

Disability tax in gacha games: the social cost of hidden expenses.

Callum Deery

City University of Hong Kong
Tat Chee Avenue
Kowloon, Hong Kong
3442 8049
cdeery2-c@my.cityu.edu.hk

Francesca Foffano

University of York
York
YO10 5DD
+44 (0) 1904 320 000
francesca.foffano@york.ac.uk

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INTRODUCTION

Whenever a disabled gamer purchases a game, they are faced with the risk that the game will not be accessible to them. USD\$60 wasted (Luis Levy 2011). Free-to-play games have the potential to reduce this risk. However new models of monetisation recreate an old accessibility challenge: the disability tax (Olsen et al. 2022). This paper will use *Genshin Impact* (MiHoYo 2020) as a case study to discuss current accessibility challenges disabled players face in gacha and other free-to-play games. We will analyze three design elements: pay-to-progress, daily login, and character power creep. Illustrating how the use of these designs in Geshin Impact weaponises stuckness and creates disability taxes.

A disability tax refers to the additional labor, both economical and emotional, and expenditure incurred and paid by a disabled person through their life (Olsen et al. 2022). This concept is used to describe the increased labor faced by marginalised groups. Most famously the “pink” tax, where products “for women” are placed in a pink box and at a higher price than those “for men” (Olsen et al. 2022). Accessibility taxes are a form of disability tax where people with disabilities have to pay to remove an access barrier (Olsen et al. 2022). For example: a person who uses a wheelchair may have to purchase a modified car to travel to work. Disability taxes also exist within gaming, returning to our initial example of purchasing a game: To attempt to determine if a game is accessible to them a disabled player must seek accessibility focused reviews (Can Play That 2025), find online discussions from players with similar access needs, and playthrough videos to attempt to make that judgement. This represents a large amount of time and emotional labor involved in the purchase of a game. And if the player gets it wrong, and the game does contain an access barrier, then there goes USD\$60. Accessibility taxes also exist in gaming, in the form of accessible remasters (Laura Dale 2025) and the high cost of accessible controllers ~USD\$100 (Xbox.Com, n.d.).

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The removal of upfront costs enabled by free-to-play models has the potential to reduce game's disability tax and make gaming more accessible. However, current monetisation model designs create new accessibility taxes through the pressure of progression blocking systems. For example, some studies found that designing an unbalanced experience can create states in which the player is stuck as a consequence of their inability to progress the game (Foffano 2023). A designer could create intentionally unbalanced boss fights to push players to buy more expensive items in order to succeed. This creates an even higher mismatch between the player abilities required and a disabled player (Beeston et al. 2018) with the consequence of forcing them to have to pay their way to continue the experience. Indeed some studies highlight the social cost dark patterns can have on vulnerable populations (Zhang et al. 2025; Gray et al. 2018) such as in our case of disabled players who have to pay for access. This contrasts with the specific barrier moments which existing accessibility research seeks to address (Cairns et al. 2019; Hassan 2024).

We argue this emerges from three designs utilised in Genshin Impact and other free-to-play games:

Pay-to-progress: This refers to a set of systems which restrict a player's progress unless they pay, for example requiring a player to wait hours for a task to complete. These waits increase with progression, eventually players become stuck waiting for meaningful progression. In Genshin Impact this takes the form of the 'resin' system which is spent to acquire items, where players have to either pay or wait for it to recharge.

Daily login: In this system players are required to engage with a game for a specific amount of time on a daily basis, and are punished with reduced rewards before for engaging for longer or for not engaging. A player who does not keep up regular engagement with this system will fall behind and eventually run out of resources, becoming stuck. In Genshin Impact this is the 'commission' system, daily quests which reward players with virtual currency.

Character power creep: Common in gacha games, this is a design where new characters are created to be more powerful than previous ones. This is to incentivise players to acquire or purchase new characters. A player who does not will face increasing challenges until they become stuck. In Genshin Impact this is core to the gacha system.

However, these designs are playtested and balanced around an assumption of an able-bodied player, ignoring the specific need and impact for disabled players. This results in a situation where an access barrier in any one of these gameplay systems can create a feedback loop of reduced resources, building to a player being forced to pay or have the game become inaccessible to them. In this paper we demonstrated how design practices aimed to increase engagement and monetization can widen the gap of inaccessibility for disabled players, forcing payment of a disability tax to continue engaging with a game. We invite more careful consideration and further studies in mapping this issue.

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BIO

Callum Deery is a Phd researcher investigating Games and Regulation at the Department of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong. Research interests: Games, Monetisation, and Accessibility. Also an indie game developer.

Francesca Foffano is an Associate Lecturer and PhD candidate at IGGI at the University of York. Their work focuses on player experience of in-game difficult experiences, such as being stuck or designing for emotional accessibility.