Haptic Dialects: Translating Pleasure Between Adaptive Controllers and Universal Design for Disabled Players

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ABSTRACT

While accessibility research in games has addressed functional barriers, a critical gap remains in understanding the quality of experience that follows access. This study investigates how disabled players using adaptive controllers like the Xbox Adaptive Controller negotiate haptic and systemic mismatches with mainstream games to create pleasurable engagement. Through qualitative digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews within online disabled gaming communities, we examine pleasure as an active, intersectional negotiation — shaped by economic, cultural, and social capital—rather than a passive reception of design. Preliminary findings reveal three forms of negotiated pleasure: the intellectual satisfaction of solving control puzzles, the communal joy of sharing configurations, and the agential pleasure of overcoming ableist design. The paper contributes a crip-intersectional framework for understanding pleasure in adaptive play and offers design principles for negotiable, player-led accessibility systems.

Keywords

disability, adaptive controllers, pleasure, intersectionality, crip technoscience, game accessibility

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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INTRODUCTION

While accessibility research in games has made significant strides in addressing functional barriers to play, a critical gap remains in understanding the quality of experience that follows accessibility. This study posits that for disabled players using adaptive controllers like the Xbox Adaptive Controller (XAC) with mainstream games not designed for them, play becomes a complex site of negotiation. Moving beyond the binary of access versus denial, we investigate how players navigate the haptic and systemic mismatches between customizable hardware and rigid software to carve out spaces of pleasure. The central research question asks: how do disabled players, through an intersectional lens of identity and resource, actively negotiate and redefine pleasurable engagement when their embodied interactions with games are mediated by adaptive technologies? This inquiry aligns with the DiGRA 2026 theme by critically and celebratorily examining how pleasure is not simply enabled or restricted, but dynamically co-created at the intersection of design, technology, and diverse corporeal realities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is anchored in a synthesis of Crip Technoscience and Intersectionality, framing adaptive gaming not as a technical fix but as a sociotechnical practice. We challenge the normative "standard player" embedded in mainstream game design and the often homogenizing category of the "disabled gamer." Instead, we conceptualize pleasure as a form of affective negotiation—an active, creative, and sometimes resistive process where players leverage their expertise, community knowledge, and technological workarounds to transform moments of potential frustration into personal triumph and enjoyment. Crucially, this capacity for negotiation is not equally distributed. An intersectional analysis reveals how factors such as economic capital (affording niche peripherals), cultural capital (technical literacy to map complex controls), and social capital (access to supportive communities) fundamentally shape the pathways and possibilities for achieving pleasure. Thus, the experience of haptic pleasure is understood as deeply intersectional, mediated by overlapping systems of ability, class, and knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

To capture the nuanced, lived experience of this negotiation process, the study employs a qualitative digital ethnography complemented by in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The ethnographic component involves sustained participatory observation within key online communities where disabled gamers congregate, such as specialized subreddits and Discord servers. This allows for the naturalistic study of how players share configuration profiles, troubleshoot collective problems, and narrativize their gaming achievements. Following this, approximately 15-20 disabled players who regularly use adaptive controllers will be recruited for interviews. These interviews will explore personal histories with gaming, detailed accounts of configuring setups for specific games, and rich descriptions of what constitutes pleasure and frustration in their play. Where possible, screen-recorded play sessions will be collected to triangulate verbal accounts with observed practice.

EXPERIMENTS & RESULTS

Analysis of the ethnographic and interview data will be structured around comparative case studies of players engaging with different game genres. For instance, examining play in a fast-paced action title like Elden Ring may reveal how players reconfigure the "intended" haptic challenge of rapid button combos into a distinctive, deeply strategic pleasure born of meticulous timing and remapped control schemes. Conversely, analysis of a seemingly accessible social simulation like Animal Crossing: New Horizons might uncover how mundane actions like menu navigation or item placement present hidden barriers, and how players employ creative macros or switch sequences to reclaim the pleasure of casual creativity and sociality. Preliminary findings anticipate highlighting several key themes: the intellectual and affective pleasure of "solving" the control puzzle itself; the communal joy derived from sharing these solutions; and the profound sense of agential pleasure when overcoming a design not meant for one's body. The results will explicitly map how these experiences vary along intersectional axes, demonstrating that the pursuit of digital pleasure is inextricably linked to material and social realities.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that for disabled gamers using adaptive technology, pleasure is not a passive reception of designed content but an active achievement negotiated across uneven terrain. It argues that mainstream game design's latent ableism is not merely a barrier to access, but a provocation for innovative player-led practices that fundamentally expand the definitions of play and pleasure. The research contributes to game studies by bridging the gap between accessibility and experience-quality research, and to broader discourse by modeling a crip-intersectional analysis of technology use. Ultimately, it offers a critical framework for designers: to move beyond creating static accessibility options and towards fostering negotiable systems — designing with open input APIs, shareable configuration layers, and a humility that recognizes players as expert co-designers of their own pleasurable experiences.

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