Killjoy Play: Illness, Disability, and No-Fun Pleasures in Video Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Video games are routinely framed as producing "fun," both in popular discourse and in game design theory (Koster 2004). This imperative that gameplay must be fun ultimately shapes which kinds of play experiences are valued and which are dismissed. At the same time, intersectional feminist, queer, and disability scholarship has shown how ideals of happiness, health, and productivity are unevenly distributed by being associated with normative bodies and lives.

In this regard, Sara Ahmed's (2017) concept of the "feminist killjoy," for instance, draws attention to the refusal of compulsory happiness as it is sustained by racist, sexist, and ableist structures. Building on Ahmed, Adan Jerreat-Poole (2020) analyzes the figure of a "crip killjoy" in the *Mass Effect* video games, in which disabled characters refuse ableist expectations of productivity, bodily autonomy, and cure. Bo Ruberg, in turn, argues that game analysis requires venturing beyond the heteronormative frame and instead exploring "no-fun" by embracing pain and "game over" (2015, 115). The normativization of fun has thus been critically examined at the intersection of video game studies and disability studies, with a focus on negative emotions, discomfort, and failure as meaningful and even pleasurable forms of play. Jesper Juul's account of failure as central to the pain and pleasure of playing games hereby offers an additional touchstone, though his model largely frames failure as something to be overcome through renewed effort and skill (Juul 2013). My focus in this paper instead shifts from failure as a structure of mastery to "no-fun" as a crip killjoy mode of play that refuses mastery, cure, progress, and resolution.

Disability studies and crip theory emphasize that disability (and illness) are both lived within and produced by specific socio-cultural, socio-political, socio-historical, and socio-medical contexts and power relations, intersecting with gender, race, and class discourses. When read as cultural texts, video games that focus on disability, illness, and care are thus shaped by prevailing understandings of healthy and unhealthy bodies, able and disabled bodies, and of care practices. In video game studies, collections such as *Gaming Disability* (Ellis, Leaver, and Kent 2023) and *Krankheit in*

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digitalen Spielen (Görgen and Simond 2020) show that games are sites for negotiating disability, accessibility, illness, and care. Yet less attention has been paid to how games about illness, disability, and care deliberately refuse conventional forms of fun through frustration, slowness, and non-mastery. At the same time, scholars in disability studies and game studies have cautioned that approaches to illness, care, and disability in games can reproduce othering narratives of pity and voyeurism or offer colonialist access to marginalized experiences, as highlighted by debates on empathy games and identity tourism (Ruberg 2020; Nakamura 1995; Gibbons 2015; Meinen 2023).

Building on these discourses, and Ahmed, Ruberg, and Jerreat-Poole in particular, my paper asks how "no-fun" games that address health, illness, disability, and care can be understood as sites of intersectional, crip forms of pleasure, refusing mastery, cure, and easy empathy, and instead making discomfort, slowness, frustration, acceptance, and non-mastery central to play. Here, I focus on *you're just imagining it* (npckc 2024), a first-person chronic illness simulation game; *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games 2016), an autobiographical game focusing on a white Christian family's journey as their four-year-old son is diagnosed with cancer; and *Before I Forget* (3-Fold Games 2020), a first-person narrative game following the story of Sunita, an Indian woman living with dementia.

Through a close reading of the games' narratives, mechanics, and audiovisual design, I examine what kinds of pleasures are at stake in playing games that deliberately refuse fun to represent chronic illness, terminal illness, and dementia. Where available, I also draw on the developers' reflections, particularly from those who are themselves disabled or ill, have personal experience caring for disabled or ill family members, or have consulted medical professionals, to situate the games' "no-fun" designs within lived and relational contexts of illness, disability, and care.

I examine how the games invoke both care and exhaustion through narrative and mechanics, as players follow the protagonists' intersectional experiences with illness, disability, care, and the medical system. Here, I analyze the games' temporal and spatial designs, revolving around waiting, repetition, and non-linear progress, alongside disability scholarship on "crip spacetime," which rethinks time and space as shaped by non-linear, access-driven rhythms of disabled life (Price 2024). In this regard, the games resist framing disability, care, and illness as fully accessible experiences for the player; instead, they mediate these experiences as situated, radical, and often frustrating relations across bodies, spaces, and time. Pleasure thus emerges not from mastery or cure, but from being seen, and from having one's slow, painful, ill, and disabled life rendered playable. The games' "no-fun" pleasures become crip killjoys in that they refuse to make chronic illness, terminal illness, and dementia voyeuristically accessible or overly inspirational, instead inviting players into a shared space of frustration, discomfort, pain, and slowing down.

By situating *you're just imagining it*, *That Dragon, Cancer*, and *Before I Forget* as "crip killjoy," "no-fun" games at the intersection of disability studies, crip theory, and video game studies, I read them as forms of intersectional pleasure: they are pleasurable not because they are enjoyable in a conventional sense, but because they create spaces where marginalized experiences of illness, disability, and care, shaped by race, gender, class, and faith, are felt, recognized, and politicized through play. In doing so, the work contributes to DiGRA 2026's theme by reframing pleasure not as the

opposite of discomfort but as a radical and complex space in which discomfort and frustration are central to how players may find meaning and connection in video games.

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