Against seamlessness and hedonistic loops: The cases of pause, reflect, resist, and reform, from Interaction Design into games

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Friction is typically framed within Interaction Design as a usability flaw, something to be minimised in order to maintain a seamless experience, driven by its efficiency of uninterrupting flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990). This assumption also permeates much of Game Design philosophies, where maintaining players in flow became essential for their engagement and retention. Yet, as argued by scholars of interaction and game design concerned with ethics, politics, and dark patterns, this seamlessness can obscure structural inequalities and reproduce power asymmetries. When examined through an intersectional lens, friction emerges as a tool for shaping access, control, and agency, inviting alternative forms of *pleasure* that exceed the paradigm of uninterrupted flow. This extended abstract reinterprets findings from a qualitative analysis of intentional friction in interaction design to argue that some sorts of friction can generate reflective, political, sensory, and transformative pleasures in games and play.

Our study was based on purposeful sampling across commercial, artistic, speculative, and infrastructural cases, examined how friction is intentionally integrated to shape behaviour, provoke reflection, support self-regulation, resist surveillance, and promote literacy. This corpus included interventions such as checkout delays designed to interrupt impulsive consumption, community-operated local Wi-Fi libraries that require physical presence, browser extensions that deliberately corrupt advertising profiles, minimalist phones that restrict algorithmic engagement, and phone accessories that impose a physical step before accessing distracting apps. Although these examples were not developed for games, their mechanisms resonate

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strongly with ludic concepts such as pacing, agency, challenge, subversion, and meaning-making, as well as with critiques of persuasive or extractive design within games.

Reinterpreting these findings for DiGRA's theme *Intersectional Pleasures* highlights how friction can operate as a generator of alternative pleasures that challenge dominant assumptions about tempo, engagement, and value in play. The analysis identifies four behavioural modalities—*pause, reflect, resist*, and *reform*—each associated with distinct affective and political possibilities.

Pause describes intentional disruptions that interrupt automatic behaviour. These interruptions, seen in features such as reading prompts before content sharing or timed delays before checkout, create brief intervals for sensory recalibration and intentionality. When translated to games, pause-frictions can produce contemplative or sensory pleasures by slowing play, foregrounding embodiment, and creating affective density. They challenge the assumption that pleasure is bound to the uninterrupted absorption characteristic of flow, showing instead how slowness and hesitation can generate meaningful and enjoyable moments. *Death Stranding* (2019) and its contemplative gameplay, and all the planning it requires before going to the field in order to traverse it successfully. *Desert Bus* (2008) and *Mountain* (2014) are also examples of contemplative gameplay, although more extreme.

Reflect emerges when friction opens space for ethical, epistemic, or social contemplation. Interventions that require physical proximity to access a digital library, or that demand reconsideration before completing a purchase, exemplify how friction can foreground the politics of distribution, consumption, and presence. Games similarly employ reflective friction when they deliberately slow decision-making, emphasise consequences, or interrupt impulsive actions. These frictions create epistemic pleasures rooted in awareness, interpretation, and ethical discernment, especially significant in intersectional contexts where players negotiate identity, power, and representation. *Papers, Please* (2013) is an example, juggling with how bureaucracy affects the life of people.

Resist captures friction's role as a tool against surveillance, algorithmic capture, or coercive behavioural loops. Projects such as the AdNauseam extension, which floods tracking systems with misleading data, illustrate how friction can be co-opted as an act of technological resistance. In games, resistant pleasures arise when players subvert expected mechanics, reclaim autonomy from retention-driven loops, or interrupt patterns of extraction embedded within game economies. This aligns with design perspectives that challenge frictionless optimisation and call for more situated, value-driven forms of interaction. For example, in *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* (2001), more towards the end game reminds you have been playing for far too long, and in *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (2004) the game warning the player "Please consider resting" to encourage players to take a break in long play sessions.

Reform describes how friction guides long-term behavioural transformation. Examples such as minimalist phones or physical tags that mediate access to apps demonstrate how friction can support healthier habits without blocking agency. Within games, reform-friction can encourage sustainable play rhythms, support accessibility needs, or cultivate new relationships to challenge and mastery. These frictions produce transformative pleasures grounded in self-regulation, agency, and

the reconfiguration of habitual interaction patterns. In *The Graveyard* (2008), the playable character takes us on a small journey through a cemetery. She does not run and jump, she does not walk fast, there are no shortcuts. She walks in difficulty aided by a cane.

By reframing friction through these four modalities, this paper argues that friction is not merely a barrier to be eliminated but a generative site for *intersectional pleasures*. These pleasures arise when designers prioritise player intention over their retention, create opportunities for deliberation, and foreground players' diverse identities and embodied experiences. Friction destabilises the dominance of seamlessness and invites moments where disengagement, hesitation, interruption, and critique become pleasurable in themselves. For game design, recognising friction as a productive element opens pathways toward more inclusive, ethical, and reflective play experiences, especially those that resist extractive interaction models and affirm alternative ways of sensing, acting, and relating within ludic environments.

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