

**INTERSECTIONS OF DISABILITY AND
LUDOLOGY: A STUDY OF THE SOCIAL
IMAGINARIES OF DIFFERENTLY ABLED
VIDEO GAMERS IN THE SELECTED
POPULAR CULTURE FICTION**

BY

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NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES

ISLAMABAD

June, 2025

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BS English, Gomal University, D. I. Khan, 2020

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

In English

To

FACULTY OF ARTS & HUMANITIES



NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES, ISLAMABAD

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FACULTY OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF MODERN LANGUAGES

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ABSTRACT

Title: Intersections of Disability and Ludology: A Study of the Social Imaginaries of Differently Abled Video Gamers in the Selected Popular Culture Fiction

This study explores the production of a gaming culture and how it shapes the social imaginaries and leads to the formation of gaming identities of differently abled gamers in Gabriele Zevin's *Tomorrow, Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* and Keith Stuaerts's *A Boy Made of Blocks*. I have employed the concept of "Gamer Identity" by Graeme Kirkpatrick as a reading prop to position gaming as a cultural practice. This cultural practice is a major force for transforming societies and is shaped by the society in return. I have further triangulated my theoretical support with Charles Taylor's concept of "Social Imaginary". It facilitates comprehending how the selected gamers may conceptualise their social interaction after the establishment of their gaming identities. Moreover, Jean Baudrillard's theorising of "Hyperreality" is taken as a supporting lens for reading the two primary texts. It helps highlight the creation of a hyperreal world within a video game which is a virtual commodity and an artistic display of capitalism. The creation of these kinds of gaming spaces may provide accessibility to differently abled gamers. Consequently, through such ludic practices, they create their own virtual avatars and may attain a sense of autonomy, interactivity, and emancipation from day-to-day inequalities. The study has also deployed Tobin Siebers' concept of "Complex Embodiment" that enforces the acceptance of disability as a human variation. This concept is helpful to substantiate the representation of differently abled gamers. The research is qualitative in nature and has used textual analysis as a research method. It is expected that this investigation productively contributes to the field of Ludology and Disability Studies.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder

MMORPG: Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

TTT: Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow

ABMB: A Boy Made of Blocks

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Bismillahirrahmanirahim. Starting with the name of Allah *Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala*, the entirely merciful, the especially merciful. All praise be to Allah Almighty, the Gracious, the Omnipotent, and the ultimate source of knowledge. I am profoundly grateful for his mercy and blessings that accompanied me in the intricate labyrinth of my research expedition. I also pay my respect and Salam to our Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who is the mentor, the unmatched, the extraordinary. His teachings and guidance have always enlightened our hearts.

I am especially grateful to my advisor, my instructor, and my supervisor, honourable Professor Dr. Sibghatullah Khan. His constructive feedback and evaluation persistently illuminated my path. He believed in me when I could not believe myself. I am forever indebted to him for his precious time and unwavering support.

I am also grateful to my family for their support and love. I am deeply thankful to my parents for their trust and prayers. Secondly, I owe special thanks to my siblings, Hayat bhai and Haleem bhai, for their endless support and encouragement. I also extend my gratitude to my husband for bearing patience with me when the clouds of hopelessness and uncertainty loomed over me.

Lastly, but equally important, I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Arshad Mahmood, Dean Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Dr. Farheen Ahmed Hashmi, Head Department of English (GS) and all the teaching staff of the English Department of NUML.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my mentor respected **Dr. Sibghatullah Khan** who was a persistent source of inspiration and knowledge throughout my research journey. I also dedicate it to **my parents**; they always believed in me and pushed me to go forward. To add, **my dear sister Aisha Sahar (late)** whose presence in this world was a constant source of encouragement for me and now her absence is a consistent reminder of motivation to leave a meaningful legacy of knowledge in the transience of life.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Rationale of the Study

This research investigates the concept of agency and subjectivity enabled by gaming spaces by analysing Gabriele Zevin's *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*¹ (2022) and Keith Stuart's *A Boy Made of Blocks*² (2016). The study explores the selected primary texts by invoking Graeme Kirkpatrick's "Gamer Identity", Charles Taylor's "Social Imaginary", and Tobin Siebers' "Complex Embodiment" as principal theoretical positions and Jean Baudrillard's "Hyperreality" as secondary theoretical support.

Video games are imitations of the concrete world. The earlier and conventional video games were designed to solve a problem or to reach a desired goal. However, with the advancement of digital technologies, video games have become more reified real-world experiences. The current realm of video games offers places for the construction of simulated societies and online human culture. The majority now even feature virtual emancipation and proffer spaces for constructing virtual identities through choice-based avatars. This form of digital media is expanding rapidly in its popularity. It is one of the popular media which is entering homes at a rapid rate. Since it is a participatory media, it requires active participation of its users. Moreover, because of their paramount importance in the mainstream media, video games have occupied a prominent place in contemporary culture. As Frans Mayra holds, it is "a significant cultural force" (4). The prolonged interaction with this media may lead to the construction of gaming identities. The current project engages with the contemporary video gaming world.

¹Henceforth, I will refer to *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* as *TTT* throughout my dissertation.

² Henceforth, I will refer to *A Boy Made of Blocks* as *ABMB* throughout my dissertation.

Pertaining to this line of inquiry, since video games are participatory media, players' interaction with them may be altering their lives. However, this alteration would be difficult to access if players have some disabilities. In terms of disability studies, Tobin Siebers emphasises that it "is not a pathological condition" which can only be studied through individual psychoanalysis "but a social location complexly embodied" (14). Consequently, disability is the product of the complex interactions between a disabled body, society, and environment. It implies that if the physical and social environment does not provide accessibility, accommodation, and a positive attitude towards disability, the experiences of the body are more complex. It is crucial to understand where the body is situated and how it interacts with its surroundings. As, in Siebers' opinion, "identities, narratives, and experiences based on disability have the status of theory" thereby providing us a lens "from which the other dominant ideologies of society become visible and open to criticism" (14). In this fashion, the theoretical power of disability studies is able to dismantle the theoretical stances of able-bodiedness or the ideology of ability which in turn "is the preference for able-bodiedness" (Siebers 8). Although the contemporary "modern culture feels the urgent need to perfect the body", disability theory critiques it by considering it "discriminatory and exclusionary" (7-8). The latter maintains the notion of claiming and accepting the disability rather than overcoming it.

The problems with digital games are seen as a lighthearted topic while disability has always been viewed as a serious one. As a result, the two regions have up to this point received quite distinct amount and types of attention (Ellis et al. 5). However, contemporary trends in the digital media have started to highlight the issues of accessibility by making it more accessible for their special consumers. Therefore, by modifying the mechanics, designs, and features of the gaming platform, game designers promote a sense of freedom and acceptance to those gamers who struggle with some form of disabilities. To add, different types of impairments, ranging from cognitive to physical, can be accommodated by customising the games to meet the needs of the players.

In relation to this, the current investigation argues that when differently abled youth are exposed to simulations in the medium of video games, their social imaginaries are influenced. Social Imaginary refers to the understanding of how individuals imagine their

interactions with the society they are surrounded by. The hyperreality of video games posits fresh avenues for the subjectivities of the players. The gaming space gives them freedom in which they may create their own virtual avatars the way they want. Moreover, these virtual avatars are simulations of their real selves. With the help of the selected novels, I claim that video games based on hyperreality act as a medium to turn differently abled gamers into agentive subjects. Though it is a creative expression of capitalism, the gaming world may help transform submissive players into agentive subjects. These in turn further provide them with opportunities for better self-expression. Though my major concerns are gaming and disability studies, my investigation may be subsumed under postmodern and sociological paradigms. I am not strictly focusing on postmodernism and sociology per se; I am only engaging with concepts of “hyperreality” and “social imaginary” respectively. My study deals with the hyperreal configurations of video games with which the differently abled gamers interact. Likewise, my investigation is related to sociology because it probes the impact on social imaginaries of the gaming protagonists. And since I analyse fiction, literary studies also get triangulated with gaming and disability studies. That is what makes my research project interdisciplinary.

Hence, the current project has highlighted the issues of gaming and its representation in contemporary literature, as well as its relation to Disability Studies. It deals with two basic concerns. It analyses the hyperreal world of gaming spaces that highlights the likelihood of the construction of hallucinations and the construction of gamer identities. Secondly, it examines the encounter between differently abled players and such ludic spaces and the resultant impact of this interaction in both their gaming and real worlds. Such transformation results in acceptance of their bodies. Furthermore, the study deals with the concepts of simulated societies that are created by the gaming worlds and make differently abled gamers dependent on them.

This notion of transforming docile players into agentive subjects is subversive because it provides the players with the agency to dismantle the narrative of a toxic gaming world. Daniel Fu holds: “They [gamers] view their toxic behavior as part of the gaming culture and readily dismiss their wrongdoings with little or no guilt. They buy into the collective identity that is “the anonymous and toxic gamer” (11). So, such unpleasant

behaviour breeds a poisonous atmosphere that has an adverse effect on everyone who interacts with it. The gaming space, however, has been viewed in this project as a source of acquiring power and control over themselves. This power and control may be evident not only in their virtual but also in their real worlds. For that reason, the current study emphasises on the positive potential of gaming known as “curative gaming” because it is proved to be corrective in terms of players’ social acceptance. Moreover, the concept also aids in dismantling the notion of normalcy by giving agency to the two disabled characters through the medium of gaming.

Since my research explores the intersectional engagement of Ludology and Disability Studies, a brief introduction of these two genres is in order here. The primary texts chosen for textual analysis in this thesis can be situated in the broader categories of gaming literature that depict the gaming culture, gaming medium, and players’ experiences with such medium. Gonzalo Frasca notes, gaming studies or “ludology can be defined as a discipline that studies games in general and video games in particular” (222). The term “ludology” was first exclusively used to refer to research on computer, video games, and, more broadly, digital games (Surdyk 262). The study of games eventually has become a known discipline after the popularisation and abundance of digital games around the end of the twentieth century. However, the focus is mainly on digital games such as computer games or video games. In academia, it was uncommon before the late twentieth century and was confined to disciplines like anthropology and history. As Andrea Romeo writes in his online article “Game Studies”, academic interest in games has increased along with the video game revolution in the early 1980s. This has given rise to a separate domain that incorporates a variety of approaches and school of thoughts (2015).

Moreover, the works also overlap with the literature of disability studies, a genre of literature that foregrounds the notion of acceptance of disability and dismantles the notion of perfection or able-bodiedness. The theorists of Disability Studies challenge the binary of ability/disability, and the politics involved in labelling differently abled individuals. They challenge existing status quo and interrogate the dominant ideologies that interpret certain bodily configurations as deviant. The marginal and minority status of identity associated with a disabled body is criticized and denounced in this discipline. It

asserts that deformity/disability/abnormality should be perceived and empowered as diversity, not as a misfortune or shortcoming. Simi Linton, one of the authors and activists of Disability Studies holds: “Disability studies, in contrast, focus on the external variables: the social, political, and intellectual contingencies that shape meaning and behavior” (6). Hence, instead of projecting the focus towards the medical condition, physical limitations and mental impairment, the discipline highlights the malfunctioning of dominant ideologies that seem to marginalise these individuals. For this reason, the study takes into consideration both cognitively and physically differently abled gamers.

Furthermore, the current project deals with the genre of popular culture fiction which is different from popular fiction. The former refers to various forms of literary works that incorporate the elements of popular culture. It features elements, themes, and characters from social trends, cultural phenomena, and mainstream media such as video games in the current study. Moreover, it also includes fads, media, entertainment, technology, popular movies, internet culture, even gadgets etc. thereby catching the essence of the particular time or place. Therefore, this fiction reflects the popular culture of a particular time period.

On the contrary, popular fiction is a broader term that encapsulates all types of literary works that are commercially popular in a particular period of time and are widely read by the public. It includes various genres such as romance, mystery, science fiction, fantasy, thrillers, and even popular culture fiction. In this manner, popular culture fiction is subsumed under popular fiction. But I have used “popular culture fiction” in my title because I am strictly focusing on this sub-genre for my research.

In a similar vein, my research aims to explore that the dominance of popular media, such as video games, in contemporary society has changed the implicit mental map of social interactions. Highlighting this specific perspective provided by my primary sources, I provide a brief introduction to the novels in hand in the following discussion.

TTT has been written by an American author Gabrielle Zevin. The story follows the life of an enthusiastic gamer, Samson Masur, which spans about thirty years. He explores the world of multiple games, ranging from conventional to technologically advanced

games with highly immersive environments. Moreover, as he navigates the never-ending world of chances, such interaction allows him to navigate his emotions. Eventually, when he designs his video games then he gives an outlet to his emotions and experiences. Moreover, the story also illuminates the struggle of Samson Masur with his amputated foot.

ABMB has been written by a British author and a journalist Keith Stuart. It is the story of Mr. and Mrs. Alex Rowe and their eight-year-old son, Sam. While dealing with his autism, Sam develops a never-ending love for a virtual game, *Minecraft*. The game posits a fresh avenue in his life for a new journey of change. Through the gaming medium, he develops a strong bond with his father. Moreover, the game proffers him chances to express and develop his creative skills over time.

As a result, both the novels portray that the characters identify themselves with the participatory media of games and their evolution occur through incorporating gaming media into their lives. Based on this discussion, I emphasise that my area of investigation has not been tapped much in terms of the reading of texts. Therefore, this research provides insight into how the disabled video gamers are transmogrified into agentive subjects in the gaming environment and how they embrace their true selves in their concrete worlds.

1.2. Locating Selected Ludic Texts in Contemporary Literary Disability Studies, Ludology and Popular Culture Fiction

It is crucial to locate my primary texts in the literature of disability studies, ludology, and popular culture fiction. By situating these texts, I attempt to affirm the relevance of the current project. I have divided this section into three subsections to give an overview of the literary landscapes of disability studies, ludology, and popular culture fiction separately. This allows me to identify my key texts within each genre independently.

I

In this section, I attempt to locate my selected texts within the genre of Disability Studies.

Disability has been a recurring motif in literature from the very earliest poetry of ancient times to contemporary literature, whether poetry, visual texts or novels. However, disability is not a circulating theme in the earliest forms of literature, but when later analysed those references depict how it was functioning during that time. The earliest traces of the subject of disability are found in *Havamal or The Words of Odin the High One*. It is a collection of poems ascribed to the god Odin who is portrayed as blind. The collection was speculated to be written around 1270 CE. The poem's important stanza seventy-one addresses this sense of inclusion of disabled people into the community:

The lame can ride horse, the handless drive cattle,

The deaf one can fight and prevail,

'tis happier for the blind than for him on the bale-fire,

But no man hath care for a corpse. (Ashliman and Bray, lines 281-284)

Although being a part of Old Norse Literature, the lines emphasise that a disabled person too can contribute to a building of a community until or unless he/she is dead. In mediaeval times, disability has taken the feature of ridicule and amusement. Disabled characters are categorised as villains and associated with evilness. The best example is William Shakespeare's *Richard III*, and it is speculated to be written in 1592-3 AD. He has a deformity of scoliosis and unequal legs. His disability has been symbolised as the symbol of villainy. The way he kills everyone whoever comes in the way of his throne, whether friends or enemies, defines his villainy traits.

Moving on with the time and literature, the genre of disability studies in literature too started to witness immense evolution. Considering the nineteenth century, we have the example of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843). In *A Christmas Carol*, Tiny Tim is a symbol of sympathy and pity. The author has ascribed positive traits to the character of Tiny Tim to portray him as the representative of the vulnerable class of society. Grace Lapointe mentions in his online article "The Alienating Lack of Disability Representation in Literature" that the image of disability makes him appear saint-like because he lacks the ability to commit major crimes (2018). Rosemarie Garland-Thomson therefore notes that

“disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters” (9). The list of misrepresentation of disabled characters is long and wide. Take some of the few examples: An evil Captain Hook with an amputated hand in J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, a crippled and pitiful Laura Wingfield from Tennessee William’s *Glass Menagerie*, crippled but immoral Signora Madeline Neroni in Anthony Trollop’s *Barchester Towers*, an autistic but murderer and pathetic Lennie Small from Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. Hence, the list is ongoing where the different kinds of disabilities are used as metaphors for pity, stigmatisation, villainy, evilness, and abnormality etc.

During the twentieth century, the theme of disability started to take the central place. In addition to that, many differently abled writers emerged during this century, who took charge of narrating the voice of this marginalised community. Hence, there has been an unprecedented increase in the biographies and autobiographies of differently abled figures. For example, Helen Keller, who is an American author and political activist, outpours her experiences of the disability of blindness and deafness in her autobiography *The World I Live In* (1908). Similarly, Christy Brown was an Irish painter as well as a writer who could only write or paint with his one foot’s toes due to cerebral palsy. *My Left Foot* (1954) is his best-known work that explicates his challenges. This century has witnessed a courageous expression of disability.

With the remarkable increase on the growing body of literature, literary disability studies too start to witness a remarkable increase in the overlapping with other genres. Twenty-first century writers like Gabrielle Zevin and Keith Stuart push the boundaries of disability studies by their unprecedented overlap with the genre of Ludology or gaming studies or gaming literature. Though Ludology itself is a young field, in relation to disability studies, it narrates the issues and concerns of gamers who are struggling with some sort of disability.

In this historical context of the twenty-first century my two primary texts, *TTT* and *ABMB*, can be located. The experiences of video gamers in relation to their disabilities are relatively fresh in the literary scenario. Hence, this is the interventionist approach of the

current study which is unprecedented and hopes for promising avenues for future research scholars. After locating the primary sources in the disability studies, it is essential to situate them in Ludology. I have tried to do this in the next section.

II

In this section, I attempt to locate my selected texts within Game Studies.

Game Studies, also known as Ludology, deals with the issues of games and gamers and the culture of playing them. Due to the immense popularity of video games and its rapid inclusion in society, gaming has become a part of popular culture. Consequently, the literary texts that come around the late twentieth century circulate the elements of digital games and feature gamers as their main characters. However, the genre is evolving and expanding; it is increasingly overlapping and intersecting with other genres.

The first novel that relates to my argument is *Ender's Game* (1985) by an American author Orson Scott Card. It is one of the earlier novels that depict the ludic elements. The book carries the elements of science fiction since it is set in a future where they are supposed to combat aliens, but it has integrated few of the elements of ludic fiction or gaming literature. The book follows the story of Ender Wiggins, a young boy who has exceptionally great gaming skills. When Ender gets recruited into a military training program, he is promoted further on the basis of his gaming skills such as strategic thinking, combat skills and tactics etc. The military training program trains young recruits through the use of complex simulation games. Ender's and the other recruits practise their skills by taking part in those games that simulate space combat.

The second novel that relates to my argument is *Heir Apparent* (2002) written by an American writer Vivian Vande Velde. It propagates the idea of blending fiction and reality when the protagonist finds herself immersed in a virtual reality game. The novel features a 14-year-old girl, Grannine Bellisario, who is an addicted gamer. The description of the virtual reality role-playing game does not only bewitch the protagonist but the readers themselves. For this reason, not only the gamers but the readers too can get confused in the world of reality and fiction described in the novel.

Epic (2006) is another young adult fiction written by Conor Kastick. The gaming world described in the novel seems to be inspired by the two very popular video games Warcraft and Dungeons and Dragons. The novel portrays a powerful gaming world; it is seen as providing power and resources to its gamers, more than just entertainment, in their real world, that is known as New World in the text. The gamer Erik is highly involved in the fantasy world of a virtual game Epic. The issues of his real world are resolved in the virtual world of Epic. As a ludic novel, it focuses more on the description of Epic rather than on New World. The plot follows a revenge story which propagates in both the worlds.

This is Not a Game (2009), is written by Walter Jon Williams, is also a ludic and science fictional read. The novel follows the life of a game designer Dagmar Shaw who designs games based on augmented reality. During her visit to Indonesia, the currency collapses and a normal life breaks down in her country due to a terrorist attack. However, during those hard times her gamer friends belonging from her virtual world rescue her. The writer has shown the porous boundaries of the virtual and the real world. Through the blurring of two worlds, the story raises questions about the power of games to influence real world actions and the impact of highly immersive gaming experiences. Dagmar uses her gaming skills in order to navigate in both worlds.

Hence, this dynamic landscape encompasses a diverse array of novels that delve into themes, narratives and experiences around gaming and players. Therefore, in this historical context of the twenty-first century my two principal texts, *T TT* and *ABMB*, can be located. These two literary works, that are the creations of the modern day, embody the essence of the present age through their exploration of the ludic themes that correspond with the trending games in the current marketplace. Moreover, Stuart and Zevin have further expanded the contours of Ludology by making it overlap with disability studies. Although disability studies itself is a well-established discipline, through its intersection with Ludology we are able to discern the rich tapestry of themes, narratives, and experiences that emerge from the convergence of differently abled gamers and their gaming experiences. Furthermore, both of my primary texts incorporate references of video gaming, a prevalent aspect of contemporary popular culture. As a result, they also intersect with the realm of popular culture fiction. In wake of that, it is also essential to locate them

in the literary landscape of popular culture fiction which I have attempted to do in the next section.

III

In this section, I situate my primary ludic texts in the literary landscape of Popular culture Fiction.

Popular culture fiction is a literary genre of literature that takes references from the popular trends and issues of contemporary times. This genre has no clear distinct point of existence as it has evolved with the passage of time. The practice of adding references has been present for so long but during the twentieth century it has become so prominent due to the abundance of mass media and consumerist culture.

With the advent of mass media and technological advancements and industrialization during the nineteenth and twentieth century, this practice began to gain prominence. The earlier examples are the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby* by American novelist and essayist F. Scott Fitzgerald is set in the 1920s. The tale unfolds the theme of obsession of love, wealth, and American Dream that is the essence of its contemporary time. The novel propagates with the interaction of Nick Carraway, a young man from Midwest to his mysterious neighbour Jay Gatsby. Through the series of events that results in a tragic ending but before that goes through the charismatic life of love, wealth, parties. The novel takes multiple references to the popular brands, luxury gadgets, movies, and culture of the Jazz Age. Being the essence of the times, Fitzgerald catches the societal and economic changes of the “1920s to build Gatsby's stories from simple details like automobiles, the evolution of jazz music, flapper culture, to broader themes like Fitzgerald's discreet allusions to the organized crime culture and bootlegging” (Taher 401). Similarly, the novel offers a critique of the social decay and superficiality of the age, but it also highlights the popular culture of the time by the vivid description of the glamour of that time.

Meanwhile the evolution of consumerist culture has become more prominent and abundant with the emergence of postmodern literature. Popular culture is espoused by writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Kurt Vonnegut as a major theme in

their works. These writers explore the fragmented nature of modern society and the blurring of boundaries between high and low culture by referencing television shows, consumer goods, and other mass media.

This abundance has also been grasped by the literary work of Bret Easton Ellis in *American Psycho* (1991). The novel unfolds the tale of Patrick Bateman, a young Banker from Manhattan's Upper West Side, who is obsessively preoccupied with his aristocratic lifestyle that comes along with his immense status and wealth. As the story propagates, the outwardly charming and materialistic life of Batman reveals the dark underbelly of his life. His violent fantasies as well as his increasingly brutal actions such as murder, rape, abductions, and torture mostly victimise the underprivileged individuals of the society. Given that, the protagonist's life is centred on materialism; the book keeps referencing luxurious modern brands. As a result, these allusions act as a constant reminder of the materialistic view of his society and culture. Brand names like Armani, Gucci, Valentino, Ralph Lauren, and Versace resound throughout the book as a constant reminder of the privileged American popular culture of the 1980s.

By the end of the twentieth century, digital games have also begun to play a significant role in popular culture due to the explosion of information technology. One example is *Ready Player One* (2011) by Ernest Cline, which is also a ludic novel. It is set in the dystopian world of 2045 where humans are more gamers than civilians. It follows the story of a teenage gamer Wade Watts whose life takes a big turn when he aims to compete in a contest within a virtual reality game Oasis. The virtual world of OASIS, an online role-playing game, created by James Halliday, has attracted numerous people into this world. The text is a prime example of popular culture fiction; the whole novel circulates around gaming and internet culture that is the popular culture of the current generation.

It can be seen from the analyses of popular culture fiction in this section, the contemporary writers of popular fiction are well aware of the current popular trends in society. Being fictional writers, they are meticulously capturing the essence of popular trends with every changing turn. The writers of the twenty-first century are conscious of its social trends and popular media and are cognizant of the role it has played in popular culture fiction. Therefore, here in this tradition of the twenty-first century, my two primary

texts *TTT* and *ABMB* can be located. Both texts, being a product of the twenty-first century, reflect the spirit of the current times by focusing on the current popular media of video games. Zevin and Stuart, as heralds of gaming literature, have further disseminated this practice of incorporating references of popular video games in their texts. That is how my principal texts may be located in the writing tradition of disability studies, game studies and ludology.

1.3. Situatedness of the Researcher

In recent years, Pakistan has seen a tremendous increase in the amount of its internet users with a total of almost 87.35 million people. Not only this, but the country has also started to venture into the arena of gaming and technology in the past few years. However, the development has been seen as a positive effort as it has started to explore the needs of special gamers. The efforts can be seen as a positive step to bridge the gap that exists in the educational sectors of those who struggle with some form of disability, whether cognitive or physical.

For example, a few years ago, Muhammad Usman, a student of Bahria University Karachi set out to create a video game, along with his friends, which functions on the technology of augmented reality. Their idea is to provide technological accessibility to those younger individuals who struggle with some form of cognitive disabilities. Nevertheless, the game mechanics behind WonderTree are relatively less complex and work on easily available hardware, such as Kinect v2 sensor and any computer or laptop screen to interact with a user interface. The hardware, which is equipped with sensors, detects the movements of its gamers and gives the output to the screen thereby interacting with its software. As Omer Bashir writes in his online article “Meet the Award-Winning Pakistanis Who Create Augmented Reality Games for Special Children”, the game is accessible to children struggling with down syndrome, ADHD, dyslexia, autism, cerebral palsy (2016). Their debut game won the third prize at Stanford University in 2016 in Global Innovation through Science and Technology (GIST) in 2016.

As a researcher from Pakistan, through my research project, I investigate the gaming technology space that has not been extensively explored in a developing nation

such as Pakistan. Part of my project is to explore the promising field of video games specifically designed for players with physical and cognitive disabilities.

1.4. Delimitation

The study is delimited to two novels, Gabrielle Zevin's *TTT* and Keith Stuart's *ABMB*. Furthermore, the research is delimited to the social imaginary that is impacted by the production of gaming identities and the atmosphere of hyperreality in the gaming medium, along with the particular focus on differently abled characters. Thus, only two main characters of the selected texts are the focus of the current investigation. Moreover, it is pertinent to mention here that in the discipline of Disability Studies, I address only the issues regarding social aspects of players, and I do not engage with their psychological or medical issues. Similarly, in the discipline of Ludology, my study is delimited to the experiences of a player and no other considerations of Ludology such as game mechanics, game designs, game narratives, etc.

1.5. Thesis Statement

Gabrielle Zevin's *TTT* and Keith Stuart's *ABMB* engage with the differently abled video gamers who are heavily influenced by the hyperreality of the gaming space. A persistent interaction with gaming medium appears to give them a sense of agentive subjectivity that allows them to reconstruct their social identities. Kirkpatrick, Taylor, Siebers and Baudrillard's theoretical concepts of "Gamer Identity", "Social Imaginary", "Complex Embodiment", and "Hyperreality" respectively are likely to support the reading of the selected texts.

1.6. Research Questions

The study attempts to find answers to the following controlling questions based on the reading props invoked in this project.

1. What are the configurations of hyperreal video games that facilitate the development of gaming identities in the selected texts?

2. How are the social imaginaries of the focused characters impacted by their interaction with the gaming medium in the texts under scrutiny?
3. How do gamers with disabilities become agentic subjects in their virtual and concrete worlds in the selected texts?

1.7. Research Plan

I have organised my research into six chapters. Chapter one is a comprehensive introduction of my research project in the context of literary disability studies and contemporary gaming fiction. This chapter also includes the situatedness of the researcher, thesis statement, research questions, significance, and delimitation.

Chapter two is a literature review that contextualises my study and points out the gaps that my study intends to fill. This chapter is further categorised into two sections. In the first section, I have given the rationale of this chapter. In the second section, I have reviewed the critical scholarship that deals with the theoretical and the textual aspects of my investigation. However, for convenience, the second section is further divided into three parts that deal with the critical scholarship in the area of disability studies, ludology, and works done on my primary texts. This chapter contextualises my research in the scheme of existing critical resources.

Chapter three includes an extensive explanation of my theoretical framework followed by research methodology. Chapter four and five are the textual analysis of *TTT* and *ABMB*, respectively. I have analysed the aforementioned principal texts by deploying the theoretical positions of Kirkpatrick, Taylor, Siebers and Baudrillard, as explained in the rationale of my study.

Chapter six concludes my research project, provides its findings and makes recommendations for further research.

1.8. Significance of the Study

This investigation is significant in that it converges disability studies with ludology. The thesis makes an intervention by triangulating the concepts of “Gamer Identity” and “Social Imaginary” with theoretical approaches to Disability Studies. It forges a connection between postmodernism and sociology against the backdrop of a literary landscape. As Keogh claims in his online article “Hackers, Gamers and Cyborgs”, “[e]ven today, the study of video games in universities will more often be found in computer science or IT faculties than in the humanities” (Keogh). My research project addresses Keogh’s concern in the sense that it is an interdisciplinary investigation that develops productive connections among disability studies, video games (ludology), and literature (fiction). In addition, my research paves ways for the culture of “curative gaming” (my coinage) that has not largely been tapped yet. Furthermore, the significance of this project also lies in the fact that the selected texts have hardly been made the subject of scholarly inquiry through the critical stance that I have taken.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The purpose of literature review is to contextualise the study in the available scholarship and find out the gaps in the existing knowledge of the related research domain. There is an abundance of scholarly literature available on disability studies, and ludology. However, I have attempted to review a diverse range of available scholarships crucial to my investigation. Since the focus of this research is the overlap between disability studies and ludology, the sources of review range from books, articles, and book reviews on the given disciplines. This chapter also includes a section on the works done on my principal texts. This chapter is written in chronological order in order to track new findings and shifting perspectives related to my area of research.

2.2. Review of Critical Sources

I have organised my literature review into three subsections in order to give a coherent review of the literature.

- Critical Scholarships in the realm of Disability Studies and Ludology
- Works Done on *TTT*
- Works Done on *ABMB*

Consequently, after reviewing the critical scholarships, I have been able to find research gaps. Moreover, I have successfully contextualised and analysed my principal texts. In addition to that I have drawn links between the current chapter and the subsequent one.

As the current project circulates around disability studies, ludology and the overlap between them therefore my secondary sources vary from the critical scholarship on disability studies, and ludology in general and on the primary sources in particular.

2.2.1. Critical Scholarships in the Realm of Disability Studies and Ludology

Jennifer Dalsen (2023) in her article “A History of Disability in Video Game Character Design” draws on historical themes to illuminate the depiction of disability in media. She particularly analyses the development of characters that have evolved over time. This evolution owes to the advancement in technology that allows the formation of more complex and “human-like characters with supernatural power” (21). She suggests the character of Mario from the game of Super Mario Brothers, and Ryu or Chun-Li from the game of Street Fighters. These aforementioned characters depict new abilities in their characters’ designs when the new versions launch.

Dalsen argues that health is a primary characteristic that is mostly there in almost every video game, and it is a crucial factor on which any game’s narrative works. From exceedingly early times, video games have been designed to maintain the agility, strength and health of the characters and the gamers are required to maintain these in order to succeed in the game. In addition to that, Dalsen also affirms that “historically, film and media have portrayed characters with visual disabilities in stereotypical ways. They are either characters who possess supernatural powers or play a comedic role” (23). This suggests that from a long time in media industry the disabled character is being portrayed as an anomaly. Similarly, such misrepresentation is also carried on in the mass media of digital technology. One of the prime examples is the game Beyond Eyes. As she suggests that in this game the emphasis is mainly “on the struggles surrounding disability and less on the character’s personal quest or motivation” (24). Thus, she emphasises the need to break these stereotypes and misrepresentation of a disabled body in the designs of video games characters, let alone any other media.

However, the essay has also pinned hope in the upcoming games and their developers as she notes “as technology has advanced over time, the development of highly detailed characters has replaced the rudimentary images that many gamers knew from the

1970s and 1980s” (27). Although technology is evolving, the image of disability in this popular media of video games is still so much lagging behind because “video games continue to link individuals with disabilities to violent behaviour or criminal activity” (27). Such games propagate the social stigmas attached to the differently abled people. Meanwhile, through the use of gaming spaces, the new games in this media need to grow out of these negative notions.

Moreover, the depiction of supernatural powers associated with disabled characters promotes the need to “compensate for a person’s abilities through supernatural powers” within a game (Dalsen 28). Therefore, she suggests that “game designers should consider ways in which to highlight the positive images of disability in characters through storylines that do not rely heavily on stereotypes” (28). The essay criticises the game mechanics that center on the idea of maintaining physical normalcy. This refers to the gameplay of majority of games, when the character loses his/her strength then his/her functionality also gets reduced. Likewise, in order to increase his/her performance and strength, he/she requires gaining a perfectly fit body. Thus, the functionality is generally portrayed by the perfect body of such characters.

Although Dalsen’s analysis succinctly highlights the negative stereotypes that are being propagated through the popular media of video games, she does not focus on the experiences of disabled gamers who interact with them. Hence, my study intervenes by contributing to the perpetuation of the positive connotation of disability. The research focuses on the players with disabilities who try to dismantle negative stereotypes regarding their disabilities.

Michael James Heron (2023) investigates sociological accessibility from the medium of games in his article “The Sociological Accessibility of Gaming”. Heron criticises the cultural context around video games by arguing that many people with disabilities are excluded from the medium because of the lack of accessibility. With the advancement in bionic technology “gamers with disabilities now demand accessibility support in their video games and seeing companies provide it inspires further participation” (Heron 147). Heron’s study establishes that improving accessibility in games entails more than just putting technological fixes like colour-blind settings or different controller

mappings into place. It also involves tackling the societal barriers that prevent people from playing video games. The prevalence of gaming culture in contemporary times cannot be ignored. Popular media like video games has moved beyond the constraints of time and space (144). It is impossible to deny the importance of games in current times because of its widespread popularity and demand. However, unfortunately video games still cause the issues of inaccessibility and lack of inclusion for the community of differently abled people. This article addresses the need to celebrate the accessibility of gaming culture with its complete diversity. In these technologically advanced times when gaming culture has taken a major seat in current society, differently abled gamers do demand more video games that are more inclusive and accessible in their configurations. Therefore, “seeing companies provide it inspires further participation from previous non-gamers” (147). This suggests a way to encourage and welcome differently abled gamers in the ludic worlds.

Heron notes that the expression of inclusivity is also another issue that needs to be addressed. It does not relate with the physical barrier but rather than making the environment hostile for the disabled people. Hence, it's not always about the apparent concrete barriers but some barriers are “more attached to the narrative, theme, and aesthetic of the game” (147). In such cases, it is not that players cannot play but that they do not want to play because the game discourages them. In this case, empathetic measures are needed here to address these issues. The article, therefore, emphasises the need for discussion and advocacy to create a gaming culture that is accessible in the widest possible varieties for people. My study intervenes by analysing literary texts to better understand the needs and experiences of gamers with disabilities. In this way my study is interventionary because it takes into consideration the literary landscape of gaming studies and disability studies. Additionally, in-depth analysis of differently abled players helps to encourage game designers to prioritise accessibility in their design process.

The necessity for accessibility of video games in virtual environments for individuals with impairments is also highlighted by Erica Neely (2018) in “Digitally Disabled: Accessibility and Inclusion in Video Games and Virtual Worlds.” Neely emphasises the need to raise awareness for accessibility in physical settings while advocating that virtual surroundings should also be accessible to people with impairments.

Neely stresses on the need for accessibility features but she also notes that “accessibility features can benefit all players, not simply disabled ones” (3). Accessibility is the way to avoid othering the community of differently abled gamers in the virtual spaces. She argues about the normalisation of the idea of accessibility. There are multiple advancements in digital technology therefore the need to alter the accessibility feature should be acknowledged. Moreover, she also suggests that the alteration in such accessibility features can support wide range of players including those who are not able-bodied. Pertaining to this line of thought, she highlights a few major types of disabilities that need to be considered while designing new video games. These are: “auditory impairments, visual impairments (including colorblindness), cognitive impairments, mobility/motor impairments, and speech impairments” (Neely 4). However, in terms of auditory impairment, the changes in audio configuration, inclusion of subtitles, and provision of less-shrieking sound that is serene to the auditory nerves can maximize the inclusion for the concerned players. Nevertheless, the problem arises when making a game accessible to one group in turn makes it inaccessible to the other groups. In that scenario, video game designers “need to avoid erecting unnecessary barriers for a subgroup of users to achieve those ends” (6). Thus, multiple disabilities should be kept in mind while designing such games.

Furthermore, Neely also emphasises the need for proper representation for disabled gamers in ludic spaces. Representation is also crucial for the inclusion of disabled gamers into the virtual space of games. One very crucial means of representation is through the personalization of avatars. She suggests that through the availability of avatars’ customisation differently abled gamers will have the access to create their desired selves the way they want. This is how; they will have “the autonomy to decide how they wish to represent themselves” (Neely 9). This is also a significant way for the detoxification of the gaming spaces to avoid othering and to make the place accessible for all classes of the society. In this way “by representing people with a range of impairments, the gameworld itself becomes richer and more realistic; it also avoids sending any unintentional messages that people with disabilities do not exist or should be hidden” (10). Neely’s study, therefore, provides a detailed analysis of the issues of inclusion and representation of disabled gamers in the gaming worlds.

However, by involving the elements of hyperreal games and the ways through which disabled players engage with them in the selected literary texts, my work thereby intervenes in this fashion. Moreover, it also intervenes by probing the sociological impact of *gameworlds*. Besides offering a method of accessibility in the gaming medium through analysis of a technologically sophisticated gaming environment, it fills a gap in the existing body of knowledge.

Stephen Orr (2006) analyses the production of gaming media in his article “Beyond Content: The Emergence of Video Games and their Diverse Effects on Legal Normativity as Seen Through the Lens of Jean Baudrillard”. The article explores the interaction of humans with video games as a new form of communicative technology. It argues that gaming machines have a more profound impact on shaping the world than the content of video games themselves.

Orr argues that popular digital media of video games cannot be subversive and impactful in isolation. However, when taken together in combination with other media then it can be highly influencing for the society. Moreover, one of the prime motives of this medium is to get the control of human agency. Video games make their consumers so immersed in their signs and functioning that it is somehow creating a barrier between humans themselves. Consequently, by becoming more and more immersive, they are used to obstruct human mode of in person communication. Moreover, in terms of the categories of video games, Orr suggests that the one that involve hyperreal mechanics are more powerful in relation to their immersive nature. Here, Orr does not dwell more on the configurations of hyperreal video games. Orr has employed three of Baudrillard’s arguments to the regulation of video games: “medium is the message, . . . reality is becoming hyperreality, and . . . that communicative technology is reducing, or perhaps even negating, human agency” (Orr 42). In this way, Orr’s probe suggests that gaming medium is a political domain that works on negating agencies of its consumers. Although if the interaction is there it is not “face to face interaction” rather machine “mediated interactions are privileged” (45). Thus, the human-ludic encounter is considered to be “the most commanding relationship . . . between the machine and the individual” (45). In this way Orr examines that machine *mediated interactions* are playing a pivotal role in shaping

the technology even though the direct face-to-face encounter is missing here. These interactions cause notable social, cultural consequences that refer to the powerful impact of such encounters.

Orr argues about the significance of legal ramifications of video games. He suggests that legal action should be taken on exploring the content of games rather than placing restrictions on this media. Although Orr has drawn his research on Baudrillard and McLuhan, he still suggests the ascendancy of video games. The paper suggests that future works should focus on understanding the broader effects of video games beyond content, and how they continue to shape cultural norms. Moreover, his probe does not dwell deeper into the hyperreal configuration of video games while my research dives deeper in this area. Orr's research, however, has mostly examined the negative aspects of video games as a kind of communicative technology. My research steps in to offer a fresh viewpoint on video games. My study offers a positive and optimistic face of video games by focusing on gamers with disabilities while employing the concept of "Hyperreality".

2.2.2. Works Done on *TTT*

In this section I have reviewed the available scholarship on Zevin's *TTT*.

Ruben Brundell (2024) in his research "Shifting, Linking and Framing: The Case for Technology as a Coherence-Making Textual Device in Literary Realism" seeks to draw on the theoretical underpinnings of Ian Watt, Eric Auerback and Roland Barthes. Brundell argues "that technology functions as a coherence-making, textual device in literary realism, and that because it does, technology should be considered a defining, distinguishing element of the realist, literary text" (50). Brundell's study takes under consideration the following texts: *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe, *A Simple Heart* by Gustave Flaubert, *Mrs Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, *Jellicoe Road* by Melina Marcetta and *TTT* by Gabrielle Zevin. He attempts to foreground "that technology has a specific and largely overlooked function in the realist text, that certain aspects of the realist narrative . . . are indeed formed by the technological development taking place in the actual" (2). This suggests that through the evidence of technological developments in the aforementioned texts, Brundell has proposed the literary devise of realism. Technology has taken a

considerable section in the literary landscape of both fiction and non-fiction. Not only that, the genre of science fiction and posthumanism rings with the themes of technology and its impact.

Brundell takes into consideration various novels from different writers; however, my review is only focused on Zevin's *TTT*, which is also my principal text. Brundell situates *TTT* in the list of realist fiction. One of the main characters in the text, Sam, suffers from the issue of an amputated foot. Thus, here technology has been used as a metaphor "to introduce Sam's relation to his body to the readers" (Brundell 46). The digital technology of games, "allows for an extreme, physical rendition of Sam's feelings towards his own body" (46). Hence, in this way "digital technology is employed as a textual, coherence-making bridge that allows for the narrative to move between abstract, conceptual thinking and Sam's actual physical state in a seemingly logical manner" (46). This suggests that the technology of gaming medium is invoked to help readers comprehend the internal state of Sam. The gaming medium provides mediation through which Sam's relation with his body is interpreted. It suggests that the way he creates and plays games it narrates a lot about his relation with his body.

Not only that, the other instances because of which Brundell categorises the text as a realist fiction is that "the text is embedded in a timeframe that depicts both actual years and seasons with a high sense of verisimilitude" (Brundell 38). Moreover, it also "mimics historical reality in a detailed manner, to construct a sense of real time passing" (38). Zevin utilises actual urban locations as its setting. She delves extensively into the process of game development and incorporates psychological authenticity to portray the protagonists' deepest emotions and thoughts along with the rationale driving their choices and behaviours. For Brundell, these technological processes that have been depicted in the text provide a temporal framework that further situates the text in a realistic setting of time. Furthermore, the book is structured into distinct sections, where each concentrate on the creation of a game. Over time, there is a noticeable evolution and enhancement in every game compared to its predecessor. Thus, Brundell's study highlights how Zevin illustrates the progression of technology in correlation with the temporal advancements. While Ruben Brundell has traced digital gaming technology as a coherence-making textual device in the

fiction of literary realism, he has not analysed the focused text of Zevin in relation to disability studies. Although the study probes into the relation of gaming technology and disability of the main character, yet it does not dwell deeper in terms of its impact on the social imaginary of him. My project, therefore, attempts to address this gap.

Maureen Corrigan (2022) analyses the selected text as a novel of intricacies. According to her, the structure of the novel is as complicated as the mechanics of video games. The novel is entwined with multiple storylines that make the text further intricate and complex. As the novel utilises the setting of gaming spaces, therefore, “emotions are grounded on shared passions and fierce arguments” that are consequential of the gaming space they are deeply immersed in (Corrigan). For her, the novel “succeeds in both serious art and immersive entertainment” since it deals with both passions and creativity. As the author of the book is Japanese American therefore the text also takes cultural ruminations such as one of the games mentioned in the novel “is inspired by Japanese artist Hokusai’s famous painting *The Great Wave at Kanagawa*”.

Although Corrigan discusses the creativity and passion associated with gaming, she does not analyse the artistic freedom it proffers to disabled gamers. Thus, my intervention does not only highlight the creativity and artistic freedom associated with the medium but also uncover the impact it has on the real lives of a differently abled gamer.

According to Max Dunbar (2022) what makes the story more gripping is through the creation of different characters. The author, Gabrielle Zevin, has not only made them deep and complicated but she has also made them unpredictable. For Dunbar, the story raises the issues of not only male but female gamers and game designers. As the world of game is generally considered male dominated, it creates hurdles for female participants. Dunbar analyses how the novel beautifully describes different timelines related to the creation of video games that ranges from the world of latest virtual games and dates back to arcade machines that were used for gaming prior to the 1990s. Dunbar considers it a multilayered novel as he notes “there are worlds upon worlds inside *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*” (Dunbar). There is a diversity of themes, multiple storylines, and various issues related to every age along with the two worlds of virtual reality and

concrete reality. Dunbar's analysis leaves a gap since he only talks about the female gamers while my project circulates around the disabled male gamer.

Audra Miller (2022) considers *TTT* a story of gaming and gamers. It is the complex tale of bond between two game developers who were more than friends but not lovers. Miller's probe highlights the importance of the connection between two collaborators of the ludic field. He considers the shared experience of gaming more intimate than any other form of friendship. For Miller, the novel has a complicated narrative structure. It "skips around on its timeline largely moving forward chronologically but doubling back or skipping ahead as necessary". The novel centres on multiple issues. It is about "trauma, creativity and gun violence and education and disability and platonic love vs. romantic love" etc. According to Miller the text depicts video games as an art form. Miller praises the text for having a "strong social consciousness". The way it navigates through multiple timelines and multiple issues in those times.

Furthermore, he also highlights that the writing style of the text subtly matches with the games that are being developed in the text. Miller writes that it is a novel of growth that takes place through art particularly the art of video games. He argues that Zevin has realistically portrayed her characters. They are unpredictable and dynamic, growing with experiences and making the readers alter their emotions for them at every change. Miller's analysis does not specifically roam around Samson (the protagonist of the novel), but he writes about the characterisation of the text without exploring the issues of disabled gamers. My research fills the gap by uncovering the impact of gaming activities on the surrounding relationships of the disabled gamer when he is exposed to the gaming medium. Furthermore, it also illuminates the change that takes place in the social imaginaries of the concerned gamer.

Pippa Bailey (2022) analyses that Zevin's *TTT* has masterfully weaves the two worlds of playing and reading together. Moreover, the text is written in gripping language which is comprehensible for non-gamers as well. The novel is free from all kinds of heavy jargon related to the field of computers or video games. For Bailey, Zevin has beautifully crafted the relationship of her two main characters that is based on the "joining of minds and of worlds that is both purer and sweeter than any physical attraction" (Bailey). As this

is the story of two collaborators of video games rather than two lovers or friends. As Sadie, one of the main characters in the text, says that “true collaborators in this life are rare” (*TTT* 393). Zevin depicts a world of freedom through the depiction of gaming worlds.

My intervention suggests the intricacies of hyperrealism that gaming medium has to offer. In relation to that it highlights the link between gamers with disabilities and the changes in their social imaginaries.

2.2.3. Works Done on Stuart's *ABMB*

This part contains a review of the scholarly research available on *ABMB*. Since this novel has yet to receive scholarly inquiry, the researcher has chosen a few articles.

Holly Parker (2023) has talked about technological utopia and neoliberal regime in Keith Stuart's *ABMB*. His essay “‘It's as if We're Free of Ourselves': Minecraft and Techno-Utopias in Keith Stuart's '*A Boy Made of Blocks*'”, argues that Minecraft presents a space that provides everyday liberty to the protagonist Sam and his father Alex. However, this technologically utopian space encompasses the culture of video gaming by considering it a neoliberal system. In addition, Parker's essay also takes into consideration the character of Alex, Sam's father. He notes that Alex's character is portrayed to show a typical father who is forced to undergo his role as a father and a husband. Likewise, Sam is also expected to retrace the same behavioural traits that one can expect from neurotypical children. In this way, Minecraft is a space to escape for both of them.

Parker draws his essay on the theoretical framework provided by performance studies and the affect theory. It highlights how neoliberalism of the gaming space informs the gameplay experience of Sam with Minecraft. Therefore, the study depicts an overlap between performance study and neoliberalism to show that how the contours of neoliberalism informs the performance of Sam in Minecraft. In terms of performance study, Parker draws on Jon Mckenzie's *Perform or Else* and Marvin Carlson's essay of “What is Performance”. The essay also argues that performance is an iterative phenomenon; therefore, Sam and Alex assimilate their performances of daily lives in the game. Parker has based his study on the notions of performance with gaming culture

prevalent in Minecraft in relation to neoliberalism. However, my research probes into the contours of Minecraft to analyse the development of Sam's gamer identity, while drawing in the light of disability studies.

Stela Plesa (2019) in her article "A Cognitive Approach to Stuart's *A Boy Made of Blocks*" draws on Alan Palmer's construct of intermental and intramental thought that refer to thought processes that occur between individuals and within an individual's mind, respectively. Palmer is a linguist whose book *Fictional Minds* elaborates on the theory of thought-action processes of a character in fictional worlds. Plesa employs Palmer's construct to figure out the consciousness of the two main characters Sam and Alex in Stuart's *ABMB*. The article brings into light the perceptual and cognitive viewpoint of the characters through which Plesa has examined them in the novel for the analysis.

The articles highlight the significance of Xbox in the lives of the main characters. Palmer notes "The Xbox increases the 'motivation' within both of them to interrelate with each other and to become empathetic and highly communicative, turning their private minds into 'social minds'" (119). This addition strengthens their inter-mental process while decreasing their tension at the intra-mental level. Here, Xbox is considered as a mean to connect their minds; this causes a decrease in their communicative gap. In addition to that, Plesa argues that if the communication has taken place in their intramental space but later slowly and gradually it is shifted to intermental space. Hence, the article illuminates the impact of digital media, particularly a video game, on the lives of the character while bringing out a change into the characters' cognitive levels.

Drawing on Palmer's construct, Plesa decodes the actions and thoughts of the characters by figuring out the relation between them. She notes that "since words describe both the characters' behaviour and their states of mind, the descriptions of characters' actions occur along the 'thought-action continuum'" (121). Plesa's extensive analysis helps understand the characters' mental functioning both at intermental and intramental level. The tension and struggle found in the beginning between the intramental level of Sam and Alex "is quickly surpassed through Alex's suggestion that they should play Minecraft" (122). For her, "the switch from Sam's 'intra-mental' to 'inter-mental thought'" is a sign of growth and progress for Sam (125). Hence, she relies heavily on Palmer's cognitive

construct of thought in action for understanding the cognitive functioning of the main characters in order to read the actions of the characters. Nevertheless, she explores the mental events of the two main characters, Sam and Alex, at great length but her research only circulates on their cognitive functioning and does not intervene in the arena of sociology. However, my research fills the aforementioned gap. It also highlights the change in the perception of technology and the social imaginaries of the selected gamer as a result of his ludic activities.

Rob Gallagher (2018) in his article “Minecrafting Masculinities: Gamer Dads, Queer Childhoods and Father-Son Gameplay in *A Boy Made of Blocks*” argues about the “portrayal of a father-son relationship mediated via a video game” (1). This article invokes Kathryn Bond Stockton’s concepts on development of queer childhood in relation to games. The article argues that gaming practices may offer a space for exploring and expressing non-normative identities and experiences, particularly for players who may feel marginalised or excluded in mainstream culture. Gallagher also takes inspiration from McReur’s crip theory to explore the development of queer childhood in a gaming culture.

For Gallagher gaming spaces challenges the traditional notions by “providing a counterpoint to discourses that associate gaming with addiction, anomie and bigotry” (6). His research probes into the element of acceptance and adaptation in the gaming fields for players, but it does not specifically address the issues related to disabled gamer. His analysis moves around disabled as well queer players. In this way, he talks about “equipping adults and children alike to expand their conceptions of gender and ability” (6). Nevertheless, he offers a critique of the novel’s approach to these topics, contending that it lacks sufficient evidence for its proposed resolutions and comprehensive descriptions of societal transformations resulting from the interrogation of conventional ideologies.

However, Gallagher also critiques the novel about the transformation of one of the main characters Alex who follows “the construction of a new form of masculinity better suited to the demands of post-Fordist culture” (6). Meanwhile, the study strives to dismantle the traditional norms of queer child and masculinity through the gaming space. In this way, Alex’ transformation depicts the “outdated models of masculinity” (Gallagher 8). In addition to that, Gallagher argues that the book advocates the idea of gaming culture

as a means to “detoxifying masculinity” as well as a source for “bringing people together” (9-10). His research has exclusively focused on the construction of masculine identity, the evolution of disabled queer childhood, and the enhancement of interpersonal connections within gaming environments. Although he too probes into the development of a differently abled child in relation to disability studies, his study does not intervene in the intricacies of the gaming medium. My research attempts to plug the aforementioned gap by unearthing the complexities, immersions and interactivity of the gaming world within the realm of disability studies.

The review of sources in the foregoing pages has pointed out gaps that my study is likely to fill, particularly in studying the hyperreal aspects of gaming space and its impact on the social imaginaries of differently abled players. My research project moves towards my intervention of “curative gaming”. However, in terms of differently abled players, my study takes into consideration both physically and mentally disabled gamers. Therefore, invoking these theoretical positions may help investigate how these differently abled players use gaming spaces as a medium to gain agency in the gaming world. This in turn also affects their agencies and social imaginaries in the concrete world. These notions have not hitherto been employed in the discussions surrounding these novels; it leaves the novels untapped in the available scholarship. However, I have provided only a few book reviews and research essays on the selected novels under scrutiny because these are the most relevant to my area of investigation.

First and foremost, reviewing a variety of secondary sources pertinent to various areas of my study enables me to contextualise it within the body of existing scholarship. Second, by reading these evaluations, I have taken guidance in choosing my theoretical framework and research approach that I have discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

The preceding chapter of Literature Review has provided me with crucial insights and aided me in identifying the gaps for my research. It has further supported me in formulating my theoretical framework and allowing me to express my analytical viewpoint on the selected primary texts. Furthermore, it has also contributed towards determining my research methodology. I have divided this chapter into three parts, Introduction, Theoretical Framework, and Research Methodology. The following subsection discusses the theoretical framework that I have invoked in order to analyse the selected texts.

3.2. Theoretical Framework

The intersections of disability studies, ludology, sociology, and popular culture fiction provide the theoretical framework for my research. I have employed the theoretical positions of Kirkpatrick's "Gamer Identity", Taylor's "Social Imaginary" and Siebers' "Complex Embodiment" as my main props. Moreover, this research also deploys Baudrillard's "Hyperreality" as a secondary prop for support. The rationale behind adapting these ideas is to build a comprehensive map for researching how differently abled players evolve as a result of their continuous engagement with gaming spaces. Moreover, such long-term interaction also uncovers the consequential effects on their social imaginaries. For clarity, I have divided my theoretical framework into the following subheadings.

3.2.1 Kirkpatrick's Gamer Identity

Graeme Kirkpatrick, in his seminal work *Computer Games and Social Imaginary* (2013), lays out the concept of "Gamer Identity". In his view, "Gamer identity is defined by the presence within it of unresolved contradictions associated with the form: it is poised uncomfortably between technology and art; it is neither childish nor adult; and it is both therapeutic and ... addictive" (73). The binaries of *technology* and *art*, *childish* and *adult*, and *therapeutic* and *addictive* visibly show the unresolved contradictions of gamer identity. Kirkpatrick draws on Charles Taylor's concept of "Social Imaginary" to highlight how games change the way of perceiving society and making sense of available technology. Furthermore, video games are also used as a medium to socialise with others in a simulated society as an alternative to real society by involving different ludic practices.

Games are a form of popular mass media that demands active participation of their users. In order to engage with them, this medium requires the formulation of reciprocal relationship with its players. As games are a "source of human creativity and inventiveness" incorporating these kinds of behaviours into the lifestyles of consumers may encourage them to "import the prospect of new forms of dependency" (Kirkpatrick 21). However, this dependency can be in the form of addiction that harbours the prospect of escapism. On the other hand, it can also foster the space to alleviate their gamers on their social scale by providing interactions that they lack in their concrete world. This suggests that the identity of gamers is imbued with the persona of "gamer habitus" that increases their propensity to partake in such ludic activities (72). Hence, the identity imbued with ludic fields is a constructed identity that becomes visible from the corporeal actions of their players.

Kirkpatrick further explains on the gamer identity by considering it as something solely developed through a practice of consistent interaction rather than the one based on "cognitive acquisition" (81). Here, Kirkpatrick explicitly makes it distinct from those identities that require cognitive propensities or active learning. In addition to that, Kirkpatrick suggests, these individuals have their own way of "picking up a controller, or rattling keys and twisting a mouse in the specific manner associated with playing computer games" that appears quite "natural and obvious to them" (82). This implies that gamers

with persistent gaming habits develop novel ways to perceive their bodies and acquire a distinctive mindset or disposition toward them.

Kirkpatrick positions gaming in contemporary society where the concept of gaming has achieved the level of identity construction and an act of playing games is a cultural practice. Henceforth, the culture of gaming is crucial for the development of such kinds of identities in order to create communities of gamers who “possess the embodied perceptions and skills necessary to play games” (72). In addition to that, players find the discourses, narratives, and communities around gaming as reflections of their identities, and their experiences. The persistent interactions of gaming media become their embodied experience and slowly and gradually it becomes a part of their identities.

Gaming is an activity that can also be practiced in a secluded space as well as in the shared space of gaming. However, in the shared space, ludic engagement fosters the opportunities for community building and social interaction in wider level. In the process of creating a gaming culture in such communities, gamers require the need to share their *habitus* in a form of community that is only designed for gaming purposes. Kirkpatrick considers it a sort of imagined community and in the struggle for that, he comments, “players have forged their own vocabularies for evaluating and criticizing games and generated a new community (of ‘gamers’) in the process” (36). It provides them with an emancipatory atmosphere where they can practise their *habitus* in their own way with those who share their interests. Moreover, by incorporating such behaviouralistic traits, they develop their own culture of gaming community that unites them in their offline as well as online ludic worlds.

However, in terms of gaming as a recuperative practice, Kirkpatrick has not dwelled deep into its virtues, but he does acknowledge that it is a “place where people can secure recognition for their achievements” and they “derive satisfaction from performing well” (91). My project adds to the depth of its virtues by investigating the positive attributes of gaming practices particularly for those who belong from the communities of disabled gamers. These positive qualities represent the ameliorative gaming atmosphere that proves to be therapeutic in terms of building their social networks. Thus, in this study, I introduce and deploy the concept of “curative gaming” as a part of my analytical framework. I

foreground “curative gaming” as the primary interventionary concept that capture the idea of gaming as a beneficial activity on the social tiers of its gamers by providing them with the space for their creativity. However, this conceptual terrain intersects with what Ulrich Brandstätter and Christa Sommerer have referred to as “productive gaming”, which they define as a practice that “transforms playing activities into creative processes, facilitating creations with validity beyond game virtualities” (1). Additionally, Michelle Reid, in her online article “Playing for Well-being: The Rise of Video Games in Therapy”, mentions it as “therapeutic gaming” particularly in contexts where gaming is applied as a tool in medical or psychological interventions. Nevertheless, I retain the term “curative gaming” as my preferred terminology, as neither “productive gaming” nor “therapeutic gaming” have yet achieved standardized or dominant status in academic discourse. My coinage allows for a more nuanced and theoretically flexible engagement with the potential of games to mediate healing, creativity, and self-reclamation.

Moreover, in terms of technology, Kirkpatrick is of the view that production and promulgation of video games as well as the spread of its culture does not depend solely on the development of technology. On the contrary, he considers these two developments completely interdependent. It's not only the games and gaming culture that gets updated with the awareness of technology, but the technology too enters domestic spaces through the rise of gaming culture. As Maillet and De Meyer (2005) in their essay “The History of the Videogame”, note that, “the continuous development of computer technology has served as the driving force behind the ever-increasing sophistication of video games” (24). Kirkpatrick contends the reciprocal relation of technology with games where the former increases the growth of the latter and the demand of the latter aestheticises the former, consequently increasing its popularity.

Kirkpatrick’s concept of “Gamer Identity” is based on Boltanski and Chiapello’s *New Spirit of Capitalism*; therefore, he contextualises computer games as a networked and creative display of capitalism. Kirkpatrick emphasises the current atmosphere of work that adopted engaging tendencies in order to attract the workers for the progress of their capitalist machinery. This is the novel strategy of capitalist regime that works on the idea games by fostering a playful atmosphere of workplaces. This makes it quite contrary to the

“old hierarchical bureaucracies” because in the current atmosphere, the working of organisations depends on people in order to manage their progress (23). Similarly, in relation to video games, they are a part of broader capitalist machinery and game designers sell millions of their copies as commodities every day. In this manner, by partaking in gaming activities, gamers as consumers willingly entrench themselves in the web of capitalist machinery.

Moreover, in relation to the addictive propensity of games, gaming spaces create an emancipatory and idealised form of the world that sometimes blurs the boundary between reality and fiction by proffering hyperrealistic experiences. In line with this argument, Jane McGonigal suggests, as paraphrased by Kirkpatrick, “computer games offer a utopian alternative to reality, acknowledges that the activities we engage in with them often efface the conventional distinction between work and play” (25). Here, McGonigal’s argument serves to complement Boltanski and Chiapello’s conception of playful web capitalism. Her stance is akin to Baudrillard’s conception of Hyperreality that also deals with the creation of an alternate form of reality that replaces the original by evaporating the boundaries that differentiate them.

Here I may take a departure from the theory of Kirkpatrick and problematise it in line with my argument. I argue that though the production of gaming culture helps construct the gaming identity (that involves capitalist machinery), yet it does possess a tendency to transmogrify the abilities of its consumers, in this case, gamers. Therefore, gaming culture is speculated as beneficial and healthy by giving the video gamers agency. Moreover, my research attempts to provide a reasonable understanding of the therapeutic potential of games. I intervene in the sense of tapping into the productive potential of video games regarding differently abled players, an area that has largely been overlooked by Kirkpatrick. His focus mainly remains on the capitalist side of video games.

As this investigation focuses on how the culture of games is altering the social imaginaries of its users, the “Gamer Identity” is likely to be supportive in the discussion of the focused players in the selected primary texts. I discuss the idea of social imaginary in the next section.

3.2.2. Charles Taylor's Concept of "Social Imaginary"

In the preceding section, in relation to "Gamer Identity", Kirkpatrick draws on Charles Taylor's concept of "Social Imaginary" based on his book *Modern Social Imaginaries* (2004). Therefore, this project also invokes Taylor's theorising of "Social Imaginary" as one of the major props to pursue the argument. Taylor argues that "Social Imaginary" refers to "the way people imagine their social existence, and how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows" (23). The idea in this citation serves as a lens for my investigation because it structures our understanding of how players as social beings imagine their interactions with the society they are living in. Furthermore, it encompasses "our common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life" (24). Social imaginary is an acquired conception of the world that we gain with the passage of time by making ourselves inhabit that space. It starts from our daily day to day practices and extends to the collective behavioural traits that are in accordance with every society. Therefore, such norms and practices that serve to function as our social imaginaries vary from society to society. Nevertheless, they help govern our "implicit map of (a) social space" (25). They further aid our understanding of social interactions such as with whom, in what ways and under what circumstances we can associate.

The ingrained perception regarding our social imaginary is largely unstructured and works on our collective consciousness about how interaction is supposed to take place. Therefore, Taylor considers it "imaginary" rather than a "social theory" because it stems on indefinite and unlimited perceptions and "not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends" (23). Social imaginary, therefore, largely depends on our cultural patterns. Therefore, one way of transmitting its understanding is through the transmission of oral traditions. So, it does not require a set of lengthy theoretical principals in order to incorporate it rather than it speaks to our common understanding of our everyday social reality. In addition to that, it is not a theory also because it applies to "large groups of people" and implies "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (23). Hence, the social imaginary encompasses the observed or everyday patterns of social conduct as well as the ideals or

anticipations concerning the ideal patterns. All these perceptions are intricately intertwined and mutually influential. Within this social imaginary, a perception exists regarding which actions or behaviours are deemed legitimate or appropriate. This involves a comprehension of actions that would be classified as "missteps" or departures from the normative ideals, potentially rendering specific practices null. These missteps may be viewed as behaviours that contravene societal norms, values, or expectations. (24). This suggests that social imaginary is both "factual" as well as "normative" that in turns includes how things are supposed to take place and how they usually take place (24). It enables us to navigate our way through everyday social interactions and thereby refraining from those practices that are considered as errors in accordance with the particular social space where we are living.

This thesis interrogates the limitations of the traditional social imaginary and reconfigures it through my own theoretical intervention. While Taylor refer to the daily interactions, norms, practices that makes up our social lives, he does not mention the use of screen in between. However, my project dwells deeper into the way the digital spaces of gaming has entered into the lives of the selected players. This inclusion of ludic media has significantly altered the conventional social map by becoming an important ingredient of their lives, let alone remapping them into a sociotechnical imaginary. In the subsequent section, I examine the idea of "complex embodiment".

3.2.3. Tobin Siebers' Concept of "Complex Embodiment"

I have deployed Tobin Siebers' concept of "Complex Embodiment" in *Disability Theory*, published in 2008, as one of the principal theoretical positions to study the experiences of characters with disabilities in the selected primary sources. According to Siebers, the theory of complex embodiment "understands disability as an epistemology that rejects the temptation to value the body as anything other than what it was and that embraces what the body has become and will be relative to the demands on it, whether environmental, representational or corporeal" (27). The idea liberates disability from the confines of a medical condition by considering it as a product of an interaction of a body with its social space. By diverting the lens towards the margin of disability, it serves as an *epistemology* to analyse other defective theories that take the place of a centre and dominate

in the social map. This is how it provides a counter argument to the theory of able-bodiedness that situates able-bodied individuals in the centre and negates the existence and demands associated with a disabled body. However, here *environmental*, *representational*, and *corporeal* demands refer to the need for accessibility and accommodation in the physical environment, the need to have a positive portrayal in society and the need to navigate through the social space to perform their daily tasks, respectively. Hence, this notion of embracement and acceptance of distinct bodily experiences is invoked as a theoretical support for the analyses of my selected primary texts.

The theory of “complex embodiment” relates to the oppression faced by the community of disabled individuals along with their social locations where the bodies are situated. The experiences through which these bodies undergo are complexly embodied because the “oppressed social locations create identities and perspectives, embodiments and feelings, histories and experiences that stand outside of and offer valuable knowledge about the powerful ideologies that seem to enclose us” (Siebers 8). However, one of the most powerful ideologies that is critiqued and subverted is the ideology of able-bodiedness. It is “the preference of able-bodiedness” (8). According to Siebers, it is a discriminatory ideology and has further given rise to the construction of biased social locations (8). These social locations further sideline those individuals, resulting in psychological pain, who are already going through some sort of disability and physical and mental pain, associated with it. The experiences resulting from the navigation through such spaces forms a complex impact on disabled bodies.

Simi Linton situates minority identities, associated with some sort of disabilities, as positive identities and Siebers affirms her argument by arguing that those “individuals who identify positively rather than negatively with their disability status lead more productive and happier lives” (11). Therefore, by accepting disability as a positive identity, it provides greater chances to know more and get control over their distinct abilities. Not only that, the acceptance and embracement of a body with disability as a positive identity serves as a counter argument that dismantles the theory of able-bodiedness since the latter foregrounds the notion of perfection. In line with this argument, Siebers’ argument provides a political move against the dominated and defective ideologies that negate the

prospect for considering individuals with disabilities as another form of humanity rather than an anomaly.

Siebers describes disability as a minority identity. Prior to that, disability was mostly seen as a medical intervention that deserved to be cured. However, by ascribing disability as a form of identity, Siebers inserts a deformed or disabled body into the arena of politics of identity. Furthermore, by considering disability as a minority, he has altered the way it should be addressed. He argues that it “must be addressed not as personal misfortune or individual defect but as the product of disabling social and built environment” (3). Here, Siebers refers to the representational need of individuals with disabilities because the way they are depicted and addressed in society as well as in the media reflects a lot about the malfunctioning nature of the *social* and *built environment*. Therefore, Siebers notes, “people with disabilities insist on the pertinence of disability to the human condition, on the value of disability as a form of diversity” (3). In this way, disability studies aim for advocacy for the normalisation of the deformed body and present disability as a distinct ability rather than a lack. However, it is crucial to include disability stance in the politics of identity because through the “power of disability as a critical concept” one can evaluate the oppressive social patterns and stigmas of the society of able-bodied individuals. (3) It suggests the necessity to include bodies in the arena of identities in order to comprehend their relative needs that cannot be understood by focusing on the limitations of disability alone.

The theoretical stance of “Complex Embodiment” may offer an adequate framework for how the disabled characters engage with gaming media. It illuminates how the physical experiences of a disabled person affect his view of the outside world. In the following section, I discuss the concept of hyperreality.

3.2.4. Baudrillard’s Concept of “Hyperreality”

Since this study takes into consideration the genre of Ludology that deals with the culture of simulation, I have deployed Jean Baudrillard’s concept of Hyperreality expounded in *Simulacra and Simulation*, published in 1981, as a reading prop for supporting the argument. It is used to study the simulated experience and culture provided

by the gaming world. Baudrillard holds: “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without an origin or reality; a hyperreality” (1). This suggests that in earlier times models, structures or images referred to something concrete with their own physical boundary and existence. However, in today’s time of advanced technology, the models represent something that does not exist in reality. The simulations of a reality have taken the place of reality. Hence, this “constructed reality” is known as hyperreality (7). This results in blurring the line of distinction between fiction and fact.

In line with this argument, the blending of boundaries in the hyperreal world of virtual reality causes its users' minds to become vulnerable and to remain unaware of its hyperreality. They eventually may perceive it to be more substantial than the real world around them. This pivotal notion of blurring the boundaries between a real and its simulation is invoked by the current investigation for reading the texts.

In the technologically advanced world, the reality of the physical world has been defeated and replaced by various simulations. Based on the interactions with these simulations and understanding of the *real* as represented through technological commodities, the postmodern man develops his own experience of reality. Baudrillard’s theoretical position of “Hyperreality” may help extend the discussion of gaming media. Consequently, it further highlights the features of video games, and the intricacies associated with their interaction with gamers.

After elaborating the theoretical framework, I have discussed my research methodology in detail in the next section.

3.3. Research Methodology

This research project is located in the qualitative paradigm because it focuses on exploring and interpreting the texts rather than relying on quantified outcomes. The research design of this study is interpretive and exploratory. As my analysis is qualitative in nature, it is largely subjective. The present investigation involves textual analysis as a research method by employing Kirkpatrick’s concept of “Gamer Identity”, Taylor’s

“Social Imaginary”, Siebers’ “Complex Embodiment” as the main props and Baudrillard’s “Hyperreality” as a secondary prop for support. My study uses this method by considering lines or paragraphs from the selected primary sources and then further explicating them by drawing on the aforementioned concepts. I explain my research method in the following section.

3.3.1. Textual Analysis

As already mentioned, I have used Catherine Belsey’s concept of Textual Analysis as my research method. Since my research is qualitative in nature, the analyses of texts is qualitative and, therefore, largely subjective. This idea is in line with Belsey’s concept of analysis, as she notes that research is “supposed to be ‘original’ in that it is independent” (189). Although she foregrounds the originality of research, it must develop on pre-established facts (the available scholarship) that work together to construct new ideas.

As textual analysis foregrounds the subjectivity of a researcher, there is no single real interpretation. The reading of texts is backed up both by textual evidence and secondary sources. However, apart from assembling the secondary sources, textual analysis also works on engaging with ideas in the light of different theories operating in the realm of disability studies, gaming studies, sociology, and postmodernism that intersect together to pursue my argument. This bricolage has helped me do my textual analysis. In addition to that, the study also takes into consideration various secondary sources from the broad range of disciplines in order to strengthen my argument.

Textual analysis supports unearthing multiplicity of meanings and varied number of interpretations. Furthermore, it deals with challenging the “specificity of the text” because “there is no moment of ‘origin’ but only breaks with what went before” (194). The potential interpretations based on the careful scrutiny of the selected texts suggest that there is no one correct meaning. Belsey’s argument of textual analysis is quite in line with what poststructuralism argues in terms of the multiplicity of meanings. Therefore, in her essay of “Textual Analysis as a Research Method” in Gabriele Griffin’s *Research Methods for English Studies* (2014), she refers to post structuralism as it also asserts differences. On account of this information, Belsey quotes Barthes in her essay, as he records: “A text is

made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author” (192). This suggests that a text is the complex product of a wide range of cultural sources that assemble in the form of dialogue, parody, and contestation in order to produce a broad range of meanings. It relies on the reader, how they excavate meanings in relation to their own context instead of relying on the author for its interpretation. Hence, textual analysis is about the connection between a text and the reader/interpreter. Therefore, textual analysis is an appropriate method for my current investigation. For the sake of clarity and convenience, I have followed the following steps for my textual analysis:

- i. Close reading of the texts.
- ii. Drawing upon different theoretical positions.
- iii. Interpreting the texts with the support of secondary sources.
- iv. Identifying the untapped areas in the study.
- v. Evaluating the “intertexts, and reading them attentively too, to establish the specificity of the text in question” (Belsey 194).
- vi. Find possible answers to research questions.

As my discussion in the foregoing pages shows, my research is qualitative in nature, and I have employed textual analysis as a research method. I have closely read and analysed my primary texts in the light of Tobin Siebers’ concept of “Complex Embodiment” because it engages with the complex impacts on the bodies of disabled individuals in relation to the social locations. Moreover, the project also takes under consideration Graeme Kirkpatrick’s idea of “Gamer Identity” that centres on the concept of persistent gaming as a powerful cultural practice. Furthermore, the current investigation also employs Charles Taylor’s concept of “Social Imaginary” that deal with the individual’s notion of social existence. In addition to that, Baudrillard’s view of “Hyperreality”, complements by theoretical framework, that considers the inability of consciousness to distinguish reality from its simulation.

In the next two chapters, keeping in view my research questions, I have done textual analyses of the selected primary sources.

CHAPTER 4

EMBRACING DIFFERENTLY ABLED SELF IN ZEVIN'S *TOMORROW, AND TOMORROW, AND* *TOMORROW*: A LUDOLOGICAL-DISABILITY PERSPECTIVE

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I critically examine Gabrielle Zevin's *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow*³ from the theoretical positions of Kirkpatrick, Siebers, Taylor and Baudrillard. The title of this chapter refers to the main idea that I have attempted to investigate in the analysis of *TTT*. I explore if the intersection of disability studies and ludology leads to the reconstruction of social identities of differently abled gamers. This chapter foregrounds a differently abled gaming enthusiast, Samson Masur, who has the physical disability of amputated foot. I do my analysis with a trajectory from a critical engagement with physically disabled protagonist in chapter four to cognitively disabled player in chapter five. The reason is that moving from the former to the latter gives me a more interdisciplinary insight into a nuanced analysis of the issues of my two differently abled protagonists. In this chapter, therefore, I analyse the character of Samson and his navigation through ludic and concrete spaces with his physical limitations to examine if he emerges as an agentive subject. I scrutinise the prevalence of ludic culture that supports the development of gamer identities. Not only that, but the chapter also highlights how an individual with a disability identity has to deal with his health before making himself preoccupied with the gaming world. The analysis of Samson's life before and after his

³See my footnote on p.1, ch.1. Henceforth, I will use the abbreviation *TTT* for *Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow* across my thesis for in-text citation and indented quotes.

interaction with the gaming medium leaves us in a better position to appreciate the changes in his social life.

The analysis moves towards finding answers to all three controlling research questions. I study the configurations of hyperreal video games that allow the development of ludic identities. Moreover, it is crucial to mention here that in terms of *a persistent interaction with gaming medium*, as already mentioned in my thesis statement, I scrutinise Samson's interaction in terms of both playing as well as designing games, which further distinguishes this analysis from that in the next chapter. To add, I also investigate if the long-term engagement with such ludic spaces leaves an impact on the social imaginary of the player. This impact is probed both in ludic and the concrete world to see if Samson emerges as an autonomous figure in such spaces. In order to locate my principal text in Zevin's work, I present here a brief biographical sketch of the writer.

Gabrielle Zevin, an American author and screenplay writer, is half Korean because of her mother and half-American because of her American-born Ashkenazi Jewish father. Born on 24 October 1977 in New York, Zevin graduated in English Literature at Harvard University in 2000 and currently she is residing in Los Angeles. She has authored 10 books and various screenplays in her 17 years of writing career. Her debut work is *Margarettown* (2005) followed by successful screenplays such as *Conversations with Other Women* (2005) that was nominated for Independent Spirit Award for Best First Screenplay. Her other works include *The Hole We're In* (2010), *The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry* (2014) and *Young Jane Young* (2017). Her novels have also been given designations of New York Times bestseller and National Indie bestseller. Moreover, she has also received the Southern California Independent Bookseller Award. *TTT*, published in 2022, is the well-known work of Gabrielle Zevin that foregrounds the prevalence of gaming culture. The book has caught my attention for the analysis of my research because of the portrayal of the theme of ludology versus disability. In the book, the constructed ludic world comes in contact with the normative world of humans that result in the fabrication of new personas. The book also rings with the notion of navigating a life with a disability in the context of digital technology of video games. Although the book dwells into the lives of many players and their interaction with ludic media, but the character of Samson Masur with an

amputated foot is the focus of my study. I have analysed *TTT* under the following subheadings.

4.2. Levelling up Identity within a Ludic Culture

In this section, I argue that Gabrielle Zevin's *TTT* succinctly depicts the production of gaming identities within a gaming culture. The selected text presents the character of Samson⁴ who develops a gamer identity through his extensive gameplay with gaming spaces within a gaming culture. Before going into the detailed discussion of the development of a constructed gamer identity that leads to the reconstruction of Samson's social identity, it is instructive to discuss the depiction of gaming culture that is entrenched in the novel.

The culture of video games refers to the huge transformation that has taken place in the modern society where games have taken the mainstream position rather than just remaining a juvenile activity. The current gaming culture harbours its own sets of communities that involve social interactions in terms of gaming competition, whether online or offline. As the culture of games has evolved, it has begun to influence other areas of society such as media, politics, economy, and even medicine.

In order to pursue my argument, I foreground Kirkpatrick's definition of the gaming culture, as he defines it as "a place that allows people to rationalize the pleasure they take in an activity [of gaming] with reference to an imagined community who share their values" (91). This suggests how the gaming culture is connecting like-minded people to unite them and also boost each other by providing recognition through the space. Furthermore, in *Video Games as Culture* (2018), Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford's claim about gaming culture also supports my discussion. They articulate that video game culture is "the institutionalisation of video game practices, experiences and meanings in

⁴ Zevin has mostly referred to Samson as Sam throughout the novel. However, I have referred to him with his full name "Samson" in order to differentiate him from the character of my second principal text whose name is also Sam.

contemporary societies, which places video games and video gaming as an important part of our social imaginary” (18). Based on this discussion, I claim that such a type of culture is constructed in *TTT* that situates gaming in the forefront and recreates identities that are deeply embedded in the social system of ludic technology. Moreover, this culture also focuses on improving their social imaginaries accordingly.

I initiate this discussion with the analysis of Samson Masur, generally referred to as Sam in the novel. He recreates his own identity through incorporating extensive gameplay, under the influence of this gaming culture in his social imaginary. The visual imagery of Samson’s interaction with digital technology of games is spread across the novel. While referring to Samson’s childhood, the narrator highlights:

He lost himself in the minor stakes of the Old West world It was easy to remember why this simple game had absorbed them so much when they were young. Many afternoons, they had lain side by side on his hospital bed, sharing one identity, making decisions together, passing a fifteen-pound laptop back and forth. (*TTT* 337)

This passage reflects that Samson has completely preoccupied himself in the immersive culture of gaming. These are the days when he got hit by a speeding car, and his left foot got crushed. Afterwards, he tries to overcome his physical limitation by immersing himself in the ludic world. The social imaginary of Samson is considerably impacted when he incorporates gaming culture in his life. This is a major attribute of a gaming culture that it fosters a participatory culture that in turn provides a window to escape by involving gaming activities as “common practices” in his life (Taylor 23). Moreover, this passage also rings with an element of nostalgia. It underscores how he has spent an ample amount of childhood playing games. Not only that, the reference to *one identity* actually signals towards Samson’s gamer identity that helps him make connections not only in the virtual world but also in the offline world under the shared experience of gaming with his friend Sadie.

The very first line of the first chapter of *TTT* opens up with an introduction to Samson and him being fully acquainted and addicted with gaming activities. The novel

“does not follow what would traditionally be described as a linear chronology, but shifts back and forth between time periods and locations with analepsis and prolepsis” (Brundell 37). Therefore, it begins with the establishment of Samson as an experienced and a professional gamer. Moreover, the selected text introduces Samson in the following words: “Before Mazer invented himself as Mazer, he was Samson Mazer, and before he was Samson Mazer, he was Samson Masur—a change of two letters that transformed him from a nice, ostensibly Jewish boy to a Professional Builder of Worlds” (*TTT* 3). When Samson begins to design games in addition to playing them, his popularity soars. He opts for game designer as his career therefore he is being referred as a *builder of worlds*. It describes the transformation and growth of his identity from Samson Masur to Mazer. The gaming identity of Samson is easily recognizable when he decides to rename himself. His name *Samson Masur*, which is the very first marker of his identity, is altered because of his long-term engagement with games. Here, hyperreality is at play. In addition, it is crucial to mention here that Samson’s development of his gamer identity involves solely his own efforts. Therefore, he knowingly constructs his gamer identity of Mazer, his ludic avatar, thereby blurring the boundaries between his real self and his “constructed world” (Baudrillard 7). Moreover, it reflects an idea that his simulation is more influential than his real self. Mazer is the name of his ludic avatar that receives more recognition than Samson Masur himself.

Kirkpatrick has borrowed a term from Pierre Bourdieu to propose the term for such persistent gamers who are “equipped to perceive certain machines as games and with the habituated dispositions and inclinations necessary to play them, that is a gamer habitus” (72). In the wake of this information, such people are fully immersed in their ludic activities because they “possess the embodied perception” that is required for ludic practices (72). This means that such gamers fully identify themselves in the gaming activities that depict their emotional as well as physical involvement. The embodied relation with this digital technology is widespread and its impact is tremendous. Similarly, in the selected text Samson’s identity is fully compliant to the aforementioned norms in result of his long-term embodied interaction with the gaming technology, as he himself declares that gaming is “all hand-eye coordination and observing patterns” (*TTT* 18). The selected novel has portrayed the character of Samson who has been playing games since childhood. Therefore,

he is “habitués of science fairs, the Academic Games league, and numerous other competitions (oratory, robotics, creative writing, programming)” (5). Here, the text has depicted Samson, as he is fully ingrained into the gaming fields and the other disciplines related to it such as robotics and technology. This citation serves as a foreshadowing of Samson’s character that later emerges as a professional gamer and a popular game designer due to his propensity towards technology and art.

The novel closely follows the timeline of a gaming culture in the USA that has started to boom in the late 1980s. With the populace of internet facilities, digital gaming has become a part of a culture. Prior to that period, gaming was considered “merely as a fad or a popular craze” (Kirkpatrick 70). However, Samson’s connection with the ludic world is more than just a fad, and it leaves a lasting impact on his personality akin to legacy. Samson’s constructed gamer identity can be further understood in the light of Zevin’s conception of identity that relates with the environment one grows in. In one of her interviews conducted in 2022 available online, conducted by Helen Brown for a British newspaper, *The Independent*, Zevin argues in terms of identity creation:

As a member of Gen X⁵, I wanted to ask questions about the people who came of age along with the internet. I did. I think it affected the way we think about identity. We’re like the middle child, squashed in between the boomers [who think of identity as fixed] and the Gen Y kids [who think everything is fluid]. We’re, like, the translators, bouncing between the real world and the virtual world. Video games totally changed our perspective on identity. (Brown)

Gen X has seen the pre internet eras as well as they are the ones that have seen a surge of digital technology. It makes them different from both baby boomers as well as millennial or generation Y. The gaming identity of Sam is based on addiction with games, but its impact is reciprocal. Being a member of generation X, he is influenced by the hyperreal gaming environment, and his persistent interaction with this media also strengthens the gaming culture. Pertaining to the notion of gaming identity, Brendan Keogh also highlights

⁵ Gen X is an abbreviated form of Generation X, where X stands for the perplexed nature of this generation. It refers to the range of people born approximately between 1965 to 1980.

the criteria of a gamer identity in his online article “Hackers, Gamers and Cyborgs”. Samson fully matches this criterion as he is “male, young, skilled at ‘gameplay’ and technologically competent” (Keogh). Keogh’s description of a gamer is akin to Kirkpatrick’s definition of “Gamer Identity” as he maintains: “It is poised uncomfortably between technology and art; it is neither childish nor adult; and it is both therapeutic and . . . addictive” (73). By analysing the character of Samson and referring to Kirkpatrick and Keogh’s definition of gamer identity, I claim that the identity of Samson is based both on technology and creativity. He is a skilled gamer, and he becomes a game designer that rings with creativity and aesthetic potential. He is a passionate young male gamer whose technological competence can be seen the way he successfully designs as well as interacts with his ludic worlds. In addition to that, as I have discussed, he has been addicted with gaming since childhood and in adulthood he chose the career of game designer, which is an intentional attempt to construct his gamer identity. Notably, he is introduced to gaming by the hospital community; however, as he grows into adulthood, he chooses gaming as a career. This trajectory underscores the impact of curative gaming when played under the guided environment. This results in therapeutic results that are discussed in the coming section of this chapter. However, both Kirkpatrick and Keogh’s definition of a gamer identity lacks the space for a differently abled gamer. For this reason, my investigation is interventionary and has a postmodernist angle because it takes a dig at a fit and healthy gamer while adding a disabled gamer in the arena of a gamer identity.

The video gaming culture is mostly associated with negative connotations as it is mostly seen as a frivolous practice by the majority of the critics. Adrienne Shaw, another researcher of gaming studies, adds in his research article, “Video game culture is often defined in terms of the social interaction it engenders or negates. It is either a culture of people in isolation (bad) or a culture of obsessed people playing across the Internet into the dawn (better, but still bad)” (411). Here, Shaw has highlighted the negative prospect of video games which is the dominant ideology that is mostly associated with games. However, the gaming culture, which is mostly questioned by the critics and considered as no more than a fad, is found to be productive in the current investigation. Therefore, the current study suggests the idea of “curative gaming” that highlights the ameliorative properties of the player’s gaming identity. The gaming identity, I argue, turns out to be

productive on which Samson breeds and it paves a way for him to approve himself with his disability. Prior to this embracement, he is mostly seen as juggling with his disability in the non-inclusive society. In the next section, therefore, I examine the physical limitations of Samson and the difficulties associated with them.

4.3. *Body as an Antiquated Joystick*

In this section, I argue that *TTT* presents the character of Samson who is in various ways struggling with an acquired disability of an amputated foot. I argue that Samson's interaction with the gaming medium is complex because of him being differently abled. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the complex relation of his physical limitation with his social space. This can help us comprehend the nature of disability; Samson has to live with. This can help us picture and compare the life he has spent before and after this human-ludic encounter.

Disability is a condition that resists an individual in performing his everyday chores particularly in an environment which is engineered by able-bodied persons. In line with this argument, disability also slows down to almost negating the agility of the body as compared to the speed of able-bodied individuals. In order to pursue my argument, I take the support of Geethu Vijayan's definition of disability that is defined as "impairments, activity limitations and participant restrictions that affect either organs or body parts or a person's participation in life. It is concerned with abilities in the form of composite activities and behaviours that are generally accepted as essential components of everyday life" (15). In general terms, it is something that resists an individual by providing limitations or hurdles in navigating his life, the way it is expected from the able-bodied individuals. However, my study implies that the abilities of such individuals (in my selected texts) are not necessarily halted but in fact directed and manifested differently the way it is expected from an able-bodied person.

The physical limitation that Samson has to undergo can be best understood in the analogous description of an *antiquated joystick*. The novel depicts that "Sam experienced his body as an antiquated joystick that could reliably move only in cardinal directions" (*TTT* 307). Here the *antiquated joystick* refers to the body of Samson. It lacks flexibility

and can only be moved in the fixed directions like a simple kind of joystick that is only designed with a few keys, left, right, up, and down. Moreover, while contemplating on the nature of restrictions that he comes across in his real world, he has a different strategy. As the text shows: "The way to avoid appearing disabled was to avoid situations in which one looked disabled: uneven terrain, unfamiliar staircases, and most analog forms of frolic" (307-308). The only solution he finds to avoid feeling limited, in the real world, is to stop visiting such locations. This explains his reason for finding tranquillity and happiness in the ludic world because the real world is more disabled and limited than him by lacking accessibility for differently abled persons.

The notions, stigmas and different behaviours associated with the term disability are deeply rooted in the culture and society in which it is located. Tobin Siebers, a theorist of disability studies, has chosen the phrase *Complex Embodiment* in order to understand disability in relation to its surroundings. He affirms that disability is not simply a medical condition or physical impairment that exists within an individual but rather a complex interaction of the body and its environment. If the environment is favourable and accommodating, it leaves a positive impact on differently abled individuals. Otherwise, the environment further enhances their impairment and makes them more disabled (Siebers 25-27). Moreover, the similar argument of human-environment interaction is also reinforced by Garland Thomson in his book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), he writes:

Stairs, for example, create a functional "impairment" for wheelchair users that ramps do not. Printed information accommodates the sighted but "limits" blind persons People who cannot lift three hundred pounds are "able-bodied," whereas those who cannot lift fifty pounds are "disabled." Moreover, such culturally generated and perpetuated standards as "beauty," "independence," "fitness," "competence," and "normalcy" exclude and disable many human bodies while validating and affirming others. (7)

Like Siebers, Thomson also points out the direct relation of the body and the environment in which it is situated. He claims that the society of able-bodied individuals have set certain parameters that are required to fulfil in order to classify oneself in the category of normalcy.

The dominant ideologies of able-bodiedness do not consider disability as another face of humanity. Therefore, “the ways that bodies interact with the socially engineered environment and conform to social expectations determine the varying degrees of disability or able-bodiedness, of extraordinariness or ordinariness” (7). Therefore, Thomson and Siebers, along with the other theorists in the discipline of disability studies, question the distinction between able-bodied and disabled individuals by suggesting a direct relation of a body with its environment.

In the wake of these arguments, the selected text *TTT* also rings with the concept of embodied knowledge. Samson has the physical limitation of an amputated foot. Throughout the text, Samson is seen as struggling with this limitation until he and the world acknowledges his limitation as a difference. Due to his mobility impairment, he faces a different set of challenges in terms of his accessibility in the actual world. He talks about his experience when he is name-called on the basis of his disability: “I’m a lot slower. But when I want to go forward, I end up going to the side . . . At my high school, this one asshole used to call it the Sam shuffle” (*TTT* 88). This shows that he is being name-called and sidelined due to his minority identity, and he suffers a lack of acceptance in the concrete world.

The novel portrays the character of Samson in contrast to the setting of digital media of video games. However, Samson has also been shown to interact with real people in the real world, but his interaction with simulations of digital media leaves a far-fetched impact on him. Prior to this interaction, he sees himself only as “mentally ill poor kid with a screwed-up leg” (*TTT* 39). This refers to the idea how disabled individuals are usually forced to perceive themselves since they are considered as the other in the society. It highlights Samson’s embodied experience of disability in the non-inclusive society. Here, the minority identity of disability intersects with his gamer identity. The society is non-inclusive when it comes to disability identity, but the identity of Samson fully grows, as a gamer identity, under the shadow of a ludic world, as explained in the previous section of 4.2.

The societal differentiation of normalcy and abnormalcy prevents differently abled people from embracing their true selves. As it shows from Samson’s gait and outer

appearance, when he is in public, he has “weaved through the crowd, feeling somewhat like the doomed amphibian from the video game Frogger” (*TTT* 4). This citation serves as a reminder that in the society of able-bodied people, individuals with disabilities like Samson feel excluded. Therefore, his gait depicts that he avoids in-person social interactions. This idea also highlights the inability of Samson to conform to the “implicit map of [a] social space” (Taylor 25). This implicit map refers to the social imaginary prevalent in the society of able-bodied people.

This textual evidence also highlights the way he dresses up. It seems as if “his coat [is] too big over his boyish frame”, which shows that he is ashamed of his body and instead of embracing it he tries to hide it (*TTT* 34). Therefore “he rarely used his cane—even though it was medically necessary, he felt it made him look affected” (49). These instances further affirm that differently abled individuals go under the constant pressure of being judged and observed. They find themselves odd and isolated from the public. This refers to the defected nature of the societies that make them question themselves and leaves them deviant from what is considered ablest. Because of this non-inclusive nature of societies, Samson feels isolated in the real world that works on shallow perceptions. In terms of isolation, Dustin Kidd differentiates three types of isolation that are usually represented in fiction, by the characters with some disability. He highlights in his book *Pop Culture Freaks: Identity, Mass Media, and Society* (2014):

In some cases the character is presented as so inhuman that he simply cannot be part of human social life. In others the character is seen as having or being a virus that can taint the rest of the population, and therefore she must be quarantined from the social world. A third version is self-imposed isolation. The disability is presented as having psychic consequences, regardless of the nature of the disability itself, and this psychosis leads the disabled character into a life of solitude. This solitude is sometimes treated as an act of kindness toward the world and sometimes as a critique and rejection of the world. (199)

This passage suggests various practices through which individuals with disabilities are avoided. In the initial two ways, the environment considers them as anomalies while, in the third case, they choose to seclude themselves in order to avoid such encounters.

However, as far as the character of Samson is concerned, he seems to be situated in the third category. He is forced to isolate himself in the concrete world and he only finds comfort in the ludic world, whether it is by the designing of games himself or by playing games. Therefore, Siebers, as a theorist of disability studies, argues for the positive portrayal of disability that “insist[s] on the pertinence of disability to the human condition, on the value of disability as a form of diversity” (3). The arguments of King and Siebers clarify Samson’s rejection of the concrete world that consequently leads him to the embracement of the ludic world.

Likewise, when Samson is introduced to the gaming environment, which has greater accessibility than the ordinary society he is living in, then it results in positive consequences. The current study explores and affirms the curative potential of games. Prior to that, it is only considered as a toxic activity with no fruitful results. However, this investigation believes in the positive prospect of games and its culture by taking the character of Samson under consideration. As the text shows, the greater accessibility of gaming spaces helps him manage his pain associated with his disability. Samson says: “Sometimes, I would be in so much pain. The only thing that kept me from wanting to die was the fact that I could leave my body and be in a body that worked perfectly for a while—better than perfectly, actually—with a set of problems that were not my own” (*TTT* 70). These lines refer to the time when he finds escape in the gaming world in order to avoid feeling painful or disabled. The desire to leave his body due to difficulties associated with it makes him reject his disability identity. Here, the words of Samson reflect his desire to occupy an agile body which works on the notion of perfection.

However with the socially acceptable environment, the body experiences are noteworthy. Disability and pain are largely inseparable. This pain has been categorised by Siebers into psychic pain and physical pain. The biased society of able-bodied individuals proffers psychic pain to people with disabilities “because people with disabilities suffer intolerance and loneliness everyday” (Siebers 62). However these individuals not only suffer the pain of rejection, but the physical pain is also present. Siebers notes about this physical pain:

It hovers over innumerable daily actions, whether the disability is painful in itself or only the occasion for pain because of the difficulty of navigating one's environment. The great challenge every day is to manage the body's pain, to get out of bed in the morning, to overcome the well of pain that rises in the evening, to meet the hundred daily obstacles that are not merely inconveniences but occasions for physical suffering. (62)

Siebers acknowledges the existence of physical pain in addition to psychic pain that is mostly there depending on the type of disability. This pain also renders individuals with disabilities inefficient in carrying out their tasks particularly if the environment is not accessible enough. In the selected novel *TTT*, Samson navigates his life through both psychological and physical pain. In the text, "Sam felt incredibly lonely and slightly sorry for himself Although he'd been given a goodly amount of drugs, he could still feel his foot enough to know that when he fully felt it, the pain was going to be terrifying" (117). In the aforementioned quote, Samson is admitted to the hospital because he passed out on the street on his way to drop off his collaborator Sadie. These are the days when they are making their first game together. The main character of the game Ichigo is a boy who looks and walks a lot like Samson. After contemplating a lot on this game and even customising the character Samson mixes his identity with the identity of Ichigo. Therefore, while on his way back home, he finds himself "skipping a little—Sam Masur! skipping!—which is why he took a less than careful step off the curb. His foot slipped out from under him" (106). This suggests that in reality he is not Ichigo but rather Samson who has to struggle with his amputated foot in his real life. This incident shows Samson's desire to transcend the realms of his body to attain the realm of his ludic avatars.

There is reluctance in the character of Samson that prevents him from accepting his disability. This reluctance can be understood in the light of Kirkpatrick's notion of embodied knowledge that is linked to the social location he is situated in. His concrete world socially marginalises the people of minority identities therefore Samson is reluctant to come to the forefront with his disability. As in the novel: "The main thing Sam did not wish Marx to know about him was that he had a disability, though Sam did not think of it as a disability—other people had disabilities; Sam had 'the thing with my foot'" (307). He

likes to call it a *thing* rather than a *disability* of an amputated foot. The root cause of this hesitation and reluctance refers to the biased and disabled environment. This environment resists differently abled individuals from completely embracing their distinct selves. In the next section, I discuss the man-technology interaction and the extent of autonomy it provides to analyse if it aids Samson in transforming himself into an agentive subject in the gaming world.

4.4. Unlocking Gaming Emancipation in Hyperreal Ludic Worlds

In this section, I investigate the configurations of hyperreal ludic mediums to explore if they proffer the sense of emancipation to Samson. Moreover, it is instructive to investigate if these features lead to the construction of gamer identity as well as turning him into an agentive subject in the synthetic worlds of games.

The video games industry has seen remarkable growth over the past few years. Prior to that, “video game[s] at first only focused on the agility of the player in playing the game . . . starting from the beginning, namely the game called Pong” (Saptanto 2). Games like Pong are designed to follow a linear path with simplistic mechanics, limited graphics and players are required to play in a limited gameplay structure such as navigating through obstacles, overpowering the evil creatures that are coming in their ways, and achieving the highest possible score. However, these kinds of linear games do possess the space for freedom as they begin from the same point but always end with different outcomes.

In the selected novel *TTT*, Samson finds a sense of autonomy in games when he designs his first game, Ichigo. It is not a complex game but rather a linear game with simplistic graphics. He writes in the design document while designing the movement of the game’s character that “the child’s body moves the way a body can move before it has felt or even encountered the idea of pain” (88). Later, Samson also comments “That’s how I walk” (88). In my opinion, it shows that he simulates his own desires in the game, and he wants to see the reflection of himself in his game. The argument is further backed by Kirkpatrick’s conception of “gamer habitus” as gamers like Sam possess “habituated dispositions and inclinations necessary to play” games (72). Habituated gamers like Samson and the people like him “recognize themselves in gaming discourse and they use

that discourse to make sense of their own practices” (72). Similarly, in this citation, Samson *recognizes* himself with his character in the game. Although his movement is limited, his character can simulate his desires by depicting agility. This is how he identifies himself through his avatars in the gaming discourse and practices. It is important to highlight here that designing games is another approach to develop a sense of liberation in addition to playing them.

In another example, he names his second game as Unfair Games. This is attributed to the time when once “he had woken up in the hospital with that broken ankle, he could remember thinking that the best thing about games is that they could be fairer than life. A good game, like *Ichigo*, was hard, but fair. The ‘unfair game’ was life itself” (*TTT* 127, emphasis original). Along with the sense of freedom and emancipation that he finds in the gaming spaces, his creativity and decision-making skills also come to the forefront when he desires to name them. The same argument can be complemented by Kirkpatrick’s viewpoint as he notes that video games are a “source of human creativity and inventiveness” (Kirkpatrick 21). Similarly, through naming and designing, Samson practices his own subjectivity and implements his own experiences of life onto them. This instance shows how he slowly moves towards ludic media for its simulatory quality.

The experiences of differently abled individuals are complexly embodied into the social locations where the bodies are situated. While drawing on this argument, I claim that Samson finds the gaming community more acceptable and accommodating than the real world. Being a gamer from an early age, he finds considerable amount of tranquility along with accessibility that he rarely finds in the outside world. Therefore, while shedding the light on the purpose of creating a game, he says: “I want to make something that will make people happy” (*TTT* 70). This citation suggests that the gaming world has provided more peace and happiness to him, and he finds a sense of inclusion here. These positive traits further enhance his self-esteem and resilience in the gaming environment. The inclusive quality of the gaming environment leaves a positive embodied experience. Thus, the potential of “curative gaming” is at play here.

Furthermore, the desire to attain peace and tranquility is fulfilled when eventually Samson is able to achieve a utopian vision of the world for himself and for the rest of the

people through his ludic world. It is “exactly what people craved. A virtual world that was better governed, kinder, and more understandable than their own” (*TTT* 252). This serene environment helps establish a recuperative environment for his personal development and agency. Similarly, Muriel and Crawford reflect on the availability of agency in the gaming environment by noting that “Video games present themselves as full of opportunities and choices to be made, and the responsibility to act is always bestowed on the player: which path to take, who should survive, what decision to make?” (62). Here, Muriel and Crawford’s viewpoint also suggests the liberative potential of games in terms of *opportunities* and *choices* it provides to their gamers.

As mentioned earlier, Samson suffers from the physical disability of amputated foot. Therefore, begrudgingly, he has to spend most of his life going to the hospitals, getting admitted in the hospitals or talking about his experiences of the hospitals. Therefore, while designing his new game Mapleworld, the first thing Samson suggests regarding its setting is that “Mapletown General Hospital was based on every hospital he’d ever stayed in” (*TTT* 185). Moreover, the levels and quests that the players are supposed to pass are “given the kind of corpuscular detail that could only have come from someone who had been chronically ill and understood the indignities of hospital life” (185). These instances from the text further strengthen our understanding of the correlation between the obstacles he faces in real life and the utopian world he has desired to create in his gaming spaces. He tries to perpetuate his experiences of the hospital life by simulating its details in his game. The intricacy and depth given to its design reflect the authenticity of experience.

The intrinsic relation between Samson’s illness and his desire to create a new world is reflected in the novel. The text records: “Mapletown was, for Sam, the story of his pain, in the present and in the past. It would be the most personal game he ever made” (*TTT* 186). Mapletown is *personal* because he designs it in the light of his experiences and later, he fully harbours this place as his new utopian world.

Digital technology of games has witnessed immense evolution with the prominence of the internet in the late twentieth century. However, the later games start to incorporate more sophisticated systems. The inclusion of the internet into the gameplay mechanics has led to the creation of a complex virtual world that offers an unprecedented level of freedom.

One of the most advanced categories of games is known as Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games⁶. Kirkpatrick records about this new advanced category of games that those types of games “involve people playing together in game worlds, establishing relationships and working together on freely chosen ludic projects” (128). The text under investigation also captures this spirit of evolution of the digital media. In the novel, Samson has “been able to employ many of the graphics, environments, sounds, and character designs of Mapletown, the work to transform it into an MMORPG” to provide more hyperreal experiences to its consumers (*TTT* 237). However, it is crucial to mention that such types of high-definition games work on the mechanics of hyperreality. The intricate virtual worlds of such video games simulate the real world by incorporating realistic physics, sophisticated graphics, capturing the hyperrealistic texture of weather and environment thereby crafting a world that is “more real than the real” (Baudrillard 57). This is how it proffers infinite opportunities for self-expression and multiplicity of experiences.

It is pertinent to highlight that the simulated experiences provided by the gaming spaces can impact a lot on their consumers. In this fashion, the simulated experiences of such gaming spaces are so immersive that they blur the boundaries of virtual worlds of games and the real world. This has been seen in the novel under investigation when the focused character, Sam, perceives the virtual world of his game Mapletown more substantial than the actual world around him. The way the text introduces Samson’s virtual avatar shows that it is a more crucial identity of Samson as compared to the one he shows to the real world. As *TTT* depicts:

Sam’s avatar, Mayor Mazer, was the first person who greeted a new visitor to Mapletown. He was styled like a grunge-era rock star—ripped blue jeans, a red plaid shirt, Doc Martens—and meant to evoke plainspoken, folksy icons like Jiminy Cricket, Andy Griffith, Woody Guthrie. (251)

⁶ Henceforth, I will refer to Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games as MMORPGs.

The ability of Samson to customise avatars depicts his sense of liberty to personalise his gamer identity, given to him by a hyperreal gaming world. Furthermore, his disability, which is the main part of his personality, is explicitly depicted in his gaming avatar. The novel portrays: “He gave Mayor Mazer a cane—a gnarled wooden staff—and Mayor Mazer had also been programmed to have Sam’s slight limp” (251). This citation provides the description of Samson’s avatar. It shows that the gaming world is the first space through which Samson brings out his desired personhood. Furthermore, his ludic identity helps him bring out his disability identity through the customisation of his ludic avatar. This suggests that he explicitly accepts his differently abled self in the ludic world. In the wake of this argument, Kurt Squire adds in *Video Games and Learning* (2011) that games can provide “deeply transformative experiences in which we can do new things and become new kinds of people” (8). In this way, the atmosphere of freedom as well as the opportunities of choices results in a *transformative experience* for Samson as he lacks this emancipation in the concrete world. Likewise, this transformative experience plays a crucial role in deliberately developing his gamer identity that also supports and reconstructs his social identity.

Pertaining to this line of investigation, the virtual identity and real identity of Sam starts to influence each other. As the selected text shows: “The Samatar had Sam’s glasses (thick, black frames) and mustache (chevron shaped). No one remembered whether Mayor Mazer or Sam had grown the mustache first” (*TTT* 251). While drawing on Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality, the physical description of *Samatar*⁷ reflects the hyperreal condition because the virtual identity and real identity has been blurred leading to uncertainty in the source. Thus, here “it is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real” (Baudrillard 4). His *moustaches* are the symbol or sign of reality that has transcended the real and digital world, and it is more significant than the point of existence. Here, the influence of virtual identity and reality are reciprocal to each other, therefore nobody knows who inspired whom.

⁷ Samatar is the portmanteau of Sam and avatar.

In a similar vein, the emancipation of the hyperreal gaming world, proffered in Samson's game Mapleworld, is also underscored when he decides to implement significant changes by establishing the new social norms. One of the prime examples is that he enacted new practices such as "he banned user-created gun stores and the sale of weapons" (*TTT* 274). This reflects his desire for a peaceful society. In addition to that, he exercises autonomy by supporting "conservationism and the building of an Islamic cultural center by a group of Muslim Mapletownies. He arranged mass avatar protests about the war in Iraq and offshore oil drilling" (274). Here, in these lines, Samson is depicted as the advocate of religious tolerance and anti-war sentiments. He is trying to influence the political processes through the realm of video gaming. Here, Samson's subversive acts alternatively take a dig at the dominant ideologies of ability that states that "individuals affected by pain and suffering are irrevocably impaired for political action" (Siebers 79). Mayer Mazer, Samson's avatar, actively contributed to the political actions through the emancipatory space of Mapleworld.

Apart from the freedom, tranquility and acceptance in the hyperreal world of games, Samson is able to gain other crucial skills that also help him in his real-life experiences. He gains the sense of being honoured and heard solely on the basis of his capabilities irrespective of who he is and what his disabilities are. When Samson gets an opportunity to create games, the avatars of his games reflect his desired self. The new aura of emancipation and autonomy is depicted in the subjectivity of Samson. He, therefore, gains a sense of being an autonomous subject. Through naming and designing, he finds popularity, belongingness, and a sense of inclusion that leaves a positive impact on his embodied experience. In this way, these hyperreal ludic features facilitate the construction of ludic identity; he achieves a sense of agentive subjectivity in the ludic world. This section sheds light on his agency in the gaming world while in the next section, I have, therefore, analysed his autonomy and subjectivity in the concrete world.

4.5. Games Translating to Real-World Agency

In this section, I explore the impact of ludic spaces on the actual world of the protagonist, Samson. As mentioned in the previous section, gaming spaces provide Samson

with a sense of autonomy and subjectivity. Therefore, after achieving emancipation in the gaming spaces, he, slowly and gradually, starts to practise his agentive subjectivity in the real world. After the success of his first game, Ichigo, he has started to gain popularity among people as a successful game designer. In the novel *TTT* “Sam liked the attention more...he liked interviews; he liked bloviating to a crowd; he liked having his photo taken” (132). Samson achieves success after choosing his gamer identity. His celebrity status can be seen when his gaming avatar is considered for branding and advertising campaigns and “by 2009, Mayor Mazer ranked number seven (in between the Serta Counting Sheep and the Coca-Cola polar bears) on an AdWeek list of most recognizable branded characters of the new millennium” (252). Consequently, he gains success not only in his public life with career opportunities but also in his private life by gaining subjectivity. Moreover, it is pertinent to mention here that through the popularity of Samson’s avatar, Samson is commodified because “if at a given moment, the commodity was its own publicity (there was no other) today publicity has become its own commodity” (Baudrillard 62). Here, Mapleword gains publicity because of Samson and his popularity surges because of his Samatar, alternatively making him a brand.

Advanced online ludic activities are not based on complete isolation but involve community building. James Newman notes: “The online connectivity of the current cohort of videogames consoles makes accessible not only other players to play and converse with, but also makes accessible material such as videos of expert players tackling games or in competition with one another” (12). Newman argues that it is a participatory medium; therefore, it requires an active participation of its users. The online environment provides the opportunities of better social interactions with a wide range of players. However, the offline gaming environment consists of offline games, which keep their players interactive with technology, and those offline gaming communities that exist solely for gamers.

Similarly, Samson’s transmogrification can be explicitly seen in the following citation when he takes off the shell of shyness and turns out to be a confident self as if he is meant for the stage. In the novel, when Samson appears on stage: “Sam’s nerves disappeared, and he transformed into the world’s most entertaining talk-show guest” (*TTT* 133). This textual reference explicitly shows Samson’s transformation from an introverted

gamer to confident public figure who has gained the status of a celebrity. Through the medium of gaming and game designing, Samson masters the art of social interaction. Hence, whenever he gets a chance for public interaction then he fully grasps the opportunity for public speaking and interaction. The spirit of Samson's public aura is presented in the following words:

The crowd leaned forward when he spoke, laughed at his jokes, spontaneously broke into applause. They loved him. He was more handsome in front of a crowd; his limp, less apparent; his voice, warm and authoritative. It was as if all these years Sam had been waiting for an audience. Sadie [his collaborator] marveled at his transformation. Where had her introverted partner gone? (133-134)

This healthy transformation of Samson can be better understood while drawing on the statement of Squire. He sheds light on the collaborative potential of MMORPGs by stating that "Massively multiplayer games enable people to play together and collaborate in activities to achieve mutually desirable goals, and this intensifies learning" (Squire 10). In my argument, the medium of MMPGs that are based on the extensive hyperreal gameplay offers Samson an extensive social interactions and great prospect of collaboration. Consequently, when Samson gets the chance of public attention, he fully apprehends this prospect to assert his differently abled self. It also enhances his confidence when the crowd seems to accept his differently abled self. In this line of inquiry, Dalsen highlights a few ameliorative properties of games in her research essay "A history of disability in video game character design":

In games, characters make their way through the journey to overcome challenges and reach their goal. Upon returning to the ordinary world, the players learn more about themselves, their journey and resolve many of the quests they hoped to achieve with their characters. (1)

In the light of Dalsen's statement, Samson's character also depicts the healthy transformation when he starts to adopt his true self and show resilience with the help of games while struggling with pain.

Moreover, the positive transformative potential of Samson is also evident when he is invited for a TED talk, as a renowned figure of the ludic world, on the topic of “The Possibility of Utopia in Virtual Worlds” (*TTT* 252). After going through all the tribulations in his life, Samson believes in the goodness of people’s online selves. He responds and comments that “it is not an inevitability that we should be our worst selves behind the mask of an avatar” (253). Hence, he believes in the constructive possibilities of people’s virtual identities because lurking behind their avatars do not necessarily confirm their detrimental attributes. Hence, speaking from his own experience he concludes that “virtual worlds can be better than the actual world. They can be more moral, more just, more progressive, more empathetic, and more accommodating of difference. And if they can be, shouldn’t they be?” (253). This refers to an idea that gaming culture does not necessarily harbour a hostile gaming community but can also foster a productive ludic environment and a healthy gaming culture that can bring about encouraging behaviours in its players. However, this textual evidence also renders his agentive subjectivity and his altered self.

The current investigation dismantles the stereotypes embedded around gaming that considers it toxic and solely a waste of time. To add, I have probed the area of curative gaming culture and reinforced transformative and therapeutic impact of ludic practices as evidenced from the experiences of Samson, Mazer. However, Newman argues in his book *Playing with Games*:

Videogames have not enjoyed an easy ride in the popular press which has long concerned itself with the negative influences of their representations and the consequences of play. For many commentators, if videogames are worth considering at all, they can be easily and readily dismissed as little more than inconsequential trivialities (1).

Nevertheless, video games are mostly considered to be a source of promulgating aggression and violence in its players. However, there are different schools of thought when we relate mass media as a means of inhabiting violent activities. Bandura’s Social Learning Theory suggests that “children became more aggressive when they observed aggressive or violent models” (Nabavi and Bijandi 7). On the contrary, there is another Catharsis Theory by Feshback and Singer that holds the grounds by suggesting an alternative viewpoint in the

discussion of violence and video games. It states that mass media such as video games help channelise the aggression of their users (Griffiths 204). In the later theory, the relationship between violent behavior and video games can be seen as a punching bag; a player can mitigate his aggression by channelising his energy into games and using his potential there.

The idea of catharsis theory is very much akin to the viewpoint of the selected text about violence and videogames. As the omnipresent narrator says: “Video games don’t make people violent, but maybe they falsely give you the idea that you can be a hero” (*TTT* 300). This citation is line with catharsis theory and it is evident as well through Samson’s transformation. The previous version of Samson is always seen as fighting, struggling and managing with his disability while lurking in shadows. He is always seen as complaining, frustrating, and agitating over his body, but the transformed version of Samson, known as Mazer, has broken the shell of shyness and has an aura of tranquillity and agency. He is satisfied with himself because he has embraced his disability.

In terms of accepting his differently abled self, there are multiple examples where he can be seen as embracing his disability. In the selected novel, “Sam had his cane, which he had been using more and more often. She could not remember the last time she had seen him without it” (*TTT* 138). The idea of embracing disability can be seen in the Siebers’ stance on complex embodiment “that rejects the temptation to value the body as anything other than what it was and that embraces what the body has become” (27). The similar idea of embracement is also evident in the book of *Claiming Disability* by Simi Linton in which she argues: “The idea that someone can overcome a disability has not been generated within the community; it is a wish fulfillment generated from the outside” (26). Hence, in the light of Linton’s viewpoint, Samson’s agentive subjectivity has dismantled the notion of overcoming disability, which is the stereotype perpetuated against people with disability by able bodied individuals.

The selected text, through the character of Samson, also promulgates the idea of embracing rather than overcoming disability because it is considered as a variation rather than a disease to be cured. The selected text depicts that “[f]or years he’d tried to conceal his disability; now he was never photographed without a cane” (*TTT* 259). The Samson’s before-and-after transmogrification is vividly evident in this citation. Furthermore, he not

only accepts his disability as a marker of his identity, but he also uses his disability as strength. Therefore, in the novel, “The cane was used for pointing at things, clearing crowds, grand gestures as needed” (259). Hence, the *cane* which is the marker of his identity can be vividly seen in the transmogrified character of Samson. The real world too acknowledges his potential and gives him a status of a celebrity. This exemplifies the acceptance of his disability identity by the concrete world.

Apart from all the success and fame he enjoys because of the popularity of his gaming identity as Mazer, the ludic environment teaches him a sense of resilience and to never give up. The omnipresent narrator of the text spills her views about a gaming person that he is “the kind of person who believes that ‘game over’ is a construction. The game is only over if you stop playing. There is always one more life” (*TTT* 301). The gamer identity of Samson takes over his previous real identity; it supported and lifted his minority identity of being differently abled. Therefore, “he had had his name legally changed from Samson Masur to Sam Mazer” (259). He explains that “the name Masur had never meant much to him, and Mazer sounded more like the name of a Master Builder of Worlds” (259). Mazer is customised by Samson to carry a cane, which is the symbol of his disability. To add, the identity of Samson Mazer turns out to be much more beneficial in his life as compared to the identity he goes by in his real life, Samson Masur.

Despite the fact, Samson develops an agentive subjectivity and sense of autonomy from his sustained engagement with the ludic worlds through making and playing games, Kirkpatrick contends that “computer games have the capacity to be something much better, more beneficial to humanity perhaps, but capitalist commercialization inhibits and distorts that potential” (98). I argue, however, that digital gaming has the capacity to proffer great opportunities of being positive, transformative and productive even though it is a part of capitalist machinery. In case of Samson, he establishes his full-fledged career as a gamer and a successful game designer when he decides to monetize his games. Through his persistent interaction with gaming spaces that are equipped with MMPGs, Samson acquires the skills of problem solving, strategic thinking, ability to work in a teamwork environment, and the sense of leadership through gameplay scenarios. Moreover, he also gains a sense of achievement and self-efficacy. This human-ludic encounter consequently

impacts his social imaginary; the subsequent section discusses the alteration of social imaginary of Samson in relation to gaming media.

4.6. Rebooting Imaginaries

In this section, I analyse the alteration of Samson's social imaginary through his long-term interaction with the gaming medium. In *TTT*, individuals like Samson, who have some form of disability, are considered minority identity as discussed in detail in the section of 4.3. The prevalent social norms of the ordinary world seems to alienate them. In the following example, the pedestrians seem to socially marginalise Samson by saying:

“Can’t you go around?” a man in a black and green macramé hat yelled at Sam.

“Excuse me,” Sam said.

“Dammit, I almost had it,” a woman with a baby in a sling muttered as Sam passed in front of her”. (*TTT* 4)

These lines show that people become uncomfortable when Samson crosses their path. They do not like Samson's limping gait when he is trying to navigate his way through the bustling crowd. Samson's walking through the crowd represents his inability to conform to the prevalent social imaginaries, which supports hierarchies. Taylor's notion of “Social Imaginary” refers to the collective perceptions and norms within a society that influence its individuals and of the ways they negotiate “their social existences, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectation” (Taylor 23). Samson has a disability of foot that results in lingering movement as compared to the people around him who fall in the category of able-bodied individuals. This citation also rings with the concept of *deeper normative notions* that refers to the hierarchical positions in the society.

In line with this view, social imaginary also incorporates various kinds of institutions that exist within a society such as religious institutions, government institutions, and the institution of family. Furthermore, it also comprises hierarchies that are embedded within a society that includes social hierarchies to other types of inequalities.

Similarly in terms of inequalities and power, Taylor's viewpoint is worth noting. He writes: "Theories held by a few people come to infiltrate the social imaginary, first of elites, perhaps, and then of the whole society" (24). This shows that the discussion of social imaginary also rings with the discussion of power dynamics. In the light of Taylor's insight, it also includes the shared belief system, customs, and narratives that influence how users interact with the digital technology, in this case, video games.

Furthermore, media plays a crucial role in altering the social imaginaries, and Kirkpatrick also holds the similar opinion. He says: "The factors that most affect our specific historical experience of the social imaginary are the communications media through which we share and distribute ideas in a social register" (15). The gaming technology too has entered into the arena of communicative technology, and it is not just a source of pleasure anymore. Similarly, Tanya Pobuda holds about this new sociotechnical imagery that it promises a vision of creative power through technology (9). The new gaming technologies harbour the features of community building by in-game communication tools such as chats and video calling. To add, players sometimes extend their connections beyond the gaming media and form ludic communities to strengthen their gaming connections even more.

A similar scenario has also been depicted in the selected text when Samson interacts a lot with games that eventually results in influencing his mental paradigms. A long-term persistent interaction revolutionises his thought processes. The social imaginary regarding the perception of life is, therefore, significantly impacted through games. Similarly, in the novel *TTT*, the gaming practices impact the mental paradigms of Samson. The same is highlighted in the passage below:

The game has an algorithm, but the player also must create a play algorithm in order to win. There is an order to any victory. There is an optimal way to play any game. Sam, in the silent months after Anna's death, would obsessively replay this scene in his head....There are, he determines, infinite ways his mother doesn't die that night and only one way she does. (171-172)

After interacting with a lot of games either through making them, playing them or both, Samson starts to perceive life as a game and contemplates about the series of replays he can think of. A long-term interaction with this form of communicative technology does alter the mental mapping of its users. Likewise, Tim Gorichanaz comes up with the same argument in his essay “Being at Home in the Metaverse? Prospectus for a Social Imaginary”. He holds: “We are not just material creatures, and we do not live as monads. The technologies we create shape the ways we can dwell just as we shape them” (5). In this citation, Gorichanaz is referring to the quote “[w]e shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us”⁸. Here, *tools* suggest technology and digital media that are initially created by humans but later on these are the things that influence their lives. Too add, he dwells on the reciprocal relation of a people with technology. Similarly, Samson creates and plays games that have influenced his life. Moreover, he always contemplates his decision about what would have happened if he had taken different decisions in his life. That is how games teach him a lesson of resilience and to explore new routes.

With the advancement in gaming technology, the hyperreal worlds offered by the advanced MMORPGs proffer spaces that further impact the social imaginaries of its users. Likewise, the novel under scrutiny depicts the construction of an unprecedented social imaginary within the game of Mapleworld. Samson, as an outreach manager of the ludic community of *Both Sides: The Mapleworld Experience*, endeavours to reach out to the inhabitants of this community. *Both Sides: The Mappleworld Experience* is one of the complex virtual games (MMORPGs) designed by Samson. In order to foster a strong society in the game, Samson has tried to connect with “each Mapletownie individually to make sure they were the first members of the *Mapleworld* community, and a letterpress paper version of the invitation had been created to send to the Mapletownies’ houses” (*TTT* 238, emphasis original). This suggests that the *manager* of the *Mapleworld community* is solely recognising the players’ existence in the digital realm but also validating the significance of their presence. By incorporating the elements of invitations for the

⁸ This quote is mistakenly associated with McLuhan as Gorichanaz explains it in his first footnote of his essay. In fact, it is initially said by John Culkin in his article. See John Culkin, “A Schoolman's Guide to Marshall McLuhan”, *The Saturday Review*, 17 March 1967, p.54.

inhabitant of his game, Samson actively reshapes the social imaginary in the ludic space of *Mapleworld*. He is constructing and promulgating a narrative where the games are seen more than a leisure activity but as an integral part of the lives of the gamers.

The social imaginary of both the worlds are seen as further influenced when we see how Samson has integrated the elements of the concrete world into his ludic world. He monetizes the ludic town of Mapleworld by involving *maplebucks* which is the currency of Mapleworld (*TTT* 251). The gamers are, therefore, allowed to invest through the real-world currency to buy comfort for themselves in their ludic world. For the comfort of its residents and to make it more real, he creates a commercial area that keeps almost every luxury, such as “artisanal cheeses” and “super-rare rainbow truffle” etc. (251). He tries every possible method to construct his version of the utopian world.

The selected text particularly rings with the sociotechnical imaginary that is quite different from the day-to-day social imaginaries. Gorichanaz holds: “While social imaginaries operate in all spheres of life, sociotechnical imaginaries are those particularly related to digital technology” (650). By referring back to the citation about the Mapleworld in the light of Gorichanaz’s viewpoint, I contend that the ludic world operates on sociotechnical imaginary, and it actively influences the social imaginaries of the real world while encompassing the real-world elements. This is how such gaming spaces create different notions of identities and belongingness thereby giving hyperrealistic experiences. This is how the virtual world is “more real than the real, that is how the real is abolished” (Baudrillard 56). Therefore, in the selected novel, the *letterpress paper version of the invitation* denotes the element of hyperreality because the boundaries between the real world and the realm of *Both Sides: The Mapleworld Experience* (an advanced virtual game) are blurred. The virtual residents give more importance to it which can be seen when the great numbers of users join the virtual community.

Not only that, Samson’s agentive subjectivity also comes to the forefront when he decides to go against the government regulation by legalising marriages of same-sex couples. This happens when the California Supreme Court cancels the marriage licenses of his friends Simon and Ant. Samson comes forward; he officiates the marriage of Simon and Ant. Furthermore, the text reads that when “he had completed Simon and Ant’s

ceremony, Mayor Mazer invited anyone else who wanted to be married to step forward” (*TTT* 273). In this way, “he had married 211 couples” on the same day (273). Although Samson goes against the government by subverting the predetermined social norms, his popularity in the real and virtual world surges as stardom. This is how he emerges as an autonomous figure. To add, the transmogrification of Samson’s social imaginaries can also be seen when he endeavours to promote new social imaginaries in terms of gender-less society in *Mapleworld*. He further emphasises that

it would have been foolish to define sex or gender as a requirement for marriage in *Mapleworld* when so many of its residents adhered to neither binary nor human characteristics. There were many hipsters, like Mayor Mazer, but there were also elves, orcs, monsters, aliens, fey, vampires, and a variety of other supernatural-presenting, nonbinary folk. (272-273, emphasis original)

This reveals that the ludic community of *Mapleworld* fosters a fluid understanding about identities. It allows the exploration of identity through the availability of customisation of avatars. This also signifies the autonomy of identity. Gamers interacting with such an environment can definitely internalise a fluid sense of identity and perceptions about gender. Similarly, Samson also exercises his autonomy when he chooses to reshape social imaginaries in his virtual world rather than directly implementing these changes in the concrete world. This also emphasises Samson’s definition of subversion. He is manipulating ludic space to create new imaginaries that challenge the conventions of his real society.

In a gaming environment, friendship grows stronger under a shared experience of gaming. The social imaginary of one-on-one communication is transformed and replaced by the sociotechnical imaginary of gaming. The shift in the social imaginary can be seen when the two gamers are interacting solely on the cause of a game. As in the novel *TTT*, Samson and Sadie “would become great playmates While they gamed, they told each other the stories of their relatively short lives. Eventually, Sadie knew everything about Sam, and Sam, about Sadie” (22). This citation shows the bond between the two gamers as they engage in cooperative gameplay.

Samson also triangulates his own social imaginaries in Friendship (name of a town) in his new game Pioneer. In an attempt to create a friendly and peaceful atmosphere, their residents are advised to offer each other gifts whenever they bump into each other even when they do not know each other. Alternatively, such a type of healthy collaborative environment can surely impact the social imaginary of players in a positive way. In a similar fashion, the game of Pioneer incorporates the technology of virtual reality that provides a strong communicative circle. Similarly, Pobuda notes:

VR's promise today is that users will be able to commune more with others in new immersive experiences. Rather than entering a static picture frame, consumers are promised that they will be able to enter populated new worlds. Users will be able to experience human connection and leave their sense of isolation behind. In modern discourse, VR has been positioned as a media technology that can usher in a new era of communicative power. (9)

Samson also tastes similar immersive experiences, as highlighted by Pobuda, when he interacts with games that work on virtual reality. Therefore, Samson feels more at home in these places. Instead of going out in public, he prefers to interact in a comfortable social environment through his hyperreal games. In this way, he attempts to ingrain a progressive social imaginary as an “implicit map of [the] social space” in Pioneer (Taylor 25). Thus, this study adds nuance to the conventional understanding of the social imaginary by foregrounding digital gaming media as an integral part of his everyday life. His lived experience shifts significantly from adhering to traditional forms of social imaginary to embracing a sociotechnical imaginary shaped by digital games. In doing so, the analysis complicates Taylor's conception of the social imaginary, which does not fully account for the evolving contours of normative interactions that now often unfold through virtual avatars within digital gaming spaces. By highlighting this transformation, my study contributes a contemporary dimension to the discussion on social imaginary, one that recognizes the everyday realities of digitally mediated interactions. Hence, the social imaginary of Samson has been impacted in a positive way, as mentioned in the thesis statement of the current study.

Discussion in the foregoing pages shows that the gaming culture, depicted in *TTT*, can be seen as influencing the lifestyle of Samson. Being a follower of this culture, he develops his gamer identity because of the consistent interaction with ludic media, whether it is based on playing or designing games. Hence, the constructed gamer identity can be seen as significant in making his life favourable. The shared experience of gaming helps him strengthen his social networks in both the ludic as well in the real-world. To add, the sense of autonomy that comes along with the gamer identity helps him overcome the sense of being physically restricted. Although he has the physical disability of an amputated foot, by maneuvering his gaming avatars, he surpasses the boundaries of his limitations through the hyperreal experiences provided by such spaces. Moreover, through the construction of this gamer identity, he uplifts his marginalised disability identity. He feels comfortable in his disability identity both in the virtual and the concrete world.

Furthermore, bodies have embodied relations with the locations where they are situated. Therefore, when differently abled Samson explores the vastness of the ludic worlds, they turn him into an agentive subject. Moreover, they provide him with the sense of inclusion and belongingness that he scarcely finds in his concrete worlds. Therefore, he finds these spaces more welcoming and emancipatory as compared to the non-inclusive real world. He, therefore, emerges as an agentive subject both in the ludic and the real world. This insight helps debunk the negative connotations surrounding such spaces. The interaction with gaming culture has proved to be more salutary and healing on the social tier of differently abled Samson. That is how my principal claims, discussed in chapter 1, stand justified through my analysis. However, in order to cover the remaining dimensions of my study, I analyse my second selected novel *A Boy Made of Blocks* in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

REBRANDING SELF IN STUART'S *A BOY MADE OF BLOCKS*: EXPLORING LUDIC-NEURODIVERGENT SUBJECTIVITY

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I examine Keith Stuart's *A Boy Made of Blocks*⁹ by drawing upon the theoretical positions of "Gamer Identity", "Complex Embodiment", "Social Imaginary" and "Hyperreality". I explore if the gaming environment caters to the needs of neurodivergent players. I use the word *neurodivergent* because my protagonist, Sam, is autistic and he is different from the other protagonist of my principal text, analysed in the previous chapter. Moreover, it is also instructive to analyse if these synthetic worlds also prove to be curative in reimagining his disability and reconstructing his social identity. In this regard, I argue that the gaming activities impact the social imaginary of Sam. However, in order to affirm my stance, I examine if the player with neurodiversity (differently able-bodied) faces difficulty in comprehending the social norms of the real world and finds himself at ease in the computer-controlled systematic spaces of games. I analyse the features of a hyperreal video game that facilitates the development of gamer identity of this autistic player. It is also instructive to scrutinise the salutary impacts of a ludic field in the virtual as well as normative world of such gamer. This chapter, therefore, encompasses all three research questions.

Keith Stuart is a contemporary English writer and a journalist. Stuart began his writing career as an editor of Edge magazine. However, due to his keen interest in video

⁹ See my footnote on p.1, ch.1. Henceforth, I will use the abbreviation *ABMB* for *A Boy Made of Blocks* across my thesis for in-text citation and indented quotes.

games, technology, and their related domains, Stuart joined The Official Playstation Magazine, PC Gamer, and T3 (a magazine about technology). Not only that, Stuart also wrote plenty of reviews for the Guardian magazine on technology, games, and on various forms of art such as music, books, and movies. As a journalist, Stuart has a vast experience in covering the gaming culture for over twenty years. Stuart's debut work, which is my second principal text *ABMB*, published in 2016, is a bestseller translated into twenty-four languages because of its widespread popularity. His other works include *Days of Wonder* (2018), *The Frequency of Us* (2021), and *Love is a Curse* (2024). However, it is pertinent to underscore that Stuart has ventured into the arena of multiple genres throughout his writing career. Moreover, he also affirms that he has always wanted to become a writer since childhood. It is very important to cite Stuart's view on how writing is like solving a video game puzzle. In his interview to *Bath Life*, a digital publishing platform, he says:

The only part of school I enjoyed was writing stories and plays, and English and Drama were the only classes I cared about *Writing a story is like solving a giant video game puzzle*: you have all these moving parts – characters, plots, relationships – and you have to manoeuvre them into a narrative that tells people something and makes them feel. (Stuart, emphasis added)

While reflecting on his childhood, Stuart mentions that his love for gaming stems from his father who used to share his gaming space. Later on, Stuart shares the experience of video gaming with his own children. In this vein, *ABMB* also highlights the progressive culture of gaming technology. In this novel, the protagonist, Sam, has a cognitive disability of Autism Spectrum Disorder¹⁰. Due to his distinct mental condition, Sam ventures into the gaming world of Minecraft where he creates his own ludic home. Moreover, this act of joining the ludic world transforms his life in a productive manner. However, Alex, Sam's father and narrator of the novel, plays a pivotal role in his transformation by accompanying him in this ludic space. The novel *ABMB* is autobiographical in nature. Zac is the elder son of Stuart, the novelist. He is diagnosed with ASD at the age of seven. Zac exhibits similar

¹⁰ Henceforth, I will use ASD for Autism Spectrum Disorder across my dissertation.

behavioural patterns as portrayed by Sam in *ABMB*. Zac is only six years old when Stuart introduces him to Minecraft, which he finds quite immersive and inclusive. At the end of the novel, in “A True Story behind *A Boy Made of Blocks*”, Stuart writes on his interactions with Minecraft in the following words:

It was lovely to see him so happy, and so engaged in something – it was something he could do just as well as his brother and their friends; he wasn’t left behind. Almost as importantly, he was learning: he started to pick up new words, and he loved to tell us about what he was building, and the things he wanted to do. (392)

The novel is, therefore, inspired from the true father-son story of Stuart and Zac and their salutary interaction with Minecraft. I have analysed the text under the following subheadings.

5.2. Neurodiverse Player and his Distinct Social Imaginary

In this section, I argue that as an autistic player, Sam feels alienated in the concrete world. The social imaginary designed by the neurotypical individuals (individuals with typical neurological functioning) does not seem to accommodate the differently abled player with neurodiversity. Social imaginary refers to “the ways people imagine their social existence, and how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows” (Taylor 23). Based on this definition of social imaginary, I claim that Sam’s character in *ABMB* shows different social imaginaries compared to other neurotypical individuals. The analysis of Sam’s social imaginary, before his engagement with a virtual gaming space, helps us better understand the cognitive functioning of Sam. He, an eight-year-old boy, is depicted “on the upper end of the autism spectrum. The higher-functioning end. The easy end. The shallow end” (*ABMB* 10). The individuals on this end face difficulties in in-person social interaction and it is hard for them to form an eye-contact. However, before embarking on the analysis of Sam’s character, the definition of ASD is worth mentioning here. Judith Miles and Rebecca McCathren define autism in their research article “Autism Overview” in the following words:

Autism, often referred to as autistic disorder or infantile autism, is a complex behavioral disorder which, by definition, develops prior to age three years. Autism is defined completely on the basis of impairments in social interaction, impairments in communication, and repetitive and stereotypic behaviors. (1)

In the light of this definition, autism is a cognitive condition and its symptoms manifest themselves in the inability to form consistent social engagement. Due to their distinct neurological condition, they find it hard to *fit together with others* and unable to follow social norms that are prevalent in every society of neurotypical individuals. In *ABMB*, Sam also manifests similar symptoms of ASD. Pertaining to his different mental condition, his parents consider him a difficult child. Alex, the father of Sam as well as the narrator of the novel, notes about Sam's behavioural aspect being different from others:

Sam is the planet of concern and confusion that we have been orbiting for most of our relationship He has trouble with language, he fears social situations, he hates noise, he obsesses over certain things, and gets physical when situations confuse or frighten him. (10)

In this passage, a parent's concern about having an autistic child is obvious. Therefore, in the very first sentence of the passage, he metaphorically compares Sam with a *planet*. It suggests Sam's different cognitive ability that makes him mysterious and perplexing. Being a concerned father, he is worrying over Sam's behaviour. It is crucial to mention here that, at this phase of his life, his father is unable to accept his disability as a difference. To add, the passage also sheds light on Sam's distinct social imaginary as he faces complications in managing his social affairs. Individuals with cognitive diversities, like Sam, are over-stimulated to the chaos they see around themselves. This chaos can be present in the form of noise, hustle and bustle of a crowd. Similarly, Ralph Moller highlights in his online article "Autism and Sound Sensitivity: What We Know":

The auditory system of individuals with autism may process sounds differently than neurotypical individuals. This difference can lead to an increased sensitivity to sounds and difficulty filtering out background noise. Other possible causes of sound

sensitivity in individuals with autism include sensory overload, anxiety, and stress. (Moller)

Similarly, in the text, on multiple occasions, Sam prefers to put on ear defenders whenever he goes outside. This helps in reducing *sensitivity to sounds* and *background noise*. This action further reinforces his distinct social imaginary because of his neurodiversity. Pertaining to this line of inquiry, people with ASD have difficulty in forming day to day interactions “to carry out the collective practices that make up” their social lives (Taylor 24). To add, autistic children find it arduous in managing at schools as they are the first places that offer interactions in addition to homes. They face challenges to fit in the school environment, especially those that are designed for able-bodied younger individuals. Hence, “disability represents a diacritical marker of difference that secures inferior, marginal, or minority status” (Siebers 6). This suggests that their distinct cognitive condition socially marginalise them from the rest of the society of able-bodied individuals. Furthermore, their “implicit map of social space”, such as school, is designed to follow a different set of routes (Taylor 25). In the novel, therefore, through the mouth of Sam's father, we come to know that Sam has a daunting experience when he is forced to follow a traditional pattern of behaviour in his school. Alex highlights:

Sam is struggling at school The main problem is that he can't get on with the other children. Not in the way he needs to be able to. He can't join in with playground games without crying or stealing the football or kicking someone – and this has made him a loner. Worse, it's made him a target. The kids know they can get an instant reaction out of him, and so they do. (*ABMB* 43)

The other children alienate Sam because he is unable to form the conventional patterns of friendship in the real world and “doesn't play with the other kids” (43). Hence, these forced conventions of one-on-one interactions, which younger individuals like Sam have to follow, make them distraught and disillusioned from the constitutions of schools. In the text *ABMB*, Alex holds about Sam that “he was so distraught every morning I had to carry him to school. You know, that's how every day started” (44-45). Due to the inability to follow the criteria of neurotypical individuals, it results in making him a bullying target. This results in the outburst of harsh emotions. This line of knowledge about Sam is further

reinforced in the light of the argument of Wolfberg, Beutel et al.¹¹ in “Including Children with Autism in Social and Imaginary Play with Typical Peers”. They hold that “children with autism face distinct challenges in social and imaginary play that place them at high risk for being excluded by peers” (56). Autistic children face challenges to fit in the circle of neurotypical children because they are unable to respond to them like the neurotypical individuals. These difficulties further exclude them from normative interactions. As Siebers argues that “disability operates symbolically as an othering other” (6). Being different, therefore, makes them an anomaly in the dominant ideology of able-bodiedness that prefers perfection.

Similarly, Alex adds that being a parent of an autistic kid, he has to wait “for the next phone call from the school telling . . . that Sam has kicked someone, or he’s been punched, or that he’s been screaming out . . . the whole morning” (*ABMB* 21). This suggests that Sam’s coping mechanism works in pushing the people away from him. Therefore, it seems challenging for Sam to make social connections in the real world because he finds it complicated to reach out to others and let others enter his personal space. Therefore, Sam in *ABMB*

does have an interesting way of looking at the world To Sam, the world is a gigantic engine that needs to function in a certain way, with predictable actions, in order to ensure his safety. Before he can relax, he needs to know the timings and movements of everything around him and he must have one finger on the off button at all times. (24)

This passage is very essential in understanding the implicit cognitive map of Sam. It gives us a glimpse of Sam’s way of perceiving the world. Therefore, Alex compares Sam’s vision of the world as a *gigantic machine*, which means that he considers it a complex mechanism in regards to its functioning. Due to this distinct functioning, Sam is unable to grasp its system. This discussion is further anchored by Siebers’ viewpoint that disability is “the product of social injustice, one that requires not the cure or elimination of the defective person but significant changes in the social and built environment” (3). Here the

¹¹ The remaining author is Mila DeWitt.

exclusionary system has sidelined the individuals like Sam even more through its complex functioning. Moreover, the passage also reflects on Sam's desire to have an agency and autonomy in his life. He wants to control it as if he wants to *have one finger on the off button at all times*. Sam's conception of the real world as a mechanical system is also evident in another example of his interaction with other neurotypical children in a public space as given below:

If another child is playing on the logs, he will push them out of the way – not because he's a bully, but because this is the machine of the fallen tree trunks and it has to work in a certain way. To him, another child is a fault in the system; pushing them off is his equivalent of running an anti-virus program: 'CHILD DETECTED. PUSHING SEQUENCE ACTIVATED. CHILD DELETED. (ABMB 24)

He does not mingle with the children in the real world, rather he consider them as a barrier in his way to freedom. Similarly, this discussion is further fortified with the research of Eve Muller et al. on the younger individuals with autism. It reflects that these children fail to form normative social interactions with other children because they “simply fail to grasp the social mysteries of how to join in” with other children (178). This comment reinforces my argument that differently abled children with neurodiversity face challenges interpreting the social phenomenon around them, which underscores their different social imaginary. The following section, therefore, sheds light on the reconstructing of the relationship between Sam and his father Alex due to their shared experience of gaming and Sam's changing social imaginary.

5.3. Strengthening Father-Son Duo and Changing Social Imaginary under Gaming Culture

In this section, I attempt to examine the changing social imaginary to explore if it fosters Sam's relationship with his father Alex under the shared experience of gaming. Sam has distinct social imaginary as analysed and claimed in the previous section of this chapter. However, Sam fully finds a sense of inclusion in the sociotechnical imaginary of a gaming

space which deals with digital technology. Likewise, Alex notes the great deal of difference from the normative physical world to the later versatile online gaming community:

Normally, when we play together – in the precious moments he is prepared to concentrate – it is as a shared solitude: I watch or guide or worry about him But here, for a few hours, we are working as one... But that is another positive. In this universe, where the rules are unambiguous, where the logic is clear and unerring, Sam is in control. (*ABMB* 133)

This passage depicts Sam's adaptability in the ordinary world as compared to the structured world of Minecraft. The inborn neurodiversity of Sam makes it difficult to access the social imaginary of neurotypical individuals "to make sense, a wider grasp of . . . whole predicament" (Taylor 25). However, being a neurodivergent person, he shows distinction in his practices, which underscores his distinct perception of the world. Owing to this diversity, Sam finds adaptability in the systematic sociotechnical imaginary of Minecraft as he finds the space orderly and fully systematic. It shows that the "gaming habitus" has considerably altered the life of Sam (Kirkpatrick 72). The interaction in the playground is necessary for the development of younger individuals and their cognitive development. Wolfberg, Beutel, et al.¹² add that "[w]ithout explicit support, they [children with autism] are likely to remain isolated and thus to be deprived of consistent interactive play experiences that encourage developmental growth and meaningful peer relationships" (56). This suggests that *interactive play* with their peers is crucial and necessary for the *developmental growth* of such individuals. Therefore, when the physical space is unable to provide a playing spot to fulfil his needs then Sam alternatively finds it in the virtual playground of Minecraft. This underscores that "disability is not a physical or mental defect but a cultural and minority identity" (Siebers 4). Therefore, when Sam finds an accessible and inclusive playground of Minecraft, he completely conforms to its patterns while moulding his social imaginary according to Minecraft.

However, this switching of social imaginary causes a productive impact on the father-son relationship because Alex is the one who shares this gaming space with Sam. In

¹² See my footnote on p. 79.

this way, the activity of gaming strengthens the father-son ludic duo of Sam and Alex. As together in the “Sam and Daddy’s world”, they develop their gaming identities collectively (*ABMB* 141). However, Sam’s identity as a gamer is based on “establishment of gaming-specific evaluative norms and criteria, which occurred primarily through the medium of computer” (Kirkpatrick 70). However, one of the prime *norms* among them is the development of *gamer habitus* which is the persistent interaction of a player with an interactive media. In the novel, Alex’s interaction with this media is short-lived as shown in the text, while Sam becomes a persistent gamer. It is crucial to mention here that Sam is neurodivergent; therefore, his development of gamer identity is based on acquisition rather than a deliberate consideration, since he does not develop it with intent unlike Samson of my other principal text. He adapts in the all-encompassing social space of Minecraft that leads him to this acquisition.

The changing social imaginary along with the establishment of gamer identity can also be highlighted under the changing interaction. In the novel, Sam, who has always been a quiet figure and refrain from opening up or expressing himself in front of his parents, has now started to share his ambitions with his father. This is because of the space that develops the bond of trust with each other.

‘When I am big I want to make houses.’

‘You want to be an architect? That’s the word for it.’

‘Yes, I want to be an artiteck. I will make a castle like this.’ (*ABMB* 144)

After this minimum conversation in the gaming space of Minecraft, Alex contemplates: “This brief moment of conversation – as fleeting and trivial as it may seem – is perhaps the deepest we’ve ever had together” (144). This growing bond owes to the increasing social interaction in the ludic space of Minecraft. This in turn refers to the space that is provided by the virtual world of Minecraft. Similarly, Kathryn Ringland notes that “many young people with disabilities, including autistic youth, seek out places to play where they can feel safe” (240). Minecraft is one of those spaces that provide a *safe* harbour to Sam for his growth and development. This ludic space has emerged as a *safe* haven for people with neurodiversity that faces challenges in forming in-person interaction in the physical world.

Thus, it demonstrates the potential of gaming as a curative tool. The altering social imaginary of Sam can be seen in a parallel relation of Sam's growing social negotiation with others. He, who is mostly bullied in the physical space, is given considerable importance in the ludic space. He starts to develop a circle of friends from his gaming community who later reach at the video game festival in order to support him in his "*Minecraft* building competition" (*ABMB* 188). Alex narrates the experience in the following words:

I put my hand on Sam's shoulder and watch as he builds, totally engrossed already. And the other children build around him, and the castle rises into the blank blue sky.

'We need your help,' someone says to Sam.

'I know where the windows went,' he says. 'I can show you.'

'Yes please. Yes please, Sam.'

And then he is up on the battlements, directing the builders. (278)

This refers to the time when one of the gamers in the virtual world of Sam knocks down his castle mistakenly but on the other hand, the virtual friends of Sam from his gaming community come for his rescue to rebuild the castle exactly as before.

Similarly, in another occasion where Sam is seen opening up and building a trustworthy relationship with his father, when he starts to share his experiences of bullying he faces in the real world. He expresses: "Ben hit my leg with a ruler. But I told the teacher. I told on him, and the teacher moved him" (*ABMB* 283). This is the first time Sam has expressed how lonely he feels in his school among other neurotypical children. It is crucial to mention here that all these conversations are taking place in the virtual gaming world of *Minecraft* through the interaction of their avatars. However, it is noteworthy that the configurations of *Minecraft* are gradually simulating the real world. Moreover, at every step Sam is seen as conforming to the patterns of games. The ludic space of *Minecraft* is "more real than the real: world around him by simulating the norms of the real world and implicitly moulding the social imaginary of Sam (Baudrillard 56). By providing comfortable communication means through avatars as well as through texting and video calling, it is slowly replacing the real world of Sam.

Minecraft has an inbuilt feature of communication where the avatars belonging from the same ludic world can communicate with each other either through chat box or video calling. However, Sam and Alex prefer to use microphones, consequently building a strong level of trust and strengthening their bonding. Sam's growing reliance on his dad in Minecraft depicts the productive potential of gaming culture that proffers a salutary prospect on the social scale of its gamers. Particularly, Sam plays games with his father, who not only actively participates but also ensures his protection from potential cyber risks, thereby illustrating that gaming under adult supervision can be both safe and socially enriching. Sam employs the media of games as means to gain social cohesion. Likewise, Craig Smith and Heath Wild note that "there is a focus on seeking to overcome what we refer to as the *techno-socio divide*, where technological tools that are perceived as factors in causing social isolation are rather used to bridge the social gap and build social behavioural competencies" (107, emphasis original). In this way, my research is interventionary because it employs gaming media as a mean to dismantle negative connotations around gaming culture by considering it as a source of building social communities for differently abled autistic players.

Similarly, the growing level of trust and bonding can also be seen through the words of Alex: "Sam and I have actually been talking, having fun together. I feel like I'm beginning to understand him. We play *Minecraft* and it's this place where we can be together and nothing's too complicated or fraught." (ABMB 229, emphasis original). This citation alternatively highlights the discrepancy they face in one-to-one interactions where everything about social rules, ranging from usual conversation or simply being together, appears as an enigma for people like Sam. Alex comments while acknowledging the importance of the game in transforming Sam's social imaginary:

I thought it was only a silly game, an exercise in comforting repetition. I was wrong. It was his attempt to understand and compartmentalise the world, to read the mad flurry of activity around him. He needed systems, however fragile, to process what was happening. Because the city wasn't background noise to him, he couldn't just tune it out – the world was an endless assault on his senses. He desperately needed to make sense of it. (332)

However, prior to this interaction, Sam is considered unapproachable. On the other hand, the virtual gaming world is inclusive enough because it provides opportunities to adjust according to the needs of the player. In order to expound the discussion further, it is crucial to refer to the viewpoint of Ringland et al. They argue in their article, “Making in Minecraft: A Means of Self-Expression for Youth with Autism”, about the adjustable features of a virtual world that cater to the demands of their users that underscore inclusivity and accessibility,

Virtual worlds as makerspaces can be tailored to needs that might be difficult to accommodate in the physical world, such as overstimulation. For example, in the virtual world, if a child is highly sensitive to sound at a particular moment, they can easily adjust the volume of the world or turn it off altogether. (6)

While drawing upon Ringland et al.’s argument about accommodating a diverse range of players, it helps us to comprehend Sam’s swift acclimation in Minecraft that, on the other hand, takes a lot of time in the physical world. Hence, through the example of Sam, this section adds meaningful nuance to Taylor’s concept of the social imaginary by illustrating how digital gaming environments, particularly *Minecraft*, serve as alternative space for social interaction and identity formation. While Taylor’s framework emphasizes shared understandings that make common practices possible in physical everyday life, Sam’s experiences reveals how these shared understandings are increasingly being reconfigured within digital spaces. The sociotechnical affordances of the game enable him to engage in normative interactions, such as conversation, emotional expression, and familial bonding with his father, which are often difficult in the offline world. By embedding these interactions within the ludic structure of *Minecraft*, the game reshapes Sam’s sense of belonging and participation in society. In this way, my analysis modifies Taylor’s theory by recognizing the evolving role of ludic media in remapping the social imaginaries of neurodivergent Sam. However, in the following section, I discuss the features of games to explore if they provide hyperreal experiences that secure the gamer identity of Sam.

5.4. Gamer with Cognitive Disability and the Virtual Playground of Minecraft

In this section, I explore the configurations of the hyperreal ludic space to analyse if it supports the development of gamer identity in *ABMB*. The selected text employs the game of Minecraft where Sam's gamer identity evolves. Before venturing into the discussion of his interaction with the hyperreal configurations of the game, it is crucial to have a brief introduction about Minecraft. Minecraft is a virtual game with blockish graphics. The game is based on open-ended gameplay where players are free to interact with one another as well as with the environment and the objects situated in the game. Ringland adds in his article "Minecraft as an Online Playground" that in the game of Minecraft, "the graphics are intentionally pixelated and blocky. Players can manipulate the environment over time, with the landscapes changing as players interact with it" (239). In addition to that, the game proffers two modes of playing: creative mode and survival mode. The former is best designed for creativity and building structures while the latter one includes evil creatures like monsters and spiders, and the players are supposed to protect themselves. However, Sam is able to understand the atmosphere and lead in both the modes under the supervision of his father, Alex.

Sam has difficulty in adapting to the normative physical environment but, when he is introduced to Minecraft, he quickly adapts in the gameplay. Along with the open-ended gameplay of Minecraft, the game is designed to create a hypnotising environment through its serene and mesmerising background music that in turn helps mesmerise its players in its hyperrealistic environment. In the novel *ABMB*, "[i]n the background [of the game], the doleful piano music creates a weirdly benign atmosphere. It is almost hypnotic" (49). Alex and Sam get fully immersed in the game whenever they play it because of the *hypnotic* atmosphere. Furthermore, Alex notes:

As we play, we become more and more absorbed in the world, until it is seemingly all around us. Somehow, we lose the sense that this is a screen; we are no longer controlling digital characters in a computerised environment. It is *us* peering into

the jagged caverns, then hiking across the grassy plains beneath the bright square sun. It feels as though we are free of ourselves. (124, emphasis original)

The hyperreal experience can be explicitly seen from this passage. Sam finds the game more immersive; he finds it “more real than the real, that is how the real is abolished” (Baudrillard 56). They get so absorbed that they seem to transcend the realms of what is fictional or real because the simulation around them is more impactful, inclusive, and engaging. However, they create an alternate image of reality, which is actually based on simulation of reality; they consider it more important than the ordinary world. Consequently, he gets immersed in the game and develops a gamer identity which is based on acquisition of gaming practices because of his long-term encounter with the ludic atmosphere.

In this vein, the acquired gamer identity of Sam is seen evolving when he is becoming a persistent gamer and starts to develop “habituated dispositions and inclinations necessary to play games” (Kirkpatrick 72). In Alex’s words, we see how he and Sam spend most of their time roaming in their ludic world, which is based on the simulation of their real world. They “wander out, through the woodland area and toward the mountains, happy to scour the landscape” (*ABMB* 123). These joyful and carefree expeditions are not possible for autistic gamers like Sam in his real world (discussed in section 5.2). The virtual gaming space of Minecraft provides him with the versatile and carefree experiences. However, it is ironic that space, which appears to be constrained in physical boundaries, provides limitless experiences that transcend the constraints of his physical world.

Minecraft allows players to customise their ludic avatars and construct their desired structures and buildings. When Sam plays this game, he feels a sense of freedom here, due to the fact that he is able to roam freely and safely in the ludic world and explore new places. This ability to wander freely without any harm is lacking in the ordinary world; he is able to enjoy these expeditions in the ludic world. Drawing on Kirkpatrick’s notion of “Gamer Identity”, gaming is a “source of human creativity and inventiveness” for Sam, but by incorporating gaming culture into his lifestyle, he “import[s] the prospect of new forms of dependency” (Kirkpatrick 21). This *dependency* is beneficial in giving him agency in the ludic world. The beneficial aspect of virtual gaming activities are also acknowledged

by Smith and Wild in their article “A Spectrum of Real: Augmented Reality and Social Scaffolding”:

The game would need to allow for characters to interact with each other in ways that help to model basic social skills, such as (i) starting a dialogue with other players, (ii) engaging in extended conversations with other players, (iii) allowing for collaborative projects where skills such as compromise and project management are practised, and (iv) setting rules and boundaries for conduct within the game, such as whether you are allowed to enter another player’s house without asking and other terms of social engagement. (112)

In the light of Smith and Wild’s perspective, the analysis of Sam’s character shows that he behaves like a “professional” in his ludic world as if he owns the place (*ABMB* 313). Apart from bringing out the desire to roam, the emancipatory environment of the gameplay brings out the creative potential of Sam. He acquires social skills and gains the ability to perform in teamwork. This is how gaming proves to be curative on his social level. Similarly, the way this father-son duo builds structures in the game, it shows how Sam’s creativity comes out under his acquired gaming identity. Alex narrates:

We are extending the castle now, adding two more storeys and building stone staircases to link them together. We start partitioning of rooms, making the floors out of oak planks, and hanging torches to add light. Sam is as meticulous as ever, ensuring a uniform size and shape to every chamber, correcting my many deviations from the plan in his head. (131)

This passage shows how Sam is meticulous about the details he gives to his constructions. All these instructions, given to Alex by Sam, show Sam’s qualities like inventiveness and leadership that are never seen in the physical world prior to the introduction of games in his life. The description of Sam’s gameplay represents his engaging experience with his computer-controlled atmosphere. In addition to that, Sam prefers to build his *home* in the ludic world when he initially joins Minecraft, as he says while pointing towards his newly constructed ludic house that “[t]his is a home” and he builds it himself (*ABMB* 63). Later

on after spending more time there, both the father-son duo venture into the ludic world and upgrade it to a castle.

After lunch . . . we funnel the sugar rush into an architectural frenzy, completing the four tall towers, carefully gradating the walls to give them a circular appearance. Once again, we lose the sense that we are separated from this world by a screen; we are *in* there, mining stone from our quarries, constructing scaffolding platforms to reach the highest points, looking out over the valley and down to the sea from our battlements. (132-133, emphasis original)

In this passage, the act of constructing his ludic *home*, protecting it with towers, and then upgrading it to a castle are symbolically crucial. These maneuvers represent a sense of belongingness, comfort and emotional security that he derives from the systematic environment of his ludic world. Cadieux and Keenan also argue the same issue of belongingness offered by Minecraft, highlighting that “[p]layers navigate this cubist world using a similarly constructed block-person avatar and most usually view their world from a first-person camera orientation which reinforces a sense of belonging and immersion” (6). Moreover, the idea of hyperreality is also at play here when Alex narrates his and Sam’s experience with the game thereby considering their ludic *home* more real while “the real is no longer real” (Baudrillard 7). Therefore, they *lose the sense that they are separated from this world by a screen*. Consequently, Sam starts to consider his ludic home more substantial than the concrete home where he lives.

However, his physical world seems devoid of these factors that are necessary for the growth and development of young subjects (like Sam) on their social level. In order to strengthen my claim, it is necessary to refer to Kirkpatrick’s conception of “Gaming Identity” about which he acknowledges that “gamer identity is positive in the sense that it involves expert knowledge and virtuoso performance” (73). Similarly, Sam also depicts efficient behaviour while maneuvering his avatar and crafting innovative structures. Pertaining to this line of inquiry, Sam feels no control over anything in the normative world. However, he is able to adapt in the ludic world and find adaptability and a sense of inclusion. One of the prime reasons for this inclusion is that the hyperrealistic experience he gains from the world causes him to create an illusion of control in his “constructed

reality” (Baudrillard 7). Due to this, he asserts his autonomy, exercises his free will; he gains agentive subjectivity. Alex narrates: “The familiar title screen comes up, and though I tell him I’ve played a little bit already, he wants to explain everything. He wants to take control” (*ABMB* 118). Sam’s subjectivity and autonomy is further reinforced when he takes a lead in the gaming world that ultimately paves the way for his rebranding. This is quite contrary to the kinds of relation they have in the normative world. As in the text, Alex highlights that in the game world,

Sam is assertive enough to give me instructions, telling me to improve the farm enclosures or to go out and hunt for zombies. His confidence is growing – maybe even enough to be tested outside of this sheltered realm. (200)

Alex marvels at the transformation of Sam who is often socially marginalised and misunderstood in the physical space because of his cognitive condition. Here, he is seen guiding, directing and leading the clan of his gaming community. During his conversation with his friends as Stuart writes, he “laughs and chats [and] [h]is words are sometimes scrambled, sometimes half-lost, half-repeated. But no one corrects him. They understand” (*ABMB* 279). The distance between Sam and his neurotypical peers, belonging from the concrete world, is bridged through Sam’s introduction of gaming space in his life. In his book *Video Games and Learning: Teaching and Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*, Squire notes that “[m]assively multiplayer games enable people to play together and collaborate in activities to achieve mutually desirable goals, and this intensifies learning” (10). Drawing upon his point of view, we can see that Minecraft is also an MMORPG that functions on the theme of simulating the real world by mirroring the functioning of the concrete world. Here, the environment, therefore, is provided with an open-ended, free and serene that reinforces *learning*. The autonomy of Sam as a result of his interaction with video games is a significant agentive change which I have discussed in the next section.

5.5. Neurodiverse Gamer as an Autonomous Subject in a Normative World

In this section, I attempt to examine the skills and proficiencies Sam exercises in the outside world that establish him an autonomous subject. Alternatively, the agitative subjectivity of Sam helps bridge the gaps between him as a neurodiverse (differently abled) player and the neurotypical (able-bodied) individuals.

It is generally advisable for the children with autism to go under speech therapy. They are also suggested by their therapists to increase their social interaction that is crucial for their growth and development. But unfortunately, the physical space is not inclusive enough to accommodate individuals with disability identity. Sam, in *ABMB*, is high on the scale of autism spectrum disorder. Due to his condition, he lags behind the other neurotypical children of his age in terms of his social skills that require in-person interaction and eye-contact. Nevertheless, Sam finds solace and acceptance in the ludic world of Minecraft that leaves a therapeutic impact on his life in the concrete world. Therefore, when Alex notes Sam's progress with his speech and vocabulary, he comments:

He talks as though to himself, quietly, in clipped, stilted sentences, but there are new words dotted about – enchantment, biome, portal – and I suddenly realise he's using the sort of imaginative language that his speech therapist told us to look out for. It's progress. Actual progress. (*ABMB* 103)

It is important to highlight here that by means of progress; it suggests Sam's success in forming social connectivity with neurotypical children. In this passage, the word *progress* does not imply Sam's improvement on his autistic scale. The ludic space provides Sam with an opportunity to practice his social skills; it also helps increase his circle and rebrand himself both in the ludic world and the real world. Laura Hobbs et al.¹³ also touch on this point:

¹³ The other authors are Calum Hartley, Sophie Bentley, Jordan Bibby, Lauren Bowden, Jackie Hartley, and Carly Stevens.

Playing Minecraft offers various mechanisms through which children can potentially develop myriad social and educational skills. This skill development is scaffolded by the process of designing and completing builds, independently or collaboratively, and communicating with others within the shared virtual space. The ability to play within the same physical space enhances these benefits by allowing communication to move from the virtual world to the real world, leading to face-to-face conversations and peer support when difficulties arise. (92)

In the light of this argument, we analyse that Alex is also pleasantly surprised at the positive metamorphosis of Sam. Through the collaborative *play* with his father and neurotypical peers, Sam *develops myriad skills* that later help him in his *real world*. Likewise, Sam's growing social life comes to the forefront when his virtual friends start visiting him in the real world. Alex underscores: "For a second I'm intimidated into silence. Sam has never had a friend home before. Now he appears to have become friends with a family from the society pages of *Tatler* (*ABMB* 186). Similarly in another occasion, while getting adapted to Sam's transmogrified self, Alex adds: "Sam has friends over all the time and this isn't *in any way* an utter miracle. In the bedroom, Sam is busy showing Olivia our castle She seems impressed" (188, emphasis original). This reflects Sam's alteration of social imaginary along with his growing autonomy; it is strengthened by his growing relation with his ludic friends in both offline and virtual worlds.

Another very crucial example, which is worth mentioning, is the way Sam deals with his tantrums. Prior to the gaming interaction, Sam finds it impossible rather difficult to control himself from throwing tantrums. This refers to one of the main symptoms of ASD that manifests itself in the form of repeated movements; it is the preference for sameness and predictability. However, when things go against his will and plan, his coping mechanism comes in the form of tantrums. After acquiring a gamer identity, his life takes a big turn. The ludic practice gives him a route to control himself. In one incident, Alex narrates how Sam dives deeper into the imagination of Minecraft that provides a productive distraction to him:

If we close our eyes, we can be in *Minecraft*. We're on the Safe setting, so there are no Creepers and no zombies, just the pigs and the cows. Listen, we can hear them.

We've built a tent out of, um, sandstone. It's on the top of a very steep hill and in the distance we can see the ocean. We've travelled for many days to get here because we know that out there in the sea is a little island, and on the island is a temple that contains lots and lots of gold. (*ABMB* 221-222, emphasis original)

In this passage, Alex takes Sam for camping. This is the time when they both start to take an initiative to form a bond with each other outside the realm of Minecraft. However, the solitary site triggers his fears when the night approaches; everything seems to fade away in the darkness. In this scenario, Alex helps Sam imagine the place as it is a space of Minecraft where everything seems homely and familiar to him. This also suggests that the constructed world of Minecraft renders its impact on the mind of Sam even in his concrete world because Sam considers it “more real than the reality” (Baudrillard 53). Moreover, Taylor’s notion of “Social Imaginary” is also at play here because it suggests the common practices and interactions through which Sam navigates his life in the concrete world after his encounter with gaming medium (Taylor 23-24). This argument is further reinforced under the light of Francis Mayra’s viewpoint, in which he notes that “when the player continues to play the game, the game itself starts to impose its own rules, making the actual rules of nature governing real physical objects effectively less important” (16). The recognition of players with the gaming medium manifests itself when the gamers start to identify themselves in the gaming discourses even in the offline world. In order to further strengthen my argument, I refer to Scott and Porter-Armstrong’s viewpoint. They write that playing MMORPG “in particular and online gaming in general is a successful, persistent, or helpful method of alleviating stress” (6). Since, it is likely to fill all the discrepancies that are left by the concrete world of their players. This is how he learns to manage his *stress* through playing Minecraft and employing that mechanism in the real world by recognising himself with the medium.

In another example, Sam’s agentive subjectivity slowly begins to appear when he shows the strength to face the public in his own way. His travelling expedition to London for the gaming competition reveals a lot about his transformed self and improved self-esteem. Alex, being the father of an autistic child, is pleasantly shocked at his transformation. He expresses, “I’m surprised he’s made it this far, but now, the reality of

being here, staying in this bewildering environment may be the moment it becomes too much, too real” (*ABMB* 360). Later he adds, “In some ways, I know that it’s enough for me. It’s amazing that he’s here, amid this bizarre maelstrom of screens and action. (367)

However, it is essential to highlight that Alex acknowledges this fact that Sam is not like others; he accepts that Sam does not fulfil the criterion of neurotypical individuals because he is differently abled. Therefore, his capabilities are manifested in different ways and cannot be analysed in comparison to other people. When Sam participates in a gaming competition, Alex acknowledges that Sam is participating in the competition,

[b]ut at the same time not like them at all. This is what makes me so proud and so awestruck. He’s got here on his own terms, combatting his own uncertainties. His grasp of our world is delicate and fleeting. It is often terrifying to him. But he has somehow constructed within himself the strength to be here. (367)

The discussion shows that despite all the odds, Sam is still able to go beyond and dare to venture ahead of his comfort zone to go against the dominant ideologies of neurotypical people. He has dared to create a world for himself through the means of gaming spaces that exhibit hyperreal configurations. It is an utter achievement to see “him on stage, in front of hundreds of people, so far from his comfort zone he might as well be on another planet” (*ABMB* 373). However, his abilities come to the forefront when he rebrands himself by gaining success in the gaming competition against all the neurotypical individuals. So, the jury “decided to award a special commendation” to Sam (371). This reinforces his growing popularity and success in the real world.

This success also helps him in his later life by uplifting his self-esteem and making him stand up and make decisions for himself, eventually transforming him into an agentic subject. Similarly, Alex appraises how Sam continues his life confidently after winning that competition: “The first day of term, the first day at a new school – the school Sam has chosen, with our support” (*ABMB* 381). This line represents a very different image of Sam especially from the one that is analysed in section 5.2 of this chapter. Earlier, it is seen as a challenge for him to get ready for school; it appears like a constant battle; this battle still continues throughout the day until he returns back home. This discussion about

metamorphosis of Sam is further supported by Mark Castrodale's viewpoint, as he notes that "[g]aming can also promote collaboration, teamwork, and coordinated efforts among gamers" because it "requires strategic thinking, problem-solving, and critical thinking" (6). In line with this argument, the transformation of Sam in result of his long-term encounter with the gaming space also highlights the ameliorative potential of games in relation to his social life. In response to this "curative gaming", he slowly and gradually gains the agency to confront the concrete world in his own way by gaining these aforementioned skills. This metamorphosis highlights autistic Sam as an agentive subject, and the world around him starts embracing his disability. I discuss this new social identity of Sam in the next section.

5.6. Journey from Tolerance to Embracement

In this section, I extend my discussion in the direction of how the world endorses the distinct cognitive condition of Sam that helps him emerge out as an agentive subject. Here, I analyse the journey of change that his parents and society have to go through in accepting his disability. It is pertinent to mention here that this section analyses acceptance of Sam's autism by the outside world, mostly represented through his parents, not by the embracement of autism by Sam himself. Since the text is narrated from Alex's perspective, it does not provide an insight into the mind of an eight-year-old Sam.

In the selected text of *ABMB*, Disability of Sam has been dealt with as a variation or diversity rather than as a defect to be sympathised with or as a misfortune needed to overcome. It is applauded as a part of his personality; it is a meagre approach to introduce disability into the arena of normalised identity. In embracing disability, the people around Sam do not find his cognitive condition as traumatizing anymore; they welcome it as an extension of his identity the way it is. However, the gaming space of Minecraft plays a pivotal role in bridging a gap between Sam's neurodiversity with his neurotypical parents and friends. The sharing of the same space leaves a positive impact not only in the formation of a father-son duo but in the recognition of Sam as a distinct side of humanity. In the novel, Alex observes:

This brings me to Sam, and the spark I have seen in him these past few months. It was doubtless always there, but I was too blinkered to see it – too caught up in the

‘problem’ of Sam. Now I understand that his view of the world is completely different to mine; it is full of patterns and surprises and beauties that I don’t see and can’t comprehend. (331)

The sharing of the same space leaves a positive impact not only in the formation of a father-son duo but in the recognition of Sam as a distinct side of humanity. This shared experience of gaming has helped Alex in understanding and recognizing Sam’s individuality. Similarly on another occasion Alex says:

Sam is a human being, separate from me, separate even from Jody. He’s not a problem to be solved, a dink in my scheduling, another worrying element of my daily ‘to-do’ list. He’s a person, and somewhere in his head are his own ideas, his own priorities, his own ambitions for the future. It’s amazing how easy it has been to overlook all that, amid everything else going on, amid the struggles with autism, the daily battles over schools and food and clothing. He’s a person – he wants things, he wants to understand his place in the world. And what I should do is help him. (223)

This passage reflects the journey of awareness from taking Sam as a problem to a complex individual with his own needs. Earlier, he is sidelined as a flat character in the story of neurotypical parents, Alex and Jody, but later they recognise and espouse his multifaceted personality with a spectrum of traits, motivations, surprises and beauties. Here, Alex repeatedly emphasises Sam’s individuality by considering him *separate from* himself because he has a distinct identity. Furthermore, the passage about Sam reflects the need to shift societal attitudes towards inclusion, accessibility and support for people like Sam.

Regarding this line of investigation, earlier Alex wants Sam to “be like the gangs of other children, confident, running amok together” that stems from his desire to see him conform to the pre-established social norms like other neurotypical children (ABMB 368). This in turn reflects the societal pressure that stresses on perceiving everyone with the spectacles of the ideology of ability, which is the “preference of able-bodiedness” (Siebers 8). The power and dominance of such ideologies is further reinforced through Thomson’s viewpoint as he writes: “One testimony to the power of the normative subject position is

that people often try to fit its description in the same way that Cinderella's stepsisters attempted to squeeze their feet into her glass slipper" (8). Similarly, Alex, being the representative of this ideology, also stresses over Sam to fit in the normative subject position. However, later he "understands[his] disability as an epistemology that rejects the temptation to value" him other than what he is and supports his uniqueness "relative to the demands on it, whether environmental, representational or corporeal" (Siebers 27). He acknowledges Sam's capabilities that he possesses his own strengths, and he does not need to conform to the predetermined framework that highlights his embracement of Sam's disability. Throughout this process, Alex never gives up on Sam; he continues to support and supervise him while engaging in the same participatory culture of gaming, offering both emotional guidance and a stable presence within the ludic environment.

Furthermore, the community of people around Sam also welcomes and reimagines his autism, when his social circle starts to grow up that further affirms his reimagined social identity. Alex expresses his astonishment in the following words:

Sam has actual friends! Olivia and her brother come around and they all read computer game magazines, and talk about *Minecraft*, of course, but also *Lego* and *Adventure Time* and lots of other things I don't understand. He still struggles to keep up with them, and he listens much more than he talks, but they don't seem to mind. (ABMB 333, emphasis original)

This passage captures Sam's in-person interaction with his friends in the normative world. This citation shows that his relationship with his friends is based more on listening than conversating through words, but the crucial thing is that he is the centre of their attention. Moreover, they also accompany and support him in every competition and decision of his life, whether it is related to participation in the national gaming event or the selection of a new school. Alex adds: "Perhaps it was Olivia, his friend, his ally, who helped him. Then from behind her, Harry and his friends gather around welcoming Sam, patting him on the back" (384). This is the growing network of friends and acquaintances that have later helped him in his everyday matters, which highlights their explicit acknowledgment of his neurodiversity.

To sum up the discussion of the foregoing analysis, the selected text presents the character of Sam who is *heavily influenced by the hyperreality of a gaming medium*, as I have mentioned in my thesis statement. Unlike Samson in *TTT*, he acquires his gamer identity through his extensive interaction with gaming spaces within a gaming culture. As he has a neurodiversity of autism, therefore he acquires this identity by habituating himself in the inclusive gaming environment under the supervision of his father. Due to this distinct neurological state, he finds it strenuous to adhere to the traditional social norms and learning techniques. Moreover, he is alienated because he is not sharing the same experience as the rest of the neurotypical children. In the normative world, he encounters the experience of bullying and segregation.

The open-ended emancipatory atmosphere provided by the hyperreal gaming experience in Minecraft, therefore, has a bracing effect when Sam experiences the joy of roaming freely in a virtual playground. The virtual playground proffers him the prospect of social interaction. Furthermore, this analysis focuses on how the outside world embraces his neurodiversity. This makes the analysis of *ABMB* different from that of *TTT* in the previous chapter. In chapter four, the disability is eventually embraced both by the player himself and the world; in this chapter it is only accepted by the world itself, which is represented by his parents and friends. The ludic space of Minecraft is shown to fulfil all the gaps that are left untapped by the concrete social world for the young individuals like Sam. The differential analyses of the two selected texts were geared towards finding answers to my research questions. Therefore, in the next chapter, I conclude my study by presenting my findings and giving recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

To conclude my research project, it is crucial to review my initial research premises in order to assess if the analysis of my primary texts finds answers to my research questions and vindicates my thesis statement. This investigation is qualitative in nature, and it employs Belsey's textual analysis as research method along with an interpretive and exploratory research design (See section 3.3 p.40). The basic research claim of my research project was that *a persistent interaction with gaming medium appears to give [differently abled gamers] a sense of agentive subjectivity that allows them to reconstruct their social identities*. My point of intervention was to see if, with their physical impairment or neurodiversity, they emerge as autonomous figures after forming a long-term steady interaction with ludic spaces. Extending this to the configurations of gaming spaces, I proceeded with the idea that such ludic spaces (the virtual spaces of video games) were inclusive enough to proffer accessibility and adaptability to the gamers.

In the two preceding chapters, I comprehensively analysed my selected literary texts and now I find that my research claims have been vindicated. These texts belonged to the popular culture fiction that ring with popular culture of video games. Consequently, my controlling research questions have almost become the affirmative statements that I want to present as my findings. It is pertinent to mention here that my study does not claim any closure since qualitative analysis is not generalisable and is largely subjective.

My first finding, in line with the first research question, is that *the configurations of hyperreal video games facilitate the construction of gaming identities in Zevin's TTT and Stuart ABMB*. In Zevin's *TTT*, Samson is portrayed as a persistent gaming enthusiast who feels completely engrossed in his ludic activities. One of the characteristics of hyperrealistic video games is their ability to completely immerse the players in the gaming procedures. As my analysis shows, consistent gamers like Samson, who have a physical disability of amputated foot, find these games more inclusive than the concrete world.

Another crucial feature of a hyperreal gaming world, as analysed in the foregoing pages, is the emancipation and the luxury to personalise ludic avatars. Although physically limited in his mobility, Samson transcends the realms of the physical world through the manipulation of his avatar Mayer Mazer. However, in terms of freedom, Samson achieves it both through designing as well as playing games. By designing games, he simulates his own experience; it is related to designing a character Ichigo or a location, such as hospitals of Mapleworld. Another essential characteristic of hyperreal video games is the provision of social interaction, especially in MMORPGs (advanced virtual games). In the discussion on preceding pages, Samson constructs own ludic community in his game Mapleworld. The game simulates realistic social mapping where he bans guns and announces protests about war, happening somewhere in the concrete world (See section 4.4, p.56). All these factors alternatively help strengthen his gamer identity as his real identity begins to be subsumed under it. This is how the former emerges as the dominant identity that consequently uplifts his marginal identity because of his disability (See section 4.2, p.45).

My first finding also figures through the analysis of my second principal text. In Stuart's *ABMB*, Sam, an eight-year-old boy with a neurodiversity of ASD, interacts with the open-ended gameplay of Minecraft that he finds more captivating, welcoming and accessible. He acquires a sense of freedom to continue his expeditions, whether it is related to building new structures or just wandering carelessly in the landscape. Not only that, but the ability to form social connectivity is the simulation of real-world interactions (See section 5.4, p.85). This, alternatively, helps him transcend the physical limitation that is not possible in the non-inclusive real spaces because he is unable to integrate the mental mapping of the real world. Another configuration of Minecraft that gives him hyperrealistic experience is the ability to express his creative potential by building structures in the available resources within that gaming space. Moreover, he attains a sense of control in the ludic world that he lacks in the concrete world. Prior to his interaction with gaming spaces, he finds the real world more chaotic and frenzy than the ludic world. To add, the ludic world allows him to exert his autonomy and subjectivity due to the hyperrealistic experience that allows him to mould the world according to his desires and requirements. In this way, he is able to reduce overstimulation because the world causes an "endless

assault on his senses” (*ABMB* 332). The long-term and persistent encounter of Sam with the configurations of Minecraft develops his gamer identity.

Here it is crucial to mention here that my analysis of both the selected texts provides a differential understanding about the development of gamer identities. In *TTT*, Samson with the physical disability of an amputated foot develops his gamer identity through his long-term and deliberate engagement with ludic medium. From playing to designing games, he willingly constructs his gamer identity (See p.44). While on the other hand, in *ABMB*, the neurodivergent Sam has ASD; he eventually habituates himself in the gaming medium because he finds it more inclusive than the normative world. In this way, his acquisition of gamer identity is akin to a child’s first language acquisition (See, p.82). After getting immersed and influenced in the social environment of Minecraft, Sam acquires his gamer identity. Furthermore, the acquired gamer identity supports and uplifts his disability identity; it also helps him reimagine his social identity.

My second finding, in sync with the second research question, is that *the social imaginaries of the focused characters are impacted by their interactions with the gaming medium in the primary texts of TTT and ABMB*.

In *TTT*, the social imaginaries of Samson are influenced considerably after his consistent engagement with the ludic world. Samson, who feels excluded in the power dynamics of the concrete world, constructs his own ludic world and there he implements his own social norms. He perceives one-on-one communication much more challenging. He is subjected to bullying because of his sluggish and limping gait. However, he traverses the boundaries of his limitations through the movement of Mazer. In addition to that, the sense of fashion style, which he cannot follow in his concrete world, is carried by his ludic avatar, Mayer Mazer. Accordingly, the altered imaginary is also highlighted when he monetizes the gaming worlds created by him. The shift in his social imaginary is reinforced when Samson constructs a new game (Pioneer) and a new avatar in order to reach out to his friend, Sadie, instead of approaching her directly through face-to-face communication. Samson feels more at home in these spaces instead of going out and struggling in the non-inclusive world for an in-person interaction (See section 4.6, p.67).

My second finding also comes through the analysis of my second selected text. In *ABMB*, Sam has ASD due to which he has difficulty in forming consistent social communication and interaction with an eye-contact. He senses obstacles in one-on-one communication because of his inability to comprehend and decode social cues as well as the amount of bullying he faces in the real-life environment. Therefore, when he is introduced to the gaming environment, he is able to roam freely and form social connections through his comfort zone. He does not feel the need to put on his ear defenders to avoid overstimulation. Here, he follows a different mental mapping of social interactions because he is simply unable to conform to the social norms designed by neurotypical individuals. He, therefore, finds acceptance and adjustability in the sociotechnical imaginary of the ludic spaces. Similarly, Sam's relation with his father, Alex, also improves when they both share the gaming space of Minecraft while fortifying their gaming identities. The father-son duo helps Sam to come out of his shyness cocoon. Due to the safe harbour provided by the gaming atmosphere, Sam starts to become more expressive and communicative about his bullying experiences; he develops a trustworthy relationship with his father on the pretext of Minecraft (See section 5.3, p.81).

My third finding, in correspondence with the third research question, is that *gamers with disabilities become agentive subjects in their virtual and concrete world in the selected texts of TTT and ABMB*.

In *TTT*, Samson finds the gaming spaces and gaming discourses more captivating and accessible because they do not weigh him on the basis of his physical impairment but on his ludic proficiencies. This leaves a salutary mark on his embodied experience because the experiences of a differently abled people are directly related to the space where they are situated. Moreover, his agency also comes to the forefront when he proffers new norms in the gaming world of Mapleworld, such as legalising same-sex marriages, banning guns and weapons, invoking protests against the wars happening somewhere in the real world, and advocating for the environment by protesting against offshore drilling. Here, the character of Samson has taken a dig at the grand narrative of the ideology of ability that states that “‘individuality’ itself is disabled for political use in the case of people with disabilities” (Siebers 46). To add, in *TTT*, Samson not only makes statements but political

actions that underscore his strong individuality. Here, the subjectivity of Samson is highlighted because he surpasses the concrete boundaries of his limitations within the realm of the ludic world of his game, Mapleworld. Moreover, his agentic subjectivity is also exemplified when he highlights his socially marginalised disability identity through his ludic avatar, Mayer Mazer. He is shown to carry a cane in the Mapleworld (See section 4.4, p.56).

Furthermore, the proficiencies gained in the ludic world have further compelled him to exercise his agency in the outside world. Not only that, but he also gains resilience and the ability to overcome obstacles that make him empowered in the real-life experiences. Eventually, the physically challenged Samson begins to appear on stages and in public TV shows with his cane that highlights his approval of his disability identity. Moreover, it also highlights that the world eventually accepts his differently abled self; therefore, it gives him a status of stardom while acknowledging his potential. Due to his successful career as a game designer, the popularity of Mayor Mazor surges widely in the normative world that ultimately confers stardom upon him. For Samson, gaming is more than a leisure activity; it is an integral part of his life as it becomes a part of his identity (See 4.5, p.61).

My third finding also comes forth as a result of the analysis of my second selected novel. In *ABMB*, Sam with ASD becomes an agentic subject by exercising his artistic potential that is not possible in the non-inclusive real world. Due to the open-ended secure environment of Minecraft, he is able to express his subjectivity that gradually becomes his strength. Eventually people begin to know him, and he gains recognition not only in the ludic world but also in the normative world. Nevertheless, this “curative gaming” expedition has proven to be recuperative on a social level. Prior to this interaction, he is like an unapproachable planet of mystery and concern. Therefore, gaming space has turned out to be therapeutic by bridging the chasm between neurodivergent Sam with his neurotypical parents both in the ludic and the real world. The ludic space of Minecraft proffers a secure harbour for his growth and development, where he has the freedom to control the traffic of unwanted interactions. He collaborates with other children; it invokes learning and social scaffolding. This, alternatively, helps him gain skills to perform in the

teamwork environment. Furthermore, he refines his developmental skills while designing innovative structures. Being an autistic child, he lags behind his peers in his communication skills because of his speech impairment and limited vocabulary; Minecraft intensifies his learning that improves his social skills. As an autistic gaming enthusiast, ludic practices have turned out to be curative. Minecraft provides a sanctuary for strengthening social skills; he makes new friends who share his interests and acknowledge his potential (See 5.4, p.85).

Hence, all these factors are responsible that have supported him to emerge as an agentive subject. He also achieves autonomy when he starts to recognise himself and is able to gain control over his body at the time of emotional outbursts. Pertaining to his growing confidence and sense of empowerment, he is able to win a national gaming competition and, later on, chooses his school himself that further reinforces his transformed self. However, Sam's acquaintances accept his distinct cognitive condition which not only boosts his self-esteem but also raises the need to see him as a distinct version of humanity rather than an enigmatic creature. Here the embracement of disability implies acceptance of his disability as diversity and as a part of his personality rather than a discrepancy (See 5.5, p.90).

Here, I want to introduce my phrase "Curative Gaming" because gaming is proven to be therapeutic on the social scale of my focused gaming enthusiasts in my selected primary sources. I have coined this phrase as an oppositional binary to Toxic Gaming. Coining this term is part of my intervention in the existing critical scholarship on ludology and disability studies. Moreover, gaming media is employed as a way to dismantle stereotypes around gaming culture by perceiving it as a pathway to gain social scaffolding and build connections for differently abled players. In this vein, my research subscribes to the idea of differently abled gamers by including them in the discussion of available critical sources and debunks the notion of healthy and able-bodied gamers. Prior to that, the realm of gaming was confined as the property of "youthful masculinity" (Kirkpatrick 73). In addition, both of the selected characters, Samson and Sam, have shown their individualities by impacting the real world by surpassing the frontiers of their limitations, whether physical or cognitive, thereby subverting the ideology of ability that only includes able-

bodied and neurotypical individuals. That is how I have been able to nuance the existing critical scholarship at the intersection of ludology and disability studies within the literary domain, particularly through the lens of *curative gaming*, which foregrounds the transformative and rehabilitative potential of play in narrative structures.

6.1. Recommendations for Further Research

My study is located in ludic-human interaction, presenting a unique contribution to the disciplines of disability studies and ludology and how they figure in literary studies. This research paves the way for future scholars to excavate the impact of gaming practices from various angles. While my focus only highlights the societal consequences of gaming in relation to disabled players, upcoming studies may explore its political and economic ramifications. This research is likely to serve as a lead to any further expeditions in gaming within the realms of fiction or visual narratives. Moreover, several fictional works can be readily associated with the suggested around my area of research and scrutinised through the lens of gaming and disability theory.

As I have kept my critical focus on male gamers through an intersectional engagement of fiction, disability studies, and ludology, the future researchers may critically engage with female gamers by converging to the disciplines of ludology and gender studies. There are some fictional works that are now bringing women into the arena of gaming that was considered only a male-dominated space. Some of these works are Geoff O'Brien's *Siren Plays Zeperno*, Velde's *Heir Apparent*, and even my selected principal text Zevin's *TTT* that introduces Sadie as a female gamer. All these texts feature female gamers who somehow sense marginalisation in the synthetic world of games due to their gender. In addition, *Siren Plays Zeperno* portrays a female protagonist who is a differently abled gamer. That is how O'Brien's novel presents both disability studies and gender studies through the life of its protagonist. Likewise, in terms of gendering the ludic spaces, *Slay* by Brittney Morris offers a fresh menu for academic analysis. This novel portrays a black female gamer, Kiera Johnson. She faces discrimination on the basis of both gender and race in the gaming spaces.

Furthermore, future researchers may also find an association of war and video games in fiction. In terms of commercialization of video games, wargames have taken a considerable space since they are a widely popular genre among teenage gamers, such as *Age of Mythology*, *Red Alert*, *Commandos*, *World of Warcraft*, and *PUBG* (Player Unknown's Battlegrounds), to name a few. Some fictional works that feature such games are *Play to Live* by D. Rus, *Warcross* by Marie Lu, and *Arena* by Holly Jennings. These texts foreground war motifs in the backdrops of MMORPGs. Likewise, *United States of Japan* by Peter Tieryas also resonates with the aforementioned idea. In this novel, the government trains the military through advanced virtual wargames for WWII between United States of America and Japan.

Pertaining to this line of thought, later scholars may also find untapped areas in the overlapping of gaming and dystopian fiction. The prospects for such an inquiry are higher in *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline, *Insignia* by S. J. Kincaid, and *The Game* by Terry Schott, inter alia. These texts offer a world sliding towards destruction because of environmental issues. The resources and hopes are almost diminished. People, therefore, gradually transition towards synthetic space of digital games for escape. In this way, the ludic medium is utilised to promulgate pro-environment stance among the citizens. I hope the suggested texts can be mined for academic investigation by future scholars and my research project serves as a reference and lead for further research.

First world countries like Canada and the United States, video gaming is increasingly being used as a tool for therapy and rehabilitation. For example, the Children's Hospital Foundation of Manitoba, along with organizations such as Ludica Health and Virtual Gym, have developed motion-sensing and virtual reality technologies to support physical and cognitive rehabilitation for adults and seniors. Similarly, the PEARL Lab focuses on using movement tracking and game-based strategies to help children with their neurodivergent needs. Similarly, in the United States of America, the Therapeutic Gaming and Patient Technology Department at C.S. Mott Children's Hospital is enhancing the patient experience by integrating gaming and emerging technologies into healthcare settings. These examples reflect a growing recognition of the potential of therapeutic gaming in the medical and rehabilitative fields. While third world countries like Pakistan

is also beginning to explore this innovative area, as I have discussed in the "Situatenedness of the Researcher" section (see 1.3 p.13). However, the implementation here remains slow due to the limitations in the infrastructural, institutional resources as well, and the deep-rooted disillusionment against the gaming media. To address these gaps, it is recommended that these regions should establish partnerships with NGOs and healthcare organizations to introduce curative gaming as part of special education. In this way integrating low-cost, accessible curative games into school curriculum and therapy centers can be a practical starting point. Additionally, awareness campaigns can help normalize the use of video game-based therapy among educators, parents, and healthcare professionals. These sorts of initiatives, particularly in schools, hospitals, or public clinics supported by local governments or international health bodies, can pave the way for broader adoption and long-term impact. Consequently, the international models can offer valuable insights and inspiration for future development in under-resourced contexts.

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