For me, it is very much about the atmosphere. I can't see it. I don't know what's going on. I confuse people every summer because there used to be a church softball team. They'd say, "Oh, Megan likes baseball. She can fill out our scorecard." I'm like, "No, I can't fill out your scorecard. I can't see it, and I don't actually understand all those rules." That can be a challenging part of it. I've had to learn as a friend who sometimes likes to go watch my friends play rec sports. I used to go all the time, and then it was too mentally exhausting because I would go there and then realize I can't actually see what's happening. Why am I here? I just limit it. If it was every week for two months, I would go maybe every other week or every third week.

Eric: That makes sense.

Meagan: I'm very aware of my disability around sports because that's what's going on. It means that you have to kind of choose who you're going to watch games with because people who just sit in silence are annoying. I'm like, "You need to tell me, make a noise, am I supposed to cheer or be sad? What's going on?"

The cost of it. Blue Jays home opener 2018, they honored the then-late Roy Halladay in the preseason ceremony. It was a beautiful ceremony, cried the whole time. There was no way I was missing that, Eric. I was like, "I will be there." I saw a tweet once that was like, "You can tell somebody's age by who their favorite Blue Jay is." For the millennials, it was Roy Halladay. I've never felt more known as a millennial than I have in this tweet. Yes, 10,000%. I will go and bawl my eyes out with all these strangers. I spent... Because you can't do it alone. I got tickets. I was going to go with my dad and brother because I thought that would be appropriate, but then my brother was like, "No." He ended up going with his friends anyway. It was me and my parents, and then my brother was somewhere else. I'm like, "I'm buying the tickets." I was on ODSP and probably spent more than 100 bucks on this, which is like a tenth of your ODSP check.

Eric: Uh-huh. Yeah. Oh, I know.

Meagan: But I was like, "There's no way. I must be there to share in the collective grief of these people." That's what I did. I just didn't think about that it was 10% of my ODSP check. I will say, though, it is again one of those instances where being a person with a physical disability, I think you are often overlooked in accessible sport initiatives. There'll be more things, I think, to help people with developmental disabilities, which I'm glad there are. Stanley Cups and stuff aside, I would argue Wayne Gretzky's greatest accomplishment in hockey was helping Joey Moss get a job with the Edmonton Oilers. Joey was a fixture, and I'm really happy that there's a whole bunch of hockey teams that now hire equipment managers with Down syndrome because of that. I think that's great.

But it is a little tricky because I don't think people actually take into account the needs of fans with other disabilities. People always forget about vision loss all the time in everything. You just kind of get used to it, but you're like, "We just forgot about us." For me, it is a complicated... There are some sad parts about being a sports fan with a disability, but it's also why sports for me can just be a truly fun thing because I have no need or desire to compete with any of these people.

Eric: Yeah, that's an interesting point.

Meagan: As somebody who is really competitive, it's just really great because you're like, "I'll cheer for the team," but I'm not... I mean, it is a little weird because I am getting to the age where most of the players are younger than me. It's that awkward moment, and then you're just like, "Why am I invested so much in the ability of people a decade younger than me to chase a piece of leather?" But yeah, it could just be a more fun thing.

Eric: Absolutely. It should be as simple as that, that you just want to go enjoy watching a sports game. It should just be as simple as that. Unfortunately, there's all these things that come in the way, some of the things we've talked about here, but there are so many reasons why someone may not be able to access a sports space, right?

Meagan: Yeah. One of my favorite things to do in Toronto was to take people to their first Blue Jays game because my brother had season tickets for a while, so I would buy off a bunch of tickets from him. I took a nine-year-old to his first game once. That was fun.

Eric: That's so cool.

Meagan: I remember once taking a friend to her first game. She grew up in Dundas and was like, "I've never really been to Toronto. I've never been." I was like, "How is this? I don't understand. This is blowing my mind. How is that possible?" I don't think she loved it as much as I did because I get it, baseball is actually really super boring when you go to watch. Not a lot of noise. I get it, which is why I think it's actually a good game to take people to because you can adjust for the experience of the new fan. If they just want to hang out and talk for three hours, you can literally just talk for three hours. Or if they want to watch the game and be invested, you can watch the game and be invested. It's very easy. You can't do that at a hockey game or football game or something. That's probably my favorite one to actually watch live. The one time I did, which was a Carlton Ravens game, was great because that's a whole experience. I took her to her first Jays game, and she seemed really underwhelmed. I was sad, but then I was also like, "How have you lived in Dundas and never done this?"

Eric: My dad would take me, not all the time because we were just north of Brampton, but we would come into the city and see a Jays game. It's been a while since I've gone to a Jays game, but it's surprising because I feel like everybody in the GTA should have by some point done that.

Meagan: Oh, and my one other disability thing, this is actually true. I just remembered this. I have electronic glasses called eSight that help with distances. When I was testing them out, I took them to a Blue Jays game, sat in the 500s, third baseline, and used that as my frame of reference for the researchers. This is what I could see with them and without them. That was how I learned that on the Jumbotron, they say facts about the players, like "He has had eight doubles in the last 10 games." I didn't know that was on the Jumbotron. Growing up, I'd go to games with my dad, and some guy would come up and say some very obscure fact about him. I was like, "How does he know all this?" That's weird. I thought my dad knew it, and then I got these glasses and realized my dad did not know this. He was just reading off of a Jumbotron screen. For years, I actually thought my dad knew all these random facts, and he does have a bunch of random facts, so maybe he did know some of them. But no, he just has eyeballs that work better than mine. It's funny. When you can't see, you assume that everyone can't, and you learn that.

Eric: It's really cool that you have that with your dad.

Meagan: Yeah, the thing I'm most... I am not looking forward to when he dies and I have to go to my first baseball game after he dies. I just know that it's not going to be a good day in my life, but I'm going to have to do it. You're just like, "Oh, this sucks." Now being an aunt, getting to watch with my nephews, watching them be so excited for the Toronto sports teams and trying to explain to them, "You're in for a lifetime of misery."

Eric: But that's part of the tradition, isn't it?

Meagan: It is. Don't ask too many questions, kids, because we don't know why we do it either.

Eric: It's so true. My fiancée's dad, my future father-in-law, is a huge Leafs fan. Every once in a while, just to mess with him, I'm like, "How did the Leafs mess up in overtime again?" He's always saying, "This year, this year, this year."

Meagan: The eternal "this year" that will be better.

Eric: Yeah.

Meagan: But you know, we love them. Love them for it. Those fans need some help.

Eric: Well, that's great. Do you want to wrap it up now?

Meagan: Yeah, this is fine. I hope this was helpful.

Eric: It's been very helpful, Meagan. Thank you.

Meagan: I'm glad you got your ODSP catharsis.

Appendix II: Interview Guide

Disability fandom interview guide

Eric Vero

The following questions are prompts to incite discussion between the interviewer and the participant.

- What name would you like to be referenced by? What pronouns do you prefer?
Follow up question:
 - If you'd like to use a pseudonym, is there any significance you attribute to it? (e.g. the meaning behind an Internet handle).
- Please speak to your experiences with disability.
Follow up questions:
 - What institutional barriers are part of your experience?
 - What insight do you have regarding your experience?
 - What would better societal support look like for you as a disabled individual?
- What fandom(s) do you belong to?
Follow up question:
 - How would you describe your fandom(s) to someone who knows nothing about them?
- When did you first start participating in your fandom(s)?
Follow up questions:
 - What was the first episode/movie/book that you engaged with?
 - What about that first experience attracted you to the fandom?
 - What was the degree in which you participated in your fandom community?
 - a. Who did you connect with in the community?
 - b. Did you make connections with other disabled individuals?
 - What or who do you most identify within your fandom(s)?
- How do you feel disability is represented in your fandom(s)?
Follow up questions:
 - For yourself, what do you consider positive representations of disability? Negative?
 - When participating in the community, are fans vocal about their disabled experiences?
 - How present is disability within your fandom community?
- What are the challenges that your fandom(s) faces in the present?
Follow up questions:
 - Historically, what political/social/cultural challenges has your fandom wrestled with?
 - What are your opinions on the historic and present challenges of your fandom?